

Searching for the Pattern: A Response to the February 2024 Issue of *Truth Magazine*

Over a year ago [*Truth Magazine*](#) published an issue that reviewed several of my books. In this blog I respond to some prominent concerns in these articles. Some of these are expressed in almost every article by different writers. I thank the reviewers for reading and responding. I'm grateful for their interest and their sense of the importance of the discussion.

People write books, publish articles, or post comments on social media because they believe they have something important and helpful to say. In all my writing and interactions (even on Facebook) my goal is to communicate with a loving, kind, charitable, and generous spirit. No doubt I sometimes (perhaps even often) fail to exhibit that charity, and I am grateful when I am challenged about that.

I self-published [*Searching for the Pattern: My Journey in Interpreting the Bible*](#) at Amazon in 2019 (available in print, kindle, and audio; my references to the book will come from the printed copy). I wanted to explain how I presently read the Bible in contrast to how I once read it. Having taught theological hermeneutics in graduate schools for over twenty-five years, many former students and interested parties wanted something accessible and contextualized within churches of Christ they could give to others to explain the move from a blueprint pattern hermeneutic to a theological hermeneutic. [I had also published [some blogs](#) in 2008 on hermeneutics that also interested some.]

While I did not conceive my book as a direct assault on non-institutional or views among churches of Christ, I can see how it is reasonable to experience it that way. I raised the non-institutional horizon because that was part of my own early experience in wrestling with the received blueprint pattern hermeneutic. This is one reason I did not go into the history, sociology, and psychological dimensions of the institutional/non-institutional division. It was not a conscious part of my deliberations, though I am sure I did not escape the subconscious influences (none of us do). At the same time, I recognize the value of assessing non-institutionalism and its reading of Scripture in its historical context.

Also, I did not pursue the theological dimensions of non-institutionalism that I find healthy (including the emphasis on the faith and good works of people in the local congregations rather than relying on institutions funded by congregations or individuals). There is a theological argument for non-institutionalism that resonates with me regarding the problems of institutional power and denominational machinery. The focus of my book, however, was on the way the blueprint hermeneutic had been employed among churches of Christ since the 1860s (not only in non-institutional congregations).

There is a place for heeding the warnings of church history. I studied historical theology academically because I believe that is important. However, while I wrote with a historical consciousness, my goal in *Searching for the Pattern* was to explore how to read the Bible more deeply in the present moment; it was a hermeneutical goal rather than a historical

one, though those two are often interrelated. My intent was to seek to understand the text rather than reading the biblical text through the lens of pressures among churches of Christ in the mid-twentieth century. I do not want to ignore history or devalue its significance, but neither do I want mid-twentieth century controversies to determine or shape the meaning of a text in its own historical setting and context (at least as best I can).

I did not write *Searching for the Pattern* to justify any specific practice as an agenda item but to explain and illustrate the hermeneutic that I employed in previous books like *Come to the Table, A Gathered People* (with Bobby Valentine and Johnny Melton), *Down in the River to Pray* (with Greg Taylor), and *Enter the Water, Come to the Table* among other pieces. The appendices in *Searching for the Pattern* reflect something of that (especially assembly and baptism). I have since written three other books that, I hope, helpfully illustrate my hermeneutical practice (*Around the Bible in 80 Days, Women Serving God*, and *Transforming Encounters*). *Women Serving God* is the second in a trilogy, but I did not conceive this trilogy until after I had published *Searching for the Pattern*. The discussion of women serving God was suggested to me as a next book by several friends and then I began to think of a trilogy while writing *Women Serving God*. The third book has not yet been published but perhaps it will appear next summer.

In this post, I respond to several criticisms that appeared in the non-institutional (or congregational) journal *Truth Magazine* (February 2024). Steve Wolfgang, whom I regard as a friend and brother as he does me, pulled together some writers to respond to various aspects of the book. I have pondered for over a year whether to respond, and I finally committed to addressing some specific points that I find particularly significant for engagement. In this blog I will focus on *Searching for the Pattern*. Several other articles discuss *Come to the Table* and *Women Serving God*. Perhaps I will comment on those in the future.

Concern #1: Did I privilege “feelings over the often-challenging clarity of Scripture” (*Truth Magazine*, p. 85)?

This question comes in the context of my early consideration of non-institutionalism. As I employed the received hermeneutic (searching Acts and the Epistles for a blueprint pattern authorized by commands, examples, and necessary inferences) it seemed to me that its “rigorous application. . . warranted the conclusion” that congregations were forbidden to share their corporate resources with non-believers because there was no authorization in Acts and the Epistles through any command, example, or necessary inference. My “gut,” as I called it in *Searching* (pp. 88-90), said something was wrong with this conclusion. At the same time, I recognized my “gut” could be wrong, and it too needed examination because hearts and guts are often deceived, as I said: “I knew I could not always trust my gut” (p. 90).

I ask the reader to pay close attention because “gut” can mean different things depending on the framework in which it is heard. Some may hear it in the vein of emotionalism or a

function of confirmation bias. Perhaps I should have chosen different language to make the point. That is my fault, and I apologize for the confusion it created.

My “gut,” however, was not a feeling untethered to the biblical text and its narrative. On the contrary, my “gut” was shaped by the narrative itself, which I explained in the book (pp. 89-90). It was a theological intuition grounded in my formation by the story of God I learned in Sunday school, communal prayers, reading the Bible, listening to my father’s preaching, and singing the hymns of the church. It was a “gut” formed by faith and the teaching of Scripture. It was, I think, a well-informed and well-formed gut. It was not emotionalism.

The choice was never between feeling and Scripture, but between a story-formed understanding based on Scripture and a humanly constructed hermeneutic with a grid for determining authoritative practices that concluded God’s people ought not to share from their church treasury with non-Christians. While the blueprint patternist hermeneutic with its specific (and complicated) use of commands, examples, and inferences seemingly led to a non-institutional conclusion, I believed that conclusion rendered *the method* (not Scripture) suspect and misguided. Notice “my gut” responded to the *method* that generated a specific teaching, *not the teaching of Scripture itself*.

If the biblical text had said, “the covenant people should only share with covenant people,” I would say, “Yes, Lord.” But it does not. It is not that clear, and whatever “clarity” might be claimed is based on a complicated method. It was the blueprint method (not explicit Scripture) that generated a conclusion that was inconsistent with Scripture. It is inconsistent with the story of God from creation to new creation that loves the alien, sends the rain on the just and unjust, and sent Jesus to die for us while we were still enemies. My “gut” was not grounded in emotion or feeling but in the grand narrative of Scripture and specifically the inexpressible gift of Jesus the Messiah to sinners, the enemies of God. My “gut” response was not a rejection of Scripture but a rejection of the hermeneutic *because of Scripture*. I was led to question the method because its conclusion was so incongruent with the broad sweep of Scripture itself.

Moreover, I rejected the blueprint method’s conclusion long before I was even close to progressivism or postmodernism (not sure I am now even). So, it is puzzling to see one reviewer appraise my “gut” as the “jumping-off point for the progressive” as if the point was, “This is what the Bible says, but I don’t like it, so I will find some way around it.” Actually, the saints-only position “did not sit well with my gut” because this is the opposite of what the story of God teaches in its grand narrative. It was not a rejection of the teaching of Scripture as if I were judging God’s word but a rejection of the specific hermeneutic that, in the view of some, seemingly generated that conclusion. A hermeneutic that leads to the conclusion that the corporate body of Christ cannot share their resources with a poor unbeliever, in my estimation, must be flawed *because it is so counter to imitating the God who loves and gives to all people*. That is not an emotional conclusion, but a reasoned one based on the narrative of Scripture.

Concern #2: Are blueprint patternism and a theological hermeneutic mutually exclusive methods or tools?

This is an important question. At one level, it asks whether using commands, examples, and inferences are compatible with a theological hermeneutic. “Yes” is my answer. I affirmed that in the book (pages 142-143 or see [my video here](#)). Everyone uses commands, examples, and inferences in some form, and everyone searches for some kind of pattern or model. The question is not *whether* we use them, but *how* we use them and how we then *correlate* the data (which was the occasion for the divide between institutional and non-institutional congregations). More importantly, it is also about in what *framework* we use them (which is where a significant difference lies).

I employ commands, examples, and inferences to discern the will of God, but I do not use them within the framework of a blueprint patternism (which is described in Part I of the book). I do not deny the reality of how rhetoric provides categories of command, example, and inference, but I question *how* they are construed in service to the search for a blueprint pattern for congregational work and worship. This construal involves complicated rules which are neither intuitive nor obvious from the biblical text. For example, Roy Cogdill has seven rules or laws to a binding example alone (*Walking by Faith*, pp. 22-28). This kind of patternism treats the text in a way inconsistent with its own nature, intent, and genres.

The two are mutually exclusive at the level of *framework*. They are searching for different sorts of patterns. In other words, I believe the blueprint patternist hermeneutic reads the Bible in a way that it was not intended to be read; it searches for something that is not there (e.g., an ecclesial blueprint for the acts of worship in an assembly). That hermeneutic reads the text to construct a blueprint by mining the data of Acts and the Epistles correlating them through particular extra-biblical guidelines and then constructs what does not itself appear in the text as a detailed, specific, and exclusive pattern. I think that framework is problematic and inconsistent within the biblical text. That framework generates an exclusive system one does not find in Scripture itself. That is what I reject in *Searching for the Pattern*. I do not reject the reality of commands, examples, and inferences.

The blueprint hermeneutic and theological hermeneutics operate within two different *frameworks*. In that sense they are incompatible. The blueprint hermeneutic creates something that does not actually exist—it is the product of the hermeneutic. The theological hermeneutic, it seems to me, explores the text to discern the mystery of Christ and imitate God. I employ this hermeneutic because it is what I see, for example, Jesus and Paul doing (as I discuss in the book, pp. 90-104, 177-181).

To be sure, blueprint advocates can and do employ a theological hermeneutic at times. I am grateful they do. I think, for example, [James A. Harding](#) did this. In this sense they are not mutually exclusive because some employ both, but ultimately—as *frameworks*—they conflict at points (e.g., the “saints-only” view, frequency of the Lord’s supper, etc.). Blueprint advocates also seem to prioritize the constructed blueprint (called [positive law](#) in

the Restoration Movement) over the conclusions of a theological hermeneutic. I rejected the blueprint hermeneutic as a method, in part, because it conflicted with God's own identity as one who loves all, shares his resources with all, gives his Son for all, and calls us to imitate God (this returns to the point in concern #1). Thus, I prioritized the theological story of Scripture over a pattern generated and constructed by the blueprint hermeneutic (and not everyone agreed that the pattern entailed the "saints-only" position).

Concern #3: should we be concerned if "the church 'is 'scandalized' and 'shame[d] in the eyes of contemporary culture'?" (*Truth Magazine*, p. 87).

While this concern arises from a reading of *Women Serving God* (p. 210), it applies also to whether hermeneutical shifts are based on fear of cultural shaming.

I am not concerned about cultural shaming if it is a matter of truth. Culture may shame the church because it believes Jesus rose from the dead, affirms the traditional sexual ethic, or opposes abortion. I am willing to accept that shaming and cultural scandal. I am not at all dissatisfied with biblical teaching, though I am sometimes disappointed by how some people have taught the Bible or made it say what it does not say.

At the same time, we should be concerned with cultural shaming and scandal if a biblical truth is *not* at stake. If, for example, the church requires practices that are not required by Scripture or inconsistent with Scripture, and this creates the occasion for cultural shaming, then this is a significant problem. Paul was concerned that the church should not offend culture in 1 Corinthians 10:32.

In principle, however, I am unconcerned about whether the culture shames the church if what the church practices and teaches is the will of the Lord. But if it is not the will of the Lord, then when the culture shames us and we give offence, it hinders the mission of God.

Concern #4: Can we "follow God's pattern and trust in God's grace for our assurance?" (*Truth Magazine*, p. 94).

Yes! Otherwise, we must choose between living in perpetual doubt (knowing we have not obeyed the pattern perfectly or have understood it perfectly) or living in self-righteousness (as if we have obeyed the pattern and understood it perfectly). This is not an either/or. There is another option. We seek to do the will of God even though we will always do it imperfectly and we trust in God's grace which does not require perfection. In this sense I wrote that we might want to "let go of perfectionism"—whether personal or ecclesial. As the reviewer wrote, "There is a difference between perfectionism and faithfulness" (*Truth Magazine*, p. 94). That is my point. We can be faithful to God even when we do not perfectly follow the pattern or even perfectly understand the pattern. Perhaps we can see this point more clearly when we recognize (as we all do) that Jesus is our pattern for life and loving. None of us measure up to that standard or understand it fully.

Some perceive in my language a “disgust for careful obedience” (*Truth Magazine*, p. 99). I hope I do not; I do not think I do. I want to obey God carefully. I seek to obey God in every way I see God’s call upon my life. I want to discern the will of God and walk in it.

One writer wrote that I am attempting to “hoist[my] readers onto the horns of a false dilemma” (*Truth Magazine*, p. 100). He then quotes what he apparently thinks is me (“Hicks . . . He says, . . .”). He mistakenly attributes the quotation of David Lipscomb to me (*Searching*, 169; from *Gospel Advocate* [May 30, 1912] 671). I think it is a helpful thought, so I do not mind the attribution.

“I had rather go before God realizing my weakness and liability to sin, trusting Him for mercy and pardon, than to go relying upon my good understanding and obedience to the perfect will of God.”

My interlocuter comments, “why does it have to be one or the other? Can’t we go before God with confidence because we *tried* to understand and do His will out of love and gratitude while still realizing that we are sinful, and so we trust in His grace for mercy and pardon?” (*Truth Magazine*, p. 100; emphasis mine). Absolutely! The key point, however, is “*tried*” (or seek). We all do that imperfectly in our weaknesses such that our “good understanding and obedience” (which are imperfect) are insufficient imitations of the “perfect will of God.” Yes, let us do our best to discern the will of God (understand it) and obey it, but since it is an imperfect understanding and obedience, let us learn to ultimately rely on the “mercy and pardon” of God.

Concern #5: Can we “know the will of the Lord, when the Bible teaches that we can (Eph. 5:17)” (*Truth Magazine*, p. 95).

Yes, we can know the will of the Lord. We are called to discern the will of God and walk worthy of our calling as children of light in the darkness and as wise people (Ephesians 4:1; 5:8, 15). That is the point of hermeneutics, that is, to discern the will of God for our lives.

When we read Ephesians, we can both understand the “mystery of Christ” (Ephesians 3:3-4) and discern what the will of the Lord is for our lives (Ephesians 5:17). In the former, we understand what God has done in Christ by the Spirit, and in the latter, we see how God calls and commands believers to respond to what God has done: to be kind to one another, love one another, forgive one another, submit to another, be patient with one another, avoid sexual immorality and greed, use our language with grace and compassion rather than in anger, etc. We can discern the will of God for our lives, and, ultimately, this is about imitating God and Christ (Ephesians 5:1-2).

But I suspect that my respondent has something more particular in mind such as the blueprint pattern for the work and worship of the church. Because I reject the blueprint hermeneutic, it seems that I deny that we can discern the will of God. In fact, however,

what I reject is not the will of God but a blueprint hermeneutic that generates a construct that is supposedly required by the will of God when it is not.

Perhaps, however, another thought looms in the background. The blueprint hermeneutic propors to arrive at conclusions with little ambiguity and significant certainty. The theological hermeneutic seems, at times, to be more ambiguous than certain. There is an element of truth here because I think the blueprint hermeneutic claims certainty in some specifics where there is none, and the theological hermeneutic recognizes that there is ambiguity regarding some specifics (e.g., see below on the frequency of the Lord's supper).

Perhaps this ambiguity is the origin of the charge that I assume we cannot know the will of the Lord. The question is not whether ambiguity denies the capacity to discern the Lord's will. Rather, it may be that ambiguity is part of the Lord's will in the sense that God has not specified some specifics though the blueprint pattern assumes God has. It may be the ambiguity is intentional, that is, God does not have a specific frequency in mind for the Lord's supper.

But a further thought may also be lurking in the background. The charge against the theological hermeneutic is that its ambiguity is a slippery slope and provides an opportunity to assert a broad theological principle to subvert and deny biblical truths. This is a legitimate concern. However, the danger is mostly present when a supposed theological principle is used to supplant and overturn an explicit directive or prohibition in Scripture. This is what Richard and Christopher Hays do in their recent book. That is not a properly functioning theological hermeneutic.

When there is an *explicit* directive or prohibition in the biblical text which is (1) consistent throughout Scripture, (2) rightly understood in its contexts, (3) applied in diverse cultures without adaptation and with theological grounding, and (4) is rooted in the origins, narrative, and goals of God's story, the theological hermeneutic has solid ground to hear and obey (I think blueprint advocates probably agree with the above sentence). [The numbers are not "steps" but only for clarity about the sorts of things to consider; and these points are not necessarily the only considerations, but they are substantial ones.]

My problem with the blueprint hermeneutic is what it adds to a theological hermeneutic based on a pattern constructed from the text by correlating commands, examples, and inferences deemed *binding* and *exclusive* because of inferred propositions. It creates prohibitions and directives that are not explicit in the text and sometimes are used to bind the consciences of others as a condition of fellowship (whatever those conditions are in terms of identifying the true church, such as weekly communion).

The theological hermeneutic is not a slippery slope. It maintains what is substantive, explicit, and rooted in the narrative as a backstop against the misuse of so-called theological principles that subvert and uproot explicit God-given traditions communicated in Scripture.

Concern #6: “Are commands fundamentally legal tests of loyalty or are they modes of transformation?” (*Truth Magazine*, p. 95, quoting *Searching for the Pattern*, p. 173).

My reviewer answered, it is both! I agree. This is a both/and. Obedience to God’s commands is a matter of allegiance. Our baptisms are oaths of allegiance; they are acts of discipleship though much more, of course. I thank the reviewer for pressing this point. At the same time, in the context of my discussion, I was pointing to the ultimate goal (*telos*) of commands. That is why I added the word “fundamentally.” God’s goal is transformation into and conformation to the image of Christ.

The context in which I raise this question is more layered than the abstract question itself (*Searching*, 174-177). It comes against the backdrop of discerning the blueprint pattern so that it becomes a test of the true (loyal) church. Thus, the only true assembly of believers is the one that correctly discerns the specifics of blueprint, does them, and does them exclusively. In that setting the emphasis in “*legal tests of loyalty*” proceeds in legal categories (binding example?), tests of fellowship (which example is a line in the sand?), and identification of loyalty to the pattern.

My primary concern in that section of the book was that the pattern constructed out of the text through humanly devised rules (e.g., specific commands or examples that exclude coordinates) became fundamentally a test of loyalty. Such a move tends to (but does not necessarily) supplant, overrule, or minimize the goal of transformation, which is God’s ultimate purpose. The test of loyalty for fellowship based on a correct pattern becomes more important with respect to divine judgment and fellowship than transformation. Or, as [James A. Harding put it](#), obedience to positive law has priority because one can keep that precisely and perfectly but we cannot keep moral law perfectly due to our weaknesses.

Perhaps this is where concern arises about obedience and grace as well. If one believes a blueprint hermeneutic can generate implicit positive commands (in the sense of [positive law](#)) from the scattered data of Scripture (e.g., the Lord’s supper every Sunday and only on Sunday as a test of a true church), then obedience to that positive command is a test of loyalty and one must obey it perfectly and precisely. In this sense, perfect obedience is expected and necessary. When one prioritizes commands as tests of loyalty, this tends toward the expectation of perfect or precise obedience such that grace is dependent upon complete obedience of all the positive laws (whether implicit or explicit). The previous quote from Lipscomb addresses this well; we seek God’s mercy and pardon even when we fail to keep positive laws as well as moral ones imperfectly.

God’s commands, while they do function as oaths of allegiance and commitments of loyalty, primarily function as modes of transformation. God commands in order to transform us and not *primarily* to test our loyalty. Does God test us? Yes, of course. But why does God test us? The answer in Deuteronomy 8:1-4 and other texts is to see what is in our hearts. God wants to transform the heart, and his commands are means toward that end.

To the degree that we think of them as only or primarily tests of loyalty we are in danger of reducing God's commands to abstract fiats that draw a line in the sand between the saved and lost. That, to my mind, is dangerous, and it misses the ultimate point of commands which is transformation into the image of God.

Concern #7: "Searching for the Pattern begins with a condescending tone...[and] repeatedly labels the churches he grew up in as 'simple folk'" (*Truth Magazine*, p. 99).

I did my best to avoid a condescending tone. Perhaps I failed. Readers will have to judge for themselves. I expressed love for the churches of my youth (as well as the church today) and the people in them. I warmly and gratefully acknowledge that I was formed by their spiritual mentorship. I have no ill will toward them. In fact, I used the phrases "simple folk" (once) or "simple people" (twice) on pages 24-25 (and *only* on those pages) to describe their modest means, hard-working culture, and unadorned practices. "Simple" was a compliment, not a criticism. Those people (including my parents) and the simple practices of congregational life formed me. I am grateful. Simplicity has tremendous value, and I seek a simple faith in the Lord Jesus. At the same time, I can see how "simple" could be heard negatively, though I did not intend that.

I did use the word "simple" in another way in the book (e.g., *Searching*, 79-80). I used it in contrast to something complicated. Part of the appeal of the blueprint hermeneutic is its supposed simplicity, but the more one digs into its argument and application, the more complicated it becomes. It is not simple (e.g., deciding when an example is binding and when it is not, when a command excludes a coordinate, or when an inference is necessary to decide whether it is a line of fellowship or not). What I once thought was simple in terms of "simply obeying the Bible" did not turn out to be so simple, especially in the blueprint hermeneutic. In other words, hermeneutical decisions or discerning the will of the Lord is not always simple or facile. This is especially true when it is complicated by extra-biblical hermeneutical rules that seek to identify a specified blueprint in Acts and the Epistles that is not there. In that way, the blueprint hermeneutic and its use of commands, examples, and inferences in that framework are not simple but complicated. It is not common sensical. It constructs specified patterns that do not actually exist and are not explicitly articulated in the text.

Concern #8: "No one opposes Jesus as the pattern, but how does that work practically? . . . What does the 'the pattern of Jesus' entail? And SFTP avoids specifics" (*Truth Magazine*, p. 101).

I am grateful no one would oppose Jesus as the pattern. The point, however, is that Jesus as pattern stands in contrast to a blueprint constructed out of the data of Acts & the Epistles (cf. *Searching*, 133-136, 181-184). When I talk about Jesus as pattern, I am focusing on the redemptive story of Jesus: his incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and enthronement. This is the mystery of Christ; it is the gospel itself. Jesus as pattern refers to what God has done in Jesus by the power of the Spirit for our salvation. Or, as I expand it in

other places with the summaries we find in the New Testament, it is the pattern of divine saving activity which God works for us. It is the story of God's inexpressible gift that shapes our lives. When we respond to this work of God, we are obedient to our confession of the gospel of Christ (2 Corinthians 9:13).

The pattern as I conceive it, then, is the narrative of God's work for us, and our response to that narrative is conformation to the image of Christ or the imitation of God as God is known through the narrative. We seek to understand the mystery of Christ and embody that in our congregations and in our lives. But the "mystery of Christ" is not a constructed ecclesial blueprint with prescribed specifics that the text never articulates. Rather, the mystery of Christ is the narrative of God's work; it is the story in which we participate as disciples of Christ as we imitate God and Jesus.

How does this work practically? I attempted to answer that question in the book, but I could have done more to clarify, explain, or illustrate. That would have made it a much bigger book. Yet, readers can see extended examples in my other books, including the trilogy of *Come to the Table*, *Down in the River to Pray*, and *A Gathered People*. Or read my most accessible book, *Transforming Encounters*. The appendices in *Searching for the Pattern* function as brief illustrations, and several texts are used as examples in the main part of the book, especially 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 and the Lord's supper. They are illustrations of the theological hermeneutic at work as I seek to discern the will of God through the narrative, including its commands, examples, and inferences.

Part of the problem, it seems, is that the blueprint hermeneutic identifies details and specifics that only the blueprint hermeneutic could construct from the data. Consequently, when those same specifics are not in the pattern I discern in the narrative of Scripture through the lens of the mystery of Christ, then my sense of the pattern is judged incorrect. To the blueprint interpreter it looks like I avoid specifics because I do not have all the specifics the blueprint interpreter expects.

Does *Searching for the Pattern* advocate any specifics? There are abundant specifics (assembling, baptizing, communing at the table, etc.) but perhaps not the sort that my reviewer anticipates, expects, or desires. This is where I suggest we must let the narrative of Scripture tell its own story rather than imposing expectations on it. The specifics must arise out of the story itself rather than out of a construct of that discovers, correlates, and rearranges the data in the New Testament into a blueprint that is not explicitly there.

For example, is there a prescribed frequency to the Lord's supper in Scripture? I discuss this in *Searching* on pages 159-162. Some might say I am avoiding specifics when I claim that there is no prescribed frequency or exclusively specified day for the Lord's supper. To generate a positive law that the church must eat every week and only on Sunday is the effect of the received blueprint hermeneutic. At the same time, this is an inference from the text, and it is not a necessary one even within the blueprint hermeneutical model. Yet, the frequency of the Supper is a typically considered a consensus model for how to use the

blueprint method (e.g., J. D. Thomas, *We Be Brethren*, pp. 93-104; Roy Cogdill, *Walking by Faith*, pp. 14-15).

The theological hermeneutic notes that the New Testament tells us the story of the resurrection of Jesus, the breaking of bread with Jesus, and a table to which God has invited us. There is a command to do this in remembrance of Jesus, there are examples of breaking bread daily in Acts 2:46 and of breaking bread on the first day of the week in Acts 20:7, and there are multiple connections between Israel's table and the church's table as well as how the ministry of Jesus teaches a kingdom table etiquette. There is a theology of the table that reaches from Israel through the ministry of Jesus and his church into the new heaven and new earth (the Messianic banquet). *The theological narrative is rich and deep. But there is no explicitly prescribed frequency.* Rather, there is the joy of the disciples breaking bread with Jesus whenever and wherever there is an opportunity for the community to gather and celebrate what God has done for us. Or, as Paul said, "as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

I hasten to add, as I did in the book, that there are good theological reasons to gather around the table of the Lord every first day of the week. I practice weekly, and I encourage it and teach it as a weighty theological conclusion. However, it is not prescribed such that a church is unfaithful if they do not eat every Sunday, if they eat more than once a week, or if they also eat on Wednesday or Thursday. The theological point is that it is a joy to gather with the people of God at the table of God whenever there is opportunity. I often gather around the table of the Lord with disciples of Jesus in my home. It does not matter what day or how often. What matters is that we commune together in the body and blood of the Lord, love and serve each other at the table, and proclaim the gospel.

I suppose one could say I avoid specifics because I do not think there is a prescribed day or frequency. But it seems to me that the case for a prescribed day or frequency as a ground for discerning a true church is based on inferences and rules generated by a blueprint hermeneutic rather than stated in the text. On this point, it seems to me the theological hermeneutic is more faithful to the text and its ambiguity (liberty or freedom is another way of saying that) than the blueprint hermeneutic which forces the text to prescribe something the text never explicitly states. The prescription is itself an inference, and it is not a necessary one. Sometimes we create specifics that bind the conscience of others and are made tests of loyalty that are not prescribed by the Lord or explicitly in the Lord's will. That binding of inferences is exactly what Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* condemned (as I noted in the book, pp. 82-83).

Concern #9: Do the "Gospels contribute heavily to the pattern of Scripture" (*Truth Magazine*, p. 99)?

Yes, I think they should (*Searching*, 133-137). The ministry of Jesus is a resource for how we think about the mission and practices of the church. The ministry of Jesus embodies the mission of God in the world, and the mission of Jesus is the mission of the church. So, yes,

the Gospels form and shape the pattern we seek to obey. I stressed this in many ways, including reading the Bible like Jesus reads the Bible.

But the question is more specific than this. The reviewer disputes that the Gospels are not used to discern the pattern in the blueprint hermeneutic. Historically, even going back to Alexander Campbell, the practice of the blueprint hermeneutic draws some lines between the ministry of Jesus and the practices of the church (see *Searching*, 30-33). Part of the context of my discussion of the Gospels is how the distinction between the covenants is understood. In Acts 2 God inaugurates the new covenant and the church begins through the outpouring of the Spirit from the exalted King Jesus. From that point forward, the apostles teach and practice, as the blueprint hermeneutic argues, the pattern that Jesus gave the disciples, especially during the forty days of his resurrection appearances. Jesus, it is sometimes said, showed them the pattern, analogous to how Moses was shown the pattern for the tabernacle on Mount Sinai. Apostolic teaching in Acts and the Epistles, then, defines the pattern for the work and worship of the church, *not the Gospels*.

In the context of a specified *ecclesial* pattern for the work and worship of a congregation rather than the ethical teaching of Jesus (e.g., his teaching on divorce and remarriage, on loving enemies, etc.), *the Gospels have no legal, positivistic, or authoritative function for the practices of the church* unless what is found in the Gospels is repeated in Acts and the Epistles.

Here is a classic example. Jesus instituted the Lord's supper on a Thursday night, but this is not a pattern for the church because Acts and the Epistles only authorize the first day of the week (so the argument goes). Thursday, even though it was the day Jesus gave the bread and fruit of the vine to his disciples, is not an authorized time because the Gospels do not set the pattern for the church. The example of Jesus is insufficient for a Thursday Lord's supper because his actions do not constitute a pattern for the church. Part of the reason they do not is because Jesus was still acting under the old covenant. We practice eating the bread and drinking the fruit of the vine because this is sanctioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 (e.g., something in the Gospels is repeated in the Acts & the Epistles and thus gives it apostolic authority for ecclesial practices).

The Gospels, as the hermeneutic typically proceeds, are insufficient as patterns for the work and worship of the church. The ethical teaching and example of Jesus might apply to individuals (e.g., Jesus heals gentiles outside of the covenant community) but does not apply to the church (who cannot share with people outside of the covenant community according to non-institutional congregations). It is in this sense that I noted that the pattern for the blueprint is only found in Acts & the Epistles; it is not found in the Gospels, according to the typical blueprint hermeneutic in the history of churches of Christ.

Concern #10: *Searching for the Pattern*, as an example of "Progressive Christianity" is all about feelings, experiences, and ultimately, it is all about the following. The movement is

focused on how I can impact people so they stay invested in my material and my podcasts, thus keeping my following?" (*Truth Magazine*, p. 131).

This is disappointing. It assesses my motives rather than my teaching. I hope readers understand how inaccurate it is to describe my book as focusing on "feelings" and "experiences." Perhaps the above concern is largely due to a misunderstanding of what I meant by "gut," and I will assume some responsibility for that potential misunderstanding. At the same time, the book is immersed in the text of Scripture. But I do not see how my book suggests that I am simply catering to a following and keeping people interested in me. The above statement is a projection onto my work rather than arising from it. It imposes a motive which, if I know my heart, is simply false.

I am also accused of postmodernism. I'm not sure what that means except that my perceived emotionalism and fondness for the language of "story" are evidence of it. I previously debunked the emotional charge generated by my use of "gut." The charge based on the use of "story" is strange to me. I would understand it if my story (in terms of my experience) was the basis of my teaching. But "my story" (as in the title of the book) is about my pilgrimage or journey. It is a biblical theme. Whether it is a journey in the wilderness, or the ascent of pilgrims to Mount Zion, or the journey of Christ's life from birth to baptism to death, we all have a story and we are all on a journey. The journey is where we seek to discern the will of the Lord, know it better, understand it more deeply, and grow in love for God and each other. It is the journey to more fully know the love of Christ that passes all knowledge. It is not a postmodern declaration but a desire of the heart for which we pray just as Paul prayed for the Ephesians in 1:15-19 and 3:14-21.

So, my prayer for all my reviewers is that "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give [us] a Spirit of wisdom and revelation as [we] come to know him better." With Paul, "I pray that [we] may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God."

I am grateful we are on this journey from glory to glory until we are fully conformed to the image of Christ, my brothers and sisters!