Searching for the Pattern

John Mark Hicks

> *Because of the proof given by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all.*
>
> 2 Corinthians 9:13 (NASB)

The collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem is a major agenda for Paul at the end of his third missionary journey. Its weight is not only a matter of benevolence but also a sacrificial offering that reveals the unity of the body of Christ as Gentile believers gratefully serve Jewish believers because of the spiritual blessings the Gentiles have received through them (Rom. 15:25–29). This gift carries tremendous theological meaning and significance. It is a gracious ministry of the saints to others across ethnic, geographical, and economic divides. Importantly, Paul characterizes it as an "obedience to [their] confession of the gospel of Christ."

That is an interesting characterization, especially since Paul explicitly refuses to command the Corinthians to give. "I say this," Paul writes, "not as a command" (2 Cor. 8:8). Since it is not a command, why does Paul identify their response as "obedience"? From where does this language of "obedience" arise when Paul has given no command regarding this specific ministry?

The key word, in fact, is not "command," but "testing." Paul does not command, but he does intend "to prove" that their "love…is genuine" (2 Cor. 8:8). Indeed, when they have demonstrated that their love is genuine by contributing to the Jerusalem fund, that "proof" is their "obedience to [their] confession of the gospel of Christ." It is not, then, a command that

demands their obedience but the gospel itself that shapes their lives, and that is a matter of conformity or "obedience" to the gospel of Christ.

Or, to put it another way for the sake of this essay, it is not so much conformity to a set of regulations in a blueprint embedded in the biblical text discerned through a matrix of commands, examples, and inferences, but an embodiment of the gospel of Christ itself. The search for the pattern, then, is not a search for a blueprint for building the true church with which we comply as much as it is an exploration of the pattern of divine activity in Christ by the Spirit. That pattern forms us into disciples of Christ. The pattern is not actually the text itself, but the God whom the text reveals. The pattern is not a synthesis of commands, examples, and inferences that produces a blueprint for the church that does not actually or explicitly appear in Scripture. Rather, the pattern is the drama of divine activity into which we are invited to participate as co-workers with God in the mission of God, particularly participating in the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

These are two different ways of reading Scripture. One seeks a blueprint pattern for the church to reproduce (which is a function of ecclesiology), and the other seeks the pattern of divine action (which is, ultimately, a function of Christology). The former seeks conformity to a set of particulars as a measure of the true church, while the latter seeks the embodiment of the life of God among the disciples of Jesus.

My purpose is twofold. First, I will situate this hermeneutical question in the context of our common history, the history of the Churches of Christ (CoC) and the International Churches of Christ (ICOC). The origins and adjustments of our hermeneutical journey are especially significant for our own self-understanding and, in addition, provide a frame of reference for the

hermeneutical move I think is our next best step in this adventure. Second, I will explore the alternative to a blueprint hermeneutic by paying attention to how Paul reads Scripture in a way that locates us within the story of God with the goal of obedience to the gospel of Jesus.

Searching for Where the Bible Is Silent: An Implicit Exclusive Blueprint

Our common history is illustrated by one of the more famous Restoration Movement slogans: *We speak where the Bible speaks, and we are silent where the Bible is silent.* This 19th-century motto has its own theological history. Though the phrase itself is rather unique in its origins, its hermeneutical significance has a long history.

Reformed Theology calls it the "regulative principle." In essence, we speak as the Bible speaks and thus do what the Bible says, but we will be silent when the Bible is silent and thus not do anything about which the Bible does not speak. In other words, we do what is authorized (where the Bible speaks), and we do not do what is not authorized (where the Bible is silent). This principle was specifically applied to ecclesiology, that is, the rituals and practices of both the assembled church and its governing body.

The regulative principle means that the worship of the assembled people of God and the ministries of that body are governed by Scripture in such a way that one may only practice what Scripture practices, and one cannot introduce something about which Scripture is silent. Only Scripture regulates worship and church governance: we speak where it speaks, and we are silent where it is silent.

The Zurich reformation led by Ulrich Zwingli employed this principle, though Zwingli later regretted the path it took into Anabaptism. In fact, the Swiss Anabaptist Conrad Grebel

illustrates the hermeneutic. As early as 1524, Grebel wrote to Thomas Müntzer, "Whatever we are not taught by clear passages or examples must be regarded as forbidden, just as if it were written: 'This do not.'"[1] In other words, when Scripture is silent, it intends to forbid or exclude. In this case, its silence excluded congregational singing.

This regulative principle was operative among English Presbyterians, Puritans, and Separatists. It was formalized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646): "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture" (XXI.1).

Reformed Theology employed this method in order to identify the true visible church. The difference between Zwingli and Luther illustrates this. While Luther's question was primarily "Where may I find the merciful God?," Zwingli's question was basically "Where can I find the true church?" The search for the true church became a search for models, examples, and commands within the New Testament that would provide a pattern, and only those congregations that conformed to the pattern were true churches. This agenda generated the Puritan movement in England, and the most radical of the Puritans were the Separatists.

The Separatists believed that the Church of England was apostate. Consequently, all faithful Christians must separate from it and organize themselves in independent congregations who followed the pattern set forth by the apostles in the New Testament. Henry Barrowe, who was executed in 1593, is a prime example of this sort of separatism in his book, *A Brief Discovery of the False Church* (published in 1590).

> We seek the fellowship of his faithful and obedient servants and together with them to enter covenant with the Lord and by direction of his Holy Spirit, to proceed to a godly, free, and right choice of ministers and other officers by him ordained to the service of his church…. We seek to establish and obey the ordinances and laws of our savior Christ left by his last will and testament to the governing and guiding of his church, without altering, changing, innovating, or leaving out any of them…. The tabernacle was a figure of the church of the Lord; and the Lord gave straight charge that it should be made according to the pattern showed to Moses in the mount. And so our savior Christ was forty days after his resurrection conversant with his apostles, teaching them those things which concerneth the building of his church and kingdom. And the apostles, according as they received instructions of him, so they built and have left us a pattern. Now these churches [Anglicans] have not framed after this pattern…. Therefore, they be not the churches of Christ…. God commandeth his faithful servants being as yet private men [laity], together to build his church, according to the true pattern of Christ's testament (without altering, innovating, etc.)…for this we have the example of the primitive churches for our patterns and warrant…having received the faith of Christ, received likewise the ordinances of Christ, and continued in the same…. Now seeing we find the form and pattern which Christ has instituted and given most perfect and absolute, such as cannot be corrected or amended by any human divine or ingenuity…neither may those places or actions receive other form but that thereby become adulterate, displeasing to God.[2]

This language is all too familiar to those who learned at the feet of well-intended and godly ministers among Churches of Christ a generation or two ago. Indeed, it is found at the root of the restoration agenda within the Stone-Campbell Movement (the American Restoration Movement).

Alexander Campbell saw the restoration of the ancient order of the church as a means for uniting Christians. This was possible if everyone would commit to reading Scripture the way he envisioned, which included the regulative principle as well as through a grammatical-historical method. This order included such topics as weekly communion, weekly contribution, the use of hymns and prayers in the assembly, congregational leadership in the form of bishops, deacons, and deaconesses, and the independence of congregations, among other particulars.[3]

Nevertheless, Campbell did not believe that the ancient order was essential for fellowship among disciples. It provided a means for visible unity within the body of Christ, but not a measuring stick for who was an authentic Christian. When accused of producing a new creed, he responded:

> I object to creeds and confessions because made authoritative "tests of religious character and terms of christian communion;" and never can you, "for the same reason," object to the essays I have written on the "ancient order of things," because I have never made them, hinted that they should be, or used them as a test of christian character or terms of christian communion.[4]

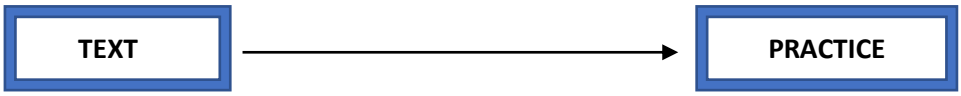
Nevertheless, the practice of the ancient order does "bring the disciples individually and collectively, to walk in the faith, and in the commandments of the Lord and Saviour, as presented in that blessed volume," and provides "all that is necessary to the happiness and usefulness of Christians."[5]

The search for the ancient order is deeply rooted in the Reformed tradition, particularly the regulative principle. Campbell was the fountainhead for the Restoration Movement, and Churches of Christ drew upon his hermeneutical practices to make their case for the ancient order in the 19th and 20th centuries. The following eleven points summarize the hermeneutical assumptions and practices that shaped the agenda of Churches of Christ as they sought to restore the New Testament church. I will not take the time to explain each, but I trust they will resonate with those of us who are steeped in our theological and hermeneutical heritage.

1. There is an ancient *order* prescribed by God.
2. The order is *uniformly* practiced (or corrected to conform) to the order in the NT.
3. The positivistic dimensions ("order") of Christianity are *clearly* defined.
4. Texts are *timelessly* normative *unless otherwise specified or adjudicated*.
5. The biblical text alone *exclusively* authorizes the order.
6. The order is exclusively found in *Acts and the Epistles*.[6]

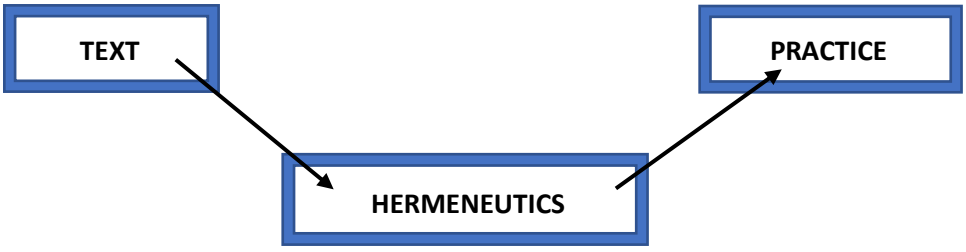
7. Command, example, and inference are the *primary tools* of discernment.[7]
8. A biblical *proposition* may function as an *autonomous datum*.
9. C*ontextless* data, as historical facts, may be linked in order to generate new, inferred truth.
10. Inferred new truth *fills in the gaps* of the explicit order in Acts and the Epistles.[8]
11. That through *induction* (accumulation of data) and *deduction* (inferred new truths) the ancient order emerges from the pages of the New Testament as a clear blueprint for the restoration of the primitive church in the present.

This approach to the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, seeks to reproduce the practices of the church in the New Testament. Traditionally, we have approached the text as static and flat: we practice what we read.



However, to put it simply, (1) we do not practice everything we read, (2) we have debated and divided over what to practice, and (3) this method risks reproducing 1st-century culture rather than the kingdom of God.

The fact that Scripture was not written to us, though it was written for us, requires something more nuanced, since we do not intent to mistake ancient culture(s) as divine prescription and reproduce it in the 21st century. In other words, a sense of historical distance recognizes a middle hermeneutical step in the process of interpretation and discernment.



This middle step is the process by which we discern God's call upon us through reading Scripture. It functions like a lens to see the text more clearly. So, it is important to ask: What

sort of lenses are we wearing when we seek to discern God's call? What are we expecting to discover when we read Scripture? For what kind of pattern are we searching?

Traditionally, we have read the Bible searching for an exclusive, mostly implicit, but nevertheless precise blueprint for "doing church" right. We assumed every command (example and inference) was a timeless prescription unless the text gave explicit reasons for thinking otherwise. We assumed that part of the function of Scripture was to provide everything necessary for identifying and executing the blueprint revealed explicitly and implicitly in the text. Consequently, we deduced "new truth" from Scripture because we expected Scripture to answer particular questions. We deduced these truths by juxtaposing one proposition in Acts (Acts 20:7) with another proposition in Paul (1 Cor. 16:1–2) in order to conclude that weekly communion was part of the prescribed blueprint for a faithful congregation.

In my own experience of Churches of Christ, a weekly voluntary offering was regarded as a command, and if the assembled church did not have this "act of worship" as part of its assembly, it was not a true church. Men—and only men—would stand at the table and say: "Separate and apart from the Lord's Supper, we are commanded to give every first day of the week as we have been prospered." This weekly collection for the church treasury was regarded as part of the blueprint that defined a true church.

Historically, Campbell identified "fellowship" in Acts 2:42 as part of the ancient order, which, according to his understanding, was the sharing of monetary resources among disciples.[9] Accepting this point, Allen reflected the hermeneutical mindset of the regulative principle by suggesting that "we may presume to find some law regulating the observance of this duty, and the object for which done."[10] Austen argued that "the laws which govern" the contribution

must identify "time, place, and circumstance," and he identified this as the first day of the week, in an assembled church, and as God has prospered the worshipper based, in part, on 1 Corinthians 16:1–4.[11] Then Turner followed up by asking the question: "Does the New Testament determine the elements of public worship?" He identified "five acts of public worship," which are teaching, singing, praying, contributing, and communing at the table.[12] In this way, the "five acts of public worship" determined the legitimacy of an assembled church and provided an exclusive blueprint to which nothing must be added or subtracted as an element of worship.

1 Corinthians 16:1–4 was the primary text for this prescribed act of worship in the assembled church. Quoted almost every Sunday in the congregations in which I grew up and served over the years, it was the pattern. The argument went something like this:

1. Whatever Paul teaches, he teaches everywhere (1 Cor. 4:17).
2. God commanded the Corinthians to give every first day of the week as an act of worship in the public assembly (1 Cor. 16:2).
3. Therefore, "this is God's plan for financing his work. God's plan is the best plan, and God's plan is the *only right* plan."[13]

Corinth's voluntary commitment to make a one-time contribution to the Jerusalem church became, *through the lens of a blueprint hermeneutic*, a divine command to make weekly contributions to support the congregational treasury.

Searching Where the Bible Speaks: Obeying the Commands of God

While Churches of Christ attempted to practice the motto "speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent," the International Churches of Christ came to embrace only the first phrase of the motto. Or, perhaps better, they came to understand the silence of the Bible as freedom. While this move signaled a significant rift between Churches of Christ and the

Discipling Movement, it opened the doors for change, as Steve Kinnard noted in his paper delivered at the 2022 Teacher's Conference. "Kip" McKean's 1993 speech, entitled "Wine, Women, and Song," turned silence into permission and freedom.[14] The ICOC became more inclusive in the use of women's gifts in the assembly (including women baptizing women), permitted the drinking of alcohol, and approved the use of instrumental music in the assembly: wine, women, and song. Silence became permissive rather than prohibitive. Silence meant freedom. Instead of using Scripture as an exclusive blueprint pattern (being silent where the Bible is silent), Scripture was now read in search of normative commands.

The ICOC (and several, if not many, contemporary Churches of Christ, as well as many Evangelical churches) abandoned the Reformed regulative principle but nevertheless retained the positivistic understanding of Scripture's nature. Scripture is read to identify the essential commands that constitute a true church. The search for a pattern continues, but the pattern is found in the construction of a true church from the New Testament's explicit directives rather than from its silence.

This works differently in various communities and circumstances. I do not know how this plays out in the ICOC, but I imagine it is similar to other traditions with the same commitment that includes a wide swath of conservative readers of Scripture from Evangelicals to many Churches of Christ. There is a freedom that arises from a liberation from the presumed prohibitive nature of Scripture's silence, and there is a security that comes from rooting practices in the explicit speech of Scripture. While freedom is expanded, the search remains one that looks for a blueprint of directives (especially commands and examples). In other

words, it is still a search to reproduce the New Testament church, even though the New Testament's silence is no longer regarded as exclusive.

The hidden assumption that drives this agenda is: *The commands in the New Testament are timeless prescriptions unless there is some specific and clearly identifiable reason to think otherwise*. Some of these are quite easy to discern. For example, in 2 Timothy 5:13, Paul wanted Timothy to bring his cloak and books to him (it is an imperative!), and none would suggest that command is timeless and universally prescriptive.

But not all cases are that simple. They range from the nature of the prescribed holy kiss to the wearing of a head covering to going to court before the nations. These kinds of examples could be multiplied, but I will focus on the point by looking at 1 Timothy. Are the explicit directives in 1 Timothy timeless and universal such that they function as part of the normative blueprint for faithful disciples?

Here is one way to illustrate the point.

1 Timothy 2:9–10	**1 Timothy 2:12**
Paul prohibits women from wearing gold.	Paul prohibits women from teaching men.
Whatever Paul teaches is timeless.	Whatever Paul teaches is timeless.
Therefore, wearing gold is forbidden.	Therefore, women are forbidden to teach men.

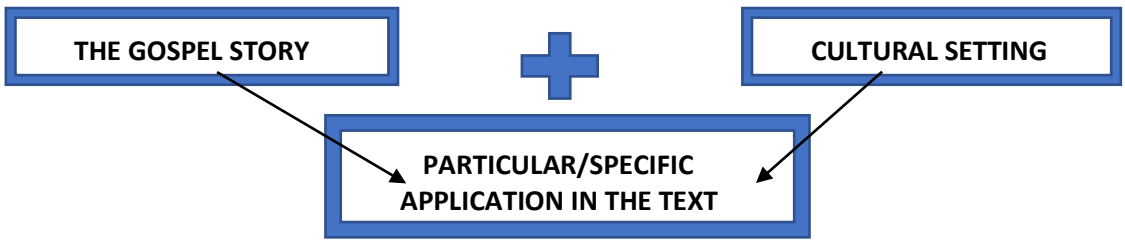
To be sure, context is important. And there may be some reason in the context to discern a difference between these two texts. For example, 2:9–10 may be dependent upon cultural practices that associate ungodly attitudes and intentions with particular styles of dress, while 2:12 is dependent upon a particular way of reading Genesis 2–3.

Nevertheless, it illustrates the problem. Whatever one might say about the conclusions of these syllogisms, some sort of hermeneutical process is in play in order to discern a

difference between them or judge them the same, or whether either syllogism comes to a legitimate conclusion. Moreover, 1 Timothy provides other examples of specific instructions about which an interpreter must make some sort of judgment—is this a timeless universal, or is it situationally shaped by the cultural and practical questions present in the Ephesian house churches? Here is a sample list.

1. "I desire…the men should pray, lifting up holy hands" (1 Tim. 2:8)?
2. "Let a widow be put [imperative] on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and [a one man woman]" (1 Tim. 5:9).
3. "she must be well attested for her good works…washed the saints' feet"(5:10).
4. "refuse [imperative] to put younger widows on the list" (5:11).
5. "I desire younger widows marry, bear children and manage" their homes (5:14).
6. "Let elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor," which refers to remuneration, "The laborer deserves to be paid" (5:17–18).
7. "No longer drink [imperative] only water, but take [imperative] a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent aliments" (5:23).
8. "Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard [imperative] their masters as worthy of all honor" (6:1).

My point is not to resolve how to read and apply these texts. Rather, it is that the application of these texts and their significance for the contemporary church is not simply reproduction or replication, as if there were a one-to-one correspondence between the needs/context of the Ephesian house churches and the needs/context of the contemporary church. Instead, 1 Timothy (as in all Paul's epistles) addresses the situation of the Ephesian house churches in their cultural setting with the gospel of Jesus the Messiah.



This recognizes that the letter was not written to us, but it nevertheless has value for us (or, it was written for us). Locating where that value resides and what it means for us is a hermeneutical question.

As we read 1 Timothy (and the rest of Scripture), it is important to recognize the historical distance between the reader and the text, as well as the situational difference between the audience addressed in the text and the contemporary reader. We cannot assume every directive is universal and timeless. On the contrary, every directive is situated, located in a specific context, and bears a significance for the original audience. It does not necessarily have the same significance for contemporary readers because we are located in a different situation. It is a mistake, it seems to me, to assume that the directives of the text should automatically function as parts of a blueprint out of which we construct the whole.

This is not to say that we should reject speaking where the Bible speaks. On the contrary, we ought to speak where the Bible speaks, but we can only do so when we ask what the Bible is saying and how might it communicate that message to readers historically and situationally distant from the text itself. In other words, what is the actual message of the Bible? Perhaps that is where we should speak rather than constructing a blueprint from its data that may, in fact, obstruct or shroud its authentic message.

Searching for God Within the Story: Thinking with Scripture

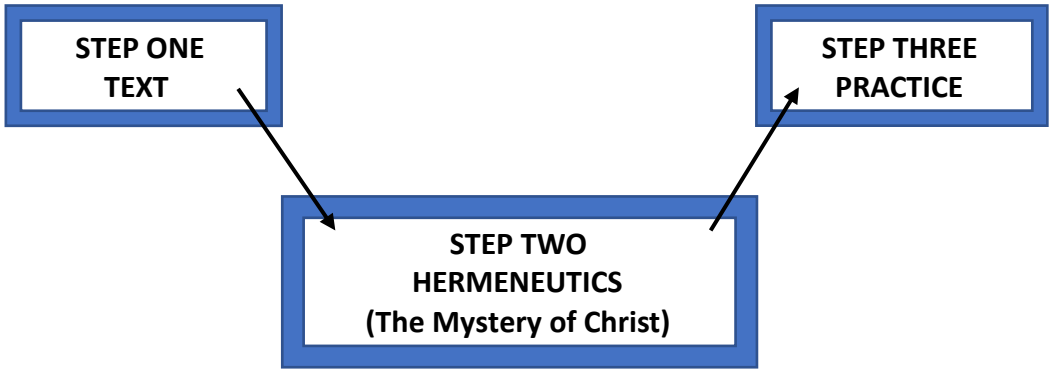
Given that the Bible was not written to us and we cannot automatically reproduce what we read as if it were a legal handbook or a collection of commands to be extracted and reconfigured, then in what meaningful sense is the Bible written for us?

Essentially, it is written for us because we and the original readers belong to the same narrative. We share the same theological identity as partners with God in the mission of God. We share the same story. Consequently, "the words of Scripture sound from the page in the present moment and address the community of believers with authority."[15]

But where is this authority located? Is it found in the constructed blueprint? Is it found in a collection of commands and propositions? I suggest it is found in the narrative of divine activity through Christ by the power of the Spirit. The pattern we seek is found in the actual work of God. The pattern is God's mighty acts in Creation, Israel, and Jesus, or more specifically the pattern is the activity of God, which finds its fullness in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus the Messiah. Or, to put it most simply, the pattern is Jesus.

This is, in fact, the purpose of Scripture: to unfold the narrative of God's saving activity in the world. I understand that is a broad claim. So, let me focus it through Ephesians 3:2–6.

> For surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.



The mystery of Christ, in other language, is the gospel or the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah, as Paul's parallelism in Romans 16:25 suggests.

> Now to God who is able to strengthen you,
> according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
> according to the revelation of the mystery
> that was kept secret for long ages.

Through reading Paul, we are able to understand the mystery of Christ, and with that understanding we are empowered, through the strength of the Spirit, to embody or live out that mystery in our lives and congregations. In other words, this is a three-step path. God revealed the mystery of Christ to Paul. We read Paul to know that mystery, who is Christ (Col. 2:2). Then we put the mystery of Christ into practice.

God, through Jesus and in the Spirit, rescues the world, and Paul calls this *the mystery of Christ* (cf. Col. 4:3). God elects, redeems, and saves because of the obedience and faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, who is now the savior of all people through the Spirit who indwells, sanctifies, strengthens, and gifts God's people. This is the teaching of Ephesians 1–3, and whoever reads this is able to *understand the mystery of Christ*. Paul, then, draws on the resources of this mystery—the mighty acts of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit—to call believers to live worthy of their calling and in loving forbearance with each other in the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:1–3).

Specifically, *we read the Bible to learn the heart, nature, and work of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit*. This provides guidance, wisdom, and direction for the people of God who want to imitate Jesus, the Son of God, in their lives and congregations through the strength of the Holy Spirit. This guidance, wisdom, and direction is based on God's identity, heart, and mighty acts.

Theological readers seek to *make explicit the deep and embedded theological reasoning* assumed by the text as part of a *coherent narrative of God's work through Christ in the Spirit* such that the text becomes part of the reader's framework of beliefs.[16] Consequently, theological readers seek to understand *how their story fits into the theological narrative of the text* rather than how the text fits into some larger story. Theological readers do not fuse these horizons of the text's story and our story, but locate themselves within the story of the text. Scripture, or more particularly the narrative of God's activity, is the world we enter in order to discern how to participate in the life and mission of God, which is the life and mission of Jesus.

We read Scripture to understand the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:3–4). This mystery is the gospel (good news) of God reconciling the world through Christ in the Spirit, or the mystery is Christ (Col. 1:26; 2:2), or the "gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ" (Rom. 16:25). Another way of saying this is something like: *It is the "pattern" of divine activity in creation and re-creation that redeems the world*. The guiding norm for the church is not what the early church practiced *per se*, but the story of God in Christ through the Spirit that forms and transforms people and communities of disciples into the image of God for the sake of participating in the life and mission of God.

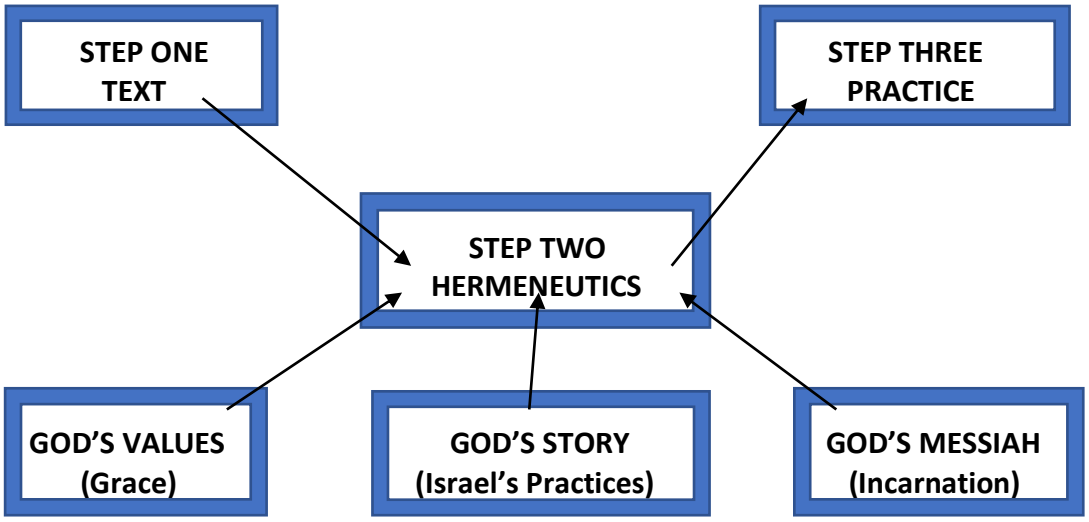
Consequently, we read these texts to discern the theological message rather than reproducing the details driven by the social location of the text. We seek to participate in the theological narrative through our own embodiment of the story of God in Christ.

As we approach the text, we ask how it reflects the missional situation of its original audience. We discern what God is doing in and through this text, and how the gospel shapes

the invitation in the text. We want to know how we receive and execute ("perform") the divine drama in our situation.

This is how Paul does theology, how he applies Scripture, and invites readers into the dramatic narrative of God's activity in the world. Permit me to illustrate this by returning to the question of generosity and its regulation that I noted earlier in the paper.

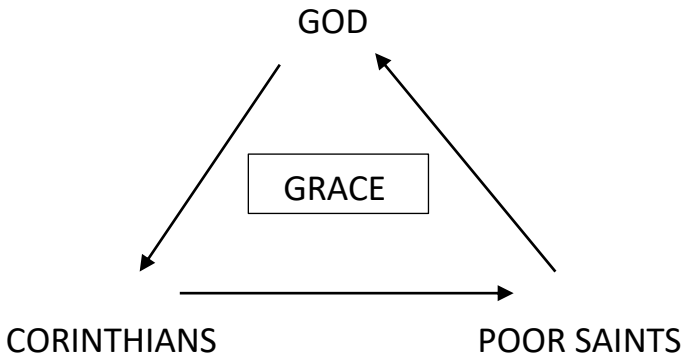
If the pattern for ecclesial generosity is not a prescribed weekly giving in the assembled body every first day of the week, what is the pattern for sharing our resources as disciples of Jesus? Some have looked for regulations because they thought a blueprint for church practices was embedded in the text and, consequently, they generated regulations. However, if the pattern is God's own activity, what sort of search do we employ? Paul provides a stellar example of how to think *within* the drama and *with* Scripture in 2 Corinthians 8–9.



One of the most significant words in 2 Corinthians 8–9, if not the most significant, is the Greek word ca¿riß (*charis*), which means grace. Its ten occurrences in these two chapters are the highest concentration in the New Testament.

- the grace (*charis*) of God given to the churches of Macedonia (8:1)
- the privilege (*charis*) of sharing in this ministry to the saints (8:4)
- complete this generous (*charis*) undertaking among you (8:6)
- as you excel in everything…excel also in this generous (*charis*) undertaking (8:7)
- for you know the generous (*charis*) act of our Lord Jesus Christ (8:9)
- Thanks (*charis*) be to God (8:16)
- while administering this generous (*charis*) undertaking (8:19)
- God is able to provide you with every blessing (*charis*) in abundance (9:8)
- the surpassing grace (*charis*) God…has given you (9:14).
- Thanks (*charis*) be to God for his indescribable gift (9:15).

These statements provide several different angles on the grace of God. God gives grace (2 Cor. 8:1, 9; 9:8, 14), the Corinthians administer the grace of God in their ministry to others (2 Cor. 8:4, 6, 7, 17), and all, including those who receive this ministry, give grace (thanks) to God (2 Cor. 8:16; 9:15).



Paul roots his invitation to participate in the collection for the Jerusalem saints in God's grace. He reminds them that (1) God has graced them, (2) they are the instruments of God's grace to the poor, and (3) their ministry will result in grace (thanksgiving) to God as well as God's glory. God's own grace moves the Corinthians to act graciously. They should "finish the task" because they are graced people through whom God graces others with the result that they will grace God.

Paul does not ground his call to share in a command or a pattern of church practices. Rather, he grounds it in God's own gracious giving. We give because God has given to us, and we give because we want to be like God. We respond to God's grace by doing what God does. Grace is no static command like a specified amount on a specified day but an internal dynamic at work in the scheme of redemption and in our lives so that we might imitate and glorify God. Paul uses a principle profoundly grounded in God's own identity and actions in order to call the Corinthians to fully live out the grace they have received.

Paul did not command or expect conformity to a blueprint, but called the Corinthians *to conform to the gospel of Jesus Christ*. If we gratefully receive God's grace, we will then cheerfully share it. This is Paul's approach in 2 Corinthians 8–9.

While the theological dynamic of grace undergirds Paul's invitation for the Corinthians to participate in the collection, he also appeals to Scripture *at least* three times to move them to act. First, God's gift of manna in the wilderness teaches the principle of fair balance. The needy are supplied out of the abundance of the wealthy so that everyone has what they need. Paul quotes Exodus 16:18 in 2 Corinthians 8:15 as an example of God's intent that grounds Paul's call for shared resources so that there is equity within the body of Christ. God supplies manna (resources) for the sake of the community, and the community shares them so that all needs are met. The instruction to gather what one needs arises out of the divine intent that one person not have too much and another person not have too little. The way God supplied the needs of Israel is a model for how we supply each other's needs. What moves God should move us, that is, a grace that meets the needs of people. God is our model, and we see God's intent through the practices of Israel.

Second, Paul quotes Psalm 112:9 in 2 Corinthians 9:9. Psalm 112 blesses the righteous person. At the same time, Psalm 111 praises God's own identity. The righteous person of Psalm 112 is the one who imitates the God who is described in Psalm 111. Psalm 112 mirrors Psalm 111. In this way, the root idea is doing what God does or becoming like God in our lives and practices. Just as God is generous, so the righteous person shares generously with the poor. God, in fact, supplies the seed or wealth which we, in imitation of God, scatter among the poor.

Third, Deuteronomy 15 lurks in the background as well. Just as God had blessed Israel so that there should be no needy among them, the Corinthians should give generously without a grudging heart (Deut. 15:10; 2 Cor. 9:7). Paul uses the language of Deuteronomy 15. Just like Israel, God intends the church to be a place where there are no needy, and Paul invites the Corinthians to participate in the practices of Israel by continuing that intent in the present.

In order to ground his appeal to the Corinthians to finish the task, Paul (1) employs the theological dynamic of grace, (2) uses Israel's Scripture as a way to understand God's own identity and call, and also (3) appeals to the foundational act of God in Jesus the Messiah. "Thanks be to God," Paul writes, for God's "indescribable gift!" (2 Cor. 9:15). The gift, of course, is God's Messiah, Jesus, the Son of God.

In 2 Corinthians 8:8–9, Paul explicitly grounded his appeal in the gracious work of God in Jesus and how their response would test their integrity and the sincerity of their love. In effect, he wants to know if they really believe the Faith they confess. Paul does not command the Corinthians. Since Jesus himself acted out of grace rather than obligation, Paul wants the Corinthians to do the same. He wants them to imitate Jesus.

"You know," Paul wrote, "the generous act (*charis*) of our Lord Jesus Christ." The grace of Jesus is his incarnation, that is, the Word of God became flesh. Or, as Paul described it, "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor." The incarnation is Paul's paradigm, and this is God's indescribable gift. *This is the pattern*. God's self-giving in the incarnation is the model or pattern for Christian life and practice.

Conclusion

When Paul asks the Corinthians to "finish the task," he grounds his appeal in God's multi-faceted grace, the practices of Israel that bear witness to God's own life, and the incarnation of the Word of God. In essence, *Paul asks the Corinthians to imitate God*. This is the basis of Paul's mission for the poor saints in Jerusalem. At every point, Paul roots that mission in the identity, grace, and love of God.

Perhaps another way to say this is to recognize that *Paul's hermeneutical step two does not find its pattern in some detailed and exclusive blueprint for church practices but in the pattern of God's mighty acts in Israel and Jesus the Messiah*. Instead of applying a blueprint for church practices to Corinth as if he were shown an ideal pattern for how churches must conduct their Sunday assembly, Paul resources the workings of God's grace in providence and salvation, Israel's history, and the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. *The pattern is the activity of God, which finds its fullness in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus the Messiah*.

Ultimately, the "symbolic world" of the narrative, as Richard B. Hays puts it, shapes how we discern the witness of various principles, paradigms, and rules within the text of Scripture.[17] Whether we share our resources or not depends on how deeply we entrust ourselves to the

gospel. Through faith, we share our resources and thus embody the gospel. In this way, as Paul wrote, others will "glorify God by [our] obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ" (2 Cor. 9:13).

Notes

[1] "Letter to Müntzer," in *The Protestant Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 124.
[2] Barrowe, "A Brief Discoverie of the False Church," in *The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1590–1591*, ed. Leland H. Carlson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).
[3] This is articulated through over 32 articles from 1825 to 1829 in the *Christian Baptist* entitled "Restoration of the Ancient Order."
[4] Alexander Campbell, "Replication No. II. To Spencer Clack," *Christian Baptist* 5, no. 2 (3 September 1827), 370. The pagination comes from the edition by D. S. Burnet published as a single book (St. Louis: Christian Publishing Company, 1889).
[5] Alexander Campbell, "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things—No. II," *Christian Baptist* 2, no. 7 (7 February 1825), 128.
[6] Alexander Campbell, "Kingdom of God," in *Christian System* (Pittsburgh: Forrester & Campbell, 1839), 163: the laws of the kingdom "are not to be sought after in Genesis, nor in the antecedent economy. Neither are the statutes and laws of the Christian kingdom to be sought for in the Jewish scriptures, nor antecedent to the day of Pentecost; except so far as our Lord himself, during his life time, propounded the doctrine of his reign."
[7] Two examples: (1) "To warrant the holding of a doctrine or practice it must be shown that it has the affirmative or positive sanction of this standard, and not merely that it is not condemned by it. Either it must be actually asserted or necessarily implied or it must be positively backed by some divinely approved precedent, otherwise it is not even an item in Christianity, and is therefore, when it is attempted to be made a part of it, criminal and wrong" (Moses Lard, "Instrumental Music and Dancing," *Lard's Quarterly* 1, no. 3 [March 1864], 330) and (2) "I have been taught all my life that the Scriptures teach 'by precept by approved apostolic example and by necessary inference,' and it is certain that this is correct…. I am sure it is safe to do as they did; I am not certain it is safe to do any other way" (James A. Harding, "Laying on of Hands—The Grounds of Unity," *The Way* 3, no. 26 [26 September 1901], 203).
[8] "If asked to specify the precise province of deduction in this method, we reply it is twofold: first, to verify the conclusions or generalizations of induction; and secondly, to conduct to new truth embraced in those conclusions." (J.S. Lamar, *The Organon of Scripture* [Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1860], 181.)
[9] Alexander Campbell, "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things—No. X.: The Fellowship," *Christian Baptist* 3, no. 6 (2 January 1826), 209–211.
[10] Albert Allen, "The Contribution," *Lard's Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (October 1864), 69.
[11] George Austen, "The Contribution," *Lard's Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (April 1865), 264.
[12] H. Turner, "Does the New Testament Determine the Elements of Public Worship," *Christian Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (January 1870), 250–258.
[13] Roy Deaver, "The Corinthian Collection—God's Financial Plan for His Church," in *Studies in 1 Corinthians*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Pearl Street Church of Christ, 1982), 269.
[14] David Pocta, "Thomas Wayne 'Kip' McKean: 'Saint or Scoundrel—Normalizing Extreme Perspectives on a Foundational Figure in the International Church of Christ," *Τελειος/Teleios: A Journal of Christian Holistic Spirituality* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2021), 132. For McKean's speech, see *UpsideDown* 3 (January 1994), 19–21.
[15] Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 165.

[16] I found Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) helpful in thinking through these perspectives, and some of my language is indebted to him.
[17] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 291–312.