

ACTS in the Restoration Movement

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The Bible is a book of many genres: history, poetry, prophecy, epistles, apocalypse, etc. But the biblical books which are most foundational are the books of narrative. In the narrative books, we learn about God through his deeds, watching them through the eyes of those who were there. Great acts of God like the creation, the exodus, the resurrection of Christ are the moments which are referred to again and again in scripture as the foundation for Christian doctrine. One could say that the heart of the Bible is its narratives, and without them, the rest of Scripture would fail to resonate.

Just as the historical/narrative five books of the Pentateuch provide the foundation for the Old Testament, the historical/narrative four Gospels and Acts provide the foundation for the rest of the New Testament. For the Christian interpreter, these five books form the hinge around which the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, revolve. We neglect them at our own theological peril.

One of the contributions of the American Restoration (or Stone/Campbell) Movement, which gave rise to the churches of Christ, has been to rescue the Book of Acts from obscurity. This movement sought to bring about the unity of the Christian denominations by leading them away from the creeds and back to the Bible as the only religious authority. The way to unify the sects was to convince them all to aim at the same bull's-eye: The restoration of the church to the way it was when the apostles lived. And, as the second-generation leaders of the Movement discovered, the Book of Acts was the narrative treasure chest where these patterns for restoration could be found.

So, for over 150 years, Acts has served as the key book for churches of Christ. It is where we find the scriptural impetus for many of our distinctive teachings, from baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38) to weekly observance of the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7). Through the generations our ministers, teachers, and scholars have crawled through its text like prospectors, searching for

insight into the worship and teaching of the first-century church. It has also become a battleground, as our fellowship has fractured over exactly which apostolic examples are normative, and which are not. Much ink has been spilled in struggling with the question of how the authority of biblical examples functions. We came to the text with questions about church organization and worship, and about what people must do to be saved. And, as with most exegetical quests, we found what we were looking for.

But, was the Book of Acts intended to serve as a pattern for the church for two millennia? Are we handling God's word correctly when we read the Book of Acts as if it were a legal document, probing it for commands, examples, and necessary inferences? Or have we dissected it to death and missed its true message? Why did Luke write this book anyway? How did it function in the early church, and how can we apply it faithfully to our lives today?

In this discussion we will examine: (1) The development of Acts as the canon-within-the-canon for churches of Christ, (2) The theme of Acts, as understood in the Restoration movement, and, to a lesser extent, (3) The use of Acts as a pattern for church organization and worship, and the plan of salvation, in the context of the inductive hermeneutical method.

Thomas Campbell and Unity Through Hermeneutics

In his *Declaration and Address* (1809), Thomas Campbell lamented the rancorous divisions that plagued Protestantism. And he suggested that the key to a unified Christendom was a hermeneutic of patternism:

Were we, then, in our Church constitution and managements, to *exhibit a complete conformity to the apostolic Church*, would we not be, in that respect, as perfect as Christ intended we should be?... Who would not willingly *conform to the original pattern* laid down in the New Testament, for this happy purpose [of Christian unity]... to *conform to the model and adopt the practice of the primitive Church*, expressly exhibited in the New Testament (emphasis added).

The reason division existed, according to Campbell, was the insertion of human opinions and human inventions into the creeds of the churches. He argued that this ought not be done, instead believers should only be expected to follow the “express terms” and “approved precedents” of Scripture.

Thomas Campbell’s plan was that, when people disagreed on a biblical teaching, they should practice forbearance and treat each other lovingly as brothers. No one had a right to exclude anyone else based on doctrinal matters that were not “expressly taught” in scripture. But here we find the key weakness in Campbell’s plan. How do we determine which Bible teachings are “expressly taught?” One person’s clear teaching can be another person’s obscure inference. And how do we know which precedents are “approved?” Which apostolic examples are divinely mandated, and which are merely expressions of first century Palestinian culture or temporary expediencies? There is no clear answer to these questions, and the history of Campbell’s movement would soon become a history of battles and divisions over precedents, inferences, and examples.

Thomas Campbell gave us another hermeneutical legacy in his *Declaration and Address*: an approach that looks at the New Testament as if it were a legal document.

...the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church, and as perfect a rule for the particular duties of its members, as the Old Testament was for the worship, discipline, and government of the Old Testament Church, and the particular duties of its members.

The problem is that no part of the New Testament is written in the form of a legal document. What we have are narrative stories about Jesus and the early Christians, a collection of letters from Paul and others (which basically amounts to reading other people’s mail), a couple of sermons, and an apocalyptic vision. There is nothing in the New Testament that corresponds to the legal codes found in the Old Testament (such as Leviticus). I would suggest that this is intentional and significant. Christianity is a completely different organism from Judaism. Whereas the writings of Moses could properly be called “Law,” the New Testament is a completely different genre. It is

“Gospel.” It is good news. As Paul argues extensively throughout his letters, we Christians have been freed from Law. We are now led by the witness of the Spirit in imitation of Christ, for “the letter [of law] kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

When we treat the New Testament as a “constitution” or rule book for the church, we are not only asking it to do something it wasn’t written to do. We are also retrogressing to a view of God and a view of Scripture that Christ and his apostles asked us to transcend. The Law was exclusive, while the Gospel is inclusive. The Law is constricting, while the Gospel is liberating. The Law was judgmental, while the Gospel was forgiving. With our legalistic reading of scripture, it’s little wonder that our brotherhood came to be known as the exclusivist self-righteous sect that thought they were the only ones going to heaven.

Thomas Campbell’s motives were good. The unity of Christians should be a top priority. His recommendation that we not make matters of inference or opinion into matters of fellowship was also good. It’s a key ingredient in Christian unity. But, his program for unity was undermined by his patternistic legalism. Sure, if the New Testament pattern was perfectly clear, it would have worked. But there is no New Testament book of Leviticus. The Book of Christ is not a legal document. To extract a clear pattern from the New Testament requires a very specialized form of hermeneutic. What method can one consistently use to separate the optional patterns from the obligatory ones? When are examples binding, and how do we make proper inferences? Thomas’ son Alexander and his followers in the second generation of the movement set themselves to figure out just these problems.

Thomas’ son Alexander continued his work. From 1825 to 1829, he wrote a series of thirty articles in his *Christian Baptist* magazine regarding the “Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things.” In these articles, he spelled out how he thought the practices of contemporary denominations differed from the New Testament pattern – a pattern found largely in the Book of Acts.

For Alexander Campbell, however, Acts was not the “key to the New Testament,” as with later Disciples. As Eugene Boring’s insightful survey has shown, Campbell was much more

interested in the epistles, especially the book of Hebrews.¹ But already present in Campbell's thought is the idea that the New Testament begins in Acts chapter two, since "everything else in the Bible, including even the Gospels, had been preparatory and preliminary" to the revelation of the Kingdom (i.e., the church, which began at Pentecost) (Boring 72).

The fourth of the Restoration Movement founding fathers after Stone and the Campbells is Walter Scott, a traveling preacher remembered most today for his "five finger exercise," which serves as a mnemonic device for how one becomes a Christian.² For his theology, Scott relied heavily on the conversion stories in Acts as models for what people must do to have their sins forgiven.

Boring points out that Scott's emphasis on the book of Acts was "of major significance for the developing Disciples theology." As the movement's premier evangelist, Scott found Acts to be most useful because it was the only book that contained stories of conversion to Christ. For anyone who wanted to make converts, Acts became the book to know.³ It was McGarvey in the next generation who would make Acts "the canon-within-the-canon *par excellence*" for the Restoration Movement (Boring 50).

Excursus A: The *Organon* and the Inductive Method

Before discussion McGarvey and his commentaries, we'll take a brief look at the underlying hermeneutical method that shaped them. We have already seen that the first-generation leaders of

¹As Boring points out, "Acts (like the Gospels) is narrative. Revelation is apocalyptic vision. Within the New Testament, only the Epistles are the kind of propositional, didactic discourse which best serves as the raw material for Campbell's kind of theology." He notes Campbell's lack of interest in Acts by noting the book's meager three-page introduction in Campbell's *Living Oracles* translation of the New Testament, and how Campbell's intro has "nothing about Acts as a model for how to become a Christian" (73).

²Scott's original exercise included six points, three steps which humans must take and three that God would take in response: (1) faith, (2) repentance, (3) baptism, (4) forgiveness of sins, (5) gift of the Holy Spirit, and (6) eternal life. By the time of Isaac Errett's *First Principles* (1869), the five steps had evolved into the five steps many of us still know today: (1) hear, (2) believe, (3) repent, (4) confess, (5) be baptized, and the sixth, continue to walk in the commandments of Jesus. God's role in the process of salvation had become edited out.

³Compare Isaac Errett's statement that when teaching the unbeliever, Acts is "the most important book in the Bible" (Boring 127).

the Restoration Movement hoped to unite Christianity by restoring the pattern of the church found in the New Testament. But how is one to extract this pattern from the New Testament narratives and epistles? Campbell's student at Bethany College, J. S. Lamar, believed he had the answer.

Lamar, like Campbell, was very much impressed with the "inductive" scientific method as described in Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*. They were impressed with the unanimity found among scientists and the exciting discoveries that were being made using the scientific method. Why not then, they reasoned, use this method as a form of rigorous inquiry into the biblical texts? Lamar's rationale, as stated in his *Organon of Scripture* (1860), is this:

God has spread out before his children two great volumes – the Book of Nature, and the Book of Revelation... Our Proposition is, that the same method should be pursued in the interpretation of both volumes (187).

In the inductive method, "facts," or individual units of data concerning a particular biblical topic are gathered from their individual contexts, analyzed, then synthesized to form a coherent doctrinal statement. This doctrinal formulation can then be used deductively for subsequent investigations. Lamar illustrated it with his metaphor of building the temple: the individual stones (representing biblical "facts") are scattered about all over the ground. But, a good contractor, inspecting the stones and the markings found on them, is able to assemble them in exactly the right way to build the temple (of Christian doctrine) (39-42).

However, this approach has been criticized for being too "atomistic" (taking these biblical "facts" out of context, and using them as proof-texts), and for abusively "leveling" the Bible (treating all facts as equally important, and ignoring the various types of genre in which they are found). As Stephen Broyles says, "The Bible is not an assortment of prefabricated blocks on their way to becoming a temple of truth. It is itself the temple... It is not the interpreter's task to erect the

temple, but to explore it.”⁴

In 1888, Lamar’s *Organon* was followed and superseded by D. R. Dungan’s *Hermeneutics: A Text-Book*, which also extolled inductive hermeneutics and even argued that the Bible teaches this method.⁵ Dungan emphasized the importance of approved precedents, i.e., imitating the examples of behavior in the first-century churches.⁶ He also taught that “inference may be used legitimately” in interpreting the Bible (91), though he doesn’t seem to give inferences the same weight of authority as approved precedents.

With these books, the seeds were sown that would become the traditional church of Christ hermeneutic: that the Bible authorizes certain practices by command, example, and necessary inference.⁷ This threefold hermeneutic (sometimes abbreviated CEI) would become key in twentieth-century controversies, such as those over instrumental music, multiple communion cups,

⁴From Stephen E. Broyles, “James Sanford Lamar and the Substructure of Biblical Interpretation in the Restoration Movement,” *Restoration Quarterly* 29.3 (1987), 143-51. Broyles furthermore says,

When one views the Bible as a vast assortment of phenomena, spread out, "it may be, in some confusion" (p. 42), one does not so much read it consecutively for its own sake as ransack it for data bearing on a particular question--even a question that may be wholly external and alien to the biblical witness... One of the most distressing results that follow when the Bible is atomized is that there are no longer any weightier matters of the law. All matters begin to weigh the same. Every phenomenon in the Bible becomes of equal height and weight with all the other phenomena. Everything in the Bible tends to become of first importance, so nothing remains of secondary importance. Everything becomes first principles, so there are no second principles.”

⁵According to Dungan,

The Bible recognizes the correctness of this method.--When Jesus appeared to the two disciples as they went into the country, he expounded to them all things found in the law and the prophets concerning himself, (Luke 24). He thus introduced all the facts from that divine source that would bear upon their minds, that they might understand the truth...[following are the examples of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and Moses’ sermons in Deuteronomy]... it is everywhere apparent that when the Lord would conduct an investigation on any subject, He did it by the inductive method... (89-91).

⁶As Dungan says on page 95,

Religious truth may be gathered from approved precedent.—We learn from the authorized conduct of the children of God... Now, if the will of God has undergone no change since the New Covenant was completed, what was His will then is His will yet. And if those men did that will, and we do the same now, we will be accomplishing His pleasure.

⁷This CEI hermeneutic has become a key element in the unwritten church of Christ creed. Yet CEI is very limited in its function. It can only serve to answer the question, “what does the Bible authorize/command?” This has been a key question in the formation of our denominational identity, yet the Bible has so much more to offer that the CEI approach is incapable of addressing.

and church support of institutions such as missionary societies and orphans' homes. The irony is that, although this CEI approach was developed to combat religious division, it has become so rigorously systematized⁸ and become so central in church of Christ teaching⁹ that it has become divisive in itself.¹⁰ Those who do not endorse this method (or who apply it with differing results) are seen as straying from the faith. In fact, the amount of division in the church (both past and present) associated with the use of pattern theology via the inductive method argues against its legitimacy.

Part of the problem is that Dungan and others assumed that the churches in the New Testament were identical in their practices, and churches should be the same way today. As Campbell himself said, "whatever acts of religious worship the apostles taught and sanctioned in one Christian congregation, they taught and sanctioned in all Christian congregations" (*Christian System* 275). But this doesn't mean that they all practiced all things identically. Such unanimity is a myth. For example, the collectivism practiced in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 2:44) is not apparent in any other NT congregation.

Of course, the most serious criticism against the command/example/inference approach to pattern theology is that it is a modern – not a biblical – way of thinking. "These categories are not set forth as a hermeneutic within the text of the NT, but rather they are derived from a certain logical system imposed from outside the text" (From Roy B. Ward, "The Restoration Principle: A Critical Analysis," *Restoration Quarterly* 8:4 (1966) p. 210).

⁸For example, see the works of J. D. Thomas (*We Be Brethren* 1958, *Heaven's Window* 1974, and *Harmonizing Hermeneutics* 1991), Thomas B. Warren (*When Is an "Example" Binding?* 1975), and Roy C. Deaver (*Ascertaining Bible Authority* 1987). All three provide detailed, logically-based methods for extracting normative patterns from New Testament examples and inferences.

⁹According to Russ Dudrey, "patternism has been elevated merely not to our method, but our *raison d'etre*." (From Russ Dudrey, "Restorationist Hermeneutics Among the Churches of Christ: Why Are We at an Impasse?," *Restoration Quarterly* 30.1 (1988), 17-42.)

¹⁰Dudrey:: "it is fair to say that among the Churches of Christ the restoration of formal patterns has been emphasized sometimes to the practical neglect of the restoration of the spirit of true Christianity." (From Russ Dudrey, "Restorationist Hermeneutics Among the Churches of Christ: Why Are We at an Impasse?," *Restoration Quarterly* 30.1 (1988), 17-42.) This is a fair critique. Are not forbearance and diversity also part of the New Testament pattern?

McGarvey and the Book of Conversions

John William McGarvey was quite an influential Bible scholar within the second generation of the Stone/Campbell movement. And his inestimable influence is still felt in the Christian Church and churches of Christ today.¹¹

McGarvey published two commentaries on Acts, one in 1863, and one in 1892. The *New Commentary* was immediately received by the Disciples as a work of major importance – “the greatest uninspired book ever written,” as one *Gospel Advocate* editor described it (Boring 248). More than just a commentary, the book has been described as “a manual of Disciples teaching.”¹² According to Boring, McGarvey’s emphasis on Acts

symbolizes the transition from the epistles, especially Hebrews, as the center of the Disciples canon, to Acts as the typical Disciple’s favorite book. It is ironic that this shift from Campbell’s discursive propositional language [as found in the epistles] to the narrative of Acts merely means a shift of emphasis from “direct command” to “approved example” as the means of extracting direction for the church from the text... For McGarvey the purpose of the narrative was to deliver “facts” which then became material for logical inferences on the “plan of salvation” (Boring 249).

A key teaching of McGarvey’s commentaries was his conception of Luke’s purpose in writing the book. After dismissing several contemporary theories of Luke’s authorial intent, he says,

Much the greater part of Acts may be resolved into a detailed history of cases of conversion, and of unsuccessful attempts at the conversion of sinners. If we extract from it all cases of

¹¹When I took an undergraduate class on Acts at Freed-Hardeman University in 1995, McGarvey’s *New Commentary on Acts* was still being used as the textbook.

¹²This is a quote from the missionary to Australia, J. J. Haley, as quoted in Boring, 248.

this kind, with the facts and incidents preparatory to each and immediately consequent upon it, we will have exhausted almost the entire contents of the narrative. All other matters are merely incidental (*Original Commentary* 4, cf. *New Commentary* xviii).

“Undoubtedly, then,” he concludes, “the writer’s chief design was to set forth to his readers a multitude of cases of conversion... so that we may know how this work, the main work for which Jesus died and the apostles were commissioned, was accomplished” (*New Commentary* xix, cf. *Original Commentary* 4).¹³

McGarvey’s theory, however, seems incompatible with the fact that Acts is actually the second half of a larger work. Most modern scholars talk of Luke-Acts as a single literary unit. It was common in ancient times for a large work to be split up into smaller volumes (to help them fit on a scroll if nothing else). So, in this light, Luke’s purpose for writing acts must be the same (or very similar to) his purpose for writing his Gospel. If they stand as one literary unit, then their theme and purpose must be connected. Can one really conceive of the Gospel of Luke as a “book of conversions?”

Luke does have theological purposes behind what he wrote, and he has various points that he wants to make. But, above all else, it seems that Luke functions foremost as a historian. It is the stories themselves that Luke is most interested in. It is in the narrative, and in the lessons of Jesus and the sermons of the apostles that one hears the voice of God. The reader sees Jesus teaching and healing among the people. He sees Paul defending the gospel in the face of death. He sees Peter preaching a sermon and moving the crowd to tears. And by re-living these time-shattering moments, the reader is also pricked in the heart. It is through the narrative that we personally encounter the Lord and his apostles. And by knowing them, we learn about ourselves and about the God who sent them.

¹³To be even more specific, it seems that for McGarvey, the foremost teaching in the book of Acts is that forgiveness of sins is dependent upon believer’s baptism. The book even includes a nineteen-page “Excursus A: Connection of Baptism with Remission of Sins.” No other excursus is included.

Thus, for Luke, the story itself is primary; the details are incidental. To McGarvey, though, the story is just a vehicle for delivering the individual facts. The story and the characters are background. The real meat of the book is in the doctrines, the examples, the inferences that can be extracted from the narrative. McGarvey's approach takes note of many individual trees and their relationships to each other, but seems to miss the forest of the narrative itself.

McGarvey's approach also seems to imply that the scripture is a puzzle. It's somehow "broken," and the important "facts" have been jumbled up through all these narratives and epistles. The interpreter's task, then, is to extract all these doctrinal nuggets, analyze them, and arrange them into a coherent theology which then becomes the Word of God.¹⁴

But, if Luke wanted to give us a "plan of salvation," why didn't he just do it? Why would the Spirit hide all the important facts of salvation like Easter eggs in the shrubbery of Gospel storytelling? If God's purpose was for us to have the five-finger exercise, why didn't he just give us the five-finger exercise?

In my opinion, any hermeneutic which views the Scripture as a fractured puzzle which needs to be re-assembled is inherently disrespectful to the genre of Scripture itself. God speaks to us through historical narratives because he is the God who acts within human history. God speaks to us through historical narrative because we are part of that narrative, and it is events and people in time which enliven us and transform us. Through narratives like the Gospels and Acts, we can enter into the story, interact with Christ and the apostles, and learn from them the same way we learn from our families and friends. Narrative operates on a deep level of human experience and cognition. It is holistic, whereas an atomistic approach of extracting kernels of doctrine from the Bible is inferior, and not conducive to human spiritual transformation (which is the overriding purpose of the Bible as a whole).

Subsequent church of Christ commentaries on Acts have followed McGarvey's lead, such as

¹⁴Cf. The above discussion of J. S. Lamar's "temple" metaphor.

those by David Lipscomb (1896)¹⁵, H. Leo Boles (1941)¹⁶, and James Burton Coffman (1985)¹⁷.

Other 20th-century writers in the churches of Christ have taken McGarvey's "book of conversions" idea and made it the focus of a book on Acts. For example, Frank L. Cox (1962)¹⁸ and Basil Overton (1981).¹⁹

It is interesting how the burning social and religious questions of a given time will influence how one interprets the Bible. For example, how Overton used the book of Acts to teach about the cessation of miraculous gifts – something which is never discussed in the book itself, but which was a pressing issue in late-20th-century churches of Christ. James D. Bales' *The Hub of the Bible – Or – Acts Two Analyzed* (published in 1960) is especially dated by the fact that the last chapter is devoted to an indictment of Communism. After defining Communism and dismissing the notion that the church in Jerusalem was communist (an unusual inference from Acts 2:44), he presents a lengthy discussion of concepts such as dialectical materialism, economic determinism, class struggle, revolution, and the dictatorship of the proletariat. The conclusion to this book (on Acts?) is that

¹⁵Although Lipscomb's doesn't mention McGarvey, he does show familiarity with McGarvey's ideas, referring to Acts as a "book of conversions." Lipscomb gives equal time, though, to discussing Acts as a narrative of the work of the Holy Spirit, and as a continuation of the Gospel of Luke.

¹⁶Boles mentions McGarvey's and Lipscomb's works in his preface, and explains that Acts contains "the terms of admission into the church." What is the value of the Book of Acts, according to Boles?

It is in this book that we have the all-important question, "What must I do to be saved?" and the answer given by inspired men. It is in this book that we learn the terms of salvation; this makes it an important book (15).

The Bible, of course, doesn't talk about "terms of admission," or "terms of salvation." But this is exactly the sort of concept one gets when the Book is read as a legal document.

¹⁷In his introduction, Coffman states, "Acts is a book of conversions. The immortal McGarvey made this "the theme of Acts,"... And, if pressed to name a single theme, one could not improve on his thesis." However, Coffman notes that "Despite this, there are large sections of Acts which have little bearing on the subject of conversions" (3). Coffman uses his typical "buffet" approach to interpretation, laying out sixteen "definite" themes, then marveling at how Luke wove them all together. But he does list McGarvey first.

¹⁸*The Book of Conversions: Case Studies from the Book of Acts*. Cox discusses the conversion accounts in chapters such as, "Conversion of a Saleslady" (i.e., Lydia), as well as some cases of "non-conversion," like the Athenians, Felix, and Agrippa. The contents of this book are similar to a series of sermons McGarvey himself preached, which is found in his *McGarvey's Sermons* (1893).

¹⁹*Conversions in Acts*, which includes 19 chapters on the book's conversions and non-conversions, plus three additional chapters dealing with the cessation of miraculous gifts.

“Christianity and Communism are two different world outlooks which are contrary and irreconcilable” (295).

The Rise of Post-McGarveyism

In the second half of the twentieth century, the rationalist/inductive hermeneutic and McGarvey’s “book of conversions” approach to Acts have come under criticism from church of Christ scholars. For example, the *Living Word* commentary on Acts (two volumes, by Anthony Ash and Richard Oster) eschews the inductive approach in favor of a historical/critical hermeneutic and discards McGarvey’s theme.²⁰

Another publication on Acts which exists in this historical/critical hermeneutical continuum is the Harding University Lectureship book of 1989, *Acts: The Spreading Flame*. At the end of the “Introduction to Acts” article, Jack P. Lewis asserts that “It is imperative to resurrect the idea that the Book of Acts is normative for the church today” (35). Just *how* the book of Acts is normative today seems to be the big question mark hovering over the rest of the book.

For example, Monroe Hawley’s article, entitled “Is Acts a Pattern for the Church Today,” seems to answer the question with a yes and no. He begins by pointing out that Luke-Acts is a narrative, even explicitly described as such in Luke 1:1.

Since this is true, we must ask how one establishes a pattern from a narrative. If a pattern sets forth action that one should take, how do you obey a history book? You do not obey history. You learn from history (406).

²⁰Ash gives four purposes for Acts, ranking the validation of the Gentile mission the “dominant” one, then listing salvation/conversion/evangelism second, and citing I. Howard Marshall as arguing “cogently that the main theme of Luke-Acts is salvation in its many ramifications” (15). Nowhere does he mention McGarvey or any other Restoration Movement writer.

Furthermore,

The real pattern issue in the New Testament, and specifically in Acts, is not whether a pattern exists but rather concerns the nature of the pattern. There is indeed a pattern, but it may not be the kind we have traditionally identified (407).

Hawley criticizes the traditional command/example/inference hermeneutic, and the concept of the Bible as a collection of facts. Acts does contain pattern, but not in a legalistic sense. “In reality,” he says, “most of the divine injunctions which control our lives are not direct commands but spiritual principles.” He mentions the Golden Rule, obeying God rather than men, and how God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34-35) as examples. He seems to see the CEI/inductive hermeneutic as unnecessary, since we can discover Acts’ patterns without forcing a foreign system onto the text. He asserts that the true pattern is Christ, and the true plan of salvation is his death, burial, and resurrection.

The purpose and theme of Acts are addressed in the lecture article by Richard Oster. While he compliments many of McGarvey’s insights, Oster is critical of the “book of conversions” approach:

Almost no concern for the structure of Acts or the function of the structural components emerges from this particular orientation. The most serious problem with this interpretation of the evidence of Acts is that after Acts 19, there are virtually no conversions. How can Acts be a “Book of Conversions” when the last nine chapters reflect a dearth of conversion stories?... the ostensible main theme... is significantly missing from the last one-third of the entire work (43).

Oster sees the concept of “being witnesses” (from Acts 1:8) as the main thread that connects

the book. This wording of testifying/witnessing links Acts to the ending of Luke, and it focuses on the content of the Gospel rather than man's response to it. It "establishes the disciples' identity and purpose, namely to be witnesses." As additional evidence, "Virtually all of the main characters in Acts are described by the testify/witness cluster of terms," and "the testify/witness [hypothesis] is well-integrated into the last section of Acts." Paul keeps on testifying, even through the last nine chapters when no conversions are taking place (44-45).

In response, I agree with Oster that "being witnesses" is a connecting thread through the book of Acts.²¹ This is a true observation. But I prefer Hawley's statement that "the overall theme of Acts is the gospel and how it was spread to all the world according to the directions of Jesus" (413). This sounds as much like a description of plot as an identification of a theme. And it emphasizes the narrative nature of the text, not constraining it to fit in to a particular concept, whether it be the acts of the Holy Spirit, cases of conversion, or being witnesses.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the Restoration Movement was correct in drawing attention to the much-neglected book of Acts. As the "Genesis of the New Testament," it is a vital document. It shows the beginning of the church of Jesus Christ, and we ourselves are participants in the continuation of that history. We need to know our history to understand who we are. Our oldest historical document is the New Testament. But we also need to know about our more recent history. This paper has explored the history of the Book of Acts in the churches of Christ, and why we have read it as a blueprint for the church, buried inside a narrative.

The inductive method has yielded some fruitful results, and contributed many good things to

²¹There is an interesting implication of Oster's observation, too. If the "identity and purpose" of the early disciples was to "testify" to the world about Jesus, wouldn't it follow that witnessing still remains our purpose today? That this is our pattern to follow? In other words, if a church is focused internally (giving its attention to issues such as doctrinal orthodoxy) and is not chiefly characterized by providing a witness to outsiders, then that church is not following the New Testament pattern.

our theology. Yet CEI has also been a source of division because it cannot be applied consistently. The good doctrines that it gave us could also have been learned through other, more biblical (or theological) means.

Already, many in the churches have become aware of CEI's limited usefulness. And many others are not even aware it exists. I predict that the use of CEI will continue to decline in my lifetime. Yet I hope Acts will remain a key text for the church of Christ, and that we may study it diligently and be transformed by the Gospel it preaches and by the exemplary patterns of behavior we see in its heroes of the faith.

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