

DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT CONSTITUTE A BINDING PATTERN FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH?

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Over the span of time, man has attempted to diminish the significance of God’s word. Some living during Biblical times challenged the magnitude of God’s word and failed (Gen. 4:1-10; Lev. 10:1-2). More recently, men have been trying to portray the New Testament as nothing more than a general “guidebook”, denying the New Testament is a binding pattern for the 21st century church. Here are some things we have heard and are hearing today:

Carl Ketcherside said, “Nothing has been more productive of dissension among us than the concept that God intended to provide for us a specific pattern complete in minute detail and that this pattern constitutes an inviolable law for His children in all ages, climes, and conditions. I am urging that the whole pattern concept which makes of the apostolic letters mere legalistic documents be examined calmly and dispassionately” (February 1970 issue of The Mission Messenger).

Robert Duncan argues, “the New Testament cannot legitimately be used as a book of specific rules covering every aspect of the work, worship, and government of the church” (March, 1972 issue of The Mission Messenger).

Ed Fudge writes, “The New Testament Scriptures contain numerous guiding principles for Christian believers, both individually and together in community. However, it does not contain detailed instructions for the church, of the sort that God gave to Moses for building the Tabernacle” (wineskins.org, 3/28/2010).

In a debate regarding “Patternism”, Al Maxey declared, “I do not search for a pattern to impose, but for a Person to imitate.” Later, in the same debate he articulated the New Testament is “not about law, it’s all about love” (Maxey-Broking Debate, July 9, 2008).

These are but a few quotations from different eras, but enough to demonstrate there have been and are those who are *digressive* and *liberal* in their thoughts regarding the New Testament. Is the New Testament a binding pattern for the 21st century church? One needs go no further than the word of God to answer such a question. The men quoted above were not and are not

inspired of God. However, each word of the Bible is (2 Tim. 3:16). I propose we listen to the word of God and it alone!

“Non-patternists” like to accept only what Jesus or God has directly commanded. They seem to overlook the discussion in Acts 15 when the men in attendance utilized separate ways to derive authority. At that discussion, they sought direct commands (vv. 15-18), looked for approved, or apostolic examples (v. 12), drew forced and necessary conclusions (vv. 7-11), and reported how they had respected the silence of the Scriptures, knowing the silence was prohibitive, not permissive (v. 24). We learn from this grand display a pattern on determining what is authorized and what is not. To do so properly, we must take into account God’s and Christ’s commandments *and* the words of the inspired authors of the entire New Testament. Remember Paul wrote, “*If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord*” (1 Cor. 14:37). Each word in the New Testament is of equal weight and importance.

James wrote, “*But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer,*

but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed” (Jas. 1:25). Digressive “non-patternists” have a very poor attitude of the word “law”. One “non-patternist” quoted “*Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ*” (Gal. 2:16), and followed by saying law is not important at all. Not so! Good students of the Bible realize that many New Testament uses of the word “law” are referring to the Old Covenant, such as was the case in Galatians 2:16.

In what way was James using the words “*perfect law of liberty*” in James 1:25? He is referring to the law of the New Covenant, or Testament, which became effective upon the death of Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:16-17). It is “*perfect*”, in that it can do what the Old Covenant could not do: “*take away sins*” (Heb. 10:4). This is so as the “*blood of Christ*” is infinitely more valuable and “*precious*” (1 Pet. 1:19) than the blood of bulls and goats (Heb. 9:14-15). It is a “*law*”, in that it identifies what is right and wrong, that is, God’s righteousness (Rom. 10:1-3). Upon obedience to this “*law*”, man is liberated from his sin (Acts 22:16; Mk. 16:16; 1 Pet. 3:20-21). This helps us appreciate the words of our Savior when He articulated, “*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*” (Jn. 8:32).

One may wonder what this “*truth*” of which Jesus speaks is. Later, as our Savior breathed an exceptionally beautiful prayer, He said, “*Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth*” (Jn. 17:17). So then we can learn that God’s word, or truth, is a liberating power. But which part of God’s word, as man can only live under and be

subject to one law at one time (Rom. 7:1-6)? As one reads the Holy Text, he finds the Old Covenant has been done away (Col. 2:14; Eph. 2:15). Further, we find we now live under and must obey the last will and testament of our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:16-17). Like any other will, each word of it is of paramount prominence. The “*sum*” of God’s word is “*great*” (Ps. 139:17). When putting this all together, one can clearly see the “*sum*” of the New Testament is great and important!

One cannot pick and choose which part of a law he will keep (Jas. 2:10). “Non-patternists” like to point out that only parts of the New Testament are “binding” upon man today. If this is so, then which part(s) must we follow? Further, which part(s) are merely literature, having no authoritative effect? “Non-patternists” say only the words and direct commands of Christ should be followed, even though Paul said the inspired authors of the New Testament were issuers of the Lord’s commands (1 Cor. 14:37). If only the direct commands of Jesus Christ are to be followed, then there is no need to further study the New Testament past the book of John. Paul wrote of days like we have now, saying “*they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables*” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). It is absolutely a “*fable*” to teach the New Testament is not a “binding pattern” for the 21st century church. When followed to its logical conclusion, it brings only confusion and condemnation (2 Jn. 9-11). We must do all “*according to the*

pattern” (Heb. 8:5). Anything less will not be acceptable to our heavenly Father, just as it would not have been for the ark builder (Gen. 6:22) or tabernacle constructors (Ex. 25:40).

The New Testament is a “binding pattern” for the 21st century church. Paul referred to it as that “*form of doctrine*” (Rom. 6:17) and “*form (or pattern) of sound words*” (2 Tim. 1:13). The New Testament is a “*law of liberty*” by which we will be judged (Jas. 2:12). May we not only believe and have faith in it (Rom. 10:17), but follow and obey it (Heb. 5:8-9). A terrible price awaits those who will not obey this law of “*liberty*” (2 Th. 1:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:17)!

We must be as the commendable Bereans, who “*sought the Scriptures*” daily (Acts 17:11). They undertook this great task to ensure what they were being taught was “*so*”. Likewise, we must search and examine the New Testament to ensure what we are teaching and practicing is authorized (Col. 3:17; Acts 4:7). If not, why not? May we respect the New Testament for what it is!

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Larry works with the newly planted church in Vincennes, Indiana. The church meets at the Holiday Inn Express in Vincennes Sunday for Bible study at 10 am and for worship at 11 am and 3 pm and Wednesday for Bible study at 7 pm. The website of the church is www.firstcitychurchofchrist.com. We encourage you to visit, support and pray for this work.

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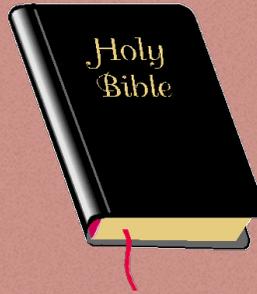
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