

A Review of John Mark Hicks,

Searching for the Pattern: My Journeying in Interpreting the Bible

by Shane Carrington

Introduction

We live in a post-modern, post-truth world. A society where everything is viewed as relative and there are only shades of gray. We are surrounded by a culture that speaks of “my truth” and “your truth,” but where the word of Jesus is denigrated rather than viewed as “the truth” (John 8:30-32). Even among churches of Christ there are some who hold to a mystical view of the Holy Spirit, believing that He provides supernatural and direct enlightenment apart from the word of God: feelings that indicate we are on the right path, emotions that are deeper than what one could receive through studying and following the written word of God, and enlightenment that studying the Bible cannot provide (2 Thess. 2:13). When a handful among us think the Asbury revival of 2023 might be the work of God through the Spirit, we have ample proof that some believe the above statements. But one preacher went so far as to say that the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives today is “tangible,” which is defined as perceptible to touch. Rather than following the pattern of God as revealed in Scripture, at one point brother John Mark Hicks decided to go with his “gut” (p. 69 Kindle Edition). In our post-modern, post-truth world, approaching God’s will like this is not uncommon, and it has impacted churches of Christ in a variety of ways. Following the teachings in brother Hicks’s book contributes to this problem.

Reviewing John Mark Hicks’s Book

Brother Hicks's book, *Searching for the Pattern: My Journeying in Interpreting the Bible*, has had a negative impact among churches of Christ. After reading the book, a number of members from sound congregations have departed for institutionalism and beyond. This has happened in several places in the last few years. With this disruption occurring, it would be of great concern to encourage members of churches of Christ, some of whom are either spiritually immature or struggling in their desire to follow Scripture, to read this book.

With these thoughts in mind, we will provide a brief review of some aspects of brother Hicks's book. There are already some wonderful reviews of different aspects of this book that I highly recommend. Mark Roberts and other authors, in *Pressing On Magazine* (October 2023), have impactful reviews of various aspects of the book. Mark Mayberry, and others, in the February 2024 edition of *Truth Magazine*, also have very helpful reviews of Hicks's teachings, both in this book and some of his other works. There are doubtless others, but these are ones with which I am very familiar and highly recommend.

Hicks's Claim about Scripture

Concerning the Bible and the church, he writes, "The Bible has always been my guide, and I love the word of the Lord. I want to order my life according to its teachings..." (p. 19). "This is what my hermeneutical journey has always attempted to do—to *hear the word of the Lord and obey it.*" (p. 19). "I hope you will hear my adoration for God, my respect for Scripture, and my love for the church in these pages." (p. 19).

These are important attitudes to which we all should aspire (Deut. 6:1-9; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; John 20:30-31; etc.). But these statements are the same as people from many religious traditions that are represented in our modern world. Among those some advocate practices and beliefs ranging from the use of mechanical instruments of music in worship to mental assent unto salvation to the acceptance of immoral practices as “normal” behavior for Christians. Proclaiming a belief in the Bible as God’s word — and that the church is of great value — do not assure that the practices of those making these claims are biblical. We must both confess Jesus as Lord AND reflect that profession in our practices (Luke 6:46; Matt. 7:21-23). Many truly sincere people make these claims. We need to help them know the truth more fully like Priscilla and Aquila did Apollos (Acts 18:24-28), and we need to be receptive when the shoe is on the other foot (Gal. 6:1-5; James 5:19-20).

A Decent Summary of “Our” Approach to Bible Authority

Brother Hicks addresses “explicit commandments,” “approved (binding) examples,” and “necessary inferences,” giving a pretty accurate summary of each (p. 34-35). In his discussion of these, he said, “For us, approved examples were *implied commands* because the example enacted a specific command, and that was why approved examples were required.” (p. 35) It is true that we view binding examples and necessary inferences as equally binding as commands, not second-class instruction from the Lord. He also discussed “the law of silence,” with some accurate statements.

“The principle behind our understanding of silence was this: *only what God authorizes is permitted* in any assembly that worship God. We didn’t practice anything that was not authorized.... [he makes application to mechanical

instruments in worship] This was not *mere silence but the absence of authorization.*" (p. 36-37)

He says we basically limited these principles to Acts and the Epistles, thus saying that we typically excluded the gospel accounts from our considerations about Bible authority (p. 37, 32-33). This is not true. The rules of communication apply from Genesis through Revelation, and we spend a great deal of time with the entire New Testament. We take the entire Bible seriously.

A Good Summary of Church History

One of the strengths of the book is brother Hicks' summary of church history and the work of the church (p. 40ff; etc.). This occurs in various places in the book. Part of his summary reads,

"The kingdom of God on earth is found in local congregations, and though together they are the church of God upon the earth, they exist as independent, autonomous congregations without any extra-congregational structures." (p. 41)

He continues, "There are no extra-congregational organizations or parachurch institutions with the New Testament." (p. 41)

Brother Hicks also mentions that he learned, "only three institutions in the Bible" exist: "*home, state* (or human governments), and *church*" (p. 40), with no others being "mentioned or sanctioned in Acts and the Epistles." (p. 40).

All of these are generally accurate descriptions of what the Bible teaches and where we stand: independent, autonomous local congregations do their own work while organized in Scriptural fashion.

An Enlightening Section

Flowing from the above, Hicks describes his discussions with a non-institutional friend through some of his early years, and these conversations are very revealing about his view of Scripture, the church, and Bible authority (p. 39-40).

He details the sense of these conversations with his high school-college friend, generally describing the institutional vs. non-institutional controversy quite well (p. 43-48).

As brother Hicks describes how he concluded that the “saints only” doctrine for congregational benevolence was out of step with Scripture, he used two lines of reasoning.

The first was that, “If this feels complicated or overwhelming, you are not alone” (p. 72). He views the system of interpretation that utilizes command, example, and necessary inference as overly complex. He says things of this nature repeatedly (p. 80, etc.). The reality is that there

“...are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:16).

We must take great pause to be sure we understand those “things” correctly. We must also realize that the “hard” things are not the only principles that interpreters “distort...to their own destruction.”

Let’s ponder two principles that Jesus thought Old Testament interpreters should have understood correctly. For one Jesus said, “Have you not read...,” then related what Genesis says about the creation of male, female, and marriage (Gen. 2:18-24), expecting first century Jewish leaders to have arrived at the necessary conclusion about one man with one woman for life with one exception (Matt. 19:4-11). That is not the easiest conclusion to draw from the Genesis account, but Jesus expected them to

understand this. Second, when the Jewish leaders challenged Jesus with questions in Matt. 22:15-40, He closed all discussion by asking them a question: “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” (Matt. 22:42). They knew Christ would be “the Son of David” (Matt. 22:42), but Jesus expected them to draw another necessary inference: “If David then calls Him [Christ, SC] ‘Lord, ’how is He his son?” (Matt. 22:45). Jesus expected them to infer the dual nature of Jesus as both Son of David and Son of God from that text. That is not simplest inference to draw, but it could be done! The ease or difficulty of arriving at the understanding of Scripture that God expects of us is not the concern. We are to work with all of the data God has provided to understand what God wants us to know and do.

The second rationale brother Hick used to avoid the conclusion of “saints only” in congregational benevolence is actually based more in emotion than reason: it “did not sit well with my gut” (p. 88). He says this more than once. While it is true that having a broad-based understanding of Scripture helps us arrive at biblical conclusions, leaning upon our “gut” is quite dangerous. Jeremiah wrote, “The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). The proverb says, “There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death” (Prov. 14:12; 16:25). Using the “gut” to sweep aside plain Bible teaching is leaning more on emotion than “truth and reason” (Acts 16:25, NKJV). What a dangerous path to pursue!

Unfortunately, brother Hicks has arrived at a number of concerning conclusions about various subjects like women preachers, the Lord’s supper (p. 161-162), etc. due to the way he views God’s pattern and Bible authority.

“Either...Or” OR “Both...And”?

Brother Hicks says that his book describes “the *specific move* from what I call a *blueprint hermeneutic* to a *theological hermeneutic*” (p. 19). In fact, he uses the “either...or” fallacy quite a bit.

“Are commands fundamentally legal tests of loyalty or are they modes of transformation? Are commands abstracted pieces of data with which we generate a list in order to construct a blueprint or are they forms of theological expression that reveal the heart of God?” (p. 135, Kindle Edition)

In this way, he puts biblical teaching in a bad light. It is as if he is saying, “You either view the Bible as a warm and genuine love letter from God with little structure, or you view it as a cold and heartless legal document that includes a great deal of specificity.”

Let’s take this reasoning into the realm of rearing children. When godly parents reveal expectations (rules) to their children in love for them and concern for their well-being, is that a heartless act of legalism? Neither is it when God reveals His pattern to us (see Deut. 6:1-9; Eph. 6:1-4). To pit God’s pattern against His grace and mercy is a false paradigm.

God has always had a pattern for human conduct, from marriage and sexuality to the sacrificial system of the Mosaic system to the New Testament church and worship. God reveals His expectations in love, and He wants us to respond in kind (John 14:15). Rather than attempting to escape God’s patterns, we need to understand them and submit through faith and love (Gal. 5:6). He is worthy of that kind trust and devotion.

The Balance of the Book

Most of the rest of the book discusses Hicks’ view of “theological” interpretation of Scripture as opposed to a “blueprint” method of interpretation (p. 19, 107-194). The

reality is that Yahweh is a God of patterns. Understanding that strikes to the theological heart of who He is. As previously noted, God's patterns are everywhere in Scripture. The tabernacle was constructed according to an intricate pattern from God. Was the tabernacle a heartless, graceless attempt by God to just see what all He could get ancient Israel to do? Or was it rather the love and mercy of God to give them access to approach the holy God who loved them too much to deny them opportunity for covenant?

“So the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God for our good always and for our survival, as it is today. It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the Lord our God, just as He commanded us” (Deut. 6:24-25).

Everything God revealed and commanded was “for our good always.” God's plan for ancient Israel was for their “righteousness.” Having a pattern is not contrary to God's love; it is the revealing of His holy character and nature by giving humans access to covenant relationship with Him. Jesus came to reveal the true nature of God even more fully (John 1:18), so pattern is also revealed in the New Testament. This is not a proposition of either a theological OR pattern approach to Scripture. God has always had a consistent way of revealing Himself and allowing humans to approach Him. He is neither capricious nor cold and calculating. God loves us, and He has revealed Himself and how He wants us to approach Him. Knowing where we stand, and how to stand in harmony with Him, are revealed from the heart of God through the pattern of Scripture.

Other, Similar Voices

A few preachers and teachers among non-institutional churches are saying similar things as brother Hicks, either due to his influence or for other reasons.

Brother Hicks places priority on the personal example of Jesus and the gospels, saying that “we” place too much emphasis on Acts and the epistles. The biblical reality, though, is that Jesus Himself said,

“I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. 15 All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you” (John 16:12-15).

The apostles saw and heard Jesus during His earthly ministry (1 John 1:1-4), so while the Holy Spirit would remind them of these things in order for them to record them for posterity (John 14:26), the Spirit would also reveal to them things they would not know until after Jesus ascended (John 16:12-15; Matt. 16:18-20; Acts 1:3-8; 10:34-48; etc.). The gospel accounts do not reveal everything disciples need to know. Acts and the epistles give us the balance of the story.

The story and sermons of Acts, and the writings of the epistles, are just as much the will of Jesus Christ as the gospel accounts of Matthew through John. While we need to be balanced in how we teach and preach the New Testament, we need to emphasize it all, because all of it comes from the Father and Son through the Spirit (John 16:12-15).

Another consideration concerning this: the church is the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:3-6; 5:23; etc.). Consequently, the outworking of Jesus Christ in this world

has a lot to do with the activity of His church. Acts and the epistles tell us how that works. Since we are His body, we need to know how to function. Jesus is the Head (Eph. 4:14-16), and we need to respond appropriately. Minimizing the balance of the New Testament does not bring Jesus the full honor of which we see Him worthy in Matthew through John.

Another voice who is more closely associated with non-institutional congregations said something to the effect that Eph. 5:19 is not Leviticus in the New Testament. That sounds clever, but the underlying assumption of this statement is a denial that there is a law aspect to the gospel. This is not true (James 1:25; 1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). While it is true that the Old Law has been fulfilled and gives way to the gospel of Jesus (Eph. 2:11-17; Col. 2:13-17; Gal. 3:19-29; etc.), acting as though we can brush aside the specifics of the New Covenant is to dismiss many statements in the that say otherwise (2 John 9-11; Rev. 22:18-19; Matt. 7:21-23; Luke 6:46; etc.). Minimizing our obedience to the will of Jesus is to miss salvation (Rom. 6; Heb. 5:8-9; etc.).

Other voices in non-institutional congregations are voicing afresh a gospel-doctrine distinction. This is the idea that the gospel is the good news of the nature and work of Jesus and salvation, while the doctrine of Christ centers upon things like the church, specifics of how we worship, etc. Their conclusion is that, as long as you believe in and love like Jesus, adhering to specific teaching about the church and worship are not as important. Some even believe that whether or not we use mechanical instruments in worship is not a salvation issue. They view that as “doctrine,” not “gospel.” On the contrary, “gospel” and “doctrine (teaching)” are used interchangeably in Scripture. When concluding a list of sins, Paul wrote,

“and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching [doctrine, NKJV], according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted” (1 Tim. 1:10-11). While there is even more wrong with brother Hicks’s view, Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15) and “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him” (John 14:21). The response in return is that the command of God is “love.” But Jesus said, “commandments,” plural, not one single commandment. Further, as we discussed earlier, the church is the body of Christ, and we must respond to Jesus our Husband and Head by submitting “in everything” (Eph. 5:22-24).

“The God of Patterns”

This is the title of Jeff Wilson’s excellent article in Pressing On Magazine from October 2023 (p. 12-13). He begins by saying,

“There is always a pattern. To say there is a pattern is simply another way of saying there is order—and with order comes hierarchy and with hierarchy comes purpose. Otherwise there will only be anarchy or chaos” (p. 12).

The account of creation in Genesis 1 shows pattern. Adam and Eve violated a facet of that pattern, leading to the fall. The Mosaic system was a pattern (Heb. 8:5). And we see pattern all over the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:16-19; 2 John 9-11; Eph. 4:3-6; Phil. 3:17; etc.).

The reality is that God has revealed in Scripture many smaller patterns that fit into larger ones: Noah’s ark, the tabernacle, the plan of salvation, the church, worship, etc.

Brother Jeff concludes his article powerfully.

“To leave the pattern is always to engage in the de facto idolatry of man-made religion and without the boundaries of the pattern we may well drift into doing things in the name of worship that never even entered God’s mind (cf. Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35)” (p. 14).

In order to follow Jesus, we must look for the order He has provided and follow that pattern. Since “God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33), subscribing to the pattern of the New Testament is following Jesus, whose word says, “all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Cor. 14:40).

Conclusion — How can we stay faithful to God and His pattern?

God’s pattern helps us know who He is. With so much confusion and false doctrine in the world (Gal. 1:6-9; Eph. 4:14), we need His clear voice through the written word saturating in our minds, hearts, and lives (Eph. 3:3-5; 4:1-6; 6:17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; etc.). Many departures from truth exist in spite of God’s clear teaching. He has spoken plainly about female leadership in churches (1 Cor. 14:33-35; 1 Tim. 2:9-15), the sinfulness of sexual immorality of all kinds (Gal. 5:19-21; Rom. 1:26-27; Matt. 19:9; etc.), and the necessity of baptism in being born again (John 3:3-5; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Gal. 3:26-29; etc.). In spite of His clarity — and God’s pattern is obvious in all three of these — modern society often goes with its “gut” rather than God’s word. Instead of our moorings being loosed, and our lives adrift from the true hope of God, how can we stay faithful to Him and His pattern?

First, we must realize that God has always had a pattern. This is displayed in glorious and gracious fashion as we read about creation, Noah and the ark, ancient Israel’s tabernacle and sacrificial system, the incarnation and redeeming work of Jesus,

and in the church of Christ and her relationship with God through Christ. Knowing where we stand — and how to serve Him — are important to God. His pattern reveals these essential truths. This enhances our comprehension of God's word, confidence and boldness in serving Him, and security in our hope.

Second, we must take the written word of God seriously. It is inspired and brings us into a mature relationship with God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). It was recorded in written fashion so that we can read and understand it (Eph. 3:3-5), live it (Col. 3:17), receive spiritual nourishment through it (1 Pet. 1:22-2:2), and find redemption in the things that “have been written” (John 20:30-31; 12:48).

Third, we must pay close attention to what God says, obeying Him precisely with every word He has recorded (2 John 9-11; Rev. 22:18-19; etc.). That means paying close attention to statements, examples, and necessary inferences.

Fourth, we also must be attentive to what the written word does not say (Heb. 7:14; etc.). Silence does not authorize, and we have no right to add to God's instructions.

Fifth, which perhaps should be first, we must realize that, holding all of the above together, everything God does and says is because of His love for us (John 3:16), and His desire to redeem us (2 Pet. 3:9). That includes every pattern revealed in Scripture (Deut. 4:1-2; 6:24; Rev. 22:18-19). Consequently, we must respond in kind (John 14:15; Gal. 5:6; 1 Cor. 16:33). Following Jesus is not about a theological vs. blueprint approach, or grace vs. faith, or trust vs. obedience. In reality, these are not “either...or.” They are “both...and.”

As the apostle Paul by the Spirit recorded in an epistle replete with references to the concept of pattern (1 Cor. 1:2, 10-17; 3:10-11; 4:6, 17; 7:17; 9:24-27; 10:1-11; 11:1; 14:6-12, 26-33; etc.),

“If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.” (1 Cor. 16:22-24).

The grace of Jesus, and our love for God, are perfectly consistent with God and His pattern. May we trust every word He has revealed and submit to Him always in love.