

Why This Debate Exists

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Introduction

- There is a particular danger whenever we enter a controversy like this one. We can become so concerned to answer what we believe is wrong that we do not take sufficient care to understand what is actually being said.
- The wise man gives us this warning, “He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him” (Prov. 18:13). We add to this the more strongly stated injunction against bearing false witness.
- I doubt that anyone intends to lie about someone else’s position. In fact, what we often do is jump to the implications of what someone believes and report it as the thing they believe.
- But if we don’t start by accurately hearing and representing an opposing position, then we run several risks:
 - Dishonesty or folly (even if unintentional).
 - We can’t learn anything from the exchange.
 - We push people who are uncertain into the arms of the other position.
- So we are starting out this lectureship with an effort to be fair and charitable in our representation of what Dr. Hicks and other likeminded writers are criticizing.
- My goal here is not generally to engage in agreement or disagreement (though there will be some of that implied along the way). Others will address those ideas. My goal is to say, “here is the argument.”

The Case Being Made

- The case begins with describing the traditional approach to how we establish authority through command, example and necessary inference.
 - Dr. Hicks describes his own inheritance of this approach.
 - It is not necessarily a flattering picture but I do not think it is a particularly uncharitable presentation.
 - We might prefer more nuance in describing the approach but I think it is fair to say that we all know people who take the somewhat flattened version presented here.
 - We can be guilty of saying this doesn’t describe our best proponents while not admitting it does describe a large segment of our brethren.
 - He points out that the CENIs come from Acts and the Epistles which prioritizes the study of those texts over others.
 - *“That hermeneutic reads the text to construct a blueprint by mining the data of Acts and the Epistles...” —John Mark Hicks, “Searching for the Pattern: A Response to the February 2024 Issue of Truth Magazine,” johnmarkhicks.com, May 18, 2025*
 - I absolutely agree with this assessment.
 - I do believe I see some shifts in this.
 - Bob and Sandra Waldron did wonderful work in striving to convince brethren to embrace a more complete study of the whole Bible.
 - But I can say confidently from my own experience that there is a constant pressure to prioritize Acts and the Epistles over and above all other portions of Scripture.
 - The idea is that we NEED those while all the other parts are supplementary. Kind of like background reference.
 - Dr. Hicks particularly emphasizes the complexity of the approach.
 - This complexity is often brushed aside but it is real.
 - This should not be disconcerting as description of basic communication can become quite complex (how many of you can describe what a gerund is).
 - He presents various charts that are not even as complex as some of the ones I have used myself.
 - The point is taken. Discussions of authority can become complex.
 - There is more to interpretation than is often admitted.
 - The point is made that we often present the blueprint hermeneutic as if we are merely collecting data and following the only possible outcome of that data.
 - We plug the data into a formula like numbers into an equation and get a solution that is incontrovertible.

- We say something like, “We just look at what the New Testament church did, and we do what they did.”
- But in reality “We had to decide what we would imitate and what we would not imitate. We had to decide what was required and what was an expedient, temporary, or circumstantial. In other words, there was an intermediate step.” — John Mark Hicks, *Searching for the Pattern*, p. 64.
- He illustrates this by pointing to a familiar conclusion about the timing of the Lord’s Supper and showing that much more interpretive is at play than a simple observe and do.
- He also points to commands that are given and examples shown that we agree do not apply particularly to us.
 - This includes holy kisses, washed feet, the rich young ruler selling all.
 - It also includes the details of an example like the upper room, time of day etc.
- Dr. Hicks then shows that institutional and non- institutional churches were using the same method but arriving at different conclusions. Why was this?
 - We might argue that one was doing it right and the other wasn’t.
 - He even concedes that if we are consistently following this type of hermeneutic, the the limited benevolence position is where we would land.
 - *“On the one hand, it appeared that a rigorous application of the method warranted the conclusion. If Acts and the Epistles contain an exclusive pattern for the work of the church, and that blueprint specifies poor saints with no other command, example, or necessary inference that the church helped others from its common funds, then it seemed that God restricted the use of congregational funds to helping only Christians.” — John Mark Hicks, Searching for the Pattern, p. 63*
- But Dr. Hicks argues that there were/are larger frameworks controlling how each group processes the data.
 - He characterizes our framework as being an assumption that there is a specific blueprint type pattern for worship, organization, and church work.
 - *“Nothing may be done in the work and worship of the church that is not positively authorized by command, example, or necessary inference.” - — John Mark Hicks, Searching for the Pattern, p. 70*
 - He also argues that this framework put him/us at odds with the larger narrative of Scripture and with the character of God.
 - *“On the other hand, that conclusion did not sit well with me. Something gnawed at me. It was as if I felt that can’t be right.” - John Mark Hicks, Searching for the Pattern, p. 63*
- The alternative framework.
 - Dr. Hicks argues that we should look at CENIs through the lens of the overall narrative of Scripture and through the lens of who Jesus/God is.
 - He points to Paul as doing this in the case of the discussion of benevolence in 2 Corinthians.
 - Paul does not appeal to an ecclesiastical blueprint.
 - He appeals to the grace given by God and the grace they have an opportunity to participate in.
 - He appeals to the Old Testament narrative of Israel in several ways (manna, the way God blesses the righteous in the Psalms, and the mutual care instructed in Deuteronomy).
 - He appeals to the grace offered by Jesus Christ.
 - Dr. Hicks asserts the universality of the grace inherent in the sources Paul appeals to.
 - So that even if the application in Corinth is limited benevolence, the principle appealed to suggests a more far reaching application is authorized.
 - In other words, Israel’s benevolence went beyond Israelites and Jesus’ grace is universal, therefore the benevolence the church offers ought to reach as far as the examples used to instruct their benevolence.
 - The appeal is to move from one kind of pattern to another.
 - Instead of starting from the premise that there is a blueprint type pattern with specifics spelled out, Dr. Hicks asserts that there is a pattern of character that we are seeking to be consistent with.
 - Whatever then is in keeping with that character is authorized.
 - This leaves us with less detail, but not without guardrails altogether.
 - Dr. Hicks admits that this methodology leaves us with broader leeway, but it does not mean we get to “do whatever we want.”
 - It means we carefully read the narrative, learn who God is through the story of His people and through the incarnation of Jesus and we live consistently with that story in our time.
 - This is presented as a simpler approach, though one that allows for less certainty and greater discernment.

- CENI becomes a way to show how first century Christians lived out that pattern but not necessarily restrictive to the only way to live out that pattern.
- So CENI is not abandoned per se, rather, it is made subservient to the framework of the narrative of Scripture instead of the framework of a blueprint hermeneutic.
- *"The commands, examples, and necessary inferences do not function abstractly or autonomously but are understood in the light of the larger story..."—John Mark Hicks, Searching for the Pattern, p. 144*

Where is the Conflict

- What it is not:
 - CENI vs. no CENI
 - Dr. Hicks repeatedly affirms the obvious need for CENI:
 - *"Everyone who reads the Bible draws inferences, and everyone appeals to examples and commands..."—John Mark Hicks, Searching for the Pattern, p.142*
 - *"I learned them as commands, examples, and necessary inferences, and that is not a bad way to say it."—John Mark Hicks, Searching for the Pattern, p.143*
 - So if you say we can't understand the Bible without CENI, Dr. Hicks would say "I agree."
 - Pattern vs. no pattern
 - He offers his alternative as a different pattern not as an abandonment of pattern.
 - The pattern may be less precise but it is not non-existent.
 - Authority vs. no authority
 - Again, authorization is more generalized but not non-existent.
 - The authority lies in imitation of character more than imitation of procedures.
 - Particulars vs. theology
 - It may sound like particulars don't matter.
 - Dr. Hicks argues that they still do matter but that they aren't stand alone rules.
 - They are particulars that flow from theology and the theology is what determines which particulars are necessary and which are incidental or merely "allowable".
 - Which are tied to culture and which are tied to the larger narrative.
- One conflict is about how the particulars relate to the narrative/theology.
 - Which factor controls the other.
 - Is it necessary to set one over the other?
- Another conflict is about the nature of the narrative.
 - This is not simply about whether the narrative is important, but what that narrative is.
 - There are several places where Dr. Hicks describes the narrative in ways that I would not accept as accurate.

Some Critique of Searching for the Pattern

- The theological model does not remove or even reduce the likelihood of disagreement.
 - In several places, Dr. Hicks indicates a broad consensus on the story of redemption and of who Jesus is.
 - But a cursory observation of religious debate will show that the disagreements in these areas are as complex and as strident as the ones surrounding blueprint hermeneutics.
 - What is the nature of atonement?
 - What about liberation theology?
 - While I don't disagree that we need to root the particulars in the narrative, we will find that the narrative is a battleground just as heated.
- Interpretation is reciprocal.
- So often, questions of hierarchies of interpretation overstate or universalize rules that are not as firm as that.
- What takes precedence between the Old and New Testament?
 - We might be tempted to say the New Testament for a host of reasons not least being that we are under the NEW covenant.
 - But what about Romans 9 or the whole book of Revelation?

- The original context of the passages quoted in Romans 9 show that Paul is not saying God chooses who will be saved and lost individually but fiat.
- The original context of the various phrases and language of Revelation constrain the interpretations to the type of imagery originally intended.
- Of course there are New Testament interpretations of Old Testament texts like Hebrews' usage of the Psalms that help us look back with a new lens at those texts.
- So it isn't a rule about which controls the other but it is a process of understand how each directs the interpretation of the other.
- The narrative must inform our interpretation of the particulars (CENI) but the particulars must also help us understand the narrative.
- The particulars are more important because of the narrative/theology.
 - The reason the pattern is so important is because it is tied to the narrative/theology (Heb. 8:5).
 - This is true of many particulars (1 Cor. 10:1-4).
- The case study examined.
 - One of the central issues examined throughout Searching for the Pattern is the question of general or limited benevolence of the church.
 - I've already pointed to how Dr. Hicks uses Paul's argumentation as a pattern for the theological hermeneutic he is proposing.
- But consider the supposed universal benevolence of Israel.
 - It was indeed commanded that they show benevolence to the pilgrim and sojourner among them.
 - The strangers and pilgrims among them were people who had to abide by Israel's laws and serve Israel's God.
 - They were part of the community of Israel.
 - They weren't commanded to set up Canaanite relief funds. They were actually commanded to destroy the Canaanites (what does that do to the narrative approach).
 - The narrative shows a limited, kingdom-focused, benevolence.
- What about the universal grace of Jesus?
 - Jesus certainly died to save all men.
 - But that grace is not received universally.
 - It is conditionally received by those who are willing to become a part of the kingdom.
 - Those who stay outside the kingdom do not still receive the benefit of the cross.
- The narrative and the theology of who God is do not just point to inclusivity and universal displays of kindness.
 - There are clear distinctions of exclusivity and judgment in that narrative as well.
 - The doors of the kingdom are open to all but not all are willing to be a part.
- I believe the narrative and the theology support the limited benevolence view and we would do well to show it.
 - One of the worst things our brethren can do is concede that the story may say one thing but the "rules" say another.
 - God's laws DO flow out from who He is. But they also tell us who He is. When we see a conflict we do need to look for harmony. That harmony should never come at the expense of one side for the sake of the other.

Conclusion

- I think John Mark Hicks has raised some important challenges.
 - We should not read Scripture as though commands, examples, and inferences floated free from the biblical story.
 - We should not treat Acts and the Epistles as though the rest of Scripture were merely background material.
 - And we should not confuse our interpretive middle step with the text itself.
- But once we embrace theological interpretation, the question becomes even more important: Are we telling the story faithfully?
- So I do not think the battle line should be CENI versus theological hermeneutics, or pattern versus Christ. The question before us is whether our theological account of Christ and the biblical narrative is faithful to the whole revelation, including the particulars through which God has chosen to reveal that story.