NORMATIVE GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING ACTS

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE

ENGLISH COMPOSITION

EN112

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KANSAS CITY, MO

JANUARY 2003

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Date needs to be the current month and year
I. Introduction

II. Principles of Interpretation

III. Conclusion

The outline page is numbered with a Roman Numeral “ii”
There are widely divergent attitudes toward the use of historical precedence for establishing ecclesiological doctrine. It is very common to assume that the church today is to be as nearly identical to the church as described in the book of Acts as possible. “By and large, most sectors of evangelical Protestantism have a ‘restoration movement’ mentality. We regularly look back to the church and Christian experience in the first century as the norm to be restored or the ideal to approximated.”

On the other hand, it appears to be more popular in recent years to cavalierly dismiss any possible relevance of Acts from consideration in ecclesiological discussions. A pastor friend of the writer was recently heard to declare, “Well, everybody knows that you can’t prove anything about elders from the book of Acts.”

Fee has well stated the problem posed in seeking to establish normative polity based on New Testament example.

The hermeneutical problem of Acts, therefore is a crucial one and touches many parts of Scripture which are basically historical narrative. How is the book of Acts, which prima facie narrates a small segment of the early spread of Christianity, to be understood as the Word of God? That is, what is its Word which not merely describes the primitive Church but speaks as a norm to the Church at all times? Indeed, do such narratives somehow establish normative precedents for succeeding generations? Or are they merely
illustrative or informative? If they do have a word for us, and I think they do, how does one discover it, or set up principles in order to hear it?²

Is there any hope for resolution of such a critical question? Not all aspects of the issue can be included in a brief paper.³ The following principles are offered as a guide in this difficult area.

**Principles of Interpretation**

**Precedence of Doctrinal Passages**

Explicit doctrinal passages and commands have precedence over historical narrative.⁴

There are many doctrinal passages in Scripture that are specifically intended to teach particular doctrinal truth or to require specific action of God's people. There are numerous commands addressed specifically to the church. In these instances, there is little dispute regarding the must form the primary basis of ecclesiological decisions. For example, the “filling and coming upon” the believer in Acts 2, 10, and 19 with the resultant speaking in tongues does not take precedent over the doctrinal command in Eph 5:18 NIV, “Instead be filled with the Spirit.”

**Historical Precedence Alone**

Historical narrative records what did happen in a given situation. It does not prescribe what must happen in every subsequent situation. Historical precedence alone should never form the basis for normativeness. “On the basis of precedence alone it is probably not valid to say,

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‘Therefore, one must.’5 “Just through being reported as truly happening, no event becomes the revelation of God’s universal will.”6

Scriptural Corroboration

Practices based on historical precedence are most clearly normative if corroborated by principles elsewhere in Scripture. There may not be a specific command addressing the situation, but there will be relevant theological principles that can be established from other prescriptive passages.7

Non-Contradictory

It should be obvious, but for the sake of clarity, a principle claiming support from historical narrative cannot contradict explicit statements found elsewhere in the epistles. “The meaning and principles derived from a story must be consistent with all other teachings of Scripture. A deductive principle drawn from a narrative which contradicts the teaching of some other scriptural passages is invalid.”8

It is perhaps valid to defend a given practice on the basis of precedence if there is substantial evidence for its practice and that pattern can be demonstrated to be the only pattern present. A consistent and clear pattern must be established. Specifically, polity considerations

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7 “For a biblical precedent to justify present action, the principle of the action must be taught elsewhere, where it is the primary intent so to teach.” Fee, “Genre of NT Literature,” 118. Although addressing a slightly different issue, the following comment is also relevant. “When these injunctions to a specific individual or group parallel general reaching found elsewhere, they may be viewed as normative, but not on their own strength.” McQuilkin, “Normativeness in Scripture,” 235.
based on Acts may be valid if the matter is both widespread (the actions of many churches reflect such a practice in the narrative) and unique (it is the only way in which the churches did something). “The strongest possible case can be made when only one pattern is found . . . and when that pattern is repeated within the New Testament itself.”

**Positive Versus Negative**

In establishing patterns, it must be recognized that positive patterns are clearer than negative patterns. In other words, the fact that something was done is more significant than something that was not done—unless the text explicitly and emphatically states that a specific action was not involved. Arguments from silence are dubious and inconclusive in most instances.

**Intention Versus Incidentals**

Exegesis must emphasize the intention of the passage rather than incidental allusions. Historical narrative texts record numerous minor details. Although accurate descriptions of what actually happened, they are not to be elevated to the primary, didactic level unless the writer is clearly representing these details as significant to his primary thesis. For example, an exegete must be careful not to draw too many thematic principles from the death of a proud politician as found in Acts 12. On a related matter, it should be noted that extensive passages on a subject take priority for theological purposes over brief allusions.

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9 Fee and Stuart, How to Read the Bible, 102.

10 Ibid., 116.

11 They may, of course, illustrate specific teaching recorded elsewhere.

Conclusion

The book of Acts can be legitimately used to establish ecclesiological polity in the contemporary church. If these principles are followed consistently, the interpreter will not be guilty of wresting Scripture to teach something that God never intended.

Helpful Turabian Hints:

* There must be at least two paragraphs on a page

* Do not use contractions such as don’t, wasn’t, etc.

* Any form of 1st or 2nd person is never used. This includes: I, we, you, etc. Instead use words such as: one, a person, the writer, etc.

* A “Capitalization/Lowercasing Glossary” can be found in the Style Guide, p. 12–16.

* See Style Guide, p. 9–11 for other general writing information.


