

Acts: Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics in Acts

- The main issue to apply the book of Acts to today is whether we see any of it as describing normative behavior for the Church
 - In other words, is what *happened* in the early church what *must happen* in the ongoing church?
- Are there behaviors described in Acts to which the Church should say, “We *must* do this?”
 - Or are they things to which we ought to say, “We *may* do this?”

Working Assumption: “Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way- unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.” Fee, 124.

Categories of Doctrinal Statements

- Doctrine: “A belief or set of beliefs held and taught by the church.”
- Christian Theology: “What Christians *believe*”
- Christian Ethics: “How Christians ought to *live* in relation to God and others”
- Christian Experience and Practice: “What Christians *do* as religious/spiritual people”

Two Levels of Statements

- Primary: Those doctrinal statements derived from the explicit propositions or imperatives of Scripture
 - What Scripture *intends* to teach
 - Ex.) God is one; God is love; all have sinned; Christ died for sins; salvation is by grace; Jesus is divine
- Secondary: Those statements derived only incidentally, by *implication* or by *precedent*
 - The logical outflow of primary statements
 - Ex.) *How* the two natures of Jesus (deity & humanity) concur in unity

Precedence

- Almost everything that Christians derive from Scripture by way of precedence is in the 3rd category (Christian experience & practice)
 - And always of the secondary level (implicit)
- Ex.) Observing the Lord’s Supper as a continuing practice in the Church is primary because it is commanded by Jesus, while Acts & the Epistles bear witness to it
 - But the frequency of its observance is based on tradition and precedent, and thus should not be binding

Intentionality

- “The general maxim of hermeneutics is that God’s word is to be found in the *intent* of the Scripture.”
 - Especially true when looking at historical narratives
- Thus, if we conclude that Luke’s *intent* in Acts is to show how the Holy Spirit moved the early church from Jewish-centered, Jerusalem-based to Gentile-dominated, worldwide, and that nothing can hinder the Spirit’s work
- Then we can surmise that Luke *intended* for his readers to apply this later truth to their own time and circumstances
- Thus, one hermeneutical application of Acts as a whole is that nothing can hinder the work of the Spirit to advance the Gospel, both then and now!
- From this conclusion, we can infer that the Church in all times should model the early Church by being:
 - Evangelistic
 - Joyful
 - Communal
 - Spirit-empowered

What about Individual Narratives?

- Do they have the same teaching authority?
 - No!
 - Because the details differ from story to story
 - Thus not showing repeated precedent, but rather incidental activity
- Ex.) Acts 6:1-7
 - Intentional: Showing how the Spirit moved the church beyond Jerusalem
 - Incidental: How to help in a minority group within the church *may* include giving them their own leaders
 - But is not *mandated*

Intended vs. Incidental

- There can be theological value in the incidental gleanings
- But, God’s word *for us* is found in the primary *intended* meaning of the text

General Principles

1. The word of God in Acts that may be regarded as normative for Christians is related primarily to what any given narrative was intended to teach.
2. What is incidental to the primary intent of the narrative may reflect an inspired authorial understanding, but it does not have the same teaching value as what the narrative intended to teach.
 - That does NOT mean that the incidental has no value
 - It just means that we cannot allow what is incidental in a text to become its primary teaching focus
3. Historical precedent, to have normative value, must be related to intent.
 - If it can be shown that the purpose of a given narrative is to *establish* precedent, then such precedent should be regarded as normative.
 - Ex.) If it could be shown that Luke's intent in Acts 6:1-7 was to demonstrate how the church should select its leaders, then we should consider that normative and follow suit. If not, then we could follow the example, but are not *required* to do so.

The Questions that Remain

- Since little in Acts can be read as normative models (precedent setting), what do we do with questions like:
 - Modes of baptism
 - Age of the baptized
 - Tongues as a sign of Spirit-baptism
 - Frequency of the Lord's Supper
 - Etc.
- We should not confuse what was _____ with what is _____
 - That, is what normally happened must not be what always happens

Specific Principles

1. It is probably never valid to use an analogy based on biblical precedent as giving biblical authority for present-day actions.
 - Examples: Gideon's fleece; Jesus' reception of the Spirit at His baptism (p. 129)
2. Although it may not have been the author's primary purpose, biblical narratives do have illustrative and (sometimes) 'pattern' value.
 - Examples: Paul's use of OT examples as warnings to those who had false security in their divine election (1 Cor. 10:1-13); Jesus' use of David's actions as justification for His Sabbath actions (Matt. 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5)
 - However, the precedent does not establish a norm for specific action

- Warning: If one wishes to use a biblical precedent to justify some present action, it is best if the principle of the action is taught elsewhere more directly.
3. In matters of Christian experience, and even more so of Christian practice, biblical precedents may sometimes be regarded as repeatable patterns- even if they are not normative.
- a) In other words, later Christians *can* repeat behaviors modeled by the early church that are not prescribed. But they are not *required* to, especially in a certain mode, in order to be obedient to God's word.

Guidelines for Repeatable Practices

A practice or pattern can be seen as *repeatable*, if the following conditions are true:

- a) The strongest case can be made when only one pattern is found and repeated within the NT itself
- Although one must be careful not to make an argument from silence
 - Argument from Silence: "To make the case for something or against something based on a lack of evidence, rather than on solid evidence for that thing."
- b) When there is an ambiguity of patterns or when a pattern occurs but once, it is repeatable for later Christians only if it appears to have divine approval or is in harmony with what is taught elsewhere in Scripture.
- c) What is culturally conditioned is either not repeatable at all or must be translated into the new and differing culture