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# The Problem With Patterns And Precedents

*Identifying Principles in the Book of Acts*

By Roderick A. Graciano  
Director, Timothy Ministries

Oh for the days of my youth when Jesus People roamed the streets and everything in the book of Acts was crystal clear. I remember Pentecostal brothers telling me, “Miracles, foot washing, witnessing—if it’s in the Bible, we do it at our church!” Once a man visited our Christian coffee house and pulled from his trench coat a photo of someone enveloped in flames. “We’re true Pentecostals,” he said with conviction, “because we believe in the baptism in the Holy Ghost and in fire!” Then there was the ubiquitous teaching among Pentecostals of the time that no one was truly baptized in the Spirit until they spoke in tongues because tongues is the evidence of the baptism in the Spirit—a principle certified by the fact that “in every case” of the Spirit baptism in Acts, the recipients spoke in tongues.

Live and learn. The naivete of Charismatic and youth-oriented street movements in the early seventies filled me and my friends with excitement as we expected supernatural intervention at every turn. Unfortunately, some of my peers soon became disillusioned as God did not seem to live up to His Word,<sup>1</sup> and I myself experienced seasons of discouragement for the same reason. I wish someone could have taught me at the outset that though the Bible is a supernatural book, it follows literary rules like any other serious work. When I first began applying the book of Acts to my own

Christian environment, I didn't stop to define terms, differentiating between *principles*, *patterns* and *precedents*. I assumed that all three transferred to the 20th century. I never dreamed of sorting out which principles were syntactically flagged as such in the narrative and then determining which were culturally conditioned, self-delimiting or corroborated by other New Testament books. I only had a vague unease about adopting 2,000 year old forms of church life: I had no concept of extracting the function from the form.<sup>2</sup> In short, I never dreamed of working so hard to understand the Bible. A growing love for the truth, however, has changed my outlook. I realize now that to correctly apply the book of Acts in our present century, we must first apply literary rules in interpreting the text.

## Defining Terms

As we attempt to extract “principles” and “patterns” from Acts, let's first define our terms. Based on biblical usage, **principles** (στοιχεία) are material elements which together form a larger whole (2 Pet. 3.10), or in the abstract realm, the elemental concepts which taken together form and facilitate a philosophy or life-style (cf. Col. 2.8,20). They are the essential propositions that one must be adhere to (στοιχείω) to be recognized as a member of a philosophical or religious system (see Acts 21.24). In a closely related meaning, we also think of principles as the rules (νόμοι) by which a phenomenon works (Rom. 3.27 (NIV); Rom. 7.21 (NASB)), or apropos to this study, by which the Christian life, or some aspect of it, is successfully lived out.<sup>3</sup> **Patterns** (τύπος, ὑποτύπωσις) are graphic examples of how the elemental principles can be assembled, whether into a building (Hebrews 8.5) or into a holy life (2 Timothy 1.13; Titus 2.7). As examples of holy living, they are usually not binding in sequence and detail, but illustrate how one *may* live out the principles of holiness.<sup>4</sup> A third word germane to our discussion, “precedent,” does not appear in the Bible, but its usage in our own culture is familiar. A **precedent** is an act or decision that serves as justification for a subsequent action. It differs from a pattern in that we generally think of a pattern as a series of like events while a single event may constitute a precedent.

## The Problem with Patterns and Precedents

Christians have based much shaky doctrine on the supposed patterns and precedents of Acts. The one that leaps to my mind is the doctrine that speaking in tongues is the sign of the initial filling (or baptism) of the Holy Spirit. Acts does record several occasions of people speaking in tongues when they received the Spirit, but does Luke's record present these occurrences as a principle, pattern, precedent—or none of the above?

### Precedents Ambiguous at Best

The Pentecost event alone (Acts 2) provides a *precedent* for the idea that tongues is a *possible* sign of the Spirit's coming. Precedents are not usually conceived of as all-encompassing and normative though. They simply provide a basis for the *possibility* of something occurring in a certain way. Any all-encompassing doctrine, such as that “every Spirit-baptism must be accompanied by tongues,” demands a firmer basis. My Pentecostal friends would agree and assure me that there is a clear *pattern* in Acts: tongues accompanied *every* instance of the baptism of the Spirit. Upon inspection though, we find that out of 5 initial encounters with the Holy Spirit (2.4; 8.17; 9.17; 10.46,47; 19.6) Luke links glossolalia to only three of the events.<sup>5</sup> We generally don't accept  $\frac{3}{5}$  as a pattern we would bet on. In fact, one exception presents a *contrary precedent* proving that the Spirit can manifest His arrival in another manner.

### Patterns Must Be Absolute to Support a Principle

But what if Luke had recorded additional accounts of Spirit baptisms? What if the ratio of tongues to baptisms grew to 6 out of 10 or 60 out of 100? If Luke had recorded 60 out of 100 cases where

tongues accompanied the coming of the Spirit, would the pattern not seem compelling, perhaps even suggesting a principle, even though the tongues-to-baptisms ratio was still exactly  $\frac{3}{5}$ . I think we'd be tempted to see a principle in such a record, but we'd be wrong to yield. Any pattern based on a frequency of less than 100% is based on an arbitrary decision as to how much is enough and none of us want our doctrine based on a whim.

Furthermore, any principle based on a pattern alone risks overlooking other decisive evidence. Is there a propositional statement in the narrative or in another biblical text that contradicts the supposed pattern? Is it corroborated by propositional teaching elsewhere in scripture? Is the proposed principle supported by the overall purpose of the narrative—or made suspect? These questions must be answered before any confidence can be placed in a pattern.

I recommend that we let something other than precedents and patterns guide us to principles. We must realize that, while they have great value as examples, *patterns are an inefficient way to teach theological truth*. If Luke had intended to teach a principle about the baptism in the Holy Spirit, he could have easily done so by a statement of principle in the narrative like, “they all spoke in tongues as the Lord ordained for everyone receiving the Spirit.” It is the kind of verbal clues in such a statement that we must rely on while combing a historical narrative for principles. Rather than looking for precedents and patterns, we must identify the normal syntactic and contextual flags that naturally flow from writers' pens when they mention principles in a historical account.

## Identifying Principles in Acts

### Syntactic Flags

When writers convey a principle as such, they will naturally flag it with indicator terms of *command*, *necessity*, *exclusivity*, or *universality*. I don't suggest that every time such a term is used it flags a principle. Terms of command in a historical narrative are usually self delimiting, being directed to characters within the narrative itself (e.g. “Tabitha arise”). Terms of necessity, etc., may just present a fact (e.g. 17.3: “Christ *had to* suffer”). Nevertheless, commands to persons in the narrative may have a larger application, as may concepts in the narrative set off by terms of necessity, etc. If we're looking for principles, we should watch for such flags and then examine the context carefully for a truth that transcends the narrative itself. Consider the following examples of possible principles flagged by indicator terms:

#### **Imperatives or Terms of Command in Acts (including the word “command”)**

1. Preach the full message: 5.20 (λαλεῖτε).
2. Appoint qualified men to minister to practical needs within the church: 6.3 (ἐπισκέψασθε > Επισκεπτομαι: with acc., to select).
3. What God has accepted we must not reject: 10.15 (μὴ κοῖνου).
4. Witnesses of Christ's resurrection must preach and testify: 10.42 (παρήγγειλεν).
5. New converts must be baptized: 10:48 (προσέταξεν > προστάσσω).
6. Forgiveness of sins comes through Christ: 13.38 (γνωστὸν οὖν ἔστω ὑμῖν).<sup>6</sup>
7. The gospel must be offered to Gentiles as well as Jews: 13.47 (ἐντέταλται > ἐντέλλομαι).
8. Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses: 15.5 (παραγγέλειν).<sup>7</sup>
9. Salvation comes by faith in Jesus: 16.31 (Πίστευσον ἐπὶ τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν).
10. All persons everywhere must repent: 17.30 (παραγγέλει).
11. Elders should watch over every member of the flock including themselves: 20.28 (προσέχετε ἑαυτοῖς καὶ παντὶ τῷ ποιμνίῳ).
12. Elders should be on their guard against false teaching: 20.31 (γρηγορεῖτε > Γρηγορέω: watch).

### Terms of Necessity

1. Old Testament Scriptures must be fulfilled: 1.16 (“had to be”; πληρωθῆναι τὴν γραφὴν).
2. Salvation must be in Christ: 4.12 (“must”; δεῖ).<sup>8</sup>
3. God must be obeyed before men: 5.29 (“must”; δεῖ).
4. Gospel proclaimed to Jews first: 13.46 (“necessary”; ἀναγκαιὸς).
5. Suffering is normal to the Christian life: 14.22 (“must”; δεῖ).
6. Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses: 15.5 (δεῖ).<sup>9</sup>
7. Gentile believers, while avoiding offence to Jewish neighbors, need not keep the Levitical law: 15.19-21; 24-29 (“essentials”; ἐπιβάναγκες).
8. Salvation by faith: 16.30,31 (“must”; δεῖ). [Implied in question and answer.]
9. Giving material support to the weak: 20.35 (“must”; δεῖ).

### Terms of Exclusivity

1. Salvation exclusively in Christ: 4.12 (“in no one else; for there is no other name”; ἐν ἄλλῳ οὐδεὶς...οὐδὲ γὰρ ὄνομά ἐστιν ἕτερον).
2. Gospel proclamation must be consistent with OT revelation: 26.22 (“nothing but”; οὐδὲν ἕκτος).<sup>10</sup>

### Terms of Universality

1. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved: 2.17,21 (πας).
2. The promise of the Spirit is for all whom God calls: 2.39 (πασιν).
3. Christ should be obeyed in everything: 3.22,23 (κατα παντα).
4. Salvation for every country must be in Christ: 4.12 (“under heaven”; ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν).
5. The message of redemption should be proclaimed in its entirety: 5.20; 20.27 (παντα; πασαν).
6. God accepts persons from every nation: 10.34,35 (παντι).
7. Everyone who believes in Christ receives forgiveness of sins: 10.43 (παντα).
8. All manner of sins are justified through Christ: 13.38,39 (παντων).
9. God commands all people everywhere to repent: 17.30 (παντας πανταχου).<sup>11</sup>
10. The universal proof of the gospel is Christ’s resurrection: 17.31 (πιστιν παρασχων πασιν).
11. Every sheep in God’s flock should be shepherded: 20.28 (παντι).
12. Giving material support to the weak: 20.35 (“In everything I showed you”; πάντα ὑπέδειξα).<sup>12</sup>

### Purpose and Summary Statements

A final literary indicator that we must not overlook in our search for principles is the author’s own purpose and summary statements placed in the narrative. Whether or not these flag a specific principle in the text, understanding the purpose and structure of the larger narrative will at least help us discern which principles are incidental and which are primary to the author’s intent at the time of writing.

Fee and Stuart, in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, have identified the five summary statements in Acts:

1. 6:7 And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.
2. 9:31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

3. 12:24 But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.
4. 16:5 So the churches [with Gentile members] were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.
5. 19:20 So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing [among churches with Gentile members].

These summary statements taken together with the Lord’s “purpose statement” at the beginning of the book (“you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”) and the book’s closing statement (relating how the gospel message in all its fullness successfully penetrated to the Gentile core of the empire), make it clear that Luke’s intent in writing Acts was to document and legitimize the expansion of Christianity into the Gentile world. **Consequently, any principles we encounter in the narrative that pertain to how the gospel was successfully transmitted, and why it was legitimately transmitted to non-Jews, should arrest our attention as of primary importance.**

## Primary Principles in Acts

Narrowing our flagged passages to those relating to the effective and trans-cultural expansion of Christianity yields the following principles:

1. Obey God in the face of adversity, recognizing suffering as a normal cost of advancing the kingdom (5.29; 14.22).<sup>13</sup>
2. Fulfill the Great Commission by the Spirit’s empowering (1.4,5,8; 2.17,39; 5.32).
3. Preach the gospel message fully, consistently with (and corroborated by) the scriptures, calling all persons to repent and submit to Christ as demanded by the proof of His resurrection (3.22,23; 5.20; 17.30,31; 20.27; 26.22).<sup>14</sup>
4. Proclaim salvation and forgiveness for every kind of sin as available exclusively through Christ by means of faith in Him (4.12; 13.38,39; 16.30,31).
5. Offer the gospel to Jews first, then to all persons regardless of race or culture (2.17,21,39; 10.15,34,35,43; 13.46).
6. Gentile believers must respect the sensibilities of their Jewish brothers, but need not take the Levitical law upon themselves (15.19-21; 24-29).
7. Elders must guard against false teaching, and shepherd all believers without partiality (20.28,31).
8. The able-bodied in the church must minister to the temporal needs of their weaker brothers (6.7; 20.35).

## Conclusion

I believe that the language and purpose of Acts marks out the eight propositions above as principles which transcend the narrative. Does this mean we can take them and run with them without further ado? Unfortunately not. There is yet need for interpretation (what does it mean to preach the gospel “fully”?), corroboration (should we still preach to the Jews in each city first?—does this principle transcend time and geography according to other New Testament passages?), and application (what are the implications of the Spirit’s empowering being available for all believers?). Still, with these eight propositions we have come much closer to the core of “what Acts teaches us for today” than we would have relying on patterns or precedents. Basic literary clues in the book of Acts have helped us find those principles that no exposition of the book should overlook, while at the same time helping us to avoid doctrines that are unnecessarily controversial by virtue of their ambiguous footing.

So what about the baptism in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues? Though I see my eight propositions as primary to the text, that does not negate the importance of other incidental principles, nor the countless additional insights for Christian life and outreach imbedded in the narrative (finding the core message of the book does not begin to exhaust the pearls of wisdom still to be found in it, especially as those pearls are tied to other parts of the canon). I value every verse that mentions the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts for what it tells me about His ways. Nevertheless, we must stop trying to turn precedents and patterns into principles that become mandatory for the church at large. If *the language* of Acts does not flag our pet precedent as a principle, we must establish our doctrine by a corroborating text elsewhere or give it up!

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- 1 In general, the seeming failure of God to live up to His promises probably has more to do with our sin and unbelief than it does with our hermeneutical naivete. However, this paper is about the hermeneutical problem.
- 2 E.g. I had no understanding of what made the “essentials” of Acts 15 essential.
- 3 This biblical usage is entirely consistent with current dictionary definitions: 1. an accepted or professed rule of action or conduct; 2. a fundamental, primary, or general law or truth from which others are derived; 3. a fundamental doctrine or tenet (Random House Dictionary). As a “rule,” “law,” or “fundamental doctrine” we see that a principle is not something optional but rather something that is binding. We do well to understand this word and not label as principles those “truths” that are by nature adaptable or otherwise non-universal in application within the framework under consideration.
- 4 The divinely revealed pattern for the Tabernacle was a blueprint, binding in its detail, whereas a pattern revealed through a human life is generally seen as an example to be imitated in concept only.
- 5 Classic Pentecostalism insists that though Luke omitted the explicit information, Paul had to have spoken in tongues when he received the Spirit, since he admits in 1 Corinthians to using the gift. That the Samaritan believers also spoke in tongues is considered obvious from the fact the Simon Magus could see some sign of the Spirit’s coming. The assumptions made in this approach reduce the “tongues-is-the-evidence” doctrine to circular reasoning.
- 6 Here the command is to *take note*, which is a bright flag indicating that a principle may follow.
- 7 Here a proposed principle is flagged by both a term of command and a term of necessity. When disproved, the opposite of the proposition becomes a principle.
- 8 Corroborated: 1 John 5.12.
- 9 Here a proposed principle is flagged by both a term of command and a term of necessity. When disproved, the opposite of this proposition (below) becomes a principle.
- 10 Cf. 24.14.
- 11 Cf. 26.20.
- 12 Here the flag has to do with a comprehensive example for the concept.
- 13 In the book of Acts we can see patterns building up to a statement of principle. The relationship of the Christian to adversity is a case in point. We see the examples of the apostolic response to the chief priests (5.29), and the response of the church to Peter’s imprisonment (ch. 12), along with Paul’s trials culminating in the propositional statement of 14.22. Likewise, we see the examples of caring for the Hellenistic widows in ch. 6 and the example of Dorcas in ch. 9 culminating in the statement of principle in 20.35.
- 14 While the gift of the Holy Spirit and His empowering presence sets the stage for the entire book of Acts, no one has ever been able to put the Spirit’s working in Acts into the box of a compelling pattern. Τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ. If there is a pattern in the book of Acts, it is the pattern of apostolic reliance on the canonical revelation as a basis for their message: See Acts 1.16; 2.16, 25-31, 34; 3.18, 21-24; 7.1-53; 8.28-35; 10.43; 13.15-41, 47; 15.15-18; 17.2, 11; 18.24-28; 23.3; 24.14; 25.8; 26.22, 27; 28.23-25.