

Paul's Free "Tents for Humanity" #3

Following the flow of thought begun under the title above, you may find this to get farther away from tent-making. I want to question with you whether our efforts to determine God's will for us by the criteria of "commands, examples (patterns), and necessary inferences" is valid. In making so many of those determinations, lack of facts and logic has been reinforced by assumptions. We hope to look into that more later but will drift into another direction in this issue.

I suspect that most of our concepts which distinguish us as a group are more traditional than from inspired direction. The Law of Moses called for no local assemblies throughout the land. There was no "going to church" two or three times weekly. On a few special days the men went to Jerusalem. It was a more patriarchal system where the respected heads of clan-like families were called elders. Each represented the interests of his clan in called assemblies.

Synagogues (gatherings, assemblies) came into view during the Babylonian captivity organized as expedients rather than by command from God. Elders were in charge of those synagogues. They were evidently non-elected but respected leaders in their communities. These community gatherings for worship and teaching overseen by their elders are familiar in the Gospel records. Jesus was in regular attendance in the synagogues and taught in them (Luke 4:15f).

Then came Pentecost. Are we to believe that they conducted "church organizing" seminars and that all of the thousands of converts immediately forsook the synagogues and formed congregations? Not likely. We do have a revealing glimpse, "*All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people*" (Acts 2:44-47 NIV). This expresses the initial enthusiasm of the converted thousands. Though inclusive terms are used, we must not force it to mean that every believer met in the temple courts every day, sold all their possessions, and that all ate together in homes every day. Neither must we interpret it as presenting a pattern to be followed universally ever afterwards.

Evidently, some of the Jewish elders were converted and were still respected in the communities, perhaps serving as the elder in his household group. A decade or more passed and no mention is made of appointing elders. As Paul and Barnabas worked in Antioch, the disciples sent relief money to the Judean disciples which was given to the elders. At this seeming late date, the first mention of elders in the church was made (Acts 11:27-30). Much later, the first mention of appointing elders is mentioned. It was not done by churches, nor has any congregation ever been instructed to appoint elders. Is that a pattern? Paul and Barnabas went back to the churches they had established and "*appointed elders for them in every church*" (Acts 14:23). Is this an example binding universally? Appointing elders in every church is no more a pattern for plurality of elders than our electing governors in every state indicates a plurality of governors in every state. We have made law out of assumption on this point.

Late in Paul's ministry, he wrote to Timothy in Ephesus and Titus in Crete describing the kind of men elders were. Why would this be needed? Neither of those men was brought up in the Jewish patriarchal culture and both Ephesus and Crete were of Grecian culture. Evidently, seeing the similarity of communities of believers to family clans, Paul saw the expediency of having an "elder" recognized as the leader and caretaker of the group similar to the Jewish family elder. Rather than our seeing that Paul was giving general descriptions, we have tried to make the qualities described into legal qualifications and the appointment of a plurality of elders in each group a lawful requirement. Thus we have been inclined to stake out organizational boundaries for each community of believers, the infringement of which would endanger the eternal welfare of each man, woman, and child in the group.

By the time of the Jerusalem conference, they well could have reached 50,000 or more in number. Paul, Barnabas, and other brothers were sent from Antioch to this gathering. "*When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the **church** and the **apostles** and the **elders***" (Acts 15:4). We can agree that the apostles would be a distinct group. The believers in general were the church, singular in number, and there was one body of elders. Whether from house churches or congregations of various sizes, the elders are presented as a singular body. They were of such esteem that they joined with the apostles and whole church in sending a binding directive to the church in Antioch and Gentiles concerning circumcision and the Law of Moses. That hardly favors our old contentions for congregational autonomy/independence!

Timothy and Titus were charged with doing corrective work among the disciples in Ephesus and Crete. I am going to offer some suggestions that may horrify you, in case I have not already used up your supply of horror. Why did Paul not write to the elders or the leaders or the whole church in those cities instead of sending two outsiders? These two men were given higher qualifications enabling them to **deal authoritatively**. Were they bishops? Who knows? The function rather than the title is what matters.

We know more about Timothy and Ephesus. Ephesus was a great commercial center. How big was the congregation there? Fifty? Two hundred? That's Texas thinking! More likely, there were thousands. His preaching there had converted so many from idolatry that he was ruining the trade of the silversmiths. He caused a riot! Across that great city, with which house group or assembly did Timothy work? There is no indication that he served any one group. He was a special envoy to bring correction to the disciples in the city.

"This charge I commit to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophetic utterance which pointed to you, that inspired by them you may wage the good warfare.." (1 Tim. 1:18).

*"Command and teach these things. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believer an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect **the gift** you have, which **was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you**" (4:11-14). He was a "**man of God**" (6:11). Timothy was the only person called a **Man of God** in new covenant writings but that term was applied to various men like Moses, Elisha, David, and other special messengers of God in old covenant scriptures. Timothy hardly fits our patternistic*

concepts. He was just a young preacher who was an example for budding preachers throughout history! Really?

Do all of Paul's instructions to Timothy apply to us today -- to young preachers, to all preachers, to all students except women? Wise caution will not allow us to apply everything Paul taught Timothy universally.

Let's look at one our favorite and much memorized texts: *“But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the **man of God** may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works”* (2 Tim. 3:14-17 KJV). In order to accomplish his assigned work, Timothy would need to *“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”* (2 Tim. 2:15 KJV).

The **scriptures** that Timothy had learned and was to use were the **Old Testament scriptures**. They would serve him fully in dealing with the Judaizers he was to face. **Rightly dividing** was not discerning between the **old** and **new** covenant writings for the new covenant scriptures had not been collected. He did not need to **study** for he already knew them. In plainer words Paul was saying, *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth”* (NIV). Paul was not commanding you and me to study our Bibles! And even though he said the scriptures are inspired of God, he did not identify any portion of them or explain what “inspired of God” meant.

Again, this is no effort to discredit the scriptures or to make a “right or wrong” checklist. It is more an effort to show the lack of evidence to substantiate a systematic pattern for “total patternists” or to confirm a lack of pattern for “zero patternists.” The saved ones are not identified by patterns or lack of them.

If you or the group you serve with are converting and maturing people and serving the needs of humanity, by all means keep it up while looking for even more effective methods. If, however, you or those with whom you serve are mostly serving yourselves “holding your own,” or are stalemated, or in decline, then let no familiar methods of perceived patterns fetter you to the past. Which is better, to hold to traditional, ineffective methods or to learn how to reach the lost around you? It is time to think outside the box! []

(Cecil Hook: March 2007)

NEXT ISSUE:

I am planning to skip next week. But you will be treated to a lesson by Randal Bowling, the computer guy who has done so much work on our web site. He is the one who sends these essays to you each week. Randy lives in Byron, Georgia.