

Are We Patternists?

by Matthew McClister

“You’re a patternist.” This sounds like an insult, especially when it refers to how one reads the Bible. Patterns are constricting and binding, but Christ came to set us free, right? We’re no longer a slave to any pattern, but freed by God’s grace from having to worry about patterns anymore. So, if I say you’re a patternist, I’ve just condemned you. I might as well have called you a legalist, because the two words are virtually synonymous.

The problem with the above reasoning is that we’re all patternists. Humans were built to see pattern and design in everything. We are pattern-recognizing creatures, and this allows us to do literally everything we do mentally. No one can play music without a pattern of notes that work together in harmony. To be sure, there are infinite variations of harmonious sounds, but without a recognizable pattern of notes to work with we wouldn’t be able to make any music. It’d just be random noise.

The same logic that applies to our musical abilities applies to all other mental abilities. You’re able to read this sentence because you’re a “patternist.” When certain letters are strung together in a certain pattern, it becomes meaningful to you. Do you recognize the difference between “potter” and “putter”? A slight variation in the pattern of letters creates a different meaning, but there must be a pattern for those letters to have any meaning when put together.

As a matter of fact, once we appreciate how integral patterns are, we come to recognize that patterns are what liberate us. The musician cannot improvise or compose beautiful music without recognizing sound patterns. The ability to make patterns with words and letters gives us the freedom to express ourselves. We could go on and on, but hopefully by now you get the point. Patterns are necessary for both comprehension and expression.

If at first we don’t comprehend something, we will attempt to make a pattern in order to understand it. It’s just built into our DNA. So to call someone whose reasoning we dislike a “patternist” isn’t really the derogatory label it’s intended to be. To call someone a patternist is to call them a human. It would be like calling someone with bad breath an “oxygenist.” We may not like their breathing but that’s a poor way to express it, and we shouldn’t furthermore conclude that we should be liberated from oxygen.

It is true that some patterns are better than others, just as some songs are better than others. It is also true that sometimes we see patterns that aren’t there. The solution to bad patterns, however, is not to say “away with patterns!” That’s not even possible. To discard another person’s pattern is to substitute your own. You may debate whether a dog is of one breed or another, but you cannot say it is of no breed at all. The only way we can judge the validity of one identification or another is measure it against a pattern of “breedness.”

Hopefully you can already see what this has to do with our Bible reading. If we don’t like that certain people have gone to the Bible looking for a pattern, the solution isn’t to say that they shouldn’t be looking for patterns. That’s unavoidable. What we should do if we don’t like a particular pattern is figure out if the pattern is flawed. Did someone find this pattern because it’s in the Bible, or did they impose a foreign pattern upon the Bible?

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