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in ethics so that we have some basis for understanding competing evaluations of the moral witness of Scripture in particular issues, such as those addressed in the Social Justice Statement.

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The Church as a Scripture-Shaped Community: The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics

Richard B. Hays

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In this excellent article the author discusses how the Church becomes a Scripture-shaped community in making ethical judgements on the issues of our time. In developing a framework for pursuing New Testament ethics as a theological discipline, he outlines the threefold task of the descriptive or exegetical, the synthetic or coherent-images and the hermeneutical or interpretative methods. He suggests a number of guidelines for both the synthetic and hermeneutical tasks and appeals to the Church to live under biblical authority rather than under the ambiguities of reason and experience. In a case study on homelessness he applies his method to an urgent ethical issue. By way of criticism, not all evangelicals will agree that the tensions in the text have to be left as irreconcilable contradictions.

‘The Devil can cite scripture to his purpose,’ so my grandmother used to say. Or, as we prefer to say now in the academy, ‘The text has inexhaustible hermeneutical potential.’ Either way we choose to phrase it, the problem is the same. Appeals to Scripture as a warrant for our beliefs and practices are suspect for two reasons: the Bible itself contains diverse points of view, and diverse interpretive methods can yield diverse readings of any given text.

This hermeneutical crisis is nowhere more acutely embarrassing for the Church than with regard to ethical questions. Our last national election offered a vivid illustration of the problem, as Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson, each appealing to the Bible as the ground of his convictions, championed widely divergent visions of Christian morality. This is an instance of a perennial difficulty: Christians of all sorts, even those who do not subscribe formally to a ‘high’ doctrine of biblical inspiration, [p. 235](#) have always deemed it essential that their ethical teachings stand in continuity with Scripture.

Under these circumstances, an outsider’s scepticism might be understandable. Is it not nonsense for Christians to pretend that the Bible can regulate moral understanding? Yet the dilemma is most poignant seen from within the community of faith: How can the Church become a Scripture-shaped community, even where it earnestly longs to do so? Those who can naïvely affirm, ‘God said it, I believe it, that settles it,’ are oblivious to the

question-begging inherent in the formulation. There is no escape from the imperative of interpreting the word. Bumper-sticker hermeneutics will not do.

Nor, sad to say, is more and better exegesis the way to a solution. Indeed, careful exegesis heightens our awareness of the theological diversity within Scripture and of our historical distance from the original communities (in ancient Israel and the earliest churches) to whom these texts were addressed. In other words, critical exegesis exacerbates the hermeneutical problem rather than solving it. That is why seminary students sometimes come away from Bible courses puzzled and alienated. As Oliver O'Donovan has remarked, interpreters who think they can determine the proper ethical application of the Bible solely through more sophisticated exegesis are like people who believe that they can fly if only they flap their arms hard enough.

Unless we can give a coherent account of our methods for moving between text and normative ethical judgements, appeals to the authority of Scripture will be hollow and unconvincing. It is my aim in the present essay, therefore, to articulate as clearly as possible a framework within which we may pursue New Testament ethics as a theological discipline.¹

I. THE THREEFOLD TASK OF NEW TESTAMENT ETHICS

The project of studying New Testament ethics is multiplex; it requires us to engage in three overlapping critical operations that we may designate as the *descriptive*, the *synthetic*, and the *hermeneutical* **p.236** tasks.² The three tasks interpenetrate one another, of course, but it is useful to distinguish them for heuristic purposes. Indeed, much confusion can arise from the failure to distinguish these operations appropriately.³

The descriptive task

The *descriptive* task is fundamentally *exegetical in character*. The first thing that we must do in order to understand the ethics of the New Testament is to explicate in detail the messages of the individual writings in the canon,⁴ without prematurely harmonizing them. When we read the texts in this way, we note distinctive themes and patterns of

¹ Wayne Meeks ('Understanding Early Christian Ethics', *JBL* 105 [1986], 3–11) suggests that the term 'New Testament ethics' confuses historical and normative categories and should therefore not be used. Several notable studies in recent years have addressed the methodological issues: Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970); James M. Gustafson, 'The Place of Scripture in Christian', *INTERP.* 24 (1970), 430–55; Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976); Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', *INTERP.* 34 (1980), 356–70; Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983); Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1984); Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1984); Robin Scroggs, 'The New Testament and Ethics: How Do We Get from There to Here?' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 11/4 (1984), 77–93; and Eduard Lohse, *Theologische Ethik des Neuen Testaments* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1988).

² Cf. the analogous description of the tasks of Christian ethics offered by Birch and Rasmussen (*Bible and Ethics*, pp. 82–83): descriptive, critical, and normative. Their categories, however, apply not to the interpretation of texts but to the analysis of moral actions.

³ For extended discussion of one instance of such confusion, see my article, 'Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of [Romans 1](#),' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14/1 (1986), 184–215.

⁴ As is done, e.g., by Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

reasoning in the individual witnesses: Luke has a special concern for the poor, the pastoral epistles emphasize order and stability in the community, and so forth. Likewise, whenever we ask a specific question, such as, ‘What is the meaning of *porneia* in the exception clause that Matthew appends to Jesus’ prohibition of divorce?’ we are operating at the descriptive level.⁵

Our descriptive work cannot be confined, however, to the explicit moral teachings of the New Testament texts; the church’s moral world is manifest not only in such teachings but also in the stories, symbols, social structures, and practices that shape the community’s ethos. Thus, the work of the historical critic entails reconstructing a ‘thick description’ of the symbolic world of the communities that produced and received the New Testament writings.⁶

The synthetic task

If we are pursuing New Testament ethics with theological concerns in view, however, we must move on to ask this question, we move from the descriptive to the *synthetic* task. Is it possible to describe a unity of ethical perspective within the diversity of the canon?⁷

Often, the problem is addressed through attempts to reconcile apparent contradictions. Does Matthew’s demand for a higher righteousness ([Mat. 5:20](#)) contradict Paul’s gospel of the justification of the ungodly ([Rom. 4:5](#))? Does Luke’s concern for an ongoing church in history betray [p. 237](#) the early church’s radical eschatological ethic? How does the command for the people of God to ‘come out and be separate’ ([2 Cor. 6:14–7:1](#)) relate to Jesus’ notorious preference for eating with tax collectors and sinners? How does the principle that ‘in Christ there is no male and female’ ([Gal. 3:28](#)) relate to specific pastoral admonitions that women should keep silent in churches ([1 Cor. 14:34–35](#)) and submit to their husbands ([Eph. 5:22–24](#))? Is the state God’s servant for good ([Rom. 13:1–7](#)) or the beast from the abyss that makes war on the saints ([Rev. 13](#))?

Such particular intracanonical tensions can be handled (with something more substantial than *ad hoc* rationalizations) only if they can be located within a comprehensive characterization of the New Testament’s moral concerns or themes. What we need, in short, is a cluster of master images to govern our construal of New Testament ethics. The unifying images must be derived from the texts themselves, rather than superimposed artificially, and they must be capable of providing an interpretive framework that links and illumines the individual writings.

The hermeneutical task

Even if we should succeed in giving some satisfactory synthetic account of the New Testament’s ethical content, we will find ourselves—like Stephen Spielberg’s Indiana Jones at the final stage of his quest for the Holy Grail—perched on the edge of a terrifying

⁵ This example contains a hidden complication that exemplifies the difficulty of doing N.T. ethics even at the descriptive level. My formulation assumes that the exception clause originates with Matthew (or his community tradition) rather than with the historical Jesus. This implies that the descriptive task must include an effort to trace the developmental history of moral teaching traditions within the canon.

⁶ See, e.g., Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986). Of course, the thicker the description, the more challenging will be the subsequent synthetic phase of the project.

⁷ The problem of unity and diversity has long been a central problem of N.T. theology. For helpful discussions, see J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977); Hendrikus W. Boers, *What Is New Testament Theology?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

abyss. The last critical task is the *hermeneutical* operation. How can we bridge the chasm between ourselves and the text? How do we appropriate the New Testament's message as a word addressed to us?

The problem was recently put to me in a striking way by a Methodist pastor in Kansas. In the course of conducting a three-day class on Romans for a pastors' school, I had insisted that Romans should not be read as a tract about personal salvation; rather, Paul's central concern in the letter is to explicate the relation of Jews and Gentiles in God's redemptive purpose, while insisting that the gospel does not abrogate God's faithfulness to Israel. On the last day, one of the pastors said, 'Professor Hays, you've convinced me that you're right about Romans, but now I don't see how I can preach from it anymore. Where I serve out in western Kansas, Israel's fate is not a burning issue for my people, and there's not a Jew within a hundred miles of my church.' The objection deserves a thoughtful answer.

The task of hermeneutical appropriation requires *an integrative act of the imagination*. This is always so, even for those who would like to deny it. With fear and trembling we must work out a life of faithfulness to God through responsive and creative reappropriation of the New Testament in a world far removed from the world of the original writers and readers. Thus, whenever we appeal to the authority of the New Testament, we are necessarily engaged in metaphor-making, placing our community's life imaginatively within the world articulated by the texts. p. 238

II. GUIDELINES FOR DISCERNMENT

For the purposes of this essay, I pass over the descriptive phrase, noting only that we must discipline our exegetical work by a rigorous intent to let the individual New Testament texts have their say, to speak a word that may contravene our own values and desires.⁸ (E.g., no matter how devoutly we might wish it otherwise, the Gospels of Matthew and John do express a theologically rationalized hostility towards Jews and Judaism.) The pivotal choices for New Testament ethics as a theological discipline are made, whether consciously or unconsciously, in our working methods for performing the synthetic and hermeneutical tasks. I offer, therefore, a preliminary list of normative methodological proposals for a church that seeks to be a Scripture-shaped community.

Guidelines for the Synthetic Task

Confront the full range of canonical witnesses. All of the relevant texts must be gathered and considered; selective appeals to favourite proof-texts are illegitimate without full consideration of texts that may stand on the opposite side of a particular issue. The more comprehensive the attention to the full range of New Testament witnesses, the more adequate a normative ethical proposal is likely to be. Beware of the interpreter who always quotes only the *Haustafeln* and never wrestles with [Galatians 5:1](#)—or vice versa.

Let the tensions stand. Do not force harmony through abstraction away from specific texts. Confronted with the diversity of New Testament witnesses, we are often tempted

⁸ Anyone conversant with recent hermeneutical discussion will realize at once how problematical such a recommendation is. 'We have learned to suspect that all interpretation serves the power-needs of the interpreter. Nonetheless, the claim that texts do have their own voices (i.e., that they do express meanings distinguishable from our own whims and predispositions, and that reasoned discussion can approximate consensus about these meanings) is an essential assumption for any discourse that attributes authority to the Bible; it is also an essential assumption for living daily life in a world where there are laws, street signs, and other 'texts' that are presumed to constrain our behaviour.

to dissolve the plurality of perspectives by appealing to universal principles (love, justice, etc.), historical-developmental schemes, or dialectical compromises. Such conceptual movements away from the text's specific imperatives are often escape routes from its uncomfortable demands. For example, [Romans 13](#) and [Revelation 13](#) are *not* two complementary expressions of a single New Testament understanding of the state;⁹ rather, they represent radically different assessments of the relation of the Christian community to the empire. We can not balance them against one another and arrive at a position somewhere in the middle that will allow us to live comfortably as citizens of a modern democratic state. If these texts are allowed to have their say, they will force us to choose between them—or to reject the normative claims of both. When [p. 239](#) we find ourselves caught between contradictory New Testament teachings, it is always better to choose one resolutely than to waffle and seek artificial compromises.

These first two guidelines serve to keep us honest by ensuring that our synthetic proposals respect rather than erode the texts with which we work. Taken by themselves, they might lead to disintegration rather than synthesis. Is it possible, however, to discern key images within the New Testament that provide firm common ground on which a New Testament ethics can be constructed? I propose three such governing images as guidelines for synthetic reflection.

Images for Synthetic Reflection

(1) *The church is a counter-cultural community of discipleship, and this community is the primary addressee of God's imperatives.* The biblical story focuses on God's design for forming a covenant *people*. Thus, the primary sphere of moral concern is not the character of the individual but the corporate obedience of the church. Paul's formulation in [Romans 12:1–2](#) encapsulates the vision: 'Present your bodies [*somata*, plural] as a living sacrifice [*thysian*, singular], holy and well-pleasing to God. And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind....' The community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world. Many New Testament images express this crucial point. The Church is the body of Christ, a temple built of living stones, a city set on a hill, Israel in the wilderness. The coherence of the New Testament's ethical mandate will come into focus only when we understand that mandate in *ecclesial* terms,¹⁰ when we seek God's will not by asking first, 'What should *I* do?' but 'What should *we* do?'

(2) *Jesus' death on a cross is the paradigm for faithfulness to God in this world.* The community expresses and experiences the presence of the Kingdom of God by participating in 'the *koinōnia* of his sufferings' (Philp. [3:10](#)). Jesus' death is consistently interpreted in the New Testament as an act of self-giving love, and the community is consistently called to take up the cross and follow in the way that his death defines. The death of Jesus carries with it the promise of the resurrection, but the power of the resurrection is in God's hands, not ours. Our actions are therefore to be judged not by their calculable efficacy in producing desirable results but by their correspondence to Jesus' example.¹¹ 'While we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that

⁹ Contra Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), who can speak of 'a fundamental unity in the valuation of the State' (p. 86).

¹⁰ See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹¹ The point has been argued compellingly by John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1972).

the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh' ([2 Cor. 4:11](#)). That is the vocation and job description of the church. Common sense protests this account of Christian faithfulness, just as Peter did when scandalized by Jesus' passion prediction ([Mk. 8:31–38](#)), but the New Testament [p. 240](#) texts witness univocally to the *imitatio Christi* as the way of obedience.¹²

(3) *In the present time, the new creation already appears, but only proleptically; consequently, we hang in suspense between Jesus' resurrection and parousia.* 'The whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' ([Rom. 8:22–23](#)). The eschatological framework of life in Christ imparts to Christian existence its strange temporal sensibility, its odd capacity for simultaneous joy amidst suffering and impatience with things as they are. We can never say, 'It doesn't get any better than this', because we know it will; we are, like T. S. Eliot's Magi, 'no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation'. The Church is, in Paul's remarkable phrase, the community of those 'upon whom the ends of the ages have met' ([1 Cor. 10:11](#)). In Christ, we know that the powers of the old age are doomed, and the new creation is already appearing. Yet, at the same time, all attempts to assert the unqualified presence of the Kingdom of God stand under judgment of the eschatological reservation: not before the time, not yet. Thus the New Testament eschatology creates a critical framework that pronounces judgment upon our complacency as well as upon our presumptuous despair. As often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's *death ... until he comes*. Within that anomalous hope-filled interval, all the New Testament writers work out their understandings of God p. will for the community.¹³

Taken together, these three images of *community*, *cross*, and *new creation* provide a matrix within which we can speak meaningfully about the unity of New Testament ethics. But can these images serve as norms for us?

Guidelines for the Hermeneutical Task

Hermeneutical appropriation of the New Testament requires us to make decisions about the *mode* of ethical discourse in which biblical warrants may function authoritatively and about the relationship between the New Testament and other authorities. What sorts of work does Scripture do in ethical discourse? What sorts of affirmation does it authorize? We may distinguish four different modes of appeal to the text.¹⁴ Scripture may serve as a source of (a) rules or law, or (b) of ideals or principles, or (c) of analogies or precedents for action. Or (d) it may posit a symbolic universe that creates the perceptual categories through which we interpret reality. We might subdivide this [p. 241](#) last mode by distinguishing between the New Testament's representation of the human condition on the one hand and of God on the other.

Each of these modes of discourse may be found *within* Scripture as well as in secondary theological reflection about Scripture's ethical import. For example, the rule/law mode is illustrated by the New Testament's prohibition of divorce; the ideal/principle mode is exemplified by Jesus' linking of [Deuteronomy 6:4–5](#) with [Leviticus 19:18](#) to form the double love commandment ([Mk. 12:28–31](#) par.); analogical reasoning

¹² See Richard B. Hays, 'Christology and Ethics in Galatians: The Law of Christ,' *CBQ* 49 (1987), 268–90.

¹³ The formulation of this guideline, of course, owes much to the work of Ernst Käsemann, J. Christian Beker, and J. Louis Martyn. See now also Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, 2 Vols. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Here I follow Gustafson, 'Place of Scripture,' though I have modified his categories slightly.

undergirds the entire argument of the Letter to the Hebrews, as the story of Israel in the wilderness is converted into a paradigm for the present experience of Christians called to endurance; [Romans 1:19–32](#) offers a diagnosis of the fallen human condition without explicitly articulating any moral rules; and [Matthew 5:43–48](#) proffers a characterization of God (who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust) in order to establish a framework for ethical discernment.

Correlating ethical norms with Scriptive

The presence of all these levels of discourse within the New Testament suggests that all of them are potentially legitimate modes for our own normative reflection.¹⁵ The hermeneutical task is—in part—the task of rightly correlating our ethical norms with the modes of Scripture’s speech. Towards that end, I suggest the following methodological guidelines.

Texts must be granted authority (or not) in the mode in which they speak. The interpreter should not turn narratives into law (for instance, by arguing that [Acts 2:44–45](#) requires Christians to own all things in common) or rules into principles (e.g., by suggesting that the commandment to sell possessions and give alms [[Lk. 12:33](#)] is not meant literally but that it points to the principle of inner detachment from our wealth). Legalists and antinomians are equally guilty of hermeneutical gerrymandering to annex New Testament texts to foreign modes of ethical discourse. Christian preachers, at least since the time of Clement of Alexandria, have preached hundreds of thousands of disastrous sermons that say, in effect, ‘Now the text says x, but of course it couldn’t really mean that, so we must see the underlying principle to which it points, which is y.’ Let there be a moratorium on such preaching! The New Testament’s ethical imperatives are either normative at the level of their own claim, or they are invalid.

This hermeneutical guideline has a couple of corollaries. First, we should guard against falling into a habit of reading New Testament ethical texts in one mode only. If we read the New Testament and find only laws, we are obviously enmeshed in grave hermeneutical distortion. Likewise, if we read the New Testament and find only timeless moral principles, we are probably guilty, as Karl Barth warned, of evading Scripture’s specific claims p. 242 upon our lives.¹⁶ Secondly, we must be wary of attempts to use one mode of appeal to Scripture to overrule major explicit teachings of the New Testament in another mode. A classic example of this is to be found in Reinhold Niebuhr’s essay, ‘The Relevance of an Impossible Ethical Ideal’.¹⁷

Narrative texts in the New Testament are fundamental resources for normative ethics. The character and values of our communities are most decisively determined by the stories that we tell and remember;¹⁸ the stories told in the Gospels and Acts subliminally form the Christian community’s notions of what a life lived faithfully might look like. No secondary process of abstraction is required in order to make the ethical ‘content’ of these stories accessible to the community; rather, the stories themselves become the framework in which we understand and measure our lives. One grave flaw in Niebuhr’s

¹⁵ Contra Verhey, *Great Reversal*, pp. 176–77, who would exclude appeals to the N.T. at the ‘moral-rule’ level.

¹⁶ *Church, Dogmatics* II/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 661–708.

¹⁷ The essay, originally published in 1935, appears in *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 62–83.

¹⁸ In very different ways, Stanley Hauerwas, Wayne Meeks, and Dan O. Via, Jr. (*The Ethics of Mark’s Gospel—In the Middle of Time* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985]) have emphasized this point.

treatment of the ethic of Jesus is that he isolates the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount from their narrative context and ignores the story of the passion. Anyone who reads the gospel all the way to the end will see that nonresistant love of enemies is not an 'impossible ideal.' It is, rather, a horrifyingly costly human possibility.

III. GUIDELINES TO BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

The other major hermeneutical issue that New Testament ethics must confront is the question of the authority of the New Testament's ethical vision in relation to other sources of authority for theology. These other sources are often characterized under the rubrics of tradition, reason, and experience. The Reformation fought its hermeneutical battles over the relation of church tradition to Scripture; the Enlightenment wrestled with the relation of reason to Scripture, a battle that continued into the twentieth century. Now, however, we have passed into an era in which the urgent question is the relative authority of Scripture and experience. Many feminist and liberation theologians are willing to assert explicitly that the authority of Scripture is in principle subordinate to the authority of the critical hermeneutical insight conferred by the experience of the oppressed or of women. For instance, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes,

I would ... suggest that the *revelatory* canon for theological evaluation of biblical androcentric traditions and their subsequent interpretations cannot be derived from the Bible itself but can only be formulated in and through women's struggle for liberation from all patriarchal oppression.... The personally and politically reflected *experience* of oppression and liberation must become the criterion of appropriateness for biblical interpretation and evaluation of biblical authority claims.¹⁹ p. 243

In contrast to such views, the community that seeks to live under the authority of Scripture must assert another hermeneutical guideline.

Extrabiblical sources for theological insight stand in a hermeneutical relation to the New Testament; they are not independent counterbalancing sources of authority. The Bible's perspective is privileged, not ours. However tricky it may be in practice to apply this guideline, it is in fact a meaningful rule of thumb that discriminates significantly between different approaches to New Testament ethics. Scripture is not just one among several 'classics', not just one source of moral wisdom competing in a marketplace of ideas, experiences, and feelings. Scripture is the wellspring of life, the fundamental source for the identity of the Church. This guideline by no means excludes exceedingly serious consideration of other sources of wisdom, but it assigns them an explicitly subordinate role in normative judgments.

Right reading of the New Testament occurs only where the word is embodied. We learn what the text means only if we submit ourselves to its power in such a way that we are changed by it. The sequence of the verbs in [Romans 12:1-2](#) is significant: 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.... Be *transformed* ... that you may *prove* what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.' Knowledge of the will of God *follows* the community's submission and transformation. Why? Because until we see the text lived, we cannot begin to conceive what it means. Until we see God's power at work among us

¹⁹ *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1983), p. 32, emphasis mine.

we do not know what we are reading. Thus, the most crucial hermeneutical task is the formation of communities seeking to live under the word.²⁰

IV. A TEST CASE: HOMELESSNESS

For communities seeking to live under the word, the presence of increasing numbers of homeless ‘street people’ in the United States poses a challenge. Some churches and Christian groups have addressed the emergency by setting up night shelters and soup kitchens. At the same time, many Christians urge the government to adopt policies that will provide affordable low-income housing for the poor. One hears much talk of decent housing as a basic human right. In the midst of this situation, however, one hears surprisingly little discussion about how the New Testament might inform our understanding of the problem. Presumably, the moral imperative is taken to be so obvious that there is neither time nor need for hermeneutical deliberation. I venture in conclusion, however, some observations to demonstrate how the New Testament might shape the Church in response to this crisis. These sketchy reflections are intended merely to illustrate—in relation to a relatively clear issue—my methodological proposals. The value of these proposals, of course, will ultimately be tested by their capacity to clarify our thinking about the hard issues.

When we seek to confront the full [p. 244](#) range of relevant texts, a wide variety of New Testament passages comes into view. Perhaps we think most readily of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in [Matthew 25:31–46](#), where those who have cared for the hungry and homeless are commended, and those who have failed to do so are condemned. Similarly, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in [Luke 16:19–31](#) strikes uncomfortably close to home for Christians who live in fine houses in cities where sick and hungry derelicts litter the streets. The implicit hortatory force of these parables is made explicit in passages such as [Luke 14:12–14](#): ‘When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.’ Similarly, [James 2:14–17](#) and [1 John 3:17–18](#) urge those who have the world’s goods to share freely with those who are in need. All these texts seem to be addressed to communities that have material resources and power to act to help the poor, but as we continue our survey, we stumble across a disconcerting text: ‘As they were going along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” ’ ([Lk. 9:57–58](#)).

Here Jesus depicts himself not as one who helps the homeless, but as a homeless one himself. His homelessness is presented as an obstacle to potential followers: They had better not follow him unless they are prepared to renounce everything, including home, and join the Son of Man in the way of dispossession. Of course, many more texts of this sort could be adduced here (e.g., [Lk. 14:25–33](#); [Mk. 10:28–31](#)).

Alongside these passages should be placed another body of texts that depict the church as a community of ‘aliens and exiles’ ([1 Pet. 2:11](#)) who have abandoned earthly security to wander in the wilderness, seeking a homeland ([Heb. 11:13–16](#)). Some of this language may be metaphorical description of the community’s spiritual state rather than

²⁰ See Wayne Meeks, ‘A Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment,’ *HTR* 79 (1986); and Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 125–31, 149–53, 191–92.

a literal account of their social situation,²¹ but passages such as [Hebrews 10:32–36](#) speak of loss of property and suggest a literal situation of suffering (partly because of ‘compassion on the prisoners’). Similarly, Paul describes his apostolic vocation in terms of the loss of everything ([Phil. 3:2–11](#)) for a life of uncertainty, suffering, and poverty ([2 Cor. 6:3–10](#)).

This quick survey shows that there are significant tensions within the New Testament between texts that call upon affluent believers to do good to the homeless poor and texts that either call them to *become* homeless or assume that they have already done so out of obedience to God’s call, following the example of Jesus. There is no way to meld these texts together into a single mandate. Rather, we must let the tension stand and consider how we might construe [p. 245](#) the implications of the New Testament as a whole in light of our proposed duster of governing images.

Community. It never occurred to the early Christians to petition Caesar to provide affordable housing. The texts call neither for government action nor private philanthropy;²² instead, they summon the *church* to respond directly to the need of the homeless. For that reason the organization Habitat for Humanity represents an impressively faithful response to the New Testament witness: It mobilizes God’s people directly to do what (some of) the texts require. Thereby it forms a community whose corporate labours can be understood as a living sacrifice pleasing to God.

Cross. If the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head—if the paradigm of faithfulness to God is one who was homeless—we can hardly suppose, as we often unthinkingly do, that the aim of ministry is to secure a reasonable level of economic comfort for everyone. Rather, the aim of ministry is to engender communities that follow Jesus’ way of costly loving service. In our contemporary situation, that means at least that we must be willing to live and work among the homeless, amidst the growing chaos and danger of our cities, and to suffer whatever consequences may follow.

New Creation. In the midst of our frustrating powerlessness to transform the social pathology that causes homelessness, the Church is to live as a sign of God’s reconciling power, as a sign of the new creation, embodying the promise of the kingdom through communities in which God’s love breaks down fear and hostility, enabling Christians to share what they have, so that distribution can be made to each as any has need (cf. [Acts 4:32–35](#)). We should have no illusions about engineering utopian social programmes; rather, we assume that the powers of this age will continue to oppress the poor. The role of the obedient community is to live as a countersign, a prophetic witness against the ultimacy of that oppression. Thus, we are enabled to live with hope amidst empirical disappointments. At the same time, the presence of the homeless in our midst is a reminder of our true condition as strangers and exiles in this age, disciples of the homeless Son of Man. We must not be seduced by affluence into thinking that home is here or now.

Few of the texts actually command Christians to leave their homes; however, the majority of the passages that speak in the *rule/law* mode require those who have ‘the world’s goods’ ([1 Jn. 3:17](#)) to help those who do not. Such passages, of course, mean exactly what they say and should be heeded. Just as importantly, however, the Synoptic narratives about Jesus’ demands for radical discipleship and the account in Acts of the

²¹ John H. Elliot, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of I Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), is perhaps overly sanguine about our capacity to discern the community’s social composition and circumstances from the text’s theological metaphors.

²² Certainly some texts do call upon individuals to share their goods, but such calls are always to be understood in the context of Israel’s covenant community (e.g., [Luke 16:19–31](#)) or of the community of brothers and sisters in Christ (e.g., [James 2:15–16](#)).

Jerusalem church are powerful sources for *analogical* reflection about the church's vocation. We cannot read these stories without asking what it would mean for us to respond to the gospel with analogous abandon; thus, these stories [p. 246](#) stand as challenges to conventional wisdom about the appropriate form of our community life. The New Testament's open-ended stories of call, discipleship, and journey suggest that our vocation in the present time is to be sojourners; permanence and stability should not be our concern. Finally, our *symbolic world* is given an extraordinary twist by [Matthew 25:31–46](#): Jesus himself is mysteriously present in the homeless and hungry.²³ If that is the reality in which we live, what then?

Reason and experience as ambiguous guides

Christian tradition reinforces Scripture's mandate to care for the homeless, but reason and experience are more ambiguous guides in this matter. To be sure, reason can present good arguments to support humanitarian concern for the poor, but self-seeking capitalism also can be defended—and often is—on rational grounds. For the Church, Scripture is the touchstone that discriminates between competing rational conceptions of justice. In any case, the ubiquitous appeal to a rationally-grounded notion of human rights is without warrant in Scripture. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any hint that housing—or anything else—is a 'right'. Those who fail to respond to the homeless are not castigated for violating a human right; rather, it is suggested that they have disregarded 'Moses and the prophets' ([Lk. 16:27–31](#)) or that they culpably failed to recognize Jesus himself ([Mat. 25:45](#)). This last image cannot be adequately translated into the Enlightenment idiom of human rights and dignity. Something more mysterious is here: God in Christ reveals himself through emptying himself, becoming one with those who suffer and thereby providing simultaneously a warrant for caring for the poor and a model for his disciples to follow. Insofar as the Church's discourse replaces these powerful images with pallid rationalistic notions of rights and equity, we as a community have lost our bearings and our identity.

Similarly, experience can teach divergent lessons, depending on whose experience is proposed as normative. Some who work with the homeless affirm joyfully that their experience confirms the testimony of Scripture: Jesus is present in the midst of poor. For others, however, the experience of working among the homeless leads to cynicism and burnout. Experience can cause some to seek rootedness in the world and to look out primarily for their own interests: The student radical becomes the corporate lawyer. Reason and experience can hardly serve as warrants sufficient for the self-sacrificial service to which the New Testament calls the Church; the commonsense counsels of reason and experience need to be disciplined by the foolishness of Scripture.

The full import of Scripture's word [p. 247](#) to us concerning the homeless will begin to come clear only in communities where they are treated not as social problems but as brothers and sisters, where we not only feed them in soup kitchens but also sit at table with them to share the supper of the Lord. The Scripture-shaped community is a *koinōnia* of the homeless.

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²³ I am not able here to discuss the difficult exegetical problem of whether the phrase 'the least of these my brethren' refers restrictively to Christians. See the discussion in John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 109–25.