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The Use of Scripture in Ethics

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This is the first part of an extended paper presented at a symposium on 'The Church, State and Justice' at Victoria University of Wellington, 19 November 1993. The symposium was a follow up reflection on a document jointly prepared by leaders of ten denominations in New Zealand as a Christian response to disturbing social and economic developments in the nation, and read in the churches earlier in 1993.

In this article the author seeks to show how Scripture can function in the process of ethical reflection. He outlines five interrelated sources of Christian ethics and why sola Scriptura is inadequate for dealing with complex contemporary ethical issues such as genetic engineering, nuclear weapons and New Right economics. He discusses the problems of historical distance and pluralism within the canonical text, in theological reconstruction and in modern idiom and concepts. He emphasizes the role of the Church as a hermeneutical community committed to the social embodiment of the text it reveres and the need to use the method most appropriate to each situation. In the second part of the article (not printed here) the author explores the prescriptive, the illuminative and formative use of the Scripture.

I. THE COMPONENTS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

For the purposes of this discussion, ethics may be understood as the systematic study of the moral principles, values, and obligations that guide human behaviour. While 'morality' concerns the *evaluation* of such behaviour as right or wrong, good or bad, 'ethics' is the *theoretical analysis* of the major ingredients that shape and validate these moral judgements. 'Christian' ethics is the P. 223 attempt to understand and justify moral obligation in relation to the will of God, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all. This makes Christian ethics a distinctive enterprise.[1] That is not to say that the *content* of Christian moral values is radically different from the content of non-Christian values. There *are* important differences,[2] but Christian attitudes to what is right and wrong are often widely shared by non-Christians. The distinctiveness of Christian ethics lies primarily in the way Christians understand the ultimate origin and sanction of these values. At the heart of Christian ethics lies an appeal to *revelation*; Christian ethical judgments are governed ultimately by belief in the self-disclosure of God's own moral character and will, not by the dictates of human reason, affections, volition or environmental conditioning.

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[1] Cf. Alister E. McGrath, 'Doctrine and Ethics', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34/2, 1991, 145–56; Jochem Douma, 'The Use of Scripture in Ethics', *European Journal of Theology* 1/2, 1992, 113f.

[2] Certain demands are made of Christians in the New Testament that go beyond natural human prudence or philosophically justifiable morality—preference for the outcast, costly service even unto death, helping others with no expectation of recompense, loving one's enemies, taking others more seriously than oneself. Christian ethics does not just require us to love our neighbour, but to love in the way specifically modelled by Jesus in the Gospels. On the love commands, see the stimulating discussion by Paul Ricouer, 'The Golden Rule: Exegetical and Theological Perplexities', *New Testament Studies* 36, 1990, 392–97.

In the attempt to clarify the ethical corollaries of divine revelation, Christian ethics draws on five main sources of guidance.

(i) *Scripture*: The Bible serves as the primary record of God's self-disclosure in the events of salvation-history, as apprehended by the community of faith. Inasmuch as it presents God as a righteous Being who demands righteousness of his creatures, the Bible is profoundly concerned with ethics. According to biblical tradition, ethical behaviour stands in a two-fold relationship to God's self-revelation. On the one hand, it is a *response of gratitude* for God's saving acts in history, while on the other hand, those saving acts themselves provide the *pattern and standard* for human conduct. The people of God are enjoined to model their behaviour on the actions of God; the covenant requires nothing less that the 'imitation of God' (Lev. 11:45). The meaning of 'justice', for instance, is arrived at not by contemplating some abstract norm of justice, but by remembering how God delivered his people from oppression, and then acting accordingly.[3] For Christian ethics, the imitation of God centres on the imitation of Christ, whose concrete manner of living and acting is known to us only through the biblical record.[4] p. 224

(ii) *Theological Tradition*: Revelation, including biblical revelation, is received, reflected on, and interpreted by the people of God, down through history. This interpretation and application of revelation constitutes the theological and moral tradition of Christianity, which serves as a second source for discerning God's will. It is not only the Catholic church that so uses tradition; all branches of Christianity have appealed to historical precedents and experience in formulating moral and doctrinal teaching. We cannot separate ourselves from our traditions and heritage. We enter into life in the midst of tradition; we are fundamentally shaped by tradition; and even our ability to question and change tradition comes from the tradition itself.

(iii) *Moral Philosophy*: The great moral traditions of Western philosophy, which have appealed principally to the exercise of *human reason* for the determination of right and wrong, have also had a profound impact on both the content and methodology of Christian ethics (the very word 'ethics' is the legacy of Greek philosophy). Of particular significance has been the concept of *natural law*, which has been very influential in Catholic moral theology. The extent to which natural law considerations should shape Christian ethics is much contested, but some concept of a 'natural' revelation of God's moral will accessible to all humanity in virtue of creation has played a role in most expressions of Christian ethics, including New Testament ethics (e.g., Matt 5:46f; Rom. 1:28; 2:14ff; Ac. 17:16–34; 1 Cor. 11:13ff).[5]

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[3] Cf. Micah 6:3–5, 8; Exodus 20:1–17. 4.

[4] The precise meaning of the *imitatio Christi* motif in the New Testament is debated, but it seems clear that the early Christians believed that by imitating Jesus, they were learning to imitate God (note, for example, the use of 'perfect' in Matt. 5:48 and 19:21). For a survey of later uses of the motif, see Margaret R. Miles, 'Imitation of Christ: Is It Possible in the Twentieth Century?', *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 10/1, 1989, 7–22.

[5] It is noteworthy that the first Christians were not specially concerned to maintain an 'ethical distance' between themselves and their non-Christian environment, except in areas where contemporary values clashed with those of the gospel. Recent studies have shown that in their paraenesis, New Testament authors draw upon well-established *topoi*, and in so doing align themselves with ethically enlightened members of wider Jewish and Greco-Roman society. This is not to deny a genuine distinctiveness about certain Christian values, nor to weaken the oft-repeated call to Christian non-conformity in the New Testament (e.g., Rom. 12:1–2). It is to rather to discern two complementary themes in early Christian ethical

(iv) *Empirical Data*: Christian ethics is more than a speculative exercise; it also requires attention to the full range of contextual factors that bear on each ethical situation. Indeed the first task of moral analysis is to clarify the decision-making situation and identify the range of available options. The data furnished by the social sciences and by other empirical analyses thus has an indispensable role in ethical discernment, not least in the complex moral dilemmas posed by developments in modern technology.

(v) *The Spirit-in-Community*: The New Testament places great emphasis on a twofold role for the Holy Spirit in Christian p. 225 ethical life—that of bringing about inner moral renewal in believers so that they spontaneously manifest ethical virtues,[6] and of guiding them in ethical decision-making.[7] It is crucial to recognize that in the New Testament the Spirit's work is expressed in the context of the Church[8] 'Paul knows nothing of solitary religion or individual morality', explains W. D. Davies, 'but rather sees the Christian firmly based in the community.'[9] The gathered community provides the necessary checks and balances which prevent the Spirit's direction degenerating into individualistic subjectivism.

This list of the main sources of Christian ethics invites two immediate observations. The first is that while the five components may be conceptually distinguished, they are in practice inseparable. Scripture cannot be entirely distinguished from tradition, since Scripture is both the product of tradition and the shaper of tradition. Empirical data does not exist in isolation from the moral values and ideological commitments that govern the gathering and interpretation of data (a point not to be overlooked in the current economic environment). The Spirit's guidance of the community is not merely intuitive but often employs the text of Scripture and the wisdom learned from ecclesiastical tradition or scientific discovery. The five sources, then, are intertwined. Yet there is still value in notionally distinguishing them, for in different Christian traditions different constituents have the dominant role, although in *all* traditions ethical arguments gain in persuasiveness by employing all five in a coherent way.

Secondly, our delineation of several sources of ethical guidance shows that the catchcry *sola Scriptura* does not really apply in Christian ethics. 'Scripture *alone*', contends Gustarson, 'is never the final court of appeal for Christian ethics'.[10] By itself the Bible is not enough to tell us what to do. Arriving at moral judgments entails a dialectic between scriptural and non-scriptural factors, between the considerations based on circumstance and rational inquiry and those which appeal to the biblical witness. The Social Justice

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teaching, one that recognizes the common humanity of Christian and non-Christian in virtue of creation, the other that stresses the eschatological distinctiveness of Christian lifestyle.

[6] See, for example, Gal. 5:16–26; 6:1; Rom. 8:13, 28; 9:1; 14:17; 15:13, 30; 2 Cor. 3:18; 6:6; Col. 1:8.

[7] See, for example, Jn. 14:25–31; 15:21–16:15; Ac. 15:28; Rom. 8:4–6, 14; Gal. 5:16, 18, 25; cf. Rom. 8:13; Gal. 6:8; 1 Cor. 2:12.

[8] 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 12:13; 14:29, 38; 1 Thess. 5:19–22; 2 Thess. 2:2; 1 Jn. 4:1.

[9] W. D. Davies, 'Paul and the Law: Pitfalls in Interpretation', in M.D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson (eds.), *Paul and Paulinism* London: SPCK, 1982, 11.

[10] James M. Gustafson, 'The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study', *Interpretation* 24/4, 1970, 455. Gustafson affirms that the role of Scripture is to inform Christian moral judgments, 'but it does not by itself determine what they ought to be. That determination is done by persons and communities as finite moral agents responsible to God' (455). So too Edward LeRoy Long, Jr. 'The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics', *Interpretation* 19/2, 1965, 451; Allen Verhey, 'Bible in Christian Ethics', in J. Macquarrie and J. Childress, *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* London: SCM, 1986, 57, 60f.

Statement is itself evidence of this; alongside Scripture, reference is made to the tradition of the p. 226 church, the Treaty of Waitangi, political philosophy, and socio-economic trends. Such a dialogical interplay between Scripture and experience is unavoidable, for every claim to understand the Bible presupposes finite human interpretation, and every interpretation is invariably conditioned by a wide range of (extra-biblical) personal and contextual factors.

Having said that, for most Christians, including those who do not subscribe to a 'high' doctrine of biblical inspiration, Scripture is still felt to possess a unique authority in Christian ethical reasoning. The essential test of validity for ethical judgments is whether they are consistent with what is perceived to be scriptural teaching. Even if our understanding of that teaching is subject to change, Scripture *per se* has long been accorded, at least in theory,[11] a privileged role in adjudicating Christian moral teaching; indeed it is precisely as an *authority* that the Bible has chiefly been employed in Christian ethics.[12]

II. THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE

Much has happened over the past 200 years to undermine the privileged position traditionally accorded Scripture in determining Christian thought and practice. For many interpreters today, such considerations as the pre-scientific worldview of the biblical authors, their reliance upon primitive mythological language and apocalyptic symbolism, the alleged dependence of New Testament ethics on a discredited imminent eschatology,[13] and the sheer, irreconcilable diversity of ethical perspectives in Scripture, make it impossible to ascribe a normative role to the Bible in ethical deliberations.[14] And yet, as Marshall observes, P. 227 'there remains a lingering suspicion that the Bible is authoritative; sermons are still based on biblical texts, and if a preacher or scholar disagrees with what Scripture says, he usually feels compelled to produce some good

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[11] According to Barnabas Lindars although the Reformers claimed to transfer authority in ethical matters from the pronouncements of the *Magisterium* of the church to the Bible, their moral traditions 'were largely prefabricared, and really only employed the Bible as the authoritative sanction for them', 'Bible and Christian Ethics', *Theology* 76/634, 1973, 181. Yoder similarly urges that 'Protestant scholasticism … claimed that the Bible was the only moral authority and announced a fundamental suspicion of moral discemment … [which] claims rootage in reason, nature, and tradition. Yet when this official Protestantism turned to the problems of administering its own society, there resulted at the time no profound difference between it and Catholicism on any practical moral issues: divorce, usury, war, or truth-telling', J. H. Yoder, 'The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood: A Protestant Perspective on Practical Moral Reasoning', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 10, 1982, 45. See also idem, John H. Yoder, 'Authority of the Canon', in W. M. Swartley (ed.), *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* Elkhart, IN: IMS, 1984, 265–272.

[12] More ink has been spilled asserting *that* the Bible possesses authority than in reflecting on what is meant by 'authority' itself. For helpful discussions on this, see N. T. Wright, 'How Can the Bible be Authoritative?', *Vox Euangelica* Vol XXI, 1991, 7–32; Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture: the Politics and Ethics of Remembering', *Interpretation* 34, 1980, 356–70.

[13] The particular model used to interpret New Testament eschatology, has been the most decisive consideration in determining how scholars have judged the contemporary relevance of New Testament ethics. See the survey in Robin Scroggs, 'The New Testament and Ethics: How Do We Get From There To Here?', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 11/4, 1984, 77–93 (esp. 84–89).

[14] For brief surveys of those with such views, see I. H. Marshall, 'Using the Bible in Ethics', in David F. Wright (ed.), *Essays in Evangelical Social Ethics* Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1979, 45–49; W. M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* Scottdale: Herald Press, 1983, 203–11; David Cook, *The Moral Maze* London: SPCK, 1983, 46–50; V. P. Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul* Nashville: Abingdon, 1985, 18–23.

reasons for his disagreement'.[15] Whatever the problems in appropriating Scripture today, and they are considerable, there remains a widespread conviction, across confessional lines, that Scripture can, does, and should shape Christian moral life. And there remain strong historical, theological and practical arguments for according the Bible such a decisive or normative role.

Historically, the Bible has significantly shaped the moral ethos of western culture. In the past, considerable knowledge of the Bible was transmitted through general culture, and biblical authority was almost universally accepted in the West. This is no longer the case, so that comparison with the Bible provides one yardstick for measuring changes in the moral values of contemporary society. Such a comparison is evident in the Social Justice Statement.

Theologically, the Christian community still affirms, with a fair measure of confidence, that the Bible contains or bears witness to divine revelation. Most important in this respect is the fact that it provides our only access to God's self-disclosure in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, to which Christians are directly accountable. In the final analysis, it is because Christian believers discover themselves to be directly encountered by Christ in the text of Scripture that they continue to listen to Scripture.

Practically, the Bible provides an indispensable framework for understanding the human situation in general, and the task of the Christian community in particular. The biblical stow offers a perspective on the human condition that carries the conviction of truth. It attests, as Gustafson observes, both to the limitations and the potentialities of human action in the world.[16] It affirms the existence of moral evil; the temptations to pride and arrogance in human achievements; the capacity for people to rationalize destructive behaviour by appealing to noble ends; the finitude of moral judgments. It provides, on the other hand, a vision of the possibilities of human life. It affirms that the unfulfilled future is in the hands of a compassionate and just God; it gives insight into God's ultimate intentions in history; it describes actions and events that are seen to be consistent or inconsistent with God's aspirations for humanity; it gives voice to the longing of oppressed people for peace and justice; and it depicts the creation of a special people to serve as co-workers with God in bringing these about. All this has profound ethical significance.

> This scriptural faith disposes the Christian community toward moral seriousness, toward profound dissatisfaction with those events that are destructive of human life and value, p. 228 toward aspirations for a future which is more fulfilling for all God's creation; and thus toward negative judgment on events which are not consistent with the possibilities that God is creating for man.[17]

Thus, while Scripture is not, and cannot, be the an *exclusive* source of guidance for Christian ethics (even within the New Testament, written Scripture does not fulfil such an exclusive role),[18] there is good reason to regard it as the *primary* or *normative* authority for Christian morality and identity. And, as George Linbeck notes, the 'instinct of the

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[15] I. H. Marshall, 'Using the Bible', 39f.

[16] Gustafson, 'Place of Scripture', 448f.

[17] Ibid., 449.

[18] In Paul's paraenesis, written Scripture serves primarily to confirm, reinforce or illuminate ethical demands that are derived from other considerations; see V. P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* Nashville: Abingdon, 1968, 28–43; idem, 'Belonging to Christ: A Paradigm for Ethics in First Corinthians', *Interpretation* 44/9, 1990, 151.

faithful' is still to invest such worth in Scripture, even if popular knowledge of the actual content of Scripture is in noticeable decline, inside as well as outside the church.[19] Despite this, the Christian community is still more ready to accept ethical judgements that run counter to theological tradition or philosophical morality or contemporary scientific judgment or the advice of their clerical leaders than those that are plainly inconsistent with Scripture.

But none of this takes us very far. It is one thing to assert the unique authority of Scripture for Christian morality; it is quite another to demonstrate *how* the Scriptures can most appropriately function this way, and to decide precisely *what* Scripture authorizes and denies. The fundamental issue is not *whether* the Bible is authoritative for ethics but *how* we move from biblical ethical judgments to present problems. Using an ancient religious text, even an inspired one, for ethical guidance today is fraught with hermeneutical difficulties, and the Bible itself 'does not give us clear instructions on how to reason from its moral imperatives to their application in every problem of real life'.[20] Consequently ways of interpreting both the ethics of Scripture, and the use of Scripture in ethics, vary enormously.[21]

III. SOME HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEMS

A great deal could be said about the hermeneutical hurdles that confront the Christian ethicist in turning to Scripture. The most obvious is the problem of *historical distance*, the fact that we face ethical dilemmas today of which the Bible knows nothing. How can the Bible be a lamp for our feet in matters such as genetic engineering, *in vitro* fertilisation, nuclear weapons, world hunger, or New Right economics? Even in areas of current concern to which the Bible does apparently P. 229 speak (e.g., politics, war, labour relations), it presupposes a radically different socio-political reality, with a different range of options open to actors. How can advice given in one context be reapplied in another, totally different context, even if the topic under discussion is the same? Just because the topic is the same it does not mean the issues are the same.

Now the problems of historical distance are certainly weighty. But they are perhaps not as serious as some allege,[22] since most pressing ethical issues, even those peculiar to modern life, usually turn on perennial questions of power, wealth, violence, class or gender, and about such matters the Bible speaks extensively.[23] Although the Bible cannot

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[19] George Lindbeck, 'Scripture, Consensus, and Community', in R. J. Neuhaus (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, 74–101.

[20] L. B. Smedes, 'Ethics: Moral Problems', *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, II. 191.

[21] Gustafson observes that 'the study of the ethics in the Scriptures … is a complex task for which few are well prepared; those who are specialists in ethics generally lack the intensive and proper training in biblical studies, and those who are specialists in biblical studies often lack sophistication in ethical thought', 'Place of Scripture', 430.

[22] There is truth in Fowl & Jones' assertion that 'the most important discontinuities are not historical, but moral and theological. That is, the important discontinuities between Scripture and our contemporary settings are more likely found within us, specifically in our inability and unwillingness to provide and embody wise readings of the texts, than in gaps of historical time', Stephen E. Fowl, and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion* London: SPCK, 1991, 61, also 81. See also Hauerwas, 'Moral Authority of Scripture', 369f.

[23] I. H. Marshall, 'How Do We Interpret The Bible Today?', *Themelios* 5/2 (1980), 10; J. Packer, 'Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics', in D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (eds), *Scripture and Truth* Leicester: IVP, 1983, 331f.

function as a direct guide with respect to many modern problems, particular courses of action can still be evaluated in light of the central commitments of the biblical text on matters of power, wealth, justice and the like.

More serious than the problem of cultural distance is the many-sided phenomenon of *pluralism* that confronts us in the interpretation of Scripture. There is, firstly, the pluralism in the *content and expression of biblical morality itself*. There is no shortage of ethical material in Scripture. But it comes in a huge diversity of literary forms—commands, laws, warnings, exhortations, prohibitions, wisdom teaching, proverbs, allegories, prayers, parables, visions of the future, narratives, living examples, dialogues, vice and virtue lists, and more. Different forms of moral discourse require different modes of interpretation. More than this, there is diversity in the ethical perspectives presented on particular themes, such as the handling of wealth. In some places, the biblical writers endorse a prudential morality accessible to everyone; in other places, they propose an ethical absolutism that defies every canon of common sense or social pragmatism.[24] As the record of God's interaction with people over a long historical period, and in a wide range of cultural and social situations, there is development as well as variety in biblical ethics. Scripture is a historical document, not a legal constitution in which all parts can be treated as equally important for all generations. There is both intracanonical *dialogue*, with one part of Scripture interpreting and complementing another; and intracanonical *critique*, with some perspectives being relegated to p. 230 preparatory and accommodating roles.[25]

Now the sheer quantity, variety and historical conditionedness of ethical material in the Bible makes sustaining any 'objective' authority for Scripture problematic. It poses the problem of how we do justice to the variety of perspectives Scripture offers without imposing our own agenda? How do we determine the continuities and moral priorities of Scripture? How do we bring some degree of organization and integration to biblical teaching? Is such secondary organization legitimate, or is it an arbitrary imposition on a heterogeneous range of texts? Is it admissible to set up a canon within a canon? Can we in fact avoid doing so?[26]

Such internal canonical pluralism is matched, secondly, by a pluralism of *historical and theological reconstructions* of the biblical message. There has always been a diversity of

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[24] For a recent discussion of this with respect to the ethics of Jesus, see A. E. Harvey, *Strenuous Commands. The Ethic of Jesus* London: SCM, 1990.

[25] Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*, 217–218.

[26] The practice of setting up a canon within a canon is usually rejected in principle by most interpreters. But in practice it seems unavoidable, for the moment we favour New Testament over Old Testament teaching, or differentiate between what is culturally relative and what is abiding revelation, we are effectively setting up a canon within a canon (so Robin Scroggs, 'Can the New Testament Be Relevant for the Twenty-first Century?', in idem, *The Text and the Times* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 273–75; also J. D. G. Jones makes a helpful distinction between a normative and functional canon within a canon.

> * a *normative* canon within a canon is where certain texts are excluded from consideration on *a priori* grounds. This is to be rejected outright, for 'no text—no matter how "difficult"—should be excluded from the ongoing processes of communal discerement in relation to the whole witness of Scripture'.
> * a *functional* canon within a canon is where certain texts are discerned by certain communities at certain times to be more appropriate than others. This is quite acceptable. 'Within a canon as diverse as the one Christians recognise, there is no reason to think that all of its texts will be equally relevant in any given situation. Some texts will be more appropriate than others in any given situation. This set up a "functional" canon within a canon.'

Fowl/Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 53 n. 23.

ways of construing the overall unity of biblical teaching—be it in terms of covenant, nature and grace, law and gospel, sequential dispensations, the kingdom of God, and so on. To this diversity has been added the results of modern historical criticism. Invaluable light has been shed on the biblical world by historical criticism, but it has also spawned an enormous diversity of explanations for the origin and meaning of the text, all of which are tentative and constantly changing. One result of historical criticism has been to convince the educated laity that biblical interpretation is a technical enterprise that requires prolonged specialized training, so that 'it is now the scholarly rather than the hierarchical clerical elite which holds the Bible captive and makes it inaccessible to ordinary folk.'[27]

Thirdly, there is a pluralism of *modern idioms and conceptions* that the biblical message is translated into, some philosophical, some political, some mystical. How do we decide what is, and what is not, a p. 231 faithful reinterpretation of the biblical message? The conscious attempt of modern interpreters to re-express biblical thought in the language of the day, while both helpful and necessary, has resulted in a 'pluralistic cacophony' of diverse and variable accounts that are often mutually unintelligible.[28] Indeed such is the diversity of modern approaches to biblical interpretation that it has become increasingly problematic to speak of the 'meaning' of the text at all. For a text can mean different things to different people, depending on the interpretive interests pursued by the reader, and there is no impartial way of determining the text's 'real' or 'true' meaning.[29]

Modern (more so post-modern) readers of Scripture are more aware than ever before in history of the hermeneutical dilemmas posed by this threefold pluralism. Sadly, for many ordinary Christians the Bible has become a closed book. Yet there is no magical way of avoiding such pluralism. The problem exists, it is real, and it has to be faced whenever we turn to Scripture for guidance in ethical decisions. What Richard Hays calls 'bumper sticker hermeneutics'—'God said it, I believe it, that settles it'—is clearly no solution, since it ignores rather than solves the problem.[30]

But the alternative need not be total relativism or scepticism. Written texts always retain a certain independence of voice over against those of their interpreters, a capacity to challenge readings based on inappropriate or alien assumptions. If this is true of texts in general, it is even more true of Scripture, which, Christians confess, is used by the Spirit-in-community to convey the mind of God to God's people. As long as we are prepared to consent to biblical authority, to be self-critical of our own handling of the text, to allow Scripture to be a 'two-edged sword' that can challenge our pre-suppositions and expose the interpretive filters of our social location, and be open to the possibility, even the necessity, of diverse yet equally faithful appropriations of the text today, the hermeneutical problems of using Scripture for ethics are not insuperable.

IV. THE SEARCH FOR A METHOD

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[27] Lindbeck, 'Scripture, Consensus, and Community', 90. So too Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Crisis of Scriptural Authority: Interpretation and Reception', *Interpretation* 44/4, 1990, 356f.

[28] Lindbeck, 'Scripture, Consensus, and Community', 88ff.

[29] See Fowl/Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 14–21.

[30] Richard B. Hays, 'Scripture-Shaped Community. The Problem of Method in New Testament Ethics', *Interpretation* 54/1 (1990), 43.

If then the Bible *should*, and, despite the above hurdles, *can* be used as a normative reference point in ethical decision-making, it seems self-evident that a method must be devised for exploring the moral implications of Scripture in a systematic and not in a haphazard way.[31] Most biblical interpreters have agreed on this for a long time. Yet despite their very best efforts, none have succeeded in P. 232 devising a comprehensive method for moving from the text of Scripture to the current situation.[32]

In view of this, there is a growing recognition that the quest for a single definitive method is misguided. It is misguided for at least two reasons. The first is that no single method can cope with the pluriformity of Scripture itself. Since there is a variety of materials in Scripture, there needs to be a variety of ways of construing its moral application. 'To reduce Scripture's moral requirements to any single category is to distort both morality and Scripture'.[33] Secondly, there is no one method that can straddle the diversity of contemporary contexts readers find themselves in. Fowl and Jones argue that past attempts to specify a clear and precise method have rested on the false assumption that ethical decisions are made by isolated individuals, who ought to follow a rationally-defensible method, the validity of which is independent of social and historical circumstances. But individuals learn to make moral judgments in particular historical communities; moral descriptions employ the categories and commitments of distinct social traditions; and even if it were possible to identify generalizable methodological principles, every attempt to apply them is context-dependent. Accordingly 'the search for a context-independent method is bound to fail'.[34]

This is not to deny the value of systematic methodological reflection, nor to advocate a complete relativism where every interpretation is equally valid. It is simply to recognize the *variety* of ways Scripture can be used in ethics, and to insist that there is no neutral, transcendent, fail-safe method for evaluating specific appropriations of the text. Moral reasoning and justification are still of critical importance, but such evaluations can be made only by particular communities in particular situations, under the guidance of the Spirit and drawing on all the resources available to them at the time. These resources will include methodological principles appropriate to the character and vision of the community.

Various typologies have been suggested to describe how the Scriptures have been used in ethics. In what follows, I will employ a tripartite classification, with various sub-categories. It must be stressed that these categories are not distinct, mutually exclusive methods pursued in opposition to each other; in practice most biblical scholars and ethicists blend elements of all three (though often with one or other occupying the driving seat). It is not my intention to suggest that the three broad approaches form a methodological hierarchy, with the third approach superseding the earlier two. Each method has a valid and irreduceable contribution to make. Therefore, p. 233 after analyzing the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each way of using Scripture, we will reaffirm the merits of a methodological pluralism. But there is still value in teasing out the different assumptions and priorities at work in each distinct way of employing Scripture

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[31] So C. Freeman Sleeper, 'Ethics as a Context for Biblical Interpretation', *Interpretation* 22/4, 1968, 460; Gustafson, 'Place of Scripture', 439.

[32] Cf. Scroggs, 'New Testament and Ethics', 90f.

[33] James F. Childress, 'Scripture and Christian Ethics. Some Reflections on the Role of Scripture in Moral Deliberation and Justification', *Interp* 34/4, 1980, 378. So too William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984, 3, 4, 5, 90.

[34] Fowl/Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 13.

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