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The Moral Authority of Scripture and the Hermeneutics of Love

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I Introduction

The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck states about faith in Holy Scriptures: 'There is no dogma about which there is more unity than that of the Holy Scriptures.'¹ He emphasises that the authority of Scripture is based not on a 'scientific pronouncement', but on the claims of Scripture itself. Much like the dogma of Trinity, the inspiration of the Bible is a dogma 'which Christians accept, not because they understand the truth of it, but because God so attests it'.²

Most commonly, 2 Timothy 3:16 has been used to stress the fact that

the Scriptures are God-breathed (*theopneustos*) and as the Word of God they are therefore credible in themselves (*autopistis*). Bavinck's observation that this dogma brings unity among Christians is particularly true for Evangelicals; the consensus on the authority of Scripture is generally considered to be one of the unifying factors in this, in many other ways diverse and dispersed group.

The evangelical view on Scripture stands in the reformation tradition and holds fast to the reformation principles of Scripture being the *regula fidei* (rule of faith) and *regula morum* (rule for morals) that was needed. The first generation of reformers tried to safeguard these principles, which were later codified in the confessions of faith. In this spirit the French Confession of 1559, for example, states in the fifth article

We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, *and receives its authority from him alone, and not from men*. It is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God

1 H Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics 1, Prolegomena* (Translated from the Dutch) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 402.

2 Bavinck et al., *Reformed Dogmatics*, 436.

and for our salvation'.³

In the same way, albeit more succinctly, the Evangelical Alliance testifies to belief in: 'The divine inspiration, authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures'.⁴

The question then logically follows regarding the nature of the authority of Scripture, which is the inquiry of this paper. More specifically, we investigate the moral authority of Scripture. A traditional evangelical understanding of the nature of Scripture's authority can be found in the work of Carl F. Henry, *Revelation and Authority* (1976-1983). Henry stresses the way in which the Bible provides us with an objective standard, revealed in propositional truths. The task of theology is to systematize the information which is conveyed through biblical propositions.

The task of Christian Ethics is similar, but is more specifically directed towards making moral decisions. Unsurprisingly, Henry's *Christian Personal Ethics* (1957) stresses the revelational dimension of Christian morality. The 'good' is the will of God, which he revealed to us in Scripture. Our response to this revelation should be obedience, which is the key concept in his moral theology.⁵ He sees the Bible as 'authoritative literature' since it reveals 'universally valid norms of goodness and truth'.⁶

It is interesting to see how he recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit as a dynamic principle, which has the power to transform people,⁷ yet warns us that the dynamic work of the Spirit does not 'rid the moral life of an *objective* ethic which is mediated through prophets and apostles, supremely illuminated by Jesus, and *inscripturated* in the Bible'.⁸

So the moral authority of the Holy Spirit is always in line with the written Word. 'The rule of the Spirit does not remove man from the will of God *objectively revealed* in the Bible.'⁹ More recently, this typically evangelical understanding of the Bible as a sourcebook of objective facts, has often been considered to be too modernistic.¹⁰ Kevin Vanhoozer (an evangelical himself) remarks in this regard:

Evangelicals have been quick to decry the influence of modernism on liberal theology but not see the beam of modern epistemology in their own eyes.¹¹

The challenges of postmodernism increase the realisation that applying sound exegesis to arrive at clear cut solutions to our ethical dilemmas, is not feasible. Modernistic methodologies are crashing against the walls of contemporary moral issues, and we need

3 'Confessio Fedei Gallicana,' <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds3.iv.vii.html> (accessed 15 Nov 2012).

4 *Symbolica Evangelica* (Evangelical alliance, 1846, art. 1).

5 Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 209-218.

6 Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 149.

7 Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 437-458.

8 Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 359. Italics mine.

9 Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 360. Italics are mine.

10 See especially the discussion about the 'Chicago Declaration of Biblical Inerrancy'.

11 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 26.

to realize that the challenge is not just to understand and order the biblical data as if we are collecting facts and consequently apply them to the complex contemporary issues we are faced with. In general terms, Postmodernity has altered the way we perceive truth and authority.

This general shift in perception of authority consequently has an immense impact on how we see the moral authority of 'Holy Scriptures'.¹² One might say that that there is a change of emphasis from the normative to the formative role of Scripture. The perception has changed from a book of law to a book of the gospel, from a moral blue-print to a compass which shows us the direction to go.

In this article, I first want to map out some of the recent developments in the use of Scripture in Ethics, which are inspired by this postmodern critique. I would then like to offer an alternative approach to Scripture for Ethics, inspired by Paul Ramsey's hermeneutic of love. I will argue that a hermeneutic of love will answer the challenges offered by Postmodernity. As a brief conclusion, I will look at 2 Timothy 3:16 from this perspective.

II Six overlapping developments in short

1. Appreciation of canonical diversity¹³

Historical criticism and biblical theology have increased the awareness of the unique historical setting of the different books in the Bible. In a postmodern setting, there is much more appreciation of diversity and people are more reluctant to unify the plurality of voices into one chorus. The diversity of the canonical books has its effect on the way Scripture is used in ethics. Moreover, the canon itself is considered to be a discourse in which we are invited to participate.

Indeed, diversity should be appreciated, but it has to be set in the larger framework of the one God, Creator and Saviour. The plurality of the four written gospels does not result in four different gospel messages. The particularities and concreteness of the biblical texts are to be seen and explained against the wider horizon of God's salvation history.

One way to appreciate the diversity in genres is to relate them to the different formats of ethical argumentation. This 'Matrix' model integrates the four classical types of moral reasoning with the diversity of biblical texts.¹⁴ We distinguish four types: value ethics, com-

¹² See Bonnie Howe, 'Authority and Power' in Joel B. Green et al., *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

¹³ See Bruce C. Birch, 'Scripture in ethics, methodological issues' in Joel B. Green et al., *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

¹⁴ Patrick Nullens, *The Matrix of Christian Ethics: Integrating Philosophy and Moral Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Colorado Springs Colo.: Paternoster, 2010).

mandment theory, character ethics and consequentialism.

We often limit ourselves to one of those models. For instance, the search for 'principles' behind the text betrays a limitation to deontological ethics, or divine command theory. The law is of course an important source for ethical reflection. But behind the laws lies a world of values.¹⁵ Wisdom literature then has a strong consequential bend.

Furthermore, the narratives are not only crucial to demonstrate value priorities, they are crucial for character formation. Nonetheless, the four models are but a manifestation of the one will of the one God as the only source of our morality.

2. Appreciation of pneumatology

Carl Henry has already pointed to the work of the Holy Spirit as a dynamic principle at work in our moral conscience. This has become even more prominent in the past century, which has been seen as 'the century of the Holy Spirit'. This is in large part due to the growth of the charismatic and Pentecostal movements, but also to the ethical statements of non-charismatic theologians, for example Jürgen Moltmann, where, the Spirit plays a central role. The Spirit originates and preserves life, and is God at work here among us.¹⁶ Another example of the re-

newed attention on the Holy Spirit can be found in Stanley Grenz's decision to deal with the authority of Scripture under the subheading of pneumatology.¹⁷

This emphasis on Word and Spirit resulted in a more dynamic view of Scripture. The Word of God 'happens'; it is the divine encounter that makes it God's word spoken to us, not a material text of written words. This of course is also more in line with a Barthian and Bonhoefferian view of Scripture.¹⁸

Revelation is not so much the provision of hidden truths, as it is the self-presentation of God, a form of divine presence, a self-presentation in divine mercy, a form of saving fellowship.¹⁹ Webster refers to Barth and summarizes:

Revelation is thus not simply bridging a noetic divide (though it includes that), but it is reconciliation, salvation and therefore fellowship. The idiom of revelation is as much moral and relational as it is cognitive.²⁰

3. Appreciation of Scripture by the interpretive community

This is possibly one of the most striking trends. The church is the primal locus of moral formation. The moral authority of Scripture is mainly manifested by the reading of the Bible with-

¹⁵ Patrick Nullens, 'Value Personalism as a Lens to Read the Ten Commandments', *Das Heilige Herz Der Tora Festschrift Für Hendrik Koorevaar Zu Seinem 65. Geburtstag* (Aachen: Shaker, 2011).

¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: a Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

¹⁸ It is a given that both theologians have grown in status among evangelical scholars.

¹⁹ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: a Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13.

²⁰ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 16.

in the community of believers. It is the church that lives out the biblical story, in the same way that Paul describes the church in Rome: 'you are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another' (Rom. 15:14).²¹

One may refer to the cultural linguistic turn in Systematic Theology. Theology is in fact explicating the practice of the church and the Bible has to be understood as the identity narrative²² of the interpretative community. Stanley Hauerwas, the main proponent of this school, insists that the Bible is first of all the church's book.²³ The particularities of the moral life are not grounded in some kind of understanding of all reality combined with practical reasoning. In fact the church has its own grammar.

One may conclude that the indi-

vidualistic tendency of evangelical use of Scripture, as we see it for instance formulated in art.2 of its *Symbola Evangelica* (1846), is under serious attack.²⁴

4. Appreciation of Character Ethics

Since Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1984) the literature on virtue ethics has been growing vastly. The focus changes from the moral object to the moral subject. Ethics is not so much about principles we need and decisions we make in difficult cases. The major question in ethics has become what kind of people we want to be.

Again, Stanley Hauerwas was a driving force in the recovery of the virtue tradition in Christian ethics.²⁵ He advocates a more particular and concrete ethics of discipleship, rather than one of universal principles and decisions.

This shift is closely related to the previously discussed turn towards community: It is in the community that traditions are embodied and the communities are the first place where character formation happens. We can develop virtuous dispositions only through communal practices and stories. Reading Scripture is therefore only one of the many practices of the church and it should go along with the celebration of the Eucharist, prayer, feeding the hungry etc.

²¹ Especially interesting in connection with Paul's former words about Scripture in Romans 15:4,5. See also Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002).

²² Hans Frei specifically emphasises the theme of 'identity' in his book, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: the Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

²³ The church is the narrative-formed community, faithful, remembering God's care for his creation, the calling of Israel and the life of Jesus. Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture: the Politics and Ethics of Remembering', *Interpretation* 34, no. 4 (O 1980): 356–370. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), and Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

²⁴ Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*.

²⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: a Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975). Also Meilaender (Lutheran), Jean Porter (Roman Catholic).

5. Appreciation of tradition

In general we can witness a growing appreciation of tradition of the early church. Oftentimes this goes along with the new emphasis on catholicity. The paleo-orthodoxy school (e.g. Thomas Oden) contributes a lot to biblical interpretation by use of the church fathers.²⁶ The Wesleyan Quadrilateral, using Scripture, tradition, reason and experience as four sources for theology, is welcomed more and more in evangelical theology.²⁷

This newfound appreciation in itself is already quite a broadening of the view, compared to a more strict use of the Bible only. We might say, however, that the appreciation of tradition is more prominent in the area of theology, biblical interpretation, and spirituality than in the more tangible and contemporary area of Christian Ethics.

6. Appreciation of theological interpretation

We make the transition from descriptive data in the Bible to prescripts

for use today through theological reflection in the context of the church community.²⁸ The Bible provides the general 'wisdom map' that guides us in our efforts of moral reflection. The broad school of Theological Interpretation can be helpful for creating a bridge between the Scriptures and current morality.²⁹

Barth's commentary on Romans is a classical example. Lesser known is his posthumously published book, *Das christliche Leben* (1959-1961), wherein Barth elaborates on the struggle for human justice, giving Christian social ethics the necessary theoretical content. He discusses our responsibility in light of the Lord's Prayer. In doing so he unites prayer with ethical behaviour. The prayers, 'hallowed be your name', and, 'your kingdom come', stand in sharp contrast to the reality in which we live. In praying for the Kingdom of God we fight the battle for human justice. The Christian's zeal for God takes its shape in fighting for human rights, freedom and peace on earth.³⁰

²⁶ See for instance *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, edited by Thomas Oden, published by InterVarsity. See also Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With the Church Fathers* (IVP Academic, 1998) and Richard J Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* ([San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

²⁷ Donald A. D Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 1990). C. van der Kooi, Eveline van Staaldune-Sulman, and A.W Zwiep, *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Essays Under the Auspices of the Center of Evangelical and Reformation Theology (CERT)* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2012).

²⁸ As Richard Hays submits, we must be actively engaged in 'metaphor making'—putting the life of our community 'imaginatively within the world articulated by the texts'. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), 6. Hays speaks of key images rather than concepts or doctrines (Hays, *The Moral Vision*, 193–214).

²⁹ Theological interpretation does not buy into the traditional modernistic biblical criticism that has created an ugly chasm between biblical interpretation and theology. Kevin Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 19–25.

³⁰ Karl Barth, *Das Christliche Leben: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV 4, Fragmente Aus Dem*

Similarly and expressed even more strongly we see this process of moral reading of Scripture in the oeuvre of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.³¹ Although he was trained in Berlin by Reinhold Seeberg and Adolf von Harnack he felt that historical criticism had failed to understand the meaning of the text. His interpretation was pneumatological and christocentric. It is a continuous and dynamic search for the 'true way'.³² Only through prayer can one have access to the meaning of Scripture. The fundamental question we should ask ourselves, he writes in his *Discipleship*: 'What did Jesus want to say to us today?'

III Loving is knowing

Essentially the six trends above show us a way of understanding and moral knowledge. It is not a new way, but all six can be incorporated in a theological interpretation that starts from the unifying theme or 'key conceptual model' of love.³³ Theological interpretation

reads the biblical text from the perspective of the nature of God. As Vanhoozer summarizes: 'A properly theological criticism will therefore seek to do justice to the priority of God'.³⁴ Theocentric ethics must start from the acting and loving God. As St John writes passionately:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them (1 Jn. 4:7-9, 16).

In this passage theological knowledge and morality merge into one another. Only the one who loves can know God. In a *theologia caritatis*³⁵ ethics precedes understanding. Morality is not only a result of obedience to the Word of God, it is also a condition for understanding the Word. The righteous hear the word of God, the evil oppose and are deaf (Is. 6:10). In this sense an ethic of love has an epistemological

Nachlass, Vorlesungen 1959-1961 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976), 356. In a note Barth refers to the fact that Calvin never advocated any form of religious war in France.

31 Geoffrey B. Kelley and F. Burton Nelson, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theological Interpretation of Scripture for the Church', *Ex Auditu* 17 (2001): 1-30.

32 On the importance of Psalm 119 for Bonhoeffer's Ethics see Brian Brock, 'Bonhoeffer and the Bible in Christian Ethics: Psalm 119, the Mandates, and Ethics as a "Way"', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18, no. 3 (December 2005): 7-29.

33 For a discussion of the role of a 'key conceptual model' in Systematics, see Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge University

Press, 1993).

34 See the introduction of Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*.

35 Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, 'This Is Not About Sex? A Discussion of the Understanding of Love and Grace in Bernard of Clairvaux's and Martin Luther's Theologies', *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 15-25.

status.³⁶

It is however not merely the very nature of God that leads us to the priority of love. Jesus himself provided us with the key hermeneutical principle in the discussion about the greatest commandment (Mt. 22:33-40), which stresses love of God and neighbour; on 'these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets' (v.40).

This double love commandment demonstrates the unity and focus of Scripture and therefore it should function as our main paradigm for understanding its moral authority. All Scripture should be interpreted in light of this double love commandment.³⁷ All of Scripture (i.e. the Old Testament) 'hangs' on the twofold commandment (Mt. 22:40) and this double commandment can be considered as the 'hermeneutic program' for the understanding and application of the Scriptures.³⁸

Using love as a hermeneutical tool was emphasized by Augustine in his *Christian Doctrine*. In the first book he identifies the love of God and neighbour as the purpose of Scripture.³⁹

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbour, does not yet understand them as he ought. If, on the other hand, a man draws a meaning from them that may be used for the building up of love, even though he does not happen upon the precise meaning which the author whom he reads intended to express in that place, his error is not pernicious, and he is wholly clear from the charge of deception.⁴⁰

In book three of *Christian Doctrine*, the love commandments comes back to the fore, now as a hermeneutical tool. When a literal interpretation goes against good morals, it should be read figuratively. Good morals are defined using the double commandment. Our interpretation should fit the 'reign of love'.⁴¹ It is only through love that we can come to the truth: *cari- tas quaerens intellectum* (love seeking understanding).⁴²

This Augustinian line fits well the evangelical view of biblical author-

36 Stephen Pardue, 'Athens and Jerusalem Once More: What the Turn to Virtue Means for Theological Exegesis', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 294-308.

37 For literature on a hermeneutical interpretation of this expression, see Charles H Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2002), 158.

38 B. Gerhardtsson, 'The Hermeneutic Program in Matthew 22:37-40'. In *Jews, Greeks and Christians*. W. D. Davies, ed. R. Hamerton-Kelly and R. Scroggs. Leiden: Brill, 1976. 129-50, quoted in (2002) D.A. Hagner, *Vol. 33B: Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, 643.

39 Par. Xxxv, xxxvi, see also Ernest L. For-

tin, 'Augustine and the Hermeneutics of Love: Some Preliminary Considerations', in *Augustine Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 35-59; Jeff B. Pool, 'No Entrance into Truth Except Through Love: Contributions from Augustine of Hippo to a Contemporary Christian Hermeneutic of Love', *Review & Expositor* 101, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 629-666. ,Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate*.

40 Book I. par. 36

41 Book 3, par. Xv, see also Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate*.

42 Pool contrasts this with the classic scholastic *fides quaerens intellectum*. Pool, 'No Entrance into Truth Except Through Love', 633.

ity. It has been more developed in the pietistic and puritan traditions. John Wesley's theology, for example, can be summarized as one of 'Holy Love'.⁴³ The Wesleyan view on sanctification and perfection (similar to Bernard of Clairvaux) is one about growth in love.⁴⁴

According to Jonathan Edwards, for instance, it is only by change of the affections that one is able to understand Scripture. True regeneration is a 'real circumcision of the heart'. God has endued the soul with two capacities: 'understanding, which merely perceives and speculates', and inclination, which is a capacity that 'does not merely perceive and view things, but is in some way inclined with respect to the things it views or considers'. One that 'has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion' and has therefore no 'true virtue'. On the other hand, to have the right inclination is also to have the right knowledge. There is a cognitive dimension to affections, because 'what makes the will choose, is something approved by the Understanding'. As there can be no light (knowledge) without a fire (affections), neither can there be fire without light.

Loving is a way of seeing, a way of understanding and in it is a condition for true moral knowledge. The German

philosopher Max Scheler developed this Augustinian line of thought. Only through the eyes of love can one discover true values. In an ethics of love the subjective and objective merge together. The moral agent is a loving person who discovers the true values of life. The human person is not a thinking being (Kant), nor a willing being (Nietzsche) but a loving being. As a loving being man is created in the image of God. Love as a value cognition determines how we perceive the world. Scheler quotes Goethe:

One can know nothing except what one loves; and the deeper and more complete one desires the knowledge to be, the more powerful and dynamic must the love, indeed the passion be.⁴⁵

Because we are primarily loving beings, our emotional relationships precede both the intellect and the will.

Scheler uses colours as a metaphor for values: The intellect is as blind to values as the ear is blind to colours. He concurs with Pascal on this point, who refers to the logic of the heart ('Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point'). Love is the highest human capacity, and forms the basis for the sympathy required to develop a moral relationship with another person.

Ultimately, love leads us to God and renders us willing to accept what he desires from us. Love thus plays an important role in enabling us both to recognize values and create them. Scheler describes love as a movement that

⁴³ Kenneth J Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007); David L. Cubie, 'Wesley's Theology of Love', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spr 1985): 122–154.

⁴⁴ Bernard, *Saint Bernard on the Love of God* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1972).

⁴⁵ Alfons Deeken, *Process and Permanence in Ethics: Max Scheler's Moral Philosophy* (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), 32.

focuses on ever-higher values. Love is literally an 'e-motion'—a movement away from ourselves which transcends our ego.⁴⁶

Value personalism combines the anthropological understanding of a human as a person with value theory in ethics. Somehow there is a match between the human person and the world of values as we experience them in our daily realities.

IV Covenantal love

One might be suspicious about the vagueness of using love as the prominent concept of understanding biblical authority. Here we are faced with a circle: It is only by studying Scripture in its entirety as a testimony to God's saving acts that we understand more about the meaning of love. Love is initiated by God and therefore our love is always responsive. It is a covenantal love that is revealed to the full in the Cross of the New Covenant. This covenantal love of the new covenant forms the basis of our understanding of the moral authority of Scripture.

It is a covenant of the Spirit writing the law in our hearts. Jeremiah and Ezekiel described the covenant as a radical change of the heart (Jer. 31-34; Ezek. 36:24-29). Unresponsive hearts of stone turned into hearts of flesh. It is the covenant that changes our identity; it has changed the identity of the moral subjects, the new covenantal

community, the readers of the text.⁴⁷

The human heart has changed, the affections have changed, the direction of love has changed. Love changes the heart, it is formative. At the same time, it is normative. Jesus himself has set the standard. He has demonstrated love to us (Jn. 13:34). Paul speaks about a radical transformation which will enable us to discern the will of God, that which is good and perfect (Rom. 12:1,2). Love is a broad concept that incorporates our whole being as creatures of God.⁴⁸

The ethicist Paul Ramsey asserted that agape love is the predominant concept of all Christian ethics by which it can critically integrate with different types of moral philosophical models. According to Ramsey, Christian ethics is about 'love transforming natural law' or 'love transforming justice'.⁴⁹ He criticizes 'medieval scholasticism when a theory of natural law and the ethics of Aristotle were assigned the fundamental, Christian faith and love only the second-story, position'.⁵⁰ Only love can have this primacy.

⁴⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 413-417.

⁴⁸ I am critical of Nygren's Eros and Agape; agape love cannot be disconnected from an erotic creational dimension. There is always a biological and social element. See also Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960); Wiberg Pedersen, 'This Is Not About Sex?'

⁴⁹ Christ transforming the natural law is the unifying theme of Paul Ramsey, *Nine Modern Moralists*, 3.

⁵⁰ Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1950), 184.

⁴⁶ This ties in with Scheler's anthropology, where the capacity for self-transcendence is characteristic of humans as dynamic beings who are able to reach beyond themselves with the capacity to love.

Ramsey's understanding of Christian love is very Christocentric. The reference is always Jesus himself, He is the prototype: 'My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.' (Jn. 15:12, 13). Christian love is self-emptying (kenotic) and grounded in the divine 'condescension' or self-sacrifice toward men.⁵¹ The main reference for all Christian ethics is the controlling love of Christ (2 Cor. 5:14). Quoting Luther, Ramsey defines love as 'being Christ to our neighbours'.⁵² So he reminds us of the fact that love should be defined by Christ himself.

For Ramsey the biblical concept of 'obedient love' is central to a distinctive Christian ethic, but needs to be explained within the larger frame of the covenant.⁵³ God acted first and established a covenantal relationship. Therefore our righteousness cannot be limited to respect or obedience to divine authority. It goes a great deal beyond submission to divine commandments. The biblical religion is one of 'grateful obedience' or 'obedient gratitude'.⁵⁴ God has first delivered us and therefore our attitude has totally changed. Within the wider perspective of the covenant, justice is not correc-

tive or distributive, but redemptive.⁵⁵

Not only theologically, also from the perspective of moral philosophy, love is an interesting option for the grounding of our ethics. Kierkegaard's reflections on the *Works of Love* (1847), for example, even though they are more theological than philosophical in nature, clearly make an anthropological claim.

Kierkegaard understands the need to give and receive love in human relationships to be deeply rooted in human nature, having been created that way by God. Our nature has its source, and thus the God who is love has left his mark, and is necessarily a presence, in all human loves.⁵⁶ His love ethics grounds the equality of all human beings. For Kierkegaard love is also an epistemological category: 'Only he who abides in love can recognize love, and in the same way his love is to be known.'⁵⁷

The hermeneutical priority of covenantal love embraces the six tendencies I have mentioned before.

First, it gives the universal message, but at the same time love, by its very nature, is manifested differently in the different biblical narratives, stylistic forms and discourses. Then love ethics is pneumatological. It is the love of the Holy Spirit that is poured into our hearts. It is through this loving Spirit we can understand the text he inspired. Furthermore, love is manifested in the Eucharistic community of the new covenant. The main distinctive of the church is that they love as Jesus

51 Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 20.

52 Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 21.

53 The centrality of the covenant for understanding love and even the human person is currently confirmed by the work of the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. The self is, as one of his books is entitled, the 'covenanted self'. Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

54 Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 13.

55 This can be illustrated by the parable in Matthew 18:27.

56 Søren Kierkegaard et al., *Works of Love* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2009), 27.

57 Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 33.

does. Only in this context do biblical words make any sense.

Then we can see that the priority of love has a long tradition (even though it is mainly Augustinian). Finally, covenantal love can be used as a key concept for theological interpretation of Old and New Testament. In this sense Scripture should be understood as the book of the covenant. As Vanhoozer stressed, it is only by participation and performance in the 'drama of redemption' that we come to a full understanding of the text.

'The church is constituted –gathered and governed—by a divine covenantal initiative that is both the source of its identity and its authoritative principle. . . . Scripture is a divine covenant document before it is an ecclesial constitution'⁵⁸ a covenant document which provides 'dramatic direction' for performing Christian wisdom.⁵⁹

V Equipped for works of love

Let us shortly turn to the text most commonly used to underline this authority, 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

It is imperative we take the context of this passage into account. The authority and inspiration of Scripture is set into the context of imitation of Paul: 'Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me,

in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (1:13,14)' Vanhoozer points out that this, following in Paul's footsteps, is not a mechanical movement, but requires personal and creative input to give direction to the theo-drama.⁶⁰

It is essential that the Spirit has the freedom to lead:

The direction doctrine provides is less a matter of moral rules than of ethical aims that pertain to the shape our freedom must take in order to realize the good. . . . Doctrine thus fosters a certain ethos, or sense of the overall shape that one's life must take in order to realize, the good, and the beautiful.⁶¹

Paul's aim is not to create a copy of himself, but sincere love gives freedom within the framework of a relationship. As Jean Paul Sartre would say: 'If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone.'⁶²

In contrast with the false teachers, Timothy's response to Paul is one of obedient love. Timothy follows Paul in everything (...now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness...—2 Tim. 3:10).

To better understand the contrast, it might be useful to take a look at the false teachers of the last days. These can be considered as people teaching Scripture falsely. The false teachers

⁶⁰ ὑποτύπωσις means a 'sketch, model, or pattern' of something.

⁶¹ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 105.

⁶² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and nothingness: an essay on phenomenological ontology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 357; quoted and discussed by Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 160.

⁵⁸ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 133.

⁵⁹ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 104.

are described as people with wrong loves (3:2-4) or wrong desires. As Max Scheler would stress, all evil is caused by the intoxicated soul of erroneous loves and the disposition of 'resentment'.

Paul gives a long list of eighteen vices (3:2-4) and, as George Knight rightly observes, it starts and ends with 'words expressing a misdirection of love'.⁶³ It Opens with 'lovers of self' and 'lovers of money' and ends with 'lovers of pleasure instead of lovers of God'. These false teachers of the last day value the wrong things. Therefore they have only the appearance of true religion (*eusebeia*), which in fact is misleading. They are not led by the desire to serve but only to fulfil their own appetites.

Paul gives another example and urges Timothy to keep in mind 'from whom you learned it' (3:14).⁶⁴ The circle of knowledge is as important as the knowledge itself. It is from his childhood on that he 'had known the Sacred Writings' (3:15).⁶⁵ Scripture in itself is not enough. It is only 'through Jesus Christ' that it becomes a source of wisdom and salvation. This is also well illustrated by the opening passage of this letter, where Paul expresses the very personal and even emotional dimension of loving relationships and even tradition (2 Tim. 3:3-5).

It is in this context of relationship, tradition and community of faith that Paul makes a more general statement

about the Scriptures. All Scripture is God-breathed.⁶⁶ The four *pros*-clauses (for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training) come together in the one *hina* clause 'so (in order) that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work' (v.17). Paul gives the ultimate purpose of Scripture's inspiration. Scripture has a divinely intended purpose for salvation.⁶⁷

The four propositional clauses may be said to form two groups, the first two dealing with doctrine (orthodoxy) and the second with behaviour (orthopraxy).⁶⁸ Timothy and all Christians can find in Scripture everything necessary to do good works.⁶⁹ The concluding participial phrase emphasises that the man of God will be well equipped for every kind of good work.

The general scope of this *locus classicus* on biblical authority is less about doctrine as such,⁷⁰ and more about morality, the man of God equipped for charity. There is a dynamic movement of the Spirit. Through the word of God the Spirit equips the man of God to do good works and in doing so participate

63 George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 430.

64 The 'all' includes grandmother, mother and Paul.

65 Referring to the Old Testament.

66 Passive meaning; see Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority of Bible*, 2nd ed. (P & R Publishing, 1948), 294.

67 I. Howard Marshall and Philip Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 794.

68 William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 2000), 570.

69 Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 571.

70 But we should not separate doctrine from morality. Indeed scripture is useful for sound doctrine (*didaskalia*). But in 1 Timothy 1:10: 'the sexually immoral, men who practise homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine'. In short, immorality is heterodoxy.

in the *Missio Deo*. Because of the Word of God we can be salt and light: 'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (Mat. 5:16).

VI Conclusion

It has been my claim in this paper that postmodernity discourages us from treating the Bible as a compilation of objective facts, and leads us to see the ethicist's task as finding the will of God within this collection of information and consequently directing the Christian towards obedience. Postmodern man no longer believes in objective, universal truths, and postmodern theologians can no longer treat the Bible as if it were an objective, universal sourcebook of truths.

We need a theology and an ethic that takes this longing for authenticity and character, this appreciation of community and tradition, the recognition of canonical diversity and pneumatology and the need for theological interpretation into account. This can be done through a hermeneutic of love.

Speaking about a *hermeneutic* of love stresses the epistemological character of love (1 Jn. 4). Love is the lens through which we understand the world (Augustine). As loving beings, love comes first, before intellect and

will (value personalism). In biblical perspective, we speak of covenantal love. The relationship between God and man is initiated by God, but requires a human response: obedient love (Ramsey). Within this covenant of obedient love we find the answer to our inquiry into the nature of the moral authority of Scripture.

This broader theological framework helps us to understand the meaning of 2 Timothy 3:16-17. The Bible is not so much a sourcebook of facts and principle, that we have to apply in our contemporary context. It is first of all a testimony of covenantal love that we read and understand in a community of love. It is only from a desire to serve our neighbour in love by good works that we have access to the depth and richness of Scripture.

Kierkegaard rightly asserted that love is a divine and incomprehensible mystery. However, the works of love can be perceived, they form the observable fruit. Kierkegaard quotes 1 John 3:18, 'Let us not love in word and speech, but in deed and truth.'⁷¹ Words are only the leaves of the tree, they already give some idea of its nature, but the final test is in the acts, the fruits. It is only within the wider context of our loving acts that Scripture makes sense in a moral discourse.

⁷¹ Kierkegaard et al., *Works of Love*, 29.