

## *Using Scripture in Ethics: Some Methodological Considerations*

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- I. Some Starting Questions
  - A. What Do We Mean by “Scripture”?
  - B. What Do We Mean by “Ethics”?
  - C. How Might the Two Intersect, Legitimately AND Illegitimately?
- II. Possible Approaches for Using Scripture in Ethics
  - A. Proof-Texting: runs the risk of blunting or skewing the biblical message,
    - 1. E.g. Gay-Bashing: "God hates Fags!" Lev. 18:22
    - 2. Other examples: for capital punishment, (let he who lives by the sword, die by the sword) etc.
  - B. Fundamentalism
    - 1. Often related to proof-texting.
    - 2. This approach views Scripture as a revelation of strict moral norms and behavior.
    - 3. Considers this normative material to be self-interpreting.
    - 4. Does play into a certain human need for clear and strict rules, boundaries, etc.
  - C. Timeless, Metaphysical, Ideals
    - 1. Unbiblical: Bible's approach is not that of Greek ethics.
    - 2. By its very nature the language of ideals does not translate easily into the language of norms.
    - 3. A third issue concerns how moral ideals can be applied in a particular historical situation which differs considerably from the original scriptural context.

D. Analogy and/or Allegory

1. Positive: Key Christian symbols of Cross and Resurrection
2. Negative, or simplistic, use of analogy and allegory
  - a. One problem: "providing persuasive evidence that the circumstances of, for example, a political and military situation in our time are similar in any significant respects to the circumstances in biblical times."
  - b. "A second is the problem of determining which biblical events will be used for purposes of an analogical elucidation of the moral significance of present events." [James Gustafson, "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study" in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 4: The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, S.J., (New York: Paulist Press, 1984 In *Readings, No. 4*): 163]

E. Gustafson's "Looser Method" for approaching Scripture in moral theology:

1. "A fourth use of scripture is looser than the first three. It could be stated as follows:
2. Scripture witnesses to a great variety of moral values, moral norms and principles through many different kinds of biblical literature:
  - a. moral law, visions of the future, historical events, moral precepts, parnetic instruction, dialogues, wisdom sayings, allegories. They are not in a simple way reducible to a single theme; rather, they are directed to particular historical contexts.
  - b. The Christian community judges the actions of persons and groups to be morally wrong, or at least deficient, on the basis of reflective discourse about present events *in the light* of appeals to this variety of material as well as to other principles and experiences.
  - c. Scripture is one of the informing sources for moral judgments, but it is not sufficient in itself to make any particular judgment authoritative." [Gustafson, pp. 164-65.]

III. Spohn's Notion of Analogical Imagination

- A. Joseph Sittler's concept of the "shape of the engendering deed"
- B. Example given in the meaning of the Foot-washing commandment in John 13.
- C. Spohn's oft-repeated comment, that this commandment is not about feet!
- D. The New Commandment of Jesus
  - 1. "The eucharistic meal and the washing of feet become paradigms for Christian life. They set patterns which will be applied analogously in countless new situations. The pattern is what becomes normative rather than any lesson about humility or equality which might be distilled from the memory of footwashing and the image of Jesus who come [*sic*] not to be served but to serve." [William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?*, Rev. ed., (New York: Paulist Press, 1984, 1995): 97].
  - 2. "The new commandment goes *beyond imitation to participation* in two interrelated ways, a union of life and mission.
    - a. "In the first place, Christians' service evolves out of participation in the life of Christ as they enter into the same humiliation and exaltation he underwent." [Spohn, p. 96.]
    - b. "Secondly, they take part in the *mission* of Jesus. Their response is not primarily directed back in memory to an historical event. In John's gospel, Jesus does not say, 'As I have loved you, so you should love me in return'. Gratitude leads the disciples forward into the same mission of Jesus, not backward into nostalgia. They will participate in the life of Jesus if they participate in his mission." " [Spohn, p. 98]

#### IV. Spohn's Notion of Jesus as the Concrete Universal

- A. Spohn notes the following problematic: "The greatest challenge to having Jesus function as a moral norm is epistemological: how can a particular life have universal significance?" " [Spohn, p. 99]
- B. He goes on to add the following insight about the nature of the relationship of the particular in ethics: "Particulars are the basis of ethics, not universals. Moral concepts derive from patterns in particular experiences; moral reflection moves analogically from paradigmatic cases to more problematic ones that contain novel

elements; and moral wisdom rests more on discerning sensibility than deductive acumen." " [Spohn, p. 101].

- C. "I propose that Jesus of Nazareth functions normatively as a **concrete universal**, because his particular story embodies a paradigmatic pattern which has universal moral applicability. ...
1. "Christians move imaginatively from his story to their new situation by analogical reasoning. The concrete universal guides three phases of moral experience: perception, motivation, and identity since it indicates
    - a. 1. *which* particular features of our situation are religiously and morally significant;
    - b. 2. *how* we are to act even when *what* we should do is unclear;
    - c. 3. *who* we are to become as a people and as individuals." " [Spohn, p. 102]
  2. In this view, the *entire* story of Jesus becomes "normative" for Christians, and thus by extension for Christian ethics: "I propose that the entire story of Jesus is normative for Christian ethics as its *concrete universal*. ... Jesus is not the only norm of Christian ethics because human nature, practical effectiveness, accurate descriptions of data, and the accumulated wisdom of the tradition are also normative.
  3. "Nevertheless, whatever actions and dispositions these other sources suggest must be compatible with the basic patterns inherent in the story of Jesus. In addition, Jesus as concrete universal may mandate certain actions and dispositions, like forgiveness of enemies, to which the other sources would not give the same importance.
  4. "Jesus functions normatively in Christian ethics through the paradigmatic imagination and moral discernment, which are distinctive ways of exercising moral authority." " [Spohn, p. 99]
- V. General guidelines for the selection and appropriation of biblical images to ethics:
- A. The appropriate biblical images should be central to the canon of Scripture.
  - B. The guiding images should convey or be coordinate with a theologically sound image of God. E.g. Exodus image of God as Redeemer and Deliverer of captives.

- C. The images should be consistent with God's definitive revelation in Jesus Christ. E.g. "Crusading Warrior" image of the Holy War would seem inconsistent with the New Testament character of Jesus.
- D. The images should be appropriate to the situation and shed light upon it.
- E. Finally, these images should indicate courses of action that concur with the standards of ordinary human morality. Christians are not called by God to behavior that is patently harmful to themselves or others. This criterion introduces the practice of a public test to check any suspension of the moral law in the name of personal inspiration.
- F. Final "Methodological Moral Reminder"
  - 1. Any *coherent* moral argument should draw on the four sources of Christian ethics in an *integrated* manner.
  - 2. Thus, our "selection of biblical material must be justified by the other sources we use: theological validity in the tradition, consistency with the normative portrait of the human person found in ethics, and relevance to the factual situation as determined by the best empirical analyses available." [Spohn, p. 84].
  - 3. H. Richard Niebuhr warns against "evil imaginations of the heart": i.e., "symbols that send us down false ways and evoke self-centered affections. They obscure the truth of who we are and what we are doing, thus leading to a future not of life, but of death. Evil imaginations of the heart are detected by the consequences they lead to, just as concepts are invalidated by their erroneous results." [Spohn, p. 84].
  - 4. Spohn offers here the example of apartheid, nationalism, and commercialism [e.g. when you pray for your Motor Home, be sure to tell God what color you want].