Using Scripture in Ethics: Some Methodological Considerations in Light of Fundamental Values & Root Paradigms

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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?  
D. How do our cultural concepts of “fundamental values” and “root paradigms” find themselves embodied in the biblical texts themselves, in our various ethical theories and systems, and in our own exegesis and interpretation of both Scripture and Ethics in light of a concrete issue or moment in time?

II. 4 Possible Approaches for Using Scripture in Ethics, each of which has certain prospects as well as problems

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.  
   3. However, certain biblical proof texts can genuinely offer “proof” of deeper themes, such as “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,” or “Forgive your brother or sister seventy-seven times seven.”

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.

5. Again, rules and boundaries are not bad in themselves, but only when they inflexibly take on a greater value than any concrete material norm ought to enjoy, or promote a value of legalism that runs counter to deeper biblical themes of mercy, compassion, care for the widow, orphan, alien, and the poor, 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.

4. Again, though, some ideals are indeed timeless and to an extent are metaphysical and these have value for us today as well (e.g., the Golden Rule)

D. **Analogy and/or Allegory**

1. Positive: Key Christian symbols of Cross and Resurrection, and often pedagogically they can function as good teaching or memory aids

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*]
III. Gustafson's "Looser Method" for approaching Scripture in moral theology


B. "Scripture witnesses to a great variety of moral values, moral norms and principles through many different kinds of biblical literature:

1. moral law, visions of the future, historical events, moral precepts, paranetic instruction, dialogues, wisdom sayings, allegories.

2. They are not in a simple way reducible to a single theme; rather, they are directed to particular historical contexts.

3. 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.


IV. Spohn’s Notion of Analogue Imagineration

A. “Analogue Imagineration” is a key theological concept developed at length by David Tracy in his classic 1998 book of the same name (*The Analogue Imagineration: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism)*.

B. Spohn references Joseph Sittler's concept of the "shape of the engendering deed"

C. Example given in the meaning of the Foot-washing commandment in John 13 (which I will elaborate on below).
D. Spohn's oft-repeated comment, that this commandment is not about feet!

E. The New Commandment of Jesus


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]

V. 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**. ...

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]

VI. Foot-washing in Holy Thursday Liturgy Controversies: Clashing Root Paradigms

A. Liturgical law (up to 2016) of using only “men” (*viri selecti*) for the ritual, in order to “symbolize” Jesus’ creation of the male priesthood.

B. Ongoing, and often-times sharp, controversy over the enforcement of this particular liturgical law.

1. Example of Archbishop Jorge Maria Bergoglio (and others), which Bergoglio continued on after his election in 2013 as Pope Francis—
horror of many hierarchs and others traditionally aligned with a more conservative wing of the Catholic Church.

C. Change in the liturgical law, and reaction of some Catholic bishops such as Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, WI. See Bishop Morlino’s January 28, 2016 Statement at http://madisoncatholic herald.org/bishop/41-bishop-category/6163-washing-feet.html in which he acknowledges the papal change in the liturgical law, but decrees for his Madison diocese the priests now have 3 options,

1. “to include women in the washing of the feet (it should be noted that Pope Francis, in fact, speaks of a “wider inclusivity”);

2. “to follow the traditional practice of washing the feet of men, who in this dramatic ritual represent the Twelve Apostles, or

3. “to omit the ritual of the washing of the feet altogether.

4. His Excellency concludes his Statement with the “hope that in their outstanding care for the people entrusted to them, the priests will engage serious prayer and reflection in coming to their choice of option. It is also my hope that our priests and people will avoid any pressure tactics so as to allow our priests to make good and prudential decisions.

5. Finally Bishop Morlino re-iterates that “the central focus of the Holy Thursday Liturgy should always be upon the Lord, His priesthood, and the Eucharist. I hope, more and more, that this will be the case in each parish of the Diocese of Madison.”

D. Spohn’s own example of the white pastor in a predominately African-American parish getting down on his knees and shining the shoes of 12 older men in his parish. I would argue that this does represent well the “shape of the engendering deed” and a legitimate use of Jesus’ own example as a “concrete universal.”

VII. General guidelines for the selection and appropriation of biblical images to ethics:

A. See my separate handout: 5-STEP METHODOLOGY FOR APPLICATION OF SCRIPTURE TO MORAL ISSUES

B. The appropriate biblical images should be central to the canon of Scripture.

C. 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.
D. 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.

E. The images should be appropriate to the situation and shed light upon it.

F. 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.

G. 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].

5. I would observe that these “evil imaginations of the heart” are particularly powerful and insidious when they are cultural embodied as fundamental values and root paradigms.