



# Ethics in Brief

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## What Role Ought the Bible to Play in Christian Ethics? 'Developing a Hermeneutic' vs. 'Immersion in a Tradition'<sup>1</sup>

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*The contemporary rediscovery of ancient sources of biblical exegesis makes an important contribution to the renewal of Christian ethics. This rediscovery is motivated by a dissatisfaction with modern critical commentaries on Scripture and by a desire to re-engage with the biblical text itself, allowing it to speak to our contemporary ethical challenges in fresh and surprising ways. The article sets out the key objectives and contributions of this new approach to biblical ethics. The heart of the challenge it brings is to encourage us to move beyond a preoccupation with questions of hermeneutical methodology and towards a properly theological appreciation of the role of 'tradition' in our ethical reading of Scripture.*

Change is afoot in biblical ethics. On the one hand, many Christians have for some time borne a niggling worry that the Bible is a document from another time and place whose moral certainties could never be their own. On the other, even those who hold the Bible in high regard are often disappointed to find that modern biblical commentaries only rarely address the most pressing contemporary dilemmas. Over the decades, this disappointing sense that Scripture does not address modern moral problems has percolated into the contemporary mind: we now see the Bible as providing only useless or positively misleading bearings in our modern moral landscape.

### **Ancient Sources, New Resources**

But it was not always so. When reading premodern Christian preaching and biblical commentary, modern readers are often struck by the assurance of previous generations that the Bible *does* speak to the moral questions of the day. For this reason some contemporary theologians have become dissatisfied with modern critical commentaries, a dissatisfaction that has led many back to premodern forms of biblical commentary. This sea change is marked by three massive commentary projects. The *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series resurrects the ancient commentaries in the form of a digest. The *Two Horizons* commentary series showcases theologians and biblical scholars interpreting biblical books together in a conscious attempt to unite their disciplines. And the *Brazos Theological Commentaries on the Bible* refuses even to grant a disciplinary division between biblical studies and theology, having lined up a top quality cast of theologians to write academic theological commentaries for today's church. It remains to be seen how effectively these commentaries will manage to address contemporary ethical issues. This essay will suggest why these new approaches promise to circumvent some of the sterile dead ends of contemporary biblical scholarship and to reconnect Scripture to contemporary moral questions.

### **'Developing a Hermeneutics' or 'Immersion in a Tradition'?**

The question of *how* the Bible is relevant to contemporary moral debates has been vigorously but inconclusively discussed for the last 30 years. The answers given have largely been determined by the divisions and self-understandings of the disciplines of biblical studies, hermeneutics, or Christian ethics. Despite rather large disagreements, there has been almost complete tacit agreement that the problem is a gap between our present with its ethical problems and the historical past in which the Bible was written. It is not my purpose here to relate the story of how this sense of separation arose.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I would like to revisit the problem so construed by clarifying the difference it makes

whether one conceives the problem as that of 'developing a hermeneutic' by which this gap can be crossed, or of being 'immersed in a tradition' that helps us to make ethical sense of our world.

This article will suggest that our sense that Scripture 'does not speak to this issue' tells us more about what we lack than about what is missing in Scripture. Put simply, modern methodological presuppositions place a barrier in the way of the Bible being read as *Scripture*. Scripture, by definition, is never outdated, never obscure, and never fails to serve the divine illumination of our moral existence. Here Christians in past ages can guide us.

### **Augustine as reader of Scripture**

Augustine recounts in his *Confessions*<sup>3</sup> how, as a bright young rhetor, he held the common opinion among the educated that the Scriptures were archaic and morally irrelevant. In time, however, he tired of the hedonistic and irresponsible life that went along with his cosmopolitan aspirations and gravitated to the bracing moral seriousness of the Manichean sect, in which he developed a familiarity with the Bible. Here he came to suspect that this text, though still embarrassingly old-fashioned, was in fact interesting, though he did harbour the worry that the Manicheans, as impressive as their lives and philosophy were, proffered rather unconvincing readings of some important passages.

The warm personality and rhetorical sophistication of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, brought Augustine face to face for the first time with an orthodox Christianity worth listening to. Surprisingly, Ambrose took the Old Testament seriously, even as life-giving. Week in and week out Augustine returned to hear his preaching, and, respecting this one Catholic saint, discovered his objections to the church and ridicule of the biblical saints exposed as straw men. Faced with these realisations and the undeniable power of Ambrose's life and biblical interpretation, he embraced Christianity and, with it, gave up his stance of judgment over its Scriptures.

This conversion, he soon discovered, was no one-time event, but an ongoing renewal of his understanding of moral sanctification. It was a transformation taking the form of a journey into Scripture. As part of this journey, he retrospectively came to understand his earlier estrangement from Scripture as primarily a moral estrangement. The roots of this alienation were partially innate and partially learned in the various social circles in

which he had moved. Each in their own way had facilitated his rationalising away any moral challenge from scripture. Beginning from believing that Scripture was morally irrelevant, and later laughable on the basis of *its* moral vision, he eventually realised that his estrangement from Scripture lay within *him* and his refusal to allow it to question him.

It was a discovery with two faces. On one hand he now saw how communities can *blind* us to Scripture, making it *inaccessible*. On the other, it was a lesson in the indispensability of God's own speaking to break through this trained deafness and moral debilitation and give him a taste for Scripture. He could not follow his own eros to find God, nor could the luminous Ambrose's teaching and moral example prove the truth of Catholic Christianity. God's own voice, Augustine said, 'called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours'.

This God-given passion led him with ever increased joy to Scripture, especially the Psalms, the praying of which kindled a genuine love for God which put to flight his untruth, deceit, and vanity. The moral confusion that had estranged him from Scripture had rendered him a blind and bitter critic, 'barking at the scriptures which drip the honey of heaven and blaze with your light.' He had come full circle, from ignorance, through hostility and incomprehension, to love of Scripture in awe of its moral power. He ends his account of this transformation with a prayer for delight in Scripture, for nourishment from it, and to be brought into all perfection through ever deepening insights into its meaning.

### **Reading Scripture today**

We need not take Augustine's example as normative to see that the range of considerations drawn into his autobiographical account is richer than most contemporary treatments of the role of the Bible in Christian ethics. He is aware that one must be morally transformed to read Scripture, and that we learn to read the Bible in communities of tradition. He also assumes that the way that the Bible shapes Christian action is not adequately described by cataloguing the moral teachings of Scripture, but demands an account of all reality which is drawn from the whole Bible, including its 'non-moral'

teachings. These are familiar points in the contemporary discussion, but Augustine also adds unfamiliar elements, such as his stress on the role played by affections and senses in directing our moral lives, and the way Scripture shapes them. Most strikingly, in reflecting on his own experience, Augustine discovered what historical criticism has recently retaught the modern church: that the Bible is a morally stranger thing than we have yet grasped.

Scripture resists being boiled down to a set of 'eternal moral rules' extracted from ancient and morally problematic stories and teachings. And those sceptics are right who note that its writers 'could not have known about the moral problems we face'. How then can it meet the moral questions of our age? Consider the rich definition of sanctified knowledge portrayed in Psalm 119: 33-36: 'Teach me, Yahweh, the *way* of your will, and I will observe it. Give me *understanding* and I will observe your Law, and keep it wholeheartedly. Guide me in the way of your commandments, for my *delight* is there. *Bend my heart* to your instructions, not to selfish gain'.<sup>4</sup> The psalmist here seeks to be remade, to become holy, not only by *understanding* (not exactly an equivalent to reason or assent to true statements), but also by learning to *walk a way* or a *path*, and to be given a *delight*, a redirection of the *affections*.

The psalmist's breadth of expression sharpens the question of whether contemporary theology and exegesis do in fact work with the psalmist's rounded definition of rationality. Within the scope of the Old Testament, the faithful are depicted as being redeemed in their perception, action, and desire in an interrelated progression. Thus, the rationality depicted in Psalm 119 cannot be of only one of these in abstraction from the others, or in priority over the others, but describes those forms of knowledge as reciprocally defining. This biblical definition of knowing presents a much broader conceptual field than most modern conceptions.

### **Tradition as 'acoustic space'**

Augustine's example indicates how the living church in conversation with its forebears is an ineradicably social 'acoustic space', within which one learns practical skills of handling and appropriating scripture. We cannot 'summarise' or mine this conversation for methodological insights, but must become attuned to the back and forth of argument that opens our questions themselves to subtle and unexpected reformulations. The point can be simply put with the statement that a good book is always

better than its summary, and as such, Scripture cannot be summarised. Nor can the exegetical tradition through which we approach it. Thus, arguably, the heart and soul of theology is its immersion in the exegetical tradition in Christian faith. This is a quite different beginning point than the inquiries of hermeneutics (How do I read well?) or ethics (What should we do?) taken on their own, yet it comprehends both questions. Augustine has indicated how gratitude to God functions as the condition for knowing where we are morally, and so knowing how to act.

It remains to unpack the hermeneutical implications of the claim that Scripture informs us of God's works, making collaborating with them possible, so rendering our works good. This is to conceive 'tradition' in a very specific way: it is that set of *practices*, or more precisely, the *ethos*, which gives priority to attentiveness to Scripture in intellectual, moral, and affective forms. This approach stands in contrast to early Enlightenment biblical criticism, which defined the academic exegetical tradition by saying that all previous forms of attentiveness had taken on a life of their own with the effect of obscuring Scripture's meaning. But what united this Enlightenment tradition with the best aspects of the Christian exegesis it questioned is a central focus on attentiveness to the details of Scripture.

Such an understanding of tradition reminds us that a 'tradition' is not a repository of settled ontological truths, but a broad, multifaceted, and yet somehow unified recollection of a single community's unbroken wrestling with specific texts. 'Tradition' so construed is not first a description of an entity, but an *invitation* to become interpreters within it. Its value is not in its antiquity, but in its ability to shape us as those who can read. This differs from the presuppositions of the contemporary Bible-and-ethics discussion, which is focused on methodological questions about hermeneutics rather than being engaged in the much less generalisable skill of developing a content-rich reading of the Bible which responds to the questions of today.

### **Conclusion: becoming a community of disciples**

The aim of this exploration is to facilitate a renewed appreciation of the moral guidance provided in the Scriptures from which the Christian tradition grows. The suggestion I have made is that this renewal is best achieved not by asking what these texts *are* and how they can be *applied* to our contemporary context, but by *joining a reading tradition* through the learning

of readings which are attentive, moral and communal. A tradition is entered not by grasping its theoretical underpinnings, but by learning its ethos. This parallels the approaches of exegetes like Augustine, who understood the tradition to have a centre because they understood it in faith as the writings of a set of people who hand on their experiences of the one God, an experience itself shaped by what has been handed on to them. For them, the existence of Scripture is the proof that this is precisely how God creates his people: by shaping them as a community of disciples.

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#### End notes

1. This is a revised and abridged version of *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), ix-xi, 99-105.
2. Cf. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, 'Why Christian Ethics Was Invented', and 'How The Church Managed Before There Was Ethics', in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).
3. The following discussion is drawn from Augustine, *Confessions*, III. iii-v, xi-xiv; VI. iv-v, x-xi; VII. xi; IX. iv; X. xxvii; XI. ii.
4. The New Jerusalem Translation emphasises the simultaneity of singing and obedience better than the NRSV. Emphasis mine.

#### For further reading

- Joel C. Elowsky and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, John 1-10 (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture)* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2007).
- Andrew Louth and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Genesis I-II (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture)* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2001).
- Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
- Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians (Two Horizons New Testament Commentary)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).
- Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)* (London: SCM Press 2006).
- Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007).

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