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Rightly Applying the Word of Truth: The Bible and the Moral Life

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The evangelical marketplace makes available to religious consumers bumper stickers and T-shirts that boldly proclaim the pious slogan, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.” With slight modification that could also serve as a motto for an evangelical understanding of the relation between Holy Scripture and the moral life: “God commands it, I must do it, and that settles it.” The life of Christian discipleship is thus seen as a matter of obedience to revealed divine law. In the words of Carl F. H. Henry, “God has been pleased to reveal His will . . . and has done so in express commands, given to chosen men through the medium of human language, and available to us as the *Word* of God in written form.” Stated in other words: “What God has revealed in the inspired Scriptures defines the content of His will.”¹

In recent years a body of literature has arisen, also among evangelicals, that is highly resistant to thinking of the Bible in any sense as law or as a “rule-book.” Allen Verhey’s perspective on New Testament ethics is characteristic of this viewpoint. “The New Testament,” he contends, “does not come to us as a timeless moral code dropped from heaven; to treat it and to inquire of it as though it were would be inappropriate.”² At the same time Verhey does not find neo-orthodoxy’s solution, in which “the task of a theological ethic . . . is not to systematize and republish the content of Scripture, but to facilitate a new revelation, a new encounter, a concrete command of God in that moment,” adequate either. His suggestion is to construe “God’s relationship to Scripture and to the Christian community through Scripture . . . as that of sanctifier.”

In and through these writings God continues to call and empower people to live with integrity and truthfulness in a

different time and place, facing concrete questions. He continues to be sanctifier in His relationship to the church through these human words. What one understands when one understands the New Testament, then, is not a systematic set of doctrines or rules or a systematically indeterminate “word of God,” but the “power of God to renew life, to transform identities, to create for Himself a people and a world for His own possessing and for their flourishing.”³

According to Verhey, use of Scripture in moral argument is authorized when and only when such use “is coherent with the message that God has already made His eschatological power and purpose felt in raising Jesus from the dead” and “if the moral claim is consistent with justice.” By contrast, “the use of Scripture as moral argument is not authorized with respect to claims at the moral-rule level of moral argument.”⁴

In response it must be acknowledged that law and obedience are not the sum and total of a Christian understanding of the moral life, and the Bible must never be reduced to a law code. For one thing, the Bible’s Author is much more than an impersonal Kantian commander. The Law-giver is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and for Christ’s sake *our* Father! To fail to remember this truth is to lose not only the gains of the Protestant Reformation and its *sola gratia* repudiation of all moralism and legalism but even to forget the apostle Paul’s defense of the Gospel against the Judaizers. Law yes, but not only law and law only as the command of a gracious God. Furthermore, even if we grant the presence of moral rules in the Bible they do not exhaust the moral demands and choices we face as twentieth-century Christians. When facing complex contemporary ethical questions such as genetic engineering and nuclear warfare, the character of the moral agent shaped by biblical narrative and example is perhaps even more important than any specific biblical command. Not only does law not exhaust

the riches of the biblical record, the biblical record does not exhaust the moral issues and choices Christians face today.

At the same time qualifying the emphasis on biblical law as we have done is somewhat uncomfortable and even risky in today’s moral and theological climate, also among evangelicals. Legalism and moralism, though, like the poor, always with us, are hardly the major problem of Christian ethical reflection today. On the contrary, it often seems that the fear of legalism plays an inordinate role in blunting the straightforward commands of Scripture. Then appeals to the character of the moral agent, to the broader biblical narrative or to specific moral virtues or themes such as love, justice, compassion, tolerance, or liberation, are often used to downplay or even set aside the explicit and traditionally accepted commandments of Scripture. The authors of a recent volume published by an evangelical press ask “what sort of ethical action is formed by Israel’s narrative,” and suggest that “the significance of this founding story, in which the exodus from Egyptian bondage is central, is that Israel’s narrative memory was shaped decisively by the crucible of oppressive suffering and liberation unto justice.”⁵ Recalling the prologue to the Decalogue we would judge this claim on the face of it to be quite unobjectionable. But we could also expect that the specific ethical applications that follow from this then would include such absolute commandments as “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not steal,” “Honor your father and mother,” and above all in the Deuteronomic version, “Observe the Sabbath day.”

What is striking is that instead we encounter in this volume a sustained critique of what the authors characterize as “timeless, abstract” and “universal, totalizing” notions of truth and morality. Instead it is the biblical metanarrative, “a metanarrative that claims to tell the true story of the world from creation to eschaton, from origin to consummation” (83), that is said to shape an ethic characterized by coun-

terideological “liberation of the oppressed and the empowerment of the marginalized” (102). This key ethical implication of Israel’s narrative, “in which the exodus from Egyptian bondage is central,” follows directly from the fact “that Israel’s narrative memory was shaped decisively by the crucible of oppressive suffering and liberation unto justice” (93). Only with this emphasis, the authors insist, can a biblical morality escape the postmodern charge that its meta-narrative expresses a worldview of “hegemonic, totalizing, violence.” The categories of oppression and liberation *must* shape our reading of the Scriptures, according to the authors, because “there simply is no intrinsically just narrative, not even the biblical one” (84).

Say what? Thankfully the authors do occasionally speak more plainly than with the politically correct jargon cited in the previous paragraph. Here’s their point in English: “The Bible is neither strictly a script for us to enact nor a rule book or repository of timeless truths into which we can dip when we need guidance.” But, they add, thankfully “this does not mean that we have no guidance for our improvisation.” Improvisation? Yes indeed, “the Author of the biblical drama has set His Spirit to be our compassionate and empowering dramatic Director and Acting Coach, who helps us discern what would be faithful improvisation in our time.” Improvisation is called for because “God’s authority is not that of an implacable tyrant who demands blind obedience” but rather “the Author of an unfinished drama who invites us to participate in a genuinely open future in which we can indeed make a difference” (184-85).

The open-ended position advocated in this volume invites response at many levels. To begin with it is difficult if not impossible with integrity to softpedal or deny the “totalizing” character of the biblical narrative. A more objective analyst, after comparing the biblical narrative with Greek mythology, put it this way: “The Bible’s claim to truth

is not only far more urgent than Homer’s, *it is tyrannical*—it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, *is destined for autocracy*.”⁶ For our purposes in this essay we need to stop and ask what is behind this remarkable and persistent aversion to law.

According to the authors of the volume briefly summarized above, Christians should be opposed to universalizing law because this leads to using “the biblical story . . . ideologically to oppress and exclude” (84). We need to press this point further. Exactly which scriptural commands are judged as being taken inappropriately as absolute and universally binding moral rules rather than guides for our improvisation? In what way does understanding certain biblical injunctions as timeless create social and ethical problems? Is the apostle’s “command” in Romans 13:8 to “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another” (NIV) hindering evangelicals today from taking out mortgages in order to buy homes? Is strict adherence to the Levitical code of Sabbath and jubilee wreaking havoc in the world’s financial markets? Are Jesus’ comments about violence and retaliation in the Sermon on the Mount creating social anarchy and chaos because an increasing pacifism among American evangelicals is giving rise to an open season of unchecked lawlessness? Is the call to “come out . . . and be separate” being taken with such a degree of seriousness that Christian withdrawal into safe ghettos is hindering the work of domestic and world evangelism? Are there hordes of “fundamentalists” in the “Christian right” who want the Levitical code enshrined in the American constitution so that adulterers, incorrigible children and homosexuals would be stoned?

To raise these questions is to answer them. Or is it? On the one hand the challenge to consider biblical commands

as binding “law” for Christians today remains strong. Though there are notable exceptions such as Richard Mouw,⁷ the strong tendency among many, if not most Christian ethicists today, is to accent the identity and character of the moral agent as shaped by communal and personal narrative instead of law, or to use broad categories such as compassion and justice to supersede specific biblical commands.⁸ On the other hand evangelicals who openly express their allegiance to specific biblical commands need to acknowledge that they do so selectively and use their own hermeneutic filters on the Bible. Aside from the Amish, other traditional Anabaptist groups, the Quakers, and ethicists such as John Howard Yoder,⁹ American evangelicals do relativize the straightforward teaching of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount on nonviolence. It is a fair question to ask why our Lord’s words on divorce should not be treated in the same way as the mainstream of the Christian tradition since Augustine has dealt with his words on nonviolence. An uncomfortable question but not an unfair one. Similarly, with the exception of the Theonomist/Christian Reconstructionist movement inspired by Rousas John Rushdoony—and the contemporary media’s fear mongering notwithstanding¹⁰—there is not a groundswell of evangelical political enthusiasm for enshrining the Levitical code in the American constitution.¹¹ Most complaints about the cultural location of American evangelicals point to excessive accommodation rather than antithetical alienation as the problem.¹²

What then is the problem with biblical law? Where exactly is the biblical moral-rule shoe pinching today? To ask it differently: Which biblical commands (or perceived commands) do the law-aversionists wish to evade? Though I do not have the space in this essay to document this fully, I judge that the two main concerns about the New Testament “code” that surface again and again in this literature about

the Bible and the moral life have to do with sex and gender, notably the role of women in society and church and the moral repudiation of homosexual behavior. In their introduction to *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott even articulate a linkage of these two when they express the hope that their volume “will offer the same liberating affirmation to another oppressed group of Christians [homosexuals] and will help to break down some of the prejudice against them” as Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty’s earlier *All We’re Meant to Be* did for evangelical women.¹³ Liberation, compassion, and justice are the core values that then set aside specific commandments that have been used to prohibit women serving in church office and homosexual behavior.

Here we come to the heart of the question. How should an evangelical ethic be shaped by Scripture? Is there really a difficulty with living by certain biblical precepts as moral rules? The problem with trying to substitute soft virtues like compassion or tolerance for specific and explicit biblical injunctions is that the very understanding of compassion, for example, needs to be defined. Christians do not presume that, apart from revelation, they adequately know the content of the love, justice, compassion or tolerance that is sufficient to set aside specific commands. One example illustrates this point.

It does not require the IQ of a rocket scientist to realize that it is not an act of compassion to allow a toddler to play in the street. It is not compassion to permit, or, worse, encourage, self-destructive behavior. We now have available to us abundant evidence that homosexual practice, particularly of males, is tragically destructive.¹⁴ As one author has put it: “If there were no specific biblical principles to guide sexual behavior, these considerations alone would constitute a compelling argument against homosexual practice. Our bodies must not be martyrs to our desires.”¹⁵ But even

if we did not have as much current medical information available to us as we do, a Christian dependence on revelation would rest confident in God's instruction on the matter. Compassion is an imperative of the Gospel, but compassion must not be confused with acceptance of immoral behavior.¹⁶ Apart from revelation we cannot be confident that we really know what is truly just or compassionate, though revelational truth is always—ultimately, if not immediately—confirmed by human experience. For that reason, we must conclude that soft virtues such as compassion and tolerance need to be defined by revelation and should not on their own be permitted to trump specific biblical injunctions.

This minimalist conclusion, though necessary, is not sufficient. In the remainder of this essay I shall propose a few guidelines as a broad framework for an evangelical approach to biblical commands and Christian moral life today.

1) *A biblical ethic starts out with a bias in favor of the explicit content and universally binding character of all biblical commands. The burden of proof is on those who seek to set them aside by limiting their binding character to a specific context or relativizing them in the light of broader biblical themes.*

In other words, we need to be talked out of obedience to specific commands. Honesty is called for at this point. Whether we deal with relatively straightforward hermeneutic decisions, such as superseding Levitical law by the realities of the new covenant or relativizing our Lord's words about nonviolence by broader biblical givens about the God-ordained authority of the magistrate, or more complex ones such as the role of women in society and church, we must acknowledge that very few of us live *simply* in full accord with all Scripture's commands. We may disagree about specific hermeneutic decisions in much the same way that traditional "peace churches" differ with "just war"

churches, but we must acknowledge the place and nature of such disagreement. Not all such disagreements, even those involving explicit biblical commands, may be judged as matters of faithfulness or unfaithfulness to Scripture. Beginning with a bias in favor of Scripture's explicit commands means that all Christians should experience some moral dissonance with their own accommodation to other than biblical reasons for certain moral positions and choices. The Amish should give us moral pause, again and again.

2) *The primary "authority" for relativizing specific biblical commands must be the clear and persistent moral thrust of Scripture as a whole.*

In classic Christian hermeneutics this is usually called the "analogy of faith." Louis Berkhof distinguishes a "positive analogy" consisting "of those teachings of the Bible that are so clearly and positively stated, and supported by so many passages, that there can be no doubt of their meaning and value" from what he calls a "general analogy." The latter "does not rest on the explicit statements of the Bible but on the obvious scope and import of its teaching as a whole, and on the religious impressions they leave on mankind."¹⁷ As an example Berkhof argues that "it is plain that the spirit of the Mosaic law as well as of the New Testament is inimical to human slavery."¹⁸

3) *A secondary resource for credible relativizing of specific biblical commands is the consensual church tradition.*

The ancient rule for establishing true catholic doctrine and moral teaching was formulated by Vincent of Lerins: *Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus, creditum est* ("That [faith] which has been believed everywhere, always, by all").¹⁹ Tradition, even venerable tradition, may be wrong and always needs to be judged and corrected by Scripture itself, but for evangelicals to make moral choices without taking the long tradition of Christian moral reflection seriously is irresponsible. There are reasons why pacifism, for

example, has consistently been a minority position in the church, and the just-war criteria from Augustine's time on need to be known and consulted when Christians today face moral choices about war and peace.

4) *Reason and the natural law tradition serve as a tertiary "reality check" for Christian moral reflection.*

Human reason, we contended earlier, is not an infallible guide for moral judgment. Biblical revelation must always shape Christian moral reasoning. Yet evangelicals should not overlook the resource of natural-law moral reflection from the Greeks on to the present. Not only is the study of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, invaluable as a source of insight into the moral life of humanity, it and other resources serve as reality checks on Christian attempts at "improvisation." Furthermore, it is crucial to have natural-law arguments available for arguing the case in the public square against abortion, euthanasia, and legitimization of homosexual behavior. On the first two, for example, it must not be overlooked that both abortion and euthanasia are explicitly forbidden to physicians in the Hippocratic oath, a useful reminder that this is hardly a prerogative of "right-wing reactionary fundamentalists." Similarly, a solid natural-law case against legitimizing homosexual behavior has been made by political philosopher Harry Jaffa.²⁰

The point I wish to make here is that though there are legitimate hermeneutic reasons for relativizing some specific biblical commands, doing so must never be done lightly, and should ideally meet all three conditions listed above. When a good case can be made that the whole of Scripture, the consensual church tradition and the natural law tradition all support such a move away from explicit scriptural command, we may have some confidence in setting aside our instinctive bias favoring it. The attempt to legitimate homosexual behavior does not meet these criteria.

More needs to be said about the use of Scripture in

Christian ethics than has been said in this essay. The identity and character of the moral agent, the importance of narrative in shaping identity, the way in which the diverse literary genres of Scripture have moral impact, how Scripture principles shape moral decision making in issues that are not explicitly dealt with in the Bible—all these are matters for another essay or two.

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Endnotes

- 1 Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 264-65.
- 2 Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 177.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 180-81; cf. Verhey's more recent treatment of this topic in David Atkinson et. al., eds. *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1995), "New Testament Ethics," 56-64.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 196.
- 5 J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1995), 93. Page references which follow in the text are to this work.
- 6 Erich Auerbach, trans. Willard R. Trask, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), 14-15, emphasis added.
- 7 Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). Mouw's

very helpful volume argues vigorously and convincingly that a divine command approach to Christian ethics need not be considered as antithetical to more recent “narrativist” approaches; the latter enriches rather than replaces the former. A generally balanced perspective is also found in Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976). Though Birch and Rasmussen argue that “the most effective and critical impact of the Bible in Christian ethics is that of shaping the moral identity of the Christian and of the church” (104), they also contend “that the Bible can and ought to be a source of moral norms for the Christian life,” adding that “it will not function as the sole source of norms. Nor should it” (114).

- 8 The collection of essays edited by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology* (Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist, 1984), gives ample evidence of this tendency.
- 9 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).
- 10 Notably during the San Diego Republican National Convention, August 12-15, 1996, when major network reporters vigorously sought out proabortion delegates in order to provoke reaction against the “religious fundamentalists” who want to “take over the Republican Party.”
- 11 See Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984 [1973]); Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, rev. ed. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984). For a helpful biblical, historical, and theological critique of Theonomy from a traditional Reformed perspective see William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

- 12 See, for example, David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); idem. *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Charles Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *The Body: Being Light in Darkness* (Dallas: Word, 1992); John F. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993); John Seel, *The Evangelical Forfeit: Can We Recover?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).
- 13 Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), x. Cf. Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).
- 14 See Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow: Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexual Debate* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1995), especially chapter 6, “The Price of Love.”
- 15 Ibid., 130.
- 16 Here the classic Christian practice of “loving the sinner, hating the sin” applies in full measure. Both sides in the debate about homosexuality have sinned and have been sinned against here. Those who advocate acceptance of homosexual practice often hold opponents hostage by insisting that full acceptance is the only possible form of compassion; many who oppose legitimating homosexual behavior often fail to love the sinner. For a balanced, loving and clear-headed, biblically informed perspective on the issue see Thomas Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow*.
- 17 Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [1950]), 164-65.
- 18 Ibid., 165. For a thoughtful use of Berkhof’s general analogy as a hermeneutic argument in favor of women’s ordi-

nation see John W. Cooper, *A Cause for Division? Women in Office and the Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1991). Cooper insists that “using Reformed hermeneutics as outlined here will not result in our blessing homosexual behavior or ordaining those who practice it” (p. 58).

- 19 “Vincent of Lerins, A Commonitory,” ch. 2; in P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. XI (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982 [1894]), 132.
- 20 Harry V. Jaffa, *Homosexuality and the Natural Law* (The Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1990).