THE BIBLE'S ROLE IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS*

JOHN BRUNT and GERALD WINSLOW
Walla Walla College
College Place, Washington 99324

Biblical scholars and Christian ethicists have in the past frequently had little contact with each other's work. The former have been content to limit their focus to historical questions; whereas the latter have usually spoken to contemporary moral issues either with minimal reference to Scripture or with little concern for the technical and historical questions of biblical scholarship. Meanwhile, people in the pew have generally assumed that the connections between Scripture and moral decision-making were obvious, even though Scripture has often played little or no role in their actual decisions. Today, however, there is a renewed interest in the place of Scripture in the Christian's moral life. Christian ethicists and biblical scholars are joining in a new and potentially fruitful dialogue.[1]

Such a dialogue is obviously not free of problems. How much moral guidance is likely to come from a book which addresses the morality of eating food offered to idols and which prohibits a freed slave from keeping his slave-girl wife? Is it reasonable to expect such an ancient collection of documents to speak to the moral issues of contemporary society? If so, what is the nature of Scripture's moral authority for the present-day Christian? Is the chief locus of its authority the process of character formation, of community building, or of decision-making? Does Scripture, with its vast variety of materials, even present a unified, coherent picture of moral virtue and obligation? And is it possible to focus on moral

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[1]For a recent bibliographic review of this dialogue see Allen Verhey, "The Use of Scripture in Ethics," *Religious Studies Review* 4 (1978): 28-37.

obligations and the justification of moral actions without usurping God's position as the One who justifies by his grace? The foregoing provide a sampling of the kinds of questions being asked.

This article addresses only a few of the methodological questions that must be answered if Scripture is to be relevant for Christian ethics and sets forth some suggestions toward establishing a model for relating Scripture to ethics.

1. *Approaches for Relating Scripture to Ethics*

We begin with a brief survey of various approaches to establishing this relationship of Scripture to ethics. Our typology is by no means exhaustive either in giving the entire range of possible approaches or in representing all of the important advocates of a given model. It is rather intended to be suggestive of the range of approaches currently being advocated and to point out a few of the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Model 1: Biblical Ethics Equals Christian Ethics

It is commonly held by fundamentalists and evangelicals that biblical ethics equals Christian ethics, a view given scholarly expression by such writers as Carl F. H. Henry[2] and John Murray.[3] This approach emphasizes that Scripture represents a "revealed morality." Henry is specifically critical of the modern tendency to separate "biblical ethics" from "Christian ethics," feeling that that which the Bible teaches *is* Christian ethics.[4]

This model also emphasizes the unity of Scripture in addressing the Christian's moral life. Henry can speak of a "unitary biblical ethic, of one coherent and consistent moral requirement, that lays claim on all men at all times,"[5] while Murray finds in Scripture "objectively revealed precepts, institutions, commandments which are the norms and channels of human behavior."[6]

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[2]Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1957).

[3]John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1957).

[4]Henry, p. 236.

[5]Ibid., p. 327.

[6]Murray, p. 24.

This revealed morality is understood to give quite specific information. While admitting that the moral information of Scripture is not always explicit, Henry contends that "there is actually no ethical decision in life which the biblical revelation leaves wholly untouched and for which, if carefully interpreted and applied, it cannot afford some concrete guidance."[7] The Bible does not merely provide principles but embraces the particularities of life, giving specific guidelines for ethical decisions.[8]

In light of this specific guidance there is never, according to Henry, a conflict of Christian duty: "In the ethical dilemmas of life there is never a real conflict of duty, even though the mind and heart may be torn between apparent conflicts that are as yet unresolved."[9]

Not only does Scripture reveal a clear, unambiguous Christian duty; there is also a distinctive Christian virtue that is attained only by Christians, as Henry makes clear in the following two passages:

> A Jonathan apple tree produces Jonathan apples because of the distinctive nature of the tree. . . . Even so the Christian life produces ethical virtues that are distinctive and characteristic of the Christian life alone. There may be imitations of Christian virtues, but they are no more the real thing than a crab apple is a Jonathan apple.[10]

> Christians alone are godlike, for God is making them like himself in virtue, holiness, and character.[11]

According to this model, then, Scripture provides a unique, revealed morality that addresses any situation a Christian might face so that there is no ambiguity of duty. By following this guide, the Christian is led to a life of virtue and moral obligation, unlike that of the non-Christian. Basically, Christian ethics consists of discovering what the Bible says and, as converted persons, acting on this.

[7]Henry, p. 339.
[8]Ibid.
[9]Ibid., p. 340.
[10]Ibid., p. 472.
[11]Ibid., p. 508.

Such a model has several advantages. It is neat and not confounded by ambiguities. It also takes Scripture seriously, recognizing its importance for the moral life. Moreover, because of this strong focus on Scripture, it is not as likely as some other models to accept uncritically the norms and values of culture that might be out of harmony with Scripture.

But there are also potential disadvantages. This model may be too simplistic, overlooking the complexity of many contemporary situations and the genuine conflicts in values they produce. Can we, for instance, extract from Scripture an unambiguous picture of Christian duty with regard to some of the difficult dilemmas that are faced in contemporary bioethics, such as genetic engineering or the allocation of scarce life-saving resources? It is also questionable whether this model's optimistic conclusions about the distinctiveness of Christian virtues and obligations are warranted. History provides too many disconcerting examples of Christians lagging behind their non-Christian contemporaries in the pursuit of social justice. Finally, while this model takes seriously the importance of Scripture for ethics, it is questionable whether it actually takes the content of Scripture seriously. Does it recognize the diversity and breadth of material in Scripture, the distinction between apodictic principles and culturally related practices, and the fact that Scripture does not speak *specifically* to many contemporary dilemmas? Most of the focus in this model is on the rules and propositions of Scripture. But the Bible does not, of course, consist mostly of rules and propositions. The question, then, is: Does this model take seriously the *whole* Bible?

Model 2: Biblical Ethics Is Generally Irrelevant for Christian Ethics

A diametrically opposite view, that biblical ethics is generally irrelevant for Christian ethics, is seldom given serious expression, though Jack T. Sanders has argued for it in a recent monograph on the NT and ethics.[12] According to Sanders, there are two major factors that render the NT largely irrelevant for ethics: the diversity of Scripture, and the imminent eschatological expectation of the

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[12]Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament: Change and Development* (Philadelphia, 1975).

NT writers. The latter consideration makes it impossible for these writers to be of help to us, for their expectation was not realized, and we must come to terms with the complexities of life in a continuing world. This is true even of Jesus, according to Sanders:

> Jesus does not provide a valid ethics for today. His ethical teaching is interwoven with his imminent eschatology to such a degree that every attempt to separate the two and to draw out only the ethical thread invariably and inevitably draws out also strands of the eschatology, so that both yarns only lie in a heap. Better to leave a tapestry intact, to let Jesus . . . return to his own time.[13]

Sanders sees the book of James as the one bright spot in the NT, as far as ethics is concerned. James reacts against Paul and argues that faith without works is dead. In this, says Sanders, James misunderstands Paul, but in turning against the Christian tradition for the sake of the fellow human by emphasizing the futility of faith that lacks concern for the neighbor's needs, James presents the best of NT ethics.[14] Furthermore, in light of this example, we are now free to derive our ethical criteria not from the Christian tradition (Jesus, Scripture, early church) but from the context. Ethical criteria are best derived from one's own active involvement in life and society and from one's realization, apart from the NT, that some things are not right.[15] Thus Sanders concludes:

> The ethical positions of the New Testament are the children of their own times and places, alien and foreign to this day and age. Amidst the ethical dilemmas which confront us, we are now at least relieved of the need or temptation to begin with Jesus, or the early church or the New Testament, if we wish to develop coherent ethical positions. We are freed from the bondage to that tradition, and are able to propose, with the author of the Epistle of James, that tradition and precedent must not be allowed to stand in the way of what is humane and right.[16]

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[13]Ibid., p. 29.
[14]Ibid., p. 127.
[15]Ibid., p. 90.
[16]Ibid., p. 130.

It cannot be denied that this model has the advantages of taking both the diversity of Scripture and the complexity of contemporary dilemmas seriously. But it also raises questions. Is there no unity, at least at the level of basic moral principles, which stands behind this diversity? And why does eschatological expectation necessarily negate ethical relevance?

A more serious problem for this model is its failure to recognize the diversity of contemporary norms and values. Is that which is "humane and right" self-evident? There are, no doubt, many—from the "moral majority" to the "life-boat-ethics"advocates—who have very different ideas about "the right" than does Sanders. What *are* the criteria for establishing what is right? Sanders suggests that these criteria come from involvement in life. But does involvement *per se* yield moral criteria? The generals in the Vietnam war were as involved as anyone in that conflict. Does that necessarily mean that valid moral criteria were more evident to them? Sanders leaves unanswered the whole question of how the "humane and right" are to be grounded.

The two models surveyed thus far represent the extremes of our typology. Most of the current discussion of Scripture and ethics falls somewhere between these two. In fact, Allen Verhey speaks of what he calls a "Chalcedonian consensus" that rules these two models out. In spite of great diversity and unsolved problems, the majority of scholars currently addressing the question are agreed that biblical ethics is not the same as Christian ethics and yet that the Bible is somehow normative for Christian ethics.[17] Typical of comments along this line is James M. Gustafson's statement:

> The principal problem is to determine how decisive the authority of Scripture is for one's moral judgment. Only the two extremes are absolutely precluded: It does not have the authority of verbal inspiration that the religiously conservative defenders of a "revealed morality" would give to it, nor is it totally without relevance to present moral judgments.[18]

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[17]Verhey, p. 30.

[18]James M. Gustafson, "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study," *Int* 24 (1970): 430-455.

The three remaining models that we will survey fall between the two ends of the spectrum represented by the foregoing models.

Model 3: God Is Free to Command

The concept that "God is free to command" is primarily the position of neo-orthodox theologians, especially those such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer who oppose natural theology. It places strong emphasis on the all-sufficiency of grace and the inadequacy of human effort. Because the sinner can only respond, and because God's act of justification rules out all self-justification, ethical reflection that seeks to justify certain acts is considered suspect. Christians are called to respond in obedience to God's grace, not to reflect on good and evil.

Thus, Bonhoeffer argues that Christian ethics is the critique of all ethics, for ethical reflection aims at the knowledge of good and evil. Christian ethics invalidates this knowledge.[19] Bonhoeffer says of the Christian, "Not fettered by principles, but bound by love for God," the individual "has been set free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision."[20]

According to this model, the essence of ethics is obedience to the command of God. Again, Bonhoeffer says that "God's commandment is the speech of God to man. Both in its contents and in its form it is concrete speech to the concrete man. God's commandment leaves no room for application or interpretation. He leaves room only for obedience or disobedience."[21]

This does not mean that advocates of this position are not interested in ethics. Barth goes so far as to argue that dogmatics itself is ethics, for it deals with the Word of God, and the Word of God is concerned with the experience of actual life.[22] Both Barth and Bonhoeffer speak in detail to specific ethical issues. In doing so, they recognize that there is no direct line from the command of Scripture to contemporary decisions.

[19]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York, 1955), p. 17.

[20]Ibid., p. 68.

[21]Ibid., p. 278.

[22]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 13 vols. (Edinburgh, 1957-1969), vol. 1, part 2, pp. 782-796.

What role, then, does Scripture play in this model? According to Barth, Christian duty is response to the command of God. This command is not identical with the content of Scripture, but Scripture reveals the "prominent lines" along which this command will strike. We become the contemporaries of the Bible writers as we confront Scripture and as together with them we listen to the concrete command of God. But we do not simply do what they did or taught. In fact, we might do that, and still not be following God's command. We must follow God's concrete command to *us*.[23]

Bonhoeffer also emphasizes obedience to the concrete command. He stresses that it does not come by some direct inspiration to the individual,[24] but through the church family, labor, and government.[25]

This model warns against self-justification and legalism in a helpful way and avoids the over-simplicity of the first model by recognizing that there is no one-to-one correspondence between Scripture and ethics. But it has its own over-simplifications. It leaves us wondering how specifically to hear the command of God and to know that it is indeed God's command. This is especially true when we are confronted with difficult moral dilemmas. In fact, it would be easy for such a stance to degenerate into an authoritarianism that simply declares what is God's command without clearly defining how God's command is distinguished from other voices.

Model 4: The Bible Forms Traits of Character

Another model stresses the importance of the Bible's role for character building. This model recognizes the difficulty of moving directly from Scriptural injunctions to contemporary decisions, but it affirms the relevance of Scripture for ethics by shifting the focus of Scripture's relevance. The focus of this relevance is not the decision-making process, but the process of character formation. Scripture shapes the character of the moral actor. Both ethicists and biblical scholars have sounded this emphasis.

[23]Ibid., vol. 4, part 2, pp. 546-553.
[24]Bonhoeffer, p. 40.
[25]Ibid., pp. 278, 286-302.

J. L. Houlden is a representative of the latter group.[26] Throughout his work he stresses the diversity of the NT materials and rules out their direct application for contemporary ethics. He warns against harmonizing this diversity into a "New Testament view." What Scripture does do is to form the Christian mind.[27] He says:

> The New Testament, like great art, may act upon a man and lead him to goodness, not by direct command but by subtle and complex interaction which involves the New Testament writers' integrity, and behind them the impulse of Jesus, and the reader's readiness to create afresh out of the material of his own experience.[28]

The joint work of Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, a biblical scholar and ethicist respectively, also draws heavily, though not exclusively, on this model. "Our contention," they say, "is that the most effective and crucial impact of the Bible on Christian ethics is that of shaping the moral identity of the Christian and the church."[29] This shaping includes the molding of perspectives, dispositions, and intentions.

For Birch and Rasmussen, a place for Scripture in the decision-making process is not ruled out, however: "While the place of the Bible in decision making and action on moral issues does not, in our judgment, match in significance its potential influence in character formation, there are nevertheless several important points of contact."[30] The Bible is a source of moral norms and assists in locating the burden of proof for ethical questions, but it is not the sole source of norms. Here Birch and Rasmussen show affinities with the next model to be presented below. Nevertheless, their chief emphasis is on character formation.

Among ethicists, Stanley Hauerwas[31] is one of the chief advocates of the position represented by the character-formation

[26] J. L. Houlden, *Ethics and the New Testament* (Baltimore, Md., 1973).

[27] Ibid., pp. 119-120.

[28] Ibid., p. 122.

[29] Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis, 1976), p. 104.

[30] Ibid., p. 112.

[31] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture: The Politics and

model. Like Birch and Rasmussen, but in an even stronger way, he lays stress on the communal aspect of character formation. It is not only individual character, but the identity of the Christian community, that is shaped by Scripture. He argues that it is already a distortion to even ask how Scripture should be used ethically. The question wrongly assumes that we must first clarify the meaning of the text and then ask its moral significance. But Scripture's authority for the moral life "consists in its being used so that it helps to nurture and reform the community's self-identity and the personal character of its members."[32]

According to Hauerwas, Scripture is not a problem solver; rather the traditions in Scripture provide a means for the community to find new life.[33] The Bible's specific commands are reminders of the kind of people we must be.[34]

There are a number of things that commend this model. Its communal emphasis is a helpful corrective to the common model of the *individual* decision-maker. Certainly much of the NT ethical material is directed toward the building up of a community. This model's emphasis on character also corresponds to the NT emphasis that *being* precedes *doing*; the good tree bears good fruit, and the motive that stands behind the act is significant in God's sight. In addition, this model opens the way for the use of *all* Scripture—its stories and images, as well as its propositions and rules.

On the other hand, Christians do face dilemmas, and it is not clear in this model how one moves from scripturally formed character to a decision in a specific situation. It may be granted that Scripture is not simply a problem solver. Still, we must wonder if Scripture's authority is not diminished too severely when it does not have more application to the believer's specific questions than this model generally allows.

Ethics of Remembering," *Int* 34 (1980): 356-370. See also his book, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics* (San Antonio, Texas, 1975).

[32]Hauerwas, "Moral Authority," p. 358.

[33]Ibid., p. 362.

[34]Ibid., p. 369.

Model 5: The Bible Is a Resource of Normative Reflection

A fifth model, which places Scripture in the role of being a resource of normative reflection, covers a broad spectrum of somewhat diverse positions. However, its advocates hold at least two basic elements in common: First, while agreeing that there is no one-to-one correspondence between biblical material and many contemporary dilemmas, they also hold that a process of reflection on Scripture is essential to Christian ethics. Second, they hold that Scripture does provide norms, either as specific rules or as general principles or presumptions.

This approach is advocated by both biblical scholars and ethicists. Brevard Childs, a biblical scholar, advocates a process of reflection for the purpose of establishing normative ethics. He recognizes that no system leads infallibly from the biblical warrant to the appropriate decision. Even after reflection, Christians will disagree and must avoid identifying their particular positions with *the* Christian answer.[35] Still, the Bible confesses that God has made his will known and testifies also that Christians must seek to discern that will in the concrete situations of life.[36] He summarizes his approach as follows:

> What we are suggesting is a process of disciplined theological reflection that takes its starting point from the ethical issue at stake along with all its ambiguities and social complexities and seeks to reflect on the issue in conjunction with the Bible which is seen in its canonical context.[37]

James Childress, an ethicist, has also presented an argument for this model.[38] He points out that most of the recent interpreters underestimate the importance of Scripture by seeing it primarily in terms of influence (i.e., the character-formation model) rather than reflection.[39] Yet, there is a need for deliberation and the justification

[35] Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1970), p. 136.

[36] Ibid., p. 130.

[37] Ibid., p. 133.

[38] James F. Childress, "Scripture and Christian Ethics: Some Reflections on the Role of Scripture in Moral Deliberation and Justification," *Int* 34 (1980): 371-380.

[39] Ibid., p. 371.

of actions. We can and do evaluate specific actions, and this process of justification in no way obviates the need for God's justification.[40]

In this view, Scripture aids in moral justification because its moral statements yield principles and rules which give structure to the moral life by establishing presumptions in favor of or against certain courses of action. Any exceptions to such presumptions are expected to bear the burden of proof. For example, Scripture establishes a presumption against killing. Although there may be situations in which this presumption is rebuttable, an exception must always bear a heavy burden of proof.[41] Childress suggests that some principles may even establish presumptions so strong that they will permit no exceptions.

Other ethicists have argued for positions similar to this model. John Bennett, for example, speaks of the heavy burden of proof that would be on those who wish to advocate exceptions to certain "strong moral pressures" that Scripture provides.[42] Paul Ramsey also argues that Scripture yields principles and rules of practice.[43]

Some who probably belong within the orbit of our fifth model would emphasize a "looser" kind of reflection on Scripture. H. E. Everding and D. M. Wilbanks stress the importance of reflection in their "response style" of relating the Bible and ethics. But they place more emphasis on reflection with regard to Scripture's images and symbols than on establishing rules or principles.[44] Gustafson also presents this type of freer approach. Scripture witnesses to a variety of moral values and norms. The Christian community evaluates actions on the basis of reflective discourse about present events in the light of this variety of biblical materials, though Scripture alone is not, according to Gustafson, the final court of appeal.[45]

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[40]Ibid., pp. 373-374.

[41]Ibid., pp. 378-380.

[42]John C. Bennett, *The Radical Imperative: From Theology to Social Ethics* (Philadelphia, 1975), p. 48.

[43]Paul Ramsey, "The Biblical Norm of Righteousness," *Int* 24 (1970): 419-429, especially p. 424.

[44]H. Edward Everding and Dana M. Wilbanks, *Decision Making and the Bible* (Valley Forge, Pa., 1975).

[45]Gustafson, pp. 444, 454.

The fifth model has in its favor the fact that it takes seriously both the need for and the content of Scripture. It also recognizes Scripture's diversity and the complexity of contemporary moral dilemmas. Through serious, disciplined reflection and deliberation, this approach seeks to bridge the gap between Scripture and the moral life. By identifying principles and rules, it gives specific shape to the process of moral decision-making.

This model is, of course, not without its difficulties. The concept of "reflection" leaves questions about the specific methodology for moving from the text to decision and action. The timeworn question cannot be avoided: Is reason or revelation in the driver's seat? What certainty is there that reflection will lead to a justifiable decision and not simply to a rationalization? And on what grounds can an exception to an established rule or principle bear the burden of proof?

2. *Observations and Conclusions*

Our investigation of these five models has multiplied the questions. Such a result seems inevitable as soon as the security of the first model is abandoned. It would be futile to attempt answers to all these questions in the space of this article. We do, however, wish to offer a few methodological proposals drawn largely from the fourth and fifth models. In offering these proposals, we join the emerging consensus that the Bible is an essential authority for Christian ethics while the particulars of biblical morality are not always identical to present Christian responsibility.

In our view, a highly important task of those who wish to maintain the moral authority of Scripture is the enunciation of basic moral norms derived from Scripture. Specific biblical precepts must be scrutinized in an effort to ascertain, if possible, the underlying principles and the basic thrust of God's revealed guidance. The norms thus derived from Scripture need to be continually restated in language comprehensible to the present community of faith. The goal is a coherent set of norms which serve as the faith community's moral action guides. It is in the pursuit of this goal that we believe Christian ethicists and biblical scholars can most effectively make common cause.

This proposal in no way diminishes the importance of Scripture as a source for enlivening the moral imagination and under-

standing, and for fostering moral virtue. We believe that recent attempts to correct an overemphasis on the Bible as a problem-solving manual are salutary, for the Bible obviously contains far more than propositions about moral obligation. Through its stories and symbols, Scripture informs our moral life in ways far richer and more deeply influential than mere commands. Indeed, at the fundamental level of the meaning and grounding of principles, the biblical stories and symbols, especially the story of Christ, become decisive. Through its narratives and poetry and metaphors, Scripture can sustain the vision of the church by enabling it to remember vividly its divine calling. We would agree with Hauerwas that "the moral significance of Scripture . . . lies exactly in its power to help us remember the stories of God for the continual guidance of our community and individual lives."[46]

But, helpful as it is, this renewed emphasis on the Bible as a source of an ethics of virtue may lead to an imbalance. An ethics of virtue uncomplemented by carefully stated principles and rules of obligation tends to lack sufficient clarity about basic rights and duties. A memorable line from William Frankena makes the necessary point: "[P]rinciples without traits are impotent, and traits without principles are blind."[47]

The inclination to be loving and just, for example, should be complemented by well-considered principles of love and justice. Character traits, such as sensitivity to others' needs, awaken in us a sense of motivation; and principles of obligation give shape and coherence to our intentions.

Ethicists and biblical scholars may share in the life of the church in many ways, including the recounting of the sacred stories. But it is also a part of their social role and their special service to the community to assist in the ongoing development of normative ethics. By assisting in this normative task they contribute to the continuing story of a people with a unique calling.

The task of normative ethics can be conducted at various levels of generality from very broad principles through more specific rules to casuistry. At the level of casuistry we make decisions about

[46]Hauerwas, p. 365.

[47]William Frankena, *Ethics*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1973), p. 65. This comment is a parody of Kant's well-known statement about concepts and precepts.

specific cases. For example, should Mary Smith, an impoverished fifteen-year-old freshman in high school, get an abortion? In our deliberations we may appeal to rules such as "Do not murder" or Joseph Fletcher's rule, "[N]o unwanted and unintended baby should ever be born."[48] We may also appeal to very general principles such as respect for personal autonomy or respect for life. The levels of generality from cases to broad principles obviously form a continuum rather than a series of discrete categories. A rule may be formulated so narrowly that it guides action in only a few conceivable cases, whereas, on the other hand, the word "rule" is sometimes used to refer to the most general normative statements, such as the Golden Rule. It is unnecessary for our present purpose to stake out precise conceptual boundaries for "rule" and "principle."[49] We simply follow common usage in which "rule" refers to those more specific action guides that determine the rightness or wrongness of particular actions. "Principles," on the other hand, are far more general. They provide justification for the more specific rules, and they provide guidance for the method of moral decision-making. With this understanding of the terms, the Golden Rule is obviously a principle.

It might seem desirable if the moral authority of Scripture could always enter in an unambiguous way at the level of casuistry. The advantages of casuistry are fairly obvious. Life arrives case by case. For some of the same reasons that many people would prefer watching soap operas to reading Aristotle's ethics, cases tend to capture our moral attention. The apparent concreteness of decisions at this level is appealing. And, if we can find what we take to be a normative decision in a case very much like our own, we may have a special sense of security; the guidance is reassuringly specific. Little distance may appear between the authoritative decision and the decision we must make.

But, as anyone who has studied the Bible knows, it is not a book full of casuistry. The biblical stories do not generally end

[48]Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 39.

[49]For a helpful discussion of the conceptual difficulties with "rule" and "principle" see Dorothy Emmet, *Rules, Roles and Relations* (New York, 1967), pp. 48-49.

with carefully drawn "morals." And we may be just as happy that they do not. A casuistic approach to ethics, as the study of traditional moral theology, can become exceedingly cumbersome. Christian casuists have filled countless library shelves in an attempt to be precise and offer specific guidance. But every case is at least a little different. And all the libraries on earth could not hold the works necessary to address the details of every moral contingency. Almost inevitably, the human capacity to grasp reasonable generalizations based on a number of similar cases leads to the establishment of rules and principles. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that, within the ordinary course of human cognitive development, people come to prefer principled thought if and when they are capable of it.[50]

Although the numerous biblical stories do not typically moralize in the way of traditional casuistry, they do provide normative guidance by giving both negative and positive illustrations. Take, for example, Peter's vision of the unclean animals and his encounter with Cornelius, recorded in Acts 10. The story gives few, if any, explicit rules or principles. Nevertheless, the potential moral impact of the story is considerable. As we learn how God sought to overcome Peter's prejudice, our own prejudice is made more vulnerable to the conquest of God's grace. At this level (and in many ways it may be the most profound) the story may affect our character by altering our perceptions of the world.

Through reflection, the story may also give rise to principles. It would be disappointing if the largest normative insight derived from the story went something like this: If ever you thrice receive a vision of unclean animals, be sure to greet your Gentile guests cordially. Although no larger principle is made explicit, one can emerge upon reflection. When, for example, Peter confesses to his Gentile host, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality; . . ." (Acts 10:34, RSV), the basis for a principle is uncovered. All people are equally deserving of the Christian's fundamental respect and concern. This principle of impartiality, so crucial to a sense of justice, is given life through a new vision of an impartial God.

[50]Here, we are thinking of the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, James Rest, and other cognitive-developmental theorists who have studied moral judgment. See, e.g., Lawrence Kohlberg, "Education for Justice: A Modern Statement of the Platonic View," in *Moral Education* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

We are not suggesting that the principles which should emerge from reflection on the biblical stories and rules are always, or even generally, obvious to us. What principle was at stake, for example, when God's people were admonished to exchange the tithe for money and buy "whatever you desire, oxen, or sheep, or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves; . . ." (Deut 14:26)? Sometimes, scholarship may be helpful in determining the principles involved, as in the case of another rule from the same chapter—the prohibition of boiling a goat in its mother's milk (vs. 21)—, discovered to have been a Canaanite religious rite. In other instances, however, it may be that no amount of modern scholarship will be able sufficiently to acquaint us with the intent of such rules so that inferences may be drawn at the level of principles. It is our contention, nevertheless, that if such biblical rules are ever to have normative value for us, it will be because we have unpacked their original purpose and found some principled meaning. At times, this may be more a process of ascertaining where God was *leading* a people than discovering where they had already *arrived.* The OT laws governing slavery and polygamy are examples (see, e.g., Exod 21:2, 10-11; Lev 25:44-45). They are probably better understood as attempts to move God's people in the direction of respect for all persons than as expressions of God's ideals for human beings.

Finally, Scripture speaks to us explicitly at the level of broad principles. Once heard and understood, such principles become the great summary statements of the Christian's sense of obligation. It has ever been a part of the prophetic role to shift the primary attention of God's people beyond the particularities of the religious and moral life to a vision of fundamental principles. We may consider, for example, Micah's memorable poetic question:

> He has showed you, O man, what is good;
>   and what does the LORD require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
>   and to walk humbly with your God?
>   (Micah 6:8, RSV)

Here, Micah contrasts basic principles of human action with an earlier stated list of specific duties which people might have considered binding. In similar fashion, Jesus contrasts the Phari-

saical concern for detailed duties with what he calls the "weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith" (Matt 23:23, RSV). The specific actions (e.g., tithing very small amounts) may be permissible or even praiseworthy. But without reference to the larger principles at stake, such actions become little more than disjointed, legalistic exercises. The "weightier matters," or basic principles, give coherence, shape, and meaning to the more specific aspects of Christian obligation.

Such principles provide base points in our moral deliberations. Like navigational aids used by ships or planes, principles act as beacons to guide the charting of specific courses of action. Put another way, principles derived from Scripture give us basic biases for or against particular courses of action.

The language of "moral presumption" and "burden of proof" is fitting in this regard.[51] Such language may sound overly juridical, but as an illustration of the function of principles it is helpful. Principles establish presumptions in favor of certain types of actions and against others. Exceptions are required to bear the burden of proof. An obvious illustration is the Anglo-American legal presumption of innocence. A person indicted for a crime is presumed to be innocent. The burden of proof is on those who would argue for guilt. Clearly, the presumption *could* have been established in the opposite way. And since people are generally guilty of some kind of wrongdoing, it might seem more reasonable to fix the presumption in favor of guilt. But the long-established presumption of innocence is likely to remain—and for good reasons. Reflection and experience have taught us that the presumption is in the service of justice. Exceptions to the presumption should not be accepted without clear and ample reasons. If, after careful consideration, doubt remains about the exception, the moral presumption stands.

Thorough reflection on the biblical material can yield a coherent set of principles as moral presumptions. The examples are numerous. There are strong biblical presumptions in favor of human equality, covenant loyalty, integrity, and peace. And there are many more. It is not our purpose here to present arguments for

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[51]This usage has been adopted by many ethicists. A recent, notable example is J. Philip Wogaman, *A Christian Method of Moral Judgment* (Philadelphia, 1976).

these examples. Each deserves its own careful statement of deriva-
tion and elaboration. In the final analysis, every such principle
reflects an attempt to formulate clearly our response to God's love.

For the Christian, the centerpiece of all such principles is the
principle of *agapē* love. Much of moral philosophy and moral
theology can be characterized as an attempt to condense all norms
into a single, master principle. For biblical faith, the master norm
is the principle of *agapē*. The summary statements of love for God
and for human beings which Jesus quotes from the OT[52] are
echoed in the writings of many subsequent authors. As Paul
reminds us in Rom 13:9-10, "The commandments . . . are summed
up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'
Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of
the law" (RSV).[53]

Love, especially as seen in the life and teachings of Jesus, is
the final test by which the validity and coherence of all lesser
principles, rules, and casuistry must be measured. Still, it is as true
to say that the principle of *agapē* "needs" the other principles and
rules as it is to say that they "need" *agapē*. Without the stories,
rules, and other principles, love becomes an amorphous notion.
Without love, the other levels of normative discourse lack focus
and unity. It is the continual exploration of this dialectic which is
the enduring task of Christian normative ethics. And it is an
exploration which can be guided at every step by the light which
shines from Scripture.

[52]Matt 22:23-40; cf. Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18.

[53]Compare the mirroring of the same central truth in recent times by Ellen G.
White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, Calif.,
1911), p. 487: "It is love alone which in the sight of Heaven makes any act
of value."