Living Under the Word:
The Pragmatic Task of Moral
Vision, Formation, and Action

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My sons got a kick out of the Tabasco commercial that premiered during SuperBowl XXXII. They'll never forget the red-neck guy sitting on his front porch rocking chair eating thick crust pizza. Several empty jars of hot Tabasco lay strewn on the porch by his feet. Beads of sweat hung on his rotund face like he'd just come in from the rain. He had this sun-burned blush about him. A crazy stare in his eyes. Above the crunch of a mouthful of pizza crust one hears the high whine of a mosquito. The guy takes his gaze off the pizza and watches the mosquito land on his bare leg and then pierce through the skin. The mosquito soon fills and flies off. About ten feet away—BOOM!. It explodes as if hit by a heat-sinking missile. Too much Tabasco for that guy. Whenever we see a bottle of Tabasco now, our minds are filled with that incredible imagery of a mosquito exploding in mid-air. It's great marketing. Tabasco. It's hot stuff!

J. B. Phillips once said: "If words are to enter men's hearts and bear fruit, they must be the right words shaped cunningly to pass men's defenses and explode silently and effectually within their minds."[1] As Solomon says, *"The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly"* (Eccl 12:10). He's talking about words easy to grasp. Words readily applied to life. Words that would win a hearing and make a difference. Like Tabasco sauce couched in what outwardly appears to satisfy thirsting hungry souls. Think of it, someone comes in for a drink of something they think they want or see, and as they go away—BOOM!—something explodes in their head. Something ex-

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[1] J. B. Phillips, as quoted by Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge* (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 368.

plodes in their conscience. They've suddenly seen truth. Suddenly had some new moral insight. Abruptly met God in a new and unexpected way.

Solomon worked hard to find living words, practical words, picturesque words with which to present deep eternal and moral truth. That is the challenging task of Christian ethics—making Scripture (*moral truth*) come alive across the landscape of people's moral vision. I can't help but think of the challenge we have in keeping proper balance between relevance and truth. Can something be both true and seemingly irrelevant? Can something be both untrue and seemingly relevant? Of course!

Most people today aren't looking for truth—they are looking for relief, for hope, for meaning, for happiness. Their existential *angst* causes them to plug into whatever appears to relieve their pain or solve their problems. Most people in our postmodern world find the Bible irrelevant. They would find Church and worship and Christian lifestyle irrelevant as well. Scripture's moral vision is seen as irrelevant, cultural, belonging to another age. And yet, Scripture is filled with incredibly relevant moral truth.

Our challenge is to *show* the Bible's moral relevance by applying its message to people's lives, to show that it is both incredibly truthful and incredibly relevant. When we share biblical principles in a way that meets a need, it creates a hunger for more truth. Being genuinely relevant creates a genuine interest in truth. We cannot *make* the Bible relevant. It *already IS* relevant. Rather, we are to *show* its relevance by applying its message personally to people's lives.

In his book about the disintegrating moral culture in contemporary society and what this now means for the church, David Wells asks, "How does Christian faith speak most effectively to a culture whose moral fabric is torn, a culture in which sin has disappeared conceptually and in which secularized life is offering up its own forms of salvation?" He suggests that the Church will have to have its moral vision restored in two principle ways if it is to seize this moment successfully:

> First, it will have to become courageous enough to say that much that is taken as normative is the postmodern world is actually sinful, and it will have to exercise new ingenuity in learning how to speak about sin to a generation for whom sin has become an impossibility. Without an understanding of sin—sin understood within a powerfully conceived moral vision of reality—there can be no deep believing of the Gospel. This, then, is not an optional task but an essential and inescapable one.
> Second, the Church itself is going to have to become more authentic morally, for the greatness of the Gospel is now seen to have become quite trivial and inconsequential in its life. If the Gospel means so little to the Church, if it changes so little, why then should unbelievers believe it?

> It is one thing to understand what Christ's deliverance means; it is quite another to see this worked out in life with depth and reality, to see its moral splendor. It is one things to know the Gospel; it is quite another to see it lived. That is when its truth catches fire in the imagination.[2]

Not only must moral vision be cast in a way that ignites imagination, BUT somehow that moral vision must bring sufficient moral formation to character and thought that it leads to decision and moral action. Helping people grasp the Scripture's moral vision, be internally formed by it, and ultimately obey it—that's our pragmatic task! In the end there needs to be an increased willingness to obey that moral vision. We need more than just knowledge on a given moral issue; we need obedience and the willingness to obey the moral summons of the Bible. We need to be less smart and more obedient.

The Not So Easy Task

But how do we do it? Showing the relevance of Scripture for contemporary (and for many, postmodern) life is challenging. Developing the moral themes of Scripture in a way that connects the biblical world to the contemporary world is not as straightforward as many would wish. People in the pew have generally assumed that the connection between Scripture and moral decision-making was obvious, even though Scripture has often played little or no role in their actual day to day decisions. Even Christian ethicists have been inclined to speak to contemporary moral issues either with minimal reference to Scripture or with little concern for the technical and historical questions of biblical scholarship. Thomas Ogletree notes there has been "a troublesome gap between biblical studies and Christian ethics."[3] James Gustafson describes biblical ethics as "a complex task for which few are well prepared; those who are specialists in ethics generally lack the intensive and proper training in biblical studies, and those who are specialists in biblical studies often lack sophistication in ethical thought."[4]

Part of the difficulty lies in the reality that some of the moral issues in the Bible are issues we no longer care about, and we are faced with moral issues today that Scripture doesn't address directly or at all. In addition, the nature of the Bible's moral content appears foreign to our postmodern existential thought. Bridging the differing cultures, time, interests, values, needs, and agendas is not always an easy task.

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[2] David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 179–180.

[3] Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983), xi.

[4] James M. Gustafson, "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study," *Interpretation* (October 1970): 430.

Models for Bridging the Gap

Various approaches exist for establishing the relationship of Scripture to Christian ethics.[5] Typologies for Scripture's role in Christian ethics include: (1) providing revealed morality (where Scripture is absolute authority and biblical ethics equals Christian ethics); (2) a witness about God or His will (where Scripture becomes the Word of God via personal encounter through witness); (3) a source of moral images (where one is confronted with relative impressions of moral facts and values); (4) a shaper of moral identity (where the character of the moral actor is shaped, and the Christian mind is formed for moral decision making); and (5) a resource for normative reflection (where the Bible as the Word of God is ultimate authority through which norms are provided either as specific rules or as general principles or presuppositions).

We will not take the time to develop these models except to note that our position here tends toward the last model. This paper assumes Scripture is the ultimate authority in the ethical enterprise. The use of reason, Holy Spirit guidance, and the reflective role of community are important elements in the equation as well.

The Fourfold Task of Biblical Ethics

According to Richard Hays, developing the moral themes of Scripture requires us to engage in four overlapping critical operations:[6]

The Descriptive Task. The descriptive task has to do with reading the text carefully. The descriptive task is fundamentally exegetical in character. It has to do with the question, "What does the Scripture say?" We read the individual New Testament or Old Testament texts or passages with the purpose of under-

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[5] See Walter C. Kaiser, "The Use of the Bible in Establishing Ethical Norms*," Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 39-56; Miroslav M. Kis, "The Word of God in Christian Ethics," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society,* 4, no. 2 (1993): 199-208; idem, "Biblical Interpretation and Moral Authority*," Journal of the Adventist Theological Society,* 6, no. 2 (1995): 52-62; James M. Gustafson, "The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study," *Interpretation* (October 1970): 430-455; John Brunt and Gerald Winslow, "The Bible's Role in Christian Ethics*," Andrews University Seminary Studies* (Spring 1982): 3-21; David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds., "The Use of the Bible in Ethical Judgments," in their *Readings in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 179-182; John Frame, "The Word of God and Christian Ethics," *Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 183-184; and Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 1-9.

[6] Richard B. Hays outlines this fourfold task in his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Harper-SanFrancisco, 1996), 3-7. While his concern is primarily New Testament Ethics, Hays' outline is useful for developing the moral vision of Scripture as a whole.

standing the distinctive moral vision embodied in each text, and in time, in each individual book in the biblical canon. We do this without prematurely harmonizing them. We are simply to note the distinctive moral themes and patterns of reasoning in the individual New Testament or Old Testament witnesses.

The Synthetic Task. The synthetic task means placing the individual text, passage, or book in its larger canonical context. This has to do with finding coherence in the moral vision of Scripture as a whole. Is it possible to describe a unity of ethical perspective within the diversity of the Old and New Testament canon? What, if anything, makes these diverse writings hang together as a guide to the moral life? Care needs to be taken that the synthetic task does not create a homogenizing interpretation that neutralizes any particularly challenging passage we may encountered. We assume a vast theological and moral unity between the Old and New Testaments, and within Scripture as a whole. This common moral vision, however, does not neutralize or homogenize the individual witnesses.

The Hermeneutical Task. How do we bridge the temporal and cultural distance between ourselves and the text? What does Scripture mean for us? This is the hermeneutical task—relating the text to our own contemporary situation. In particular, how do we appropriate the moral vision of Scripture as a word addressed to us? How do we actually use Scripture in doing ethical reflection?

The Pragmatic Task. Christian ethics ultimately comes down to the very practical question: how shall Christians shape their life in obedience to the moral vision of Scripture? In other words, what shall we do? How concretely does the moral vision of Scripture speak to our contemporary exigencies? The pragmatic task has to do with living out the Word in concrete everyday life.

We will concentrate on the last two of these tasks.

The Ups & Downs of Moral Vision

Scripture authoritatively communicates moral vision across varying modes of conceptual imagery.[7] This is in keeping with normal human moral reflection and the essential ingredients in any comprehensive ethical theory.[8]

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[7] Gustafson, 431; Hays, 208-209.

[8] According to Holmes, moral reflection includes at least four levels—overarching theological/philosophical bases or presuppositions, moral principles, moral rules, and specific cases where some unavoidable exception to moral rules appeals for resolution (moral dilemmas). See Arthur F. Holmes, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 50-56. Henry Aiken posits four levels of moral reasoning: (1) expressive level—related to value and evaluative moral judgment, i.e., spontaneous reaction to people, things, ideas, etc.; (2) level of moral rules—when values conflict rules simplify moral behavior, clarify doubt, and show us the way to go; (3) level of ethical principles—asks the question of meaning, "Why should I follow this rule this way?"; (4) the post-ethical level—Why should I be moral, i.e., the level of moral perspective, choice

In other words, these modes of conceptual imagery are not arbitrary conceptual constructs formulated by theologians or ethicists in their attempt to appeal to Scripture in ethical discourse. They simply reflect the comprehensive way in which Scripture naturally communicates moral vision to human beings. Human beings are moral agents, and these biblical modes of conceptual imagery parallel the comprehensive dynamics of human moral reflection. Each mode of expression is an authoritative expression of biblical moral vision. These differing modes of moral conceptual imagery include:

Principles: general frameworks of moral consideration by which particular decisions about action are to be governed.

Rules: direct commands or prohibitions of specific behaviors.

Stories/paradigms: stories or summary accounts of characters who model either exemplary or reprehensible conduct.

Worldview: the overarching perceptual categories through which we interpret reality.

What God is Doing: moral perspectives modeled in God's own acts, words, emotions, and thinking.

Values: God's scale of preference and examples of value-systems falling within broader principles.

Moral Direction: the unequivocal moral direction Scripture projects, implicitly or explicitly, generally or specifically, on given issues.

Principles. Principles are general frameworks of moral consideration by which particular decisions about action are to be governed. They express timeless truths that have universal application. Principles are the ultimate ethical concepts, inclusive, universal, and exceptionless, and can never give way to something more inclusive or expedient.[9] Principles are the broad moral outlines of God's will from which we derive understanding of more concrete norms and rules.[10]

Rules. Rules are direct commands or prohibitions of specific behaviors. They are direct statements of duty requiring obedience.[11] Such concrete injunctions of Scripture are usually expressed in the context of specific areas of human life (sexuality, work, finances, interpersonal relationships, etc.). In other words, they are "area rules" that transcend both culture and time because they refer to areas of human life rather than specific cases. At times, though, rules may express specific directives for a given case or situation. Some rules in this context

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and conclusions (Henry David Aiken*, Reason and Conduct: New Bearings in Moral Philosophy* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1978), 65-88.

[9] Holmes, 51, 52.

[10] Kis, "The Word of God in Christian Ethics," 205.

[11] Ibid., 207.

may never have been broader "area rules" but situationally encapsulated injunctions that express (and perhaps retain) a given cultural framework.

Rules apply principles and express the priorities of value.[12] As applications of principle, rules communicate the reality that the purpose of principles is not moral abstraction, but guidance toward concrete moral action. Rules thus serve as examples of how principles find application. In other words, Scripture does not leave up to our imagination how to apply its principles.[13] But rules are always minimums. Genuine biblical-centered principled living will always call for ever deepening and ever more tangible expressions—reaching towards applications we never dreamed of and a consistency that flavors our whole character and life. Rules express the priorities of values in that their existence safeguards the values they uphold, preserve, or concretely define.

Stories/Paradigms. Scripture is filled with stories or summary accounts of characters who model either exemplary or reprehensible conduct. Stories stir emotions, communicate values, capture imagination, motivate to action, instill moral vision, provide examples of conduct. Bible stories don't present us with a polished ideal to which we aspire, but with rough-edged actuality in which we see humanity being formed—the God presence in the earth/human condition.[14] Stories engage us existentially and can deeply inform our moral life.[15] The story of God's redemptive work casts a pregnant moral vision upon our moral intelligence. As Burton writes:

> The ethical interest of stories does not lie in general moral principles which become evident—rather it lies in the interplay of such principles with the flawed character of the protagonists in the stories, producing complex actions in which we can recognize our own moral dilemmas and obligations.[16]

Paradigms are a way of looking at something, an illustration, an interpretive framework that informs methods and principles of solution—whether in mathe-

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[12] E.g. the principles of modesty, gender-distinction, and simplicity stand behind Paul's concrete injunction concerning women and adornment (1 Tim 2:9, 10). The principle or moral innocence lies behind his request "to be wise in what is good, and innocent in what is evil" (Rom 16:19). The principle of moral innocence has to do with our memory pool and the kinds of things we expose our minds and senses to.

[13] Take, for example, love. We are to love, but who are we supposed to love?—God and our neighbor. But how do we love God and our neighbor?—the first four commandments tell us how to love God, and the last six commandments tell us how to love our neighbor. The Sermon on the Mount and other Scripture provide even deeper, more comprehensive applications of the command to love. Comprehensive concrete application is always assumed.

[14] Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over A Wall* (HarperSanfrancisco, 1997), 5.

[15] John Burton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 34.

[16] Ibid., 36.

matics, physics, ethics, etc.. Paradigms encompass and interpret a larger, more comprehensive conceptual picture than simple models or individual stories do.[17] Stories shape paradigms.[18] When Scripture combines the model aspects of vivid characters and actions of particular biblical stories into larger, more comprehensive characters and patterns, it creates paradigms that shape inner moral image.[19] Paradigms can be viewed from two broad perspectives: (1) as providing an abstract basic principle that "is not so much imitated as applied"[20] and (2) as an imprinted inner gripping image which is not so much applied as imitated.[21]

Worldview. Worldview is the overarching perceptual categories through which we interpret reality.[22] This includes the theological/philosophical bases or presuppositions that frame our worldview. Worldview provides the broad outline of the context in which moral issues and thinking take place. Scripture's worldview includes its representation of the human condition, its depictions of the character of God, its portrayal of the great controversy between Christ and

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[17] See my discussion, Larry L. Lichtenwalter, Eschatological Paradigm and Moral Theory in Contemporary Christian Ethics: Stephen Charles Mott and Thomas W. Ogletree (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University Theological Seminary, 1997), 70-78.

[18] Waldemar Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 20. According to Janzen, "Ethical model stories flow together directly to form a paradigm before the mental eye, as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle fit together to yield a picture" (Ibid., 27).

[19] Ibid., 20. Janzen use five such story-framed paradigms to construct his Old Testament ethics, i.e., the ideal family member, worshiper, priest, king, prophet. According to Janzen, " . . . biblical Israelites did not carry with them a stock of maxims or principles, but mental images of model persons. Such inner images had wholeness and embodied the rich and multifaceted qualities of exemplary behavior appropriate to a given sphere of life. In other words, before the Israelite's inner eye stood a vivid, lifelike yet ideal family member, worshiper, wise person, king, or prophet" (Ibid., 27).

[20] Christopher J. H. Wright, *An Eye for and Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 43. In this case a "basic principle" that remains unchanged forms the link between the paradigm and the new situation to which it is applied (see Janzen, 27). The principle remains unchanged, though details or situations differ.

[21] The point here is that paradigms can become effective in shaping people ethically through their complete and direct impact on the inner moral eye. A paradigm need not be reduced first to a set of abstract principles that must then be translated into life. Rather there is a "personally and holistically conceived image . . . that imprints itself immediately and on the characters and action of those who hold it" (Janzen, 27, 28). Such paradigms by nature encompass, elicit, affirm, and mediate both law and principle, but not through a reductionistic abstraction.

[22] Hays refers to this mode of biblical moral expression as symbolic world. The problem with the term symbolic is that it can be interpreted as suggesting that such biblical perceptual categories are metaphorical, figurative, allegorical, or in some way detached from reality. The moral/spiritual metaphysical context in which Scripture frames human existence is real. Better terminology for this mode of biblical moral expression include worldview, metaphysics, or theological/philosophical bases. The biblical worldview provides overarching truths that shine on our human condition.

Satan. It includes, too, such fundamental realities as an *ex nihilo* creation, judgment, and a moral universe.

What God is Doing. Pregnant moral perspectives are modeled in God's own acts, words, emotions, and thinking. What God does is significant, paradigmatic. The various ethical materials of Scripture are placed within the over-arching reality of what God is doing in history. Scripture, then, does not teach independent ethical universals. God is the universal, and God's acts supply means and power for ethics.[23]

When Peter witnessed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the house of Cornelius he exclaimed, "Who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17). The moral implications of what God was doing with the Gentiles was to be imitated by both Peter and the Church. When his brothers bowed down to him with their faces to the ground, Joseph remembered the dreams he had about them (Gen 42:9). That moment became a master key unlocking his understanding of what God was doing. The moral implications of that flashback were unavoidable—treat his brothers with grace, kindness, forgiveness, compassion, generosity (Gen 45:4-24; 50:15-21). Jesus' moral orientation was set in the context of what His Father was doing—"the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner" (John 5:19).

God is always at work around us. Moral responsibility in this context includes insight into the moral nature of His work. The moment we grasp that insight we are thrown into contrast with God. We cannot stay the way we are and go with God at the same time.[24] To move from our way of thinking or acting to God's way of thinking or acting requires moral decision and adjustment. "Be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love" (Eph 5:1, 2a).

Values. Scripture illumines the reality of God's scale of preference and provides examples of value-systems falling within broader principles. Values have to do with preferences, worth, what is esteemed, prized, or highly regarded as good. Values have to do with what is important to us, and in what order. They point to the quality of a thing that makes it desirable, useful, or an object of interest. A given value is a status on a scale of preference.[25] Values attract and

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[23] Stephen Charles Mott, "How Should Christian Economists Use the Bible? A Study of Hermeneutics*," Bulletin of the Association of Christian Economists* 13 (Spring, 1989): 11-12.

[24] Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 60.

[25] There are differing kinds of values—objective (intrinsic), subjective (extrinsic), and instrumental (pragmatic). Traditional ethical systems each express some kind of valuation, i.e., deontological (value is placed on a principle or an act in itself), teleological (value is placed on good results, ends, consequences), instrumental (value is placed on motives, means, or the moral agent), existential (value is focused on personal choice, what self creates, the moment).

motivate the will.[26] They calibrate (prioritize) standards, rules, and principles. Values also justify rules and principles.

Scripture concerns itself with the great issues of life and deals heavily with values—values in relation to God, others, self, the created world. It provides God's scale of preference (Rom 12:1-3; Eph 5:10; Micah 6:6-8; Matt 23:23; Matt 15:22). It articulates both the "what" and the "feeling" of values (the objective and existential). It presents values in extrinsic, intrinsic, and instrumental forms. Scripture is the ultimate authority in value formation.

Examples of valuation in Scripture can be found in the stories of Abraham and Joseph. When Abraham told Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister, he valued life over truthfulness, and financial gain over his own wife's sexual integrity. God's intervention, however, showed a contrasting value-system—truthfulness over life, Sarah's sexual integrity over financial gain (Gen 12:10-20). Joseph's response to the sexual propositions of Potiphar's wife shows how he found strength in two valued relationships (Gen 39:7-9). He could not bring himself to violate his trusted relationship with his boss nor, more important, his valued relationship with God. His experience shows how the issue of personal relationships is strategically central to moral excellence. We will rarely deny ourselves for a mere list of rules, even less for an institution. But we will deny self in order to preserve the priority of a valued relationship.[27]

Moral Direction. Scripture moves in certain moral directions both generally and specifically on given issues. Rules, principles, stories, what God is doing, worldview, and the moral values Scripture expresses together lead or push in a particular moral direction. We need to look for the direction Scripture is pointing and allow the Holy Scripture to orient us in this direction, as well.

Examples of ways in which Scripture provides moral direction include the status of women and oppressed peoples and the place of outward adornment in the context of cultural assimilation and moral/spiritual identity. Status (social position) has to do with the value that culture places on various groups of people and is one of the most basic elements of a social system. It is a way of control-

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[26] A basic question in ethics is the disparity between what one knows to be right and one's doing right. How is it that one can know moral principles or rules, even believe them to be true, yet not obey them? Part of the answer lies in valuation. If we don't, in our heart of hearts, internally value what particular moral principles or rules point toward, we will likely not be motivated to articulate them in our lives—or we might do so only legalistically, or minimally. In this case intentionality loses integrity. The promise of a new heart where God's will is planted in our mind and heart has valuation in focus (Jer 31:33, 34; Ezek 36:25-27). And so does Paul's assertion that "the love of Christ compels us" to the place where we no longer live for ourselves, but for Him who died and rose again in our behalf (2 Cor 5:14, 15). Value is a powerful motivation toward action.

[27] Joseph M. Stowell, *Following Christ: Experiencing Life the Way it was Meant to Be* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 86.

ling people. Because of it, some are weak and some are strong.[28] Notwithstanding the record of the actual status and treatment of women in biblical culture,[29] as well as several pointed Scriptural passages that seem to sanction such valuation and treatment (Eccl 7:28; 1 Cor 14:34, 35; 1 Tim 2:11-15), the moral vision of Scripture as a whole unequivocally points in a consistent direction of equality, respect, compassion, and justice.[30]

As Mott writes:

> A priority for the early church was to determine if the relationships among its members would be characterized by the status distinctions of the surrounding culture. The answer was far reaching. In the new reality made present by Jesus Christ, the major status distinctions of the culture—slavery, nationality, and sex—were considered null and void (Gal 3:28).[31]

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[28] This inequality is socially useful. The existence of roles is inherent in being social. See Stephen Charles Mott, "The Use of the New Testament for Social Ethics*,*" *Journal of Religious Ethics* (Fall 1987): 234-237.

[29] In order to correctly grasp the moral vision Scripture articulates, one must be sensitive to the difference that exists between, (1) the contemporary culture of biblical times (the lifestyle, customs and values expressed by the nations and peoples of the then known world); (2) the culture of biblical characters (the lifestyle, customs and values expressed in the lives of individuals knowing or representing God); and (3) heavenly culture (the values and lifestyle Scripture projects as the ideal and true and which has been expressed most fully in the life of Jesus Christ). As per above, Bible stories don't present us with a polished ideal to which we aspire, but with rough-edged actuality in which we see humanity being formed. When we understand these distinctions, we can read between the lines better and understand that not everything God's people did represents what God would have had them do. Yet the overall direction of Scripture on a given moral issue, together with the principles, rules, and values that Scripture conveys, points toward what we could call heavenly culture—the ethos of a redeemed people fully in harmony with God's ultimate purpose for human beings.

[30] That direction is seen through such passages and stories as: (1) the creation account of God splitting His image—imago dei—male and female (Gen 1:26, 27); (2) woman being the crowning moment of creation because she would make man complete and enable him to live life fully and responsibly, as well as wisdom literature's personification of wisdom as woman because without her, man is incomplete (Gen 2:18; Prov 9:1-6; 1:20, 21; 8:1-36; 2:2-4); (3) God's protection of Sarah after Abraham's indecent proposal (Gen 12:17-20); (4) Hagar, an Egyptian woman, naming God (Gen 16:13, 14); (5) how Esther begins with concerns that Vashti's example would upset social mores and undermine male social position as master in his own house (Esther 1:15-22) and flips it all upside down as Esther becomes master over the very men who would control not only her destiny but the destiny of her people, etc. Of course there are the status boundaries that Jesus crossed by his words and actions with regard to women.

[31] Mott, "The Use of the New Testament for Social Ethics," 236, 237.

Scripture sets the question of outward adornment in the context of cultural assimilation and moral/spiritual identity.[32] While it does not reject outward adornment altogether,[33] Scripture alerts us to the way we experience and come to share the values of our culture by participating in its forms[34] and draws a direct connection between luxury in adornment/dress and idolatry.[35] In addition, there is a tendency in Scripture to devalue the significance of jewelry as a symbol of ultimate value.[36] Focus is consistently inward toward character and outward toward behavior.[37]

Scripture authoritatively communicates moral vision across varying modes of conceptual imagery. This diversity reflects a comprehensiveness that enables Scripture to cast its moral vision across all of human life, thought, and experience. While Scripture does not provide a concrete example, principle, rule, etc. on every possible temptation or moral dilemma, nevertheless, all spheres of human moral life are within its purview. There is a broad outline of the context in

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[32] For example, in a solemn moment of family worship expressing spiritual revival and consecration, Jacob's family removed certain garments, idols, and pieces of jewelry from their bodies (Gen 35:1-4). Scripture conveys two important principles with regard to culture through this story: (1) the artistic expressions of culture that we are inclined to bring to our bodies or lives are value laden, i.e., they express moral or spiritual value which the wearer or participant wittingly or unwittingly identifies with; (2) consecration to God finds tangible expression in shedding those cultural idioms that convey ungodly values, i.e., while we can have external forms in our life without consecration to God, we cannot have consecration to Him without it affecting the external forms that in one way or another either nurture or compete with that very consecration. Doing and being are inseparably linked.

[33] In Scripture, jewelry is used for: personal adornment (Isa 3:16-23; Ezek 16:11-15; 23:40; Jer 2:32; 4:30; Hosea 2:2, 13; 1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3; 2 Kings 9:30; Song of Solomon 1:10, 11; Rev 17:4, 5); as a form of currency (Gen 24:22); for offerings (Ex 35:22; 30:11-16; Num 31:50, 51); as evidences of wealth (Gen 24:35, 10, 22, 53; 15:14; Exod 11:2; 12:36; 3:22; 32:2-5; 35:20-22; Rev 18:12; Job 42:11); to designate social status (James 2:2-4; 2 Sam 1:10; 2 Kings 11:12; Psalm 89:39; 132:18; 45:13, 14; Ezek 28:11-19; 16:10-13; Isa 3:16-26; Rev 17:4); as symbols of power and authority (Gen 41:42; Dan 5:29; Esther 3:10, 12; 8:2, 8, 10, 15; Zech 6:11-13; 2 Kings 11:12); as imagery for God's gracious redemption and our value in His sight (Isa 61:10; Mal 3:16-18); for religious purposes (Ezek 16:17; Exod 28:1-43; Hosea 2:13; Gen 35:2-4), and to ward off evil powers and dangers (Isa 3:3). Obviously, some of these uses are clearly unacceptable, while others are quite appropriate.

[34] It is one thing for the power of a given culture and its tangible expressions to be everywhere around us and all pervasive in its moral/spiritual influence, but it is another thing for us to bring to our body, our life, or our lifestyle, those very objects, behaviors, experiences, or icons. The moment we do, we identify with them. Their moral spiritual values somehow attach to our inner private world. Culture is no longer objective, out there. Now it is internalized. We are being shaped by it within.

[35] Rev 17:4; Isa 3; Gen 35:1-4; Ex 30 and 33.

[36] Prov 3:13-15; 8:10, 11; 20:15.

[37] 1 Tim 2:9, 10; 1 Pet 3:3-7; Isa 1-3.

which moral issues and thinking take place. The stories, values, moral direction, worldview, ways of God, principles, and rules, together frame any given moral issue. The reflective framework most consistent with the moral vision of Scripture is one where ethics is in close relation with theology.[38] "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16, 17 NASB).

Wending Our Way

Since Scripture obviously conveys moral vision across varying modes of conceptual imagery, it is only natural to ask, "How does one wend one's way in the light of Scriptural moral vision?" Being able to move between the different levels of moral reflection and conceptual imagery is important. It is important because it relates to issues of consistency and specificity of application as well as using Scripture with integrity. Not only do we need to avoid any kind of cut-and-paste methodology, but we need to avoid the destruction of context by homogenizing or proof-texting, as well. We cannot move abstractly or arbitrarily away from the form in which the texts present themselves to us. Nor can we turn narratives into law or rules into principles. We must respect the particularity of the forms through which the whole witness of the whole Scriptural canon lays claim upon us. We need to accept each of these modes and develop skills necessary to respond to the voice of Scripture in each of these modes.[39]

However, we also need to understand the organic link that exists between these varying modes of conceptual imagery. Stephen Charles Mott suggests a hermeneutical principle:

> The authority of God in the concrete injunction must be interpreted with attention to God's authority in mighty acts, in the theological affirmations, and in the prevailing ethical principles. And the specific teachings and propositions are needed to give concrete interpretation of the broad and general truths and actions.[40]

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[38] "The study of biblical ethics requires focus on . . . the theology in the Scriptures which both validates and provides content to the moral teachings. For the people of the Bible, morality was not separated from religion in the way that it has been both in theory and in practice in later developments; ethics was not separated from theology" (Gustafson, 431). See also Alister E. McGrath, "Doctrine and Ethics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, 2 (June 1991): 145-156; James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Ethics," *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 24-45; Oliver O'Donovan, "How Can Theology Be Moral?" *Religious Ethics* 17, 2 (Fall 1989): 81-94.

[39] Hays, 294.

[40] Ibid., 11.

In his ethical method, Mott is concerned with understanding the place of concrete decision-making within different aspects of ethical thought. He is interested in showing how principles and concrete injunctions relate in Scriptural thought. He is concerned with the question of how to credibly translate ethical reflection from one level to another.

In this context, Mott interprets organically the diverse, but complementary, ways in which Scripture is authoritative for ethics. According to him, the concrete biblical injunctions must be interpreted with attention to God's mighty acts, theological affirmations, and prevailing ethical principles. Likewise, the specific teachings and propositions are needed to give concrete interpretation of the broad and general truths and actions. Functionally, this provides the way for responsibly opening up the ethical meaning of Scripture across different levels of moral reflection and application.

One can credibly translate ethical reflection from one level to another because the biblical materials themselves provide both the conceptual structure and the example to do so. Scriptural moral vision is constantly flowing up and down, back and forth, between these varying modes of conceptual imagery. The bridge between these varying modes of conceptual imagery is the reality that each is yielding the normative moral content of Scripture. This is true whether or not the varying modes of conceptual imagery reflect similar moral themes. It is particularly pregnant, however, when they are.

When we understand this organic relation between the differing modes of conceptual imagery, the comprehensive moral vision that Scripture casts becomes more instructive, concrete, and relevant. It becomes more instructive in that one is moved away from mere externals and rules toward moral discernment and being. It becomes more concrete in that every story, every rule, every act of God, conveys the reality that moral vision ultimately leads toward and comes down to tangible words, acts, thoughts, decision, i.e., doing. It becomes more relevant in that values, moral direction, principles, as well as the existential dynamic of stories, connect human moral life across time and culture.

On many moral themes, Scripture conveys moral vision across every one of these different modes of conceptual imagery. On some issues, however, the moral vision is only conveyed in its more abstract forms. The former provides us concrete illustrations of both being and doing, as well as the organic link between being and doing. The latter simply challenges us toward doing that which is consistent with being. The latter, undoubtedly, demands greater spiritual and moral discernment. The former provides templates, examples of how a given moral issue includes both being and doing.

It should be noted at this point that our presuppositions of Scripture determine our perception of the level of moral vision it casts. If we see Scripture as

providing only abstract moral imagery, generalizing principles, or relative values, then the importance of the reflective community in the interpretive process rises proportionally. In addition, the task of contemporary application would of necessity be predominantly in the hands of the believing community or individual. If, on the other hand, we view Scripture as providing substantial, concrete ethical injunctions or specific moral principles—as well as clear values and unequivocal moral direction—then the biblical materials themselves are much more likely to remain the controlling element in the interpretive process. Scripture will bring both structure and guidance to the pragmatic task of application.

The comprehensive way Scripture communicates moral vision across varying conceptual imagery in effect points toward a view of revelation/inspiration consistent with that reality. If we allow the moral vision of Scripture to come to us in the comprehensive way that it does, Scripture itself will remain the authoritative controlling element in our moral reflection.

As suggested above, the bridge between the varying modes of conceptual imagery in which Scripture communicates moral vision is the reality that each is yielding the normative moral content of Scripture. That bridge is also reflected in the reality that these varying modes are in keeping with normal human moral reflection and the essential ingredients in any comprehensive ethical theory. Comprehensive moral vision is only possible when such elements as principles, rules, worldview, and values are all part of the equation.

The Pragmatic Task

A time management expert was speaking to a group of business students and, to drive a point home, used an illustration they would never forget. As this man stood in front of the group of high-powered overachievers, he said, "Okay, time for a quiz." Then he pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouthed mason jar and set it on a table in front of him. Then he produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar.

When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is this jar full?" Everyone in the class said, "Yes."

Then he said, "Really?" He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. Then he dumped some gravel in and shook the jar, causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the spaces between the big rocks. Then he smiled and asked the group once more, "Is the jar full?"

By this time the class was on to him. "Probably not," one of them answered.

"Good!" he replied. And he reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand in and it went into all the spaces left between the rocks and gravel. Once more he asked the question, "Is this jar full?"

"No!" the class shouted.

Once again he said, "Good!" Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was full to the brim.

Then he looked up at the class and asked, "What is the point of this illustration?"

One eager beaver raised his hand and said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you try really hard, you can always fit some more things into it."

"No," the speaker replied, "that's not the point. The truth this illustration teaches us is: if you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get them in at all."

That's the pragmatic task of moral vision: getting the "big rocks" into people's lives.

Putting the big rocks of moral life in first means creatively unlocking and clearly conveying Scripture's moral vision to our people. Firing their imagination with the reality that Scripture speaks with authoritative relevance across the spectrum of human life as a whole and their own experience in particular.

Putting the big rocks of moral life in first means developing the moral themes of Scripture in such a way that people begin to move beyond a mere awareness of what Scripture has to say about our moral life toward internalizing that moral vision in their inner private world. Moral vision must be sustained and articulated to the place where it brings moral formation, molds character, touches being. This assumes coaching people toward moral maturity to the place where they have their senses trained to know good and evil (Heb 5:12-14). It also assumes we have helped them understand the comprehensive way in which Scripture conveys moral vision across varying modes of conceptual imagery and helped them understand as well the relationships between the varying modes of moral conceptual imagery. It is important for our people to understand moral vision and understand Scripture in a Spirit-led way. They must learn to think morally as well as doctrinally, and ultimately to think and act biblically.[41]

Putting the big rocks of life in first also means helping people see the straight line that flows from moral vision to moral formation and from moral formation to moral action. People need to learn "the gist of faithful and reflective moral action."[42] They need to know how to translate the moral summons of Scripture into the varying spheres of human life—personal ethics, work, marriage, church life, parenting, sexuality, values, money, power, politics, leadership, social ethics, etc.

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[41] See James Montgomery Boice, *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993).

[42] Gaylord Noyce, *The Minister as Moral Counselor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 20.

Putting the big rocks of life in first is a call to read Scripture for its moral content and go on to develop its moral themes—opening moral vision, bringing moral formation, encouraging moral action. The Apostle Paul gives us an example of articulating moral vision, bringing moral formation, and encouraging concrete action. You can see it in his letters to the Corinthians, Thessalonians, Romans. When we get a feel for the variety of moral issues he addressed, when we listen to how he leads people to think about themselves in light of the work of Jesus in their behalf and what it means to be "in Christ," when we see how he addresses both thinking and behavior—and at bottom argues for moral integrity in keeping with spiritual integrity—we gain insights into the comprehensiveness as well as the concreteness of our pragmatic task.

Methodologically, putting the big rocks of life in first assumes each of the four-fold tasks outlined above. The descriptive, synthetic, hermeneutical, and pragmatic tasks must each come into play. There must be critical engagement with Scripture itself, allowing Scripture to formulate its own categories of moral reasoning and assert its own moral agenda and values.[43] Scripture's view of reality and ways of approaching moral thinking must be the guiding template.

More specifically, we need to allow Scripture to engage us through each of its modes of conceptual imagery. In the process, we need to be consciously aware of the particular mode or modes through which a given passage, story, or book is conveying moral truth. We may notice one mode of conceptual imagery on a given moral issue/theme in one area of Scripture, and a different mode of conceptual imagery on that same moral issue/theme in another passage. Thoughtful synthesis at this point brings together, not an arbitrary cut-and-paste proof-texting moral picture, but a comprehensive moral image and summons. Such a process will allow the moral vision of Scripture to both motivate and guide moral agents.

Finally, we need to build bridges between the moral vision of Scripture and contemporary life through "life stories." There are many benefits to using stories to communicate moral truth. Stories capture interest. Stories hold attention. Stories stir emotions. Stories help us remember. Stories impact us in ways that precepts and propositions never do. If you want to change lives, you must craft the moral message for impact as well as information.

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[43] It is not uncommon for individuals to try to find analogies between classical moral theories and the Bible, where the contrasting views of reality found in philosophical ethics and biblical ethics are somehow made to merge. Philosophical ethics revolves largely around categories like consequentialist (value), deontological (rule), and perfectionist (virtue) conceptual frameworks, where issues of intentionality, intersubjectivity, and self-formation are key. Attempts to show the relevancy of the biblical materials through these categories are useful, though not necessarily accurate in terms of exegesis, theology, biblical moral direction, or genuine spiritual/moral life. See Ogletree, 1-46.

Scripture is filled with life stories. Contemporary life is filled with life stories. The pragmatic task of moral vision, formation, and action facilitates shared stories. By this I mean the values or moral themes of a particular biblical story can find correspondence in the real life stories of contemporary life. Likewise, the values or moral themes of a given contemporary story can find correspondence somewhere in Scripture. The needs of human beings and the reality of human moral life is unchanged throughout time and across culture. Stories facilitate a commonness.

At bottom the pragmatic task of moral vision, formation, and action has to do with "living under the Word of God." It has nothing to do with moralism or perfectionism, but the Lordship of Jesus Christ in every area of our being and doing. On the heels of a grand doxology extolling the depths and riches of God's sovereign grace bringing providence, Paul sums it up well:

> I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your nature transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect. (Rom 12:1, 2)