



## The Role of Scripture in Public Theology

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Scripture has frequently played a role in American public life. From the Puritan efforts to create a biblical commonwealth to the fierce abolitionist slaveholder debates of the nineteenth century to the eloquent and urgent preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Bible has been drawn upon as a resource for swaying and shaping the moral convictions of society. The story of the Bible's role in our history is one still needing fuller examination.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of this history, it became common in the mid-twentieth century for church people to regard the Bible primarily as a spiritual resource which was not really appropriate to public life except for the devotional function of Scripture in American civil religion. In more evangelical circles the Bible was seen as an influence on individual moral life, while in liberal church circles the Bible was only deep historical background with little direct relevance to the issues of concern for the church's public witness. In short, it has not been difficult in recent decades to find many willing to debate whether the Bible should play *any* role in the public arena. The objection of many to Martin Luther King, Jr., was that he confused biblical preaching with politics, and for many they should be separate.

Developments in the last few years suggest that some significant changes are taking place. There are signs of a renewed concern for the appropriation of Scripture in the public arena.

Perhaps most obvious is the new assertiveness of the religious right in the public arena. On issues as wide ranging as abortion and defense policy, the preachers and lobbyists of the religious right describe their positions as biblically based, and they do so not only in addressing their own faithful but in addressing the policy makers as well. The issue of prayer in the public schools is symbolic of the prominence they want to give religious tradition, including the Bible, in the public arena. They regard as a major achievement the influence which led President Reagan to declare 1983 the Year of the Bible.

<sup>1</sup>An excellent resource for such a discussion is the volume of essays *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. N. O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University, 1982).

An evangelical left has emerged with a strong effort to address the social conscience of the church and nation from a biblical base. Strong leadership from people such as Ron Sider, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, and Jim Wallis have forced many traditional evangelical church people to consider anew the implications of Scripture for the central issues of our time, especially nuclear war, Central America, and issues of affluence and poverty. *Sojourners* magazine has been an articulate and increasingly influential voice for this perspective.

The emergence and continued importance of liberation theologies is one of the most

significant developments of our time for the impact of theology on public life. Whether black, feminist, or third world in perspective, the liberation theologies are all concretely based in experiences of oppression and marginalization which have their location in the public arenas of societies and nations. But interestingly these theologies have strong interests in biblical interpretation. The claim for liberation is rooted in a reading of the biblical material that finds the concern of God and God's people for justice and equity a central component of the biblical meaning of salvation. In many instances the roots of these theologies in grassroots movements have strong biblical components, whether in the powerful preaching of black churches or the Bible studies of base communities. For feminist theology—where women's experience is correctly seen as hidden even in much of Scripture—the recovery of Scripture from its own patriarchy and the development of a feminist hermeneutic are central concerns.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, in what is surely one of the most significant efforts at public theology in our decade, the publication of the Pastoral Letter on War and Peace by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops clearly gives a prominent role to Scripture as a major shaper of the church's participation in the public arena. Although the letter is greatly influenced by consideration of traditional Roman Catholic just war theory and its inapplicability to nuclear war, it is clear that a careful consideration of scriptural perspectives has helped shape the discussion and becomes a basis of appeal to the members of the church and the public alike: "The sacred texts do...provide us with urgent direction when we look at today's concrete realities."<sup>3</sup>

These examples all come from the front lines of debate and sometimes controversy. Behind these more visible developments are large numbers of ordinary church people seeking discernment in the confusing issues of modern life. Sales of Bibles and biblically based materials would indicate that these persons too are looking anew at Scripture and seeking guidance in appropriating its resources.

The question in our present moment does not seem to be *whether* Scripture should be used as a resource in the questions of public life. The questions in our time and for this article seem to be: "*How* is the Bible being used?" and "What helps us to judge the legitimacy of these uses?"

<sup>2</sup>See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," *The Challenge of Liberation Theology*, ed. B. Mahan and D. Richesin (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981) 91-112.

<sup>3</sup>*The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response. A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace* (Washington, D.C.: The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983) 17.

## I. THE MEANING OF SCRIPTURE

Understanding and assessment of the role which Scripture plays in public theology must begin with the realization that the term "Scripture" does not have the same meaning for different persons and groups. What is actually meant by an appeal to Scripture can vary widely. David Kelsey suggests that the important question to be asked first is:

What aspect(s) of scripture is (are) taken to be authoritative? Is it the concepts in scripture, or the doctrines, or the historical reports, or the liturgical utterances, or the "symbols," or some combination of these, or something else.<sup>4</sup>

This question is crucial because theologians and church traditions “construe” Scripture differently.

The tendency to appeal to only certain portions or aspects of Scripture as authoritative has been characteristic of positions across the theological spectrum. Earlier in the century the fundamentalist-liberal conflicts were characterized by two completely different understandings of what one drew from Scripture as authoritative in the moral life. Fundamentalists largely looked to the Bible for prescriptive or rule-book material. Those portions of the Bible which offered explicit moral guidance were more important for moral matters in the church (e.g., the Ten Commandments and the ethical teachings of Jesus or Paul). The liberal camp stressed the Bible as the source of moral principles which could be abstracted from the culture-bound materials of the Bible (e.g., love, justice).

Such a reductionist tendency in the use of Scripture is still characteristic of many groups who wish to use the Bible as a resource in the public arena. Walter Brueggemann has examined the different ways in which segments of the canon functioned for the biblical communities.<sup>5</sup> In examining the Old Testament canon he suggests that Torah was a defining of community *ethos*, the establishment of community identity and character. The Prophets speak of the *pathos* of God and Israel when the community is fractured. In Wisdom literature and other of the Writings we deal with *logos* as a sense after God’s ordering of life. In truth the modern church, when looking to Scripture as a resource, needs all these dimensions of the canon’s witness (and others that could be added) for the sake of its own wholeness in life and witness. But, as Brueggemann points out there is a distressing tendency for persons and groups to be drawn to one aspect of the canon’s witness to the exclusion or neglect of others. Reductionism and fragmentation plague the use of Scripture in a great many of the attempts to appeal to the Bible for a public theology. An impartial observer might wonder whether different groups are really speaking about the same book.

What is needed is a more integrative approach to the use of Scripture that allows the Bible’s own richness and diversity to be a part of the discussion. It is our conviction that the canon as such needs to be taken more seriously. It is not that all portions of the canon can be regarded as authoritative or important in the

<sup>4</sup>David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 15.

<sup>5</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

same way. It is, however, the diversity of Scripture that serves as the control and check against too quickly or simply elevating anyone aspect of Scripture to a status as *the* biblical view. In spite of our own predilections in appeals to Scripture, we must be constantly asked to measure our particular appeals to Scripture against the whole of the biblical witness. We will have more to say on the importance of a canonical approach later.

## II. THE NATURE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Assessment of the role Scripture plays in public theology is also limited by too narrow a conception of the dimensions of the Christian life that bear on the church’s moral witness in the public sphere. Since the Bible is seen quite often as a book for the gathered church, it may then

be regarded as irrelevant for the church scattered in the world as witnesses to hope and agents of reconciliation. Part of the problem is a limited concept of Christian ethics and the role of Scripture in relation to Christian ethics.<sup>6</sup>

One of the problems that has led to a lack of regard for the Bible in Christian ethics (especially social ethics) is an overemphasis on Christian ethics as doing. The *ethics of doing* focuses on the question, “What shall we (the church) do about...?” The blank can be filled with any of the many pressing issues calling for the church’s attention in the public arena—racism; nuclear war, abortion, criminal justice, etc. The emphasis in the ethics of doing is on decision-making and action. The construction of programs and strategies of responses to given issues becomes the central arena for Christian social ethics.

To those engaged in the church’s “doing” of Christian ethics the Bible may seem to play only a small role. Seldom, if ever, does the Bible tell us what to do. Many issues do not even have biblical analogies, such as nuclear war and issues arising out of bio-medical technology. Even issues we share with biblical times are faced in such altered circumstances that we cannot turn to the Bible for decisions on what we must do. The Bible is filled with references to concern for food and persons without it, but we must decide ourselves how that concern is acted out in the complex political and economic patterns of a global society. How can we relieve the immediate needs of the hungry while still addressing the patterns of our world order that allowed hunger to exist in the first place?

Because the Bible does not make decisions or plan courses of action for us, many persons have concluded that Scripture is irrelevant or even a distraction from the urgency of our concerns. Such conclusions fail to see the important role the Bible can play in helping to clarify the values and perspectives we use in deliberating and deciding and acting on issues. To understand how the Bible plays this role we must consider another aspect of Christian ethics.

Alongside the ethics of doing must stand a concern for the *ethics of being*. We must ask not only “What are we to do?” but “Who are we to be?” What identity are church people to bring with them into the arena of public concerns?

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<sup>6</sup>This portion of the discussion is largely based on my earlier work with Larry Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976). See also Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) where he discusses three different conceptions of the moral life that have been common in the literature of Christian ethics.

What are the values, principles, and perspectives that will inform our doing? Alongside the concern for the shaping of decisions must stand the concern for the shaping of decision-makers. To make just decisions, persons will have to understand and incorporate into themselves something of what biblical justice means and demands. This will not make decisions for us, but it will establish the framework within which they are made.

Here the Bible’s role is basic. The church, as those persons who claim to be the covenant people of God and the body of Christ, is shaped continuously by Scripture and its influence in worship, preaching, study, and life together in the community of faith. Congregations that have been strong in response to the world and its needs are almost always strong as well in their internal life of worship, study, and mutual support. Here is where Christians receive nourishment in a biblical identity that allows them to stand as an alternative to the world and its values while

at the same time living their lives for the sake of that world and its brokenness. Without that biblical identity the church becomes vulnerable to capture by the world and its ideologies and loyalties whether of the right or the left.

The whole range of the biblical witness becomes valuable to the church in this shaping of faith community. Once again the importance of a canonical approach is paramount lest the whole range of Scripture's potential influence be cut short. The tendency in dealing with foundations for public witness is to look only at portions of the Bible that specifically admonish us. Thus, for many concerned with public theology the Bible consists of something like the Decalogue, the prophets, and portions of the teachings of Jesus and Paul. When we understand the way in which Scripture shapes us through the life of the church, we can become newly aware of the importance of stories, hymns, visions, wise teachings, history, and law codes. By learning something of who the biblical communities were (both positively and negatively) we learn something of who we are called to be as the people of God for our time.

It has long been recognized that movements of renewal and revolution that have altered the course of history owe as much to the power of their ideology as to their action strategies. For the church, ideology is theology, and its theology is always biblically based. Every generation of the church has the task of appropriating the biblical witness anew. Those who can find no fresh word from God's Word risk the abandonment of Christian identity. Those open to the enduring truths of Scripture in its many and diverse voices will find those same truths at work in our world and join forces.

The imperative for those who would use Scripture as a resource in shaping a public theology will do well to pay heed to the full range of biblical witnesses as those are encountered in the whole of the church's life.

### III. APPEALS TO SCRIPTURE

What kinds of appeals do Christians make to Scripture in efforts at public theology? In a recent essay, Richard Mouw suggests a taxonomy of four

categories for understanding the variety of appeals made to Scripture.<sup>7</sup> We shall attempt to apply these categories to our concern for public theology.

A first pattern of appeal is *doctrinalism*. For some Christians the Bible is mainly a source of sound doctrine. Any public theology not based on sound doctrine would be seriously deficient. The Bible is used both as a source for doctrinal understanding and as a measure of the doctrinal "rightness" of any theological statements in the public arena. Materials that can be abstracted from Scripture as teachings get most serious attention.

The second pattern is *pietism*. Here the stress is on the experience of the godly and spiritual life. Pietism reacts against doctrinal orthodoxy and from concern for social witness or mission. The inner life and the heart are emphasized. Of course, the Bible in this view functions in an inspirational and devotional manner. Scripture is a source of comfort, strength, and faith in troubled lives and times. Naturally, of the four categories for understanding the appeal to Scripture, this is the least likely to play an overt role in the shaping of a public theology. Pietism would tend to disdain such a role as inappropriate. However, for pietism it is entirely proper that the Bible be seen as an influence to move individuals toward godly living characterized by a deep

sense of God's personal presence. Such persons might then indeed play a strong role in the public sphere. Here the danger is of an emphasis on the Bible's role in the ethics of being to the virtual exclusion of doing except on the most individualistic plane.

A third category for understanding the appeal to Scripture is *moralism*. The Bible serves to reveal a morality or a set of moral resources which focus a central concern on moral life and action. Mouw rightly points out that this category in particular encompasses a wide range of viewpoints because there are so many different patterns espoused for the moral life. Some find in the Bible a set of prescriptive moral laws, a code. Others find there certain irreducible moral principles. What they have in common is that "this kind of thinking tends toward a 'litmus test' approach to spirituality. Some groups may question the religious character of anyone who smokes cigarettes, others the religious character of those who do not protest the Bomb."<sup>8</sup>

Finally there is a *culturalist* perspective. The concern here is with the religious transformation of society itself. "For the culturalist the crucial test is how Christians relate to the broad, even institutionalized patterns of this world. This test is justified, in turn, on biblical grounds: the Bible becomes a book addressing primarily questions of culture."<sup>9</sup> The Bible supplies resources and understandings to enable social transformation, and it serves to critique social patterns as they actually exist and emerge. This perspective, from the "Social Gospel" to most forms of liberation theology, is always strongly present in efforts at public theology. It is easily combined with moralism and the two are often intertwined in a manner not easily distinguished.

At this point it is well to mention that these four types are "ideal" types. Groups that appeal to Scripture in efforts at public theology are not likely to

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<sup>7</sup>Richard J. Mouw, "The Bible in Twentieth-Century Protestantism: A Preliminary Taxonomy," *The Bible in America*, ed. Hatch and Noll, 139-162.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

maintain an absolute purity in modelling only one of the options. In reality groups will frequently mix appeals, but it is also likely that one or two of the types of appeal will predominate. Sometimes groups say their appeal to Scripture is of one type when examination of their application of the Bible's resources reveals another.

It is also well to remember that these four types are all descriptive of those who hold the Bible to be Scripture and use it in some way to inform Christian moral life as it engages the public arena. There are also, of course, those who regard the Bible only as great literature, or as an important witness to cultural history, or even as an edifying document which has no greater status than other repositories of "wisdom." In the public sphere such persons may appeal to the Bible in the course of public discussion, but such an appeal will stand side by side and be little different than appeals to other sources of cultural wisdom, e.g., Shakespeare and Greek philosophy.

#### IV. TOWARD AN INTEGRATED ROLE FOR SCRIPTURE IN PUBLIC THEOLOGY

We are now ready to suggest a number of elements that in our opinion must be present in any adequate understanding of the Bible's role in public theology. The list is not exhaustive but

intended to be suggestive. Space limitations permit only brief suggestion in the hope of stimulating further discussion in the churches on how to judge the legitimacy of our efforts and those of others to use Scripture in shaping public theology.

1. Any particular use of Scripture as a support for the church's contribution to public discussion must be measured against the fuller witness of the whole biblical canon. We have already discussed the importance of canon above. Here we shall only add that such a canonical context for the use of particular biblical resources need not be always visible in church statements and discussion. But the canon must lie behind our choice of particular materials from Scripture. Otherwise we have little safeguard from selection based on positions formed apart from and prior to coming to the Bible for its witness to our concern. When we do make ourselves attentive to the whole range of the biblical witness as fully as possible, then the particular words that seem most to address our concerns are still used in away that refuses to absolutize our choices. We are prevented from reducing the richness of the Bible by constantly claiming our judgments as representative of the whole of God's Word.

2. The witness of Scripture and our own public experience must be critically assessed. Scripture is not self interpreting. Even those who claim to take the Bible literally and at its face value are engaging in selection of materials and interpretation of that material. To be honest in the use of the Bible these processes of selection and interpretation must be subject to assessment. The use of human reason enters the process both at the point we strive to hear the address of Scripture (what it said) and at the point we appropriate its address for our own time (what it says). Recent discussion of biblical hermeneutics has stressed the close relationship of these two aspects of biblical theology ( descriptive and normative) and has cautioned against the notion that they can be readily separated. How one describes the biblical witness is affected by how one is per-

sonally addressed in that witness. This makes the use of critical reason in exegesis and interpretation of Scripture all the more important. Those attempting to do public theology who deny reason this role are either dishonest or seriously limited in the scope of their biblical understanding.

It is equally important that our experience (especially, in this instance, our public experience) be critically assessed as well. The Bible will have to be related to our public experience if it is to have any effective role, but too often our efforts at public theology have no criteria for judging the value of one experience over another. What is the nature and import of the public experience we wish Scripture to address? Without critical assessment the impact of our use of the Bible will be diffused and ineffective.

The goal in using reason and critical assessment in our interpretation of Scripture is not to replicate the experience of biblical communities. This is not possible. It is to seek a kind of congruence with the biblical communities' encounter with God.<sup>10</sup> We seek to find relationship to God in our world and its realities even as biblical peoples did in theirs. Their struggles, hopes, visions, values, and stories inform our own unique encounter with God. When we appeal to the Bible as a foundational resource in doing public theology we are seeking not a response to a book but response to the person of God revealed there.<sup>11</sup>

3. An adequate understanding of the Bible's role in public theology must recognize and

take into account the pluralism and diversity of Scripture.<sup>12</sup> The richness of the biblical witness has often been severely reduced by the way in which we use and appeal to the Bible. The diversity of Scripture calls for an approach to its use that will recognize its ability to address us in different ways. The Bible will not function in the same manner for every situation in which we might seek biblical understanding and support. Appropriation of God's Word will necessarily be multi-faceted in approach if we are to honor the richness of the Bible. Reductionist approaches of the right or the left seriously undercut the authority of Scripture, and make our use of the Bible little more than a place where we seek reflections of views already shaped by other factors and influences.

4. Finally, if the Bible is to play an authentic role in public theology, then its use must ultimately be grounded in the concrete reality of the life of the church even as it speaks to the world. The Bible is the church's book.<sup>13</sup> If it is to be a faith resource, and not just a piece of human cultural history, then we must receive its Word in the context of the full life of the community of faith and struggle there with the manner in which that Word addresses us and the world.

Much has been written on the church as the important context for Christian ethics.<sup>14</sup> We will close here by simply calling attention to a statement in a recent and important book by Thomas W. Ogletree. He is excited by the implica-

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<sup>10</sup>I am indebted here to remarks by Max Stackhouse made in an unpublished address to the Commission on Stewardship of the National Council of Churches in December 1983.

<sup>11</sup>Some will recognize here the notion put forward by some that the Bible is less a revealed morality than a revealed reality. See James M. Gustafson, "Christian Ethics," *Religion*, ed. Paul Ramsey (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 317.

<sup>12</sup>See Paul D. Hanson, *The Diversity of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

<sup>13</sup>See Phyllis Bird, *The Bible as the Church's Book* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

<sup>14</sup>See B. Birch and L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, 125-142.

tions of the rich eschatological perspectives of Scripture which enable us as the church to be hopeful even in a broken world (where we, of course, do public theology):

From the standpoint of concrete experience, two things would seem to be crucial: some degree of alienation from the institutional arrangements of the larger society, and deep involvement with a community which is engaged in developing qualitatively distinct alternatives to those arrangements. The alienation and involvement provide points of contact for comprehending what the biblical texts are saying.<sup>15</sup>

Public theology is surely to be a way of doing theology "in but not of the world." We are of God in the church, but most of our churches display little alienation from society or willingness to pose alternatives. Thus, they also miss much of what the Bible has to say in our time. The Bible is indeed a rich resource for public theologizing, but its use, if authentic, will place us once again under the radical imperative of God's Word.

<sup>15</sup>T. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics*, 182.