

Trends in Post-Vatican II Scholarship on Scripture and Moral Theology

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Few lines from Magisterial documents are more frequently quoted in post-conciliar Catholic moral theology than this one from *Optatam Totius* 16:

Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world.

In the roughly five decades since the close of Vatican II, moral theology has been undergoing a vigorous renewal. Few, if anyone, denies that pre-conciliar Catholic moral theology required such renewal. As to what constitutes authentic renewal, what has led to deviation, and what the role of *Veritatis Splendor* is in that renewal, there is significant disagreement. One of the more specific directives regarding the renewal of moral theology in *Optatam Totius*—namely, that its scientific presentation be “nourished more on the teaching of Scripture”—would be denied by few and yet has received inconsistent attention in Catholic moral theology since the Council.

This volume includes a set of essays that attempt to respond to the call of Vatican II to do Catholic moral theology in a manner nourished more by the teaching of Scripture. The authors of the essays contained herein do not explicitly reflect on the need for such an endeavor, to what extent it has been carried out in various ways over the last half century, or how their own essays constitute such an endeavor. They simply go about doing it. Yet, how they do so invites reflection on the ways that this set of essays is illustrative of both the contemporary *status quaestionis* of scholarship on Scripture and moral theology and of certain thematic emphases in Catholic moral theology more broadly. Thus, while the main task of this essay is to introduce the essays contained in this volume, it first offers some reflections on one

trajectory of development in scholarship on Scripture and moral theology in the half century since Vatican II.

Perhaps it would help to note what this essay is *not*. It is not a *Theological Studies* genre “Notes in Moral Theology” that names all important scholarship on this topic in a certain period. Nor is it an assessment of scholarship on Scripture in moral theology in the past half century. Such an argument would have to address, for instance, what trends in that scholarship constitute genuine continuity with the Biblical renewal in the years preceding Vatican II. It would also have to address several important post-conciliar trends not treated here, including the ascendancy of liberationist accounts of Scripture and (particularly political) moral theology. Rather, the task of this essay is to introduce the essays herein, and to contextualize them by narrating one trajectory in post-Vatican II scholarship on Scripture and moral theology. That trajectory is the move from a preoccupation with method in the deluge of scholarship on Scripture and ethics in the 1970s–90s, to a contemporary emphasis on virtue and formation without such preoccupation on method. To narrate that trajectory this essay proceeds in three sections. Section One offers an account of this focus on method in the initial wave of post-Vatican II scholarship on Scripture and ethics. Section Two examines certain “hinge figures” who bring this initial wave of scholarship to its fruition and/or portend future emphases. Section Three identifies a common emphasis in contemporary scholarship on Scripture and moral theology, as exemplified in both recent works on the Sermon on the Mount and the essays in this volume.

SECTION ONE: DELUGE OF SCHOLARSHIP AFTER VATICAN II

In the roughly three decades following the Second Vatican Council, there was an explosion of scholarship on the topic of Scripture and moral theology.¹ Yet in the ensuing two decades, the degree of attention to this topic has fallen precipitously. The purpose of this section is to offer a brief overview of that initial wave of scholarship on Scripture and moral theology.² No attempt is made here at anything approaching a comprehensive bibliography of scholarship on Scripture

¹ Others commonly speak of this topic with phrases such as Scripture (or the Bible) and (Christian) ethics, or Biblical morality. Though “Scripture and moral theology” is used here, it is not used as a way to distinguish this scholarship from scholarship self-described with such other terms.

² There have been other post-conciliar attempts at describing this body of scholarship in stages. See for instance, Edouard Hamel, “Scripture and Moral Theology: 1940–1980,” *Theology Digest* 36, no. 3 (1989): 203–207. See also James Bretzke, SJ, “Scripture: The ‘Soul’ of Moral Theology? The Second Stage” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (1994): 259–271. Most recently, see Lucas Chan, SJ, “Biblical Ethics: 3D,” in *The Bible and Catholic Theological Ethics*, eds. Yiu Sing Lucas Chan, SJ, and James F. Keenan, SJ, and Ronaldo Zacharias (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 17–33. For examples of scholarship that surveys the topic based on prominent figures,

and moral theology.³ Rather, important features and contributors at various stages are narrated here in order to place this volume's essays in post-conciliar context.

In the 1970s there began a veritable deluge of scholarship on Scripture and moral theology. A helpful collection of essays presenting the *status quaestionis* at this time is Charles Curran and Richard McCormick, SJ's *Readings in Moral Theology, vol. 4: The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*.⁴ This volume exemplifies certain characteristic features of this wave of research on Scripture and moral theology. A first noteworthy feature concerns the participants in this scholarship. The essays in this volume are representative of the ecumenical character of research on this topic, with the essays split nearly in half between Catholics and Protestants. Furthermore, the volume is indicative of collaboration between moralists and Biblical scholars.⁵ Finally, this volume contains seeds of the concern to include historically under-represented perspectives on the Biblical narrative.⁶

A second characteristic of this scholarship is the extent to which it served as a platform for pressing moral theological issues of the time. Consonant with a renewal in Catholic moral theology at this time was a broader inquiry into establishing the bases for morality. For instance, what are the justifications for and role of rules in morality more broadly? There was a common distinction between Scripture as "revealed morality" and "revealed reality"—in other words, between the Scripture as source of moral norms as distinct from Scripture as revealing the truth about reality which results in normative claims. This distinction evidences inquiry into the basis and function of moral norms.⁷ There was a clear focus on the hermeneutical task of engaging

see Lucas Chan, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century: Developments, Emerging Consensus and Future Directions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013). See also Jeffrey Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth Century Portraits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ Fortunately, this task has been taken up with tremendous thoroughness by James Bretzke, SJ. See his *Bibliography on Scripture and Ethics* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), which is now updated (2017) and available electronically at www2.bc.edu/james-bretzke/ScriptureAndEthicsBibliography.pdf.

⁴ Charles Curran, SJ, and Richard McCormick, SJ eds. *Readings in Moral Theology, vol. 4: The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984).

⁵ See the following essays by Biblical scholars in *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*: Richard Hiers, "Jesus, Ethics, and the Present Situation," 1–20; Jack Sanders, "The Question of the Relevance of Jesus for Ethics Today," 45–65; and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutic: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology," 354–382.

⁶ See the following essays in *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*: James Cone, "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence," 21–44; Alfred Hennelly, "The Biblical Hermeneutics of Juan Luis Segundo," 303–320; and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, cited in n. 5.

⁷ See James Gustafson, "The Changing Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics," in *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, 133–150, at 140–141. Note that his depiction of

Scripture for moral guidance, and inquiry into the authoritative role of the community in doing so, as well as the need for “outside” sources.⁸ This inquiry had a distinct inflection among Catholic scholars given debates over authority in the wake of *Humanae Vitae*. Also prevalent at this time, especially among Catholics, was an inquiry into the distinctiveness of the Biblical ethic and Christian morality more broadly.⁹ We see therefore a second feature of this first wave of scholarship on Scripture and moral theology, namely, that it reflected broader moral theological inquiry of the day.

These first two features of post-conciliar scholarship persist today. It is the next one that is noteworthy in this introductory essay, given its difference from more recent scholarship on Scripture and moral theology as evidenced by the essays in this volume. Third and finally, this initial stage of scholarship on Scripture and moral theology was dominated by the identification of a method for “using” Scripture and an attempt to encyclopedically “cover” all Scripture (or one of the Testaments).¹⁰ Comprehensive surveys of various approaches to Bible and morality, or the distinct tasks in doing so, were common at the time. It was common to speak of how to “use” Scripture in moral theology.¹¹ It was also common to speak of Scripture as one of the “sources” of morality, especially as part of the so-called Wesleyan

revealed morality was focused on moral norms. For his four types of using Scripture in such a way, see his “The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study,” in *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, 151–177, at 159–168.

⁸ For an example of the hermeneutical import of the Christian community, see Stanley Hauerwas, “The Moral Authority of Scripture: The Politics and Ethics of Remembering,” in *Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, 242–275.

⁹ Charles Curran’s essay focuses squarely on this topic. See “The Role and Function of the Scriptures in Moral Theology,” in *Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, 178–212. See also the roughly contemporaneous volume edited by Charles Curran and Richard McCormick, *Readings in Moral Theology* vol. 2: *The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980).

¹⁰ By encyclopedic here, I reference not the length or quantity but the genre as described by Alasdair MacIntyre in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). Such approaches try not only to cover everything in the field of scholarship, but to organize or categorize that field through a schema of comprehensive categories. For such examples see: James Gustafson, “The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: Methodological Study,” in *Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, 151–177, especially at 159–168; Sandra Schneiders, “From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture,” *Horizons* 8, no. 1 (1981): 23–39; and Kenneth Himes, “Scripture and Ethics: A Review Essay,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15, no. 2 (1985): 65–73.

¹¹ This phrasing is found in the subtitle of the Curran, SJ, and McCormick, SJ, volume on this topic. See also another important book on the topic from this era, Thomas Ogletree’s *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics: A Constructive Essay* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983).

quadrangle including also tradition, reason, and experience.¹² Gustafson speaks in this context of Scripture as providing “data.”¹³ The breadth and complexity of schematizations of a method or of various methods, figures, or tasks during this period of scholarship were quite impressive. Yet an irony of such an emphasis is that there was often very little engagement with particular texts of Scripture. Of course, exposure to and formation by Scripture presumably drove such scholarship. In fact, at times scholarship focused precisely on this dynamic.¹⁴ But even in these cases, scholars most commonly addressed and analyzed how to use Scripture for morality rather than focus on particular Scriptural texts themselves.

SECTION TWO: HINGE FIGURES ON SCRIPTURE AND MORAL THEOLOGY

Certain works in the 1990s warrant closer examination, as they serve as hinges between the first wave of scholarship in the decades after Vatican II and work in the twenty-first century. They represent a sort of culmination of the aforementioned emphasis in the first period and/or signals of the next wave of scholarship. One example of the former is Frank Matera’s *New Testament Ethics*.¹⁵ This book perfectly represents the encyclopedic character of the first wave of scholarship as it covers nearly the entire New Testament. Here we have a master Biblical scholar who distills from each Gospel and Pauline letter an overarching theme to help break open that book’s ethical guidance. Matera’s command of Biblical scholarship grounds his analysis of each book. He does not reflect extensively on the exegetical and hermeneutical tasks, though his mastery of these tasks as a Scripture scholar seeps through each chapter. In some ways, he signals future scholarship that focuses more squarely on particular texts rather than method. Yet his status as a Biblical scholar working on Scripture and

¹² Gustafson seems to be the source of this approach to Christian ethics in this era. See his *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 139–144. See also Lisa Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 5. In her far more recent *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008), Margaret Farley deploys this method and claims her students for decades would recognize it from her teaching; see 182, n. 22. For an example of Catholic moral theology that continues to deploy this quadrangle today, see Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler, *Virtue and Theological Ethics: Toward a Renewed Ethical Method* (New York: Orbis, 2018). For description of Scripture as a source in quite a distinct context, alongside tradition and Magisterium, see Servais Pinckaers, OP, *L’Evangile et la Morale* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 83–100.

¹³ See James Gustafson, “The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics,” 166.

¹⁴ In addition to Hauerwas’s essay, see Richard McCormick’s “Scripture, Liturgy, Character, and Morality,” in *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology*, 289–302.

¹⁵ Frank Matera, *New Testament Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

moral theology, and especially the comprehensive nature of his research on the topic, make his classic book a culmination of that first wave of scholarship.

The very same year as Matera's *New Testament Ethics*, Protestant Biblical scholar Richard Hays released his *Moral Vision of the New Testament*.¹⁶ This book so successfully brought to fruition the goals of the late twentieth century wave of scholarship on Scripture and moral theology that it may be responsible for the decline in scholarship on the topic. This book is that definitive. It is divided into four tasks. The first one, the descriptive task, identifies in a manner akin to Matera the key themes in each of the Gospels as well as the Pauline and Johannine epistles. It even wades into the heated debate of that time over the historical Jesus. As with Matera, here we see a master Biblical scholar at work, grounding his ethical claims in a command of Scriptural scholarship. The book then turns to the second, "synthetic," task and identifies three overarching themes that are at the center of the ethical vision of the entire New Testament: new creation, cross, and community. His third task, the "hermeneutical," explicitly attends to method, or how Scripture is "used." After a chapter overviewing five important approaches to Scripture by twentieth century scholars (Niebuhr, Barth, Yoder, Hauerwas, and Schussler Fiorenza), he presents his own method including a set of clear guidelines. Here we have attention to method that is both comprehensive and trajectory-setting. The final task, the "pragmatic," attends to how Scripture shapes and informs certain contentious issues in moral theology (e.g., divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, warfare, ethnic conflict and anti-Semitism, and abortion).

Hays's magisterial work represents the clear culmination of a characteristic feature of scholarship in the years preceding his work. It evidences all the key features of the methodological focus of such scholarship, including: an encyclopedic approach to the New Testament; explicit attention to the hermeneutical task approached both through a sample of prominent scholars and a constructive method; a constructive synthesis of what the New Testament says about ethics; and attention to ethical quandaries so characteristic of late twentieth century moral theology. It would be too much to claim that Hays's book decisively ended all debate on Scripture and ethics. Indeed, there were importantly different approaches to the topic even at this time. Though some of them are addressed by Hays (e.g., Yoder, Hauerwas), they would not be accurately described as part of Hays's project, which is far more encyclopedic in method.¹⁷ Yet it is certainly the case that for

¹⁶ Richard Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996).

¹⁷ In addition to the work of Yoder and Hauerwas, see also Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) and Stephen

anyone reading scholarship on Scripture and moral theology in this period, Hays's book would have to be on the reading list. As with Matera, there are hints of future directions. For instance, although neither of the terms "virtue" nor "character" appear in the index, the constructive synthetic proposal of cross, new creation, and community portends future scholarship emphasizing the role of Scripture in ongoing formation in the life of discipleship.¹⁸ Characteristically focused on methodology and hermeneutics, Hays addresses Biblical texts primarily encyclopedically, although his final section on contested moral issues starts with the relevant particular texts.

A third work that deserves further attention as a hinge to the next wave of scholarship is William Spohn's 1999 *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*. Though he entered the scholarly discourse on Scripture and moral theology after that initial spate in the 1970s, this Catholic student of Gustafson is as important a contributor to that scholarship as anyone. He burst on to the scene with his 1984 *What are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?*, which offers a six-fold summary of various approaches to Scripture and moral theology—yet ironically very little engagement with particular Scriptural texts, as was common for scholarship at the time.¹⁹ He wrote influential scholarly articles on the topic in ensuing years, and his scholarship culminated in *Go and Do Likewise* before his tragic passing in 2005.²⁰ In some ways, this book is characteristic of the first wave of scholarship on Scripture and moral theology. It is an argument for method. And although Scriptural texts such as the Psalms, the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Proclamation of the Kingdom, and the Lord's Prayer feature prominently, they support the methodological claims rather than structure the argument. That said, the book is importantly innovative in its explicit attempt to do ethics based on the person of Jesus Christ, accessed in large part through the Scriptures, and followed in a life of discipleship that Spohn terms "spirituality." His method is explicitly virtue-centered, and he is concerned throughout the book to address how encountering Jesus shapes one's perceptions, dispositions, and identity.

Fowl's *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998). In these approaches Nicholas Lash's "Performing the Scriptures," *The Furrow* 33, no. 8 (1982): 467–474, is cited prominently.

¹⁸ Hays's section on Hauerwas mentions the latter's treatments of these topics; see 253–265.

¹⁹ William C. Spohn, SJ, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984, 1996). For a recent examination of Spohn's work in the context of twentieth century Catholic moral theology, see James F. Keenan, SJ, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 75–77.

²⁰ William C. Spohn, SJ, *Go and Do Likewise* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

In these latter ways the book is an important contribution to scholarship on Scripture and ethics that represents both a culmination of prior work on the topic and a premonition of future directions in that field.

One final scholar warrants mention as a hinge figure for Scripture and moral theology. A case can be made that Servais Pinckaers, OP's 1995 *Sources of Christian Ethics* is the most important and influential book in Catholic moral theology after Vatican II.²¹ Though the book contains chapters on the Sermon on the Mount and Pauline ethics, the book's focus is not the topic of Scripture and moral theology per se, but rather constitutes a larger project aiming to restore happiness and virtue to their previously prominent place in Catholic moral theology. So, while his project is thoroughly informed by Scripture, it is not a book primarily on Scripture and moral theology. This is even true of his 1990 *L'Évangile et la morale*.²² This latter book (like *Sources*) contains no significant treatment of methodology. It is an account of the Spirit-animated life, containing essays on topics such as the new law, infused virtues, gifts of the Holy Spirit, Church, and evangelical counsels, as well as classic moral topics and issues such as the moral act, conscience, marriage, and violence. Though there are brief treatments of (again) both the Sermon on the Mount and Paul's ethics, one would be hard pressed to describe either of these books, absent their titles, as works on Scripture and moral theology. Rather, they represent Pinckaers' overall project of a Thomistic moral theology firmly rooted in sources that include Sacred Scripture; particularly in his focus on the Sermon on the Mount, but also in his account of the moral life and a Spirit-animated formation in virtue, Pinckaers augurs and informs future scholarship on Scripture and moral theology.

SECTION THREE: CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH ON SCRIPTURE AND MORAL THEOLOGY

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of a survey of scholarship on Scripture and moral theology over the past five decades is the marked difference in quantity of research on the topic. The initial explosion of research in the 1970s lasted through the 1980s and into the 1990s. Yet the volume of such work drops precipitously after 2000.²³ Anecdotally, during my own doctoral studies at Notre Dame in the late 1990s,

²¹ Servais Pinckaers, OP, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble, OP (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995). For an example of just such a case, see David Cloutier and William C. Mattison III, "The Resurgence of Virtue in Recent Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (2014): 228–259, at 238–241. Note that Pinckaers' book is the English translation of the French *Les sources de la morale chrétienne* (Paris: Cerf, 1986).

²² Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *L'Évangile et la morale* (Paris: Cerf, 1990).

²³ Quantitative support for this observation comes from a review of Bretzke's bibliography. Though updated in 2017, the enormous amount of scholarship before 2000 is massively disproportionate to that after 2000.

doctoral candidacy exams in moral theology always featured a question on Scripture and moral theology, and the body of scholarship on the topic was robust and well-known. Twenty years later, students far less frequently choose to do Scripture and moral theology as one of their topics, and when they do it is more difficult to assemble a robust bibliography with materials from the past two decades.

That said, the work does continue, and observations about the ways it is similar and yet distinct from that earlier burst of scholarship are warranted. As for similarities, this continues to be a markedly ecumenical area of research, with important contributions by both Catholics and Protestants, at times in collaboration. The work is also still being done in a cross-sub-disciplinary manner, with contributions from both moralists and Biblical scholars. Finally, a focus on liberationist topics and inclusion of under-represented voices has not only continued but greatly expanded.²⁴ This is unsurprising since research on Scripture and moral theology continues to reflect current trends in moral theology more broadly. To name one such trend that characterizes the essays in this volume, there has been a massive surge in attention to virtue in treatments of Scripture and moral theology, reflective of a resurgence in attention to virtue in Catholic moral theology beginning just before the turn of the century.²⁵

As for differences, the most immediately obvious one was noted above, i.e., the significant decrease in amount of scholarship on the topic. But the conceptually interesting differences identified here and exemplified in this volume's essays are a far greater focus on specific Biblical texts rather than an attempt to comprehensively "cover" all of Scripture, and significantly less explicit attention to questions of hermeneutics and methodology, generally in favor of a focus on formation and virtue. Put bluntly, recent scholarship focuses less on *how* to do Scripture and moral theology. It simply does it. This is not of course a claim that recent scholarship achieves some sort of immediate access to the true meaning of the text without need of hermeneutical

²⁴ Indeed, an analysis of this trend warrants an essay of its own. A review of Bretzke, SJ's bibliography reveals that though there are proportionally fewer works on Scripture and moral theology post-2000, among those works a larger proportion explicitly addresses the topic with a concern for under-represented voices, and it seems also true that proportionally more of the work is being done *by* scholars from under-represented groups. Though it is not focused directly on Scripture and moral theology, mention should be made here of James F. Keenan, SJ's Catholic Theological Ethics in a World Church initiative (CTEWC), which has fostered greater awareness of scholarship from beyond Europe and North America, and engendered greater collaboration among ethicists internationally. An essay on increased emphasis on liberationist themes and contextual theology in recent scholarship on Scripture and moral theology could surely focus on the fifth volume to come from CTEWC, Chan, Keenan, and Zacharias, eds., *The Bible and Catholic Theological Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 2017).

²⁵ For more on this resurgence, see Cloutier and Mattison, "The Resurgence of Virtue in Recent Moral Theology."

acumen and nuance. Yet when scholarship such as the essays in this volume turn to Scripture to inform contemporary moral issues, that is generally done absent any extended inquiry into method. Rather than such an emphasis primarily on method and concerned to cover all of Scripture, recent scholarship is increasingly characterized by an emphasis on *formation* and focus on specific texts.

These features, a focus on both formation and particular texts rather than method and/or more comprehensive focus on the whole of Scripture (or the New Testament), represent one important difference between twenty-first century scholarship and late twentieth century scholarship, one that is evidenced in the essays of this volume.²⁶ The following two parts of this section further examine these features of contemporary scholarship on Scripture and ethics. The second part turns to the enclosed essays in this volume. The first part utilizes a sample of this scholarship focused on the Sermon on the Mount. Once again, the goal here is neither to offer a comprehensive review of all excellent recent scholarship on Scripture and ethics, nor to claim that the features identified here are the only important features of that scholarship.²⁷ Rather, the goal is to situate the essays in this volume in the context of one trend in that scholarship.

Recent Scholarship on Scripture and Moral Theology: The Sermon on the Mount

Why focus on scholarship on the Sermon on the Mount? After all, if one claim of this essay is that more recent work on Scripture and

²⁶ There are exceptions to the increasingly common focus on specific texts in recent scholarship. Ben Witherington III has embarked on a quite encyclopedic project on Scripture (the New Testament) and ethics. See his *The Indelible Image: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament*, vol. 1: *The Individual Witness*, and vol. 2: *The Collective Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009, 2010). For a comparable project on the Old Testament, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004). Wright's book is reminiscent of an earlier wave of scholarship in its survey of various methods of doing Old Testament Ethics. His approach is encyclopedic in tackling the entire Old Testament, though he approaches it via themes rather than all of its books or sections of books. For another recent book that encyclopedically attends to the entirety of the Bible through various moral topics, see John Collins, *What Are Biblical Values? What the Bible Says on Key Ethical Issues* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

²⁷ For instance, another category of books on Scripture and moral theology left unaddressed in this essay are those that trace one theme through the entirety of Scripture (or one Testament). In addition to the works (e.g., Gary Anderson) treated below in the context of Stroud's essay, consider several such works by (this volume's co-editor) Matthew Levering, including *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); *The Betrayal of Charity: The Sins that Sabotage Divine Love* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); and *Aquinas's Eschatological Ethics and the Virtue of Temperance* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

moral theology focuses on specific texts, it seems question-begging to focus the inquiry this way. There are two reasons for this basis for a sample of recent scholarship. First, at the conference from which the enclosed essays are drawn, there was a session on two of the following books on the Sermon. Second and more importantly, the selection of this topic reflects a growing focus on that text in the past two decades, a focus that was missing in that earlier surge of scholarship, and that constitutes a return to prominence of this text in the broader context of the Christian tradition. Augustine said the Sermon offers “the complete way of living the Christian life,” containing “all the precepts that inform such a life” (*De sermo domini in monte*, 1.1.1).²⁸ Thomas Aquinas regarded it as the written version of the new law (ST I-II q. 108, a. 3 and I-II q. 106, a. 1). So perhaps it should be no surprise that there has been a return to particular focus on the Sermon in recent scholarship on Scripture and moral theology. Four books that do so are examined here.²⁹

In 2003, Glen Stassen and David Gushee, both Protestant ethicists, published *Kingdom Ethics*. The book is heavily shaped by the Sermon, if not “on” the Sermon, and thus it is a sort of “hinge” book for this section akin to those books in Section Two.³⁰ Its approach to Christian ethics is based on the Kingdom of God and forming a Kingdom people, but it does so primarily through the beatitudes (which it calls “virtues for the Kingdom”) and through attention to character. It then turns to certain methodological issues in Christian ethics, including authority and Scripture as well as the status of moral norms, both common topics in that first wave of scholarship reviewed in Section One. Its review of a dozen or so commonly addressed issues in Christian ethics is more framed *by* the Sermon than *on* the Sermon. But two features of this book portend recent scholarship on Scripture and ethics. First, it offers a careful reading of the beatitudes that is attentive to Biblical

²⁸ Accessed at www.augustinus.it/latino/montagna/index2.htm; translation mine: “*perfectam vitae christianae modum*” and “*praecepta esse omnia quae ad informandam vitam pertinent.*”

²⁹ Though just four such books are treated here, they by no means represent the whole of scholarship on Scripture and moral theology focusing on the Sermon. See also Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character and Decision-Making in Matthew 5–7* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2006); Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1999); Frank Matera, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Perfect Measure of the Christian Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013). Finally, see the excellent sets of essays in various issues of volume 22 (2009) of *Studies in Christian Ethics*.

³⁰ David Gushee published a second edition of this book in 2017, after Glen Stassen’s passing. He re-organized the book into two main parts, the first on methodology and the second on particular issues. This is more representative of the earlier wave of scholarship on Scripture and ethics. But, interestingly enough, he also renamed the various “issue” chapters to more explicitly conform to passages in the Sermon on the Mount.

scholarship.³¹ Second, it quite consciously adopts a virtue approach to morality.³² This approach, it is safe to say, dominates the next three books examined here.

The next book is Lucas Chan, SJ's *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life*.³³ It is actually not a book on the Sermon of the Mount per se. Yet, its focus on the beatitudes and the commandments, both of which dominate Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount, make it a fitting inclusion in this section. Before examining this book, a word is in order on Chan's work more broadly.³⁴ Before his tragic premature passing in 2015, Lucas was establishing himself as an authority in Scripture and ethics. His revised dissertation, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century: Developments, Emerging Consensus, and Future Directions* offers an encyclopedic overview of this field through an analysis of four Scripture scholars doing ethics and four moralists working on Scripture.³⁵ Its encyclopedic scope and focus on method were more characteristic of earlier work on Scripture and moral theology, but he made two important contributions that continue to characterize more recent work. First, he emphasized how important it is that Biblical scholarship and moral theology be done in conjunction with one another, even making this a basis for his account of the stages in recent scholarship on Scripture

³¹ Whether the beatitudes are understood as virtues (as in this book) or as related to the virtues (see Chan as well as Mattison below), a focus on the beatitudes is common in the turn to virtue in recent work on Scripture and moral theology. For another "hinge" text where the beatitudes feature prominently even as the rest of the text focuses primarily on methodological criteria for doing Scripture and moral theology, see the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *The Bible and Morality: The Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008). Interestingly enough, it aligns each of its six specific methodological criteria with a virtue (104).

³² The growing prominence of a virtue approach to morality in scholarship on Scripture and moral theology is evident in the two books on virtue and Scripture published by moral theologian James F. Keenan, SJ, and Biblical scholar Daniel Harrington's *Jesus and Virtue Ethics* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 2002) and *Paul and Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010). As noted in the introduction to *Paul and Virtue Ethics*, the claim is that a virtue approach to morality can help readers better understand Paul (or the Gospels), and in turn that the Scriptures provide a "lens" to understand virtue ethics (xii).

³³ Lucas Chan, SJ, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

³⁴ For a review of Chan's work in a recent volume dedicated to him, see James F. Keenan, SJ, "Hospitality: Interpreting Lucas Chan's Work Through a Timely, Biblical Virtue from the Book of Ruth," in *Bridging Scripture and Moral Theology: Essays in Dialogue with Yiu Sing Lucas Chan, SJ*, eds. Michael Cover, John Theide, and Joshua Ezra Burns (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 3–22.

³⁵ Lucas Chan, SJ, *Biblical Ethics in the 21st Century: Developments, Emerging Consensus, and Future Directions* (Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013).

and moral theology.³⁶ Second, he makes a case for the particular importance of virtue in doing Scripture and moral theology, a position that features prominently in recent scholarship on the topic.

As for Chan's book under spotlight here, his focus on particular Scriptural texts models the collaboration with Biblical scholars that he lauds in other work. He engages several prominent recent Biblical scholars in his interpretations, especially of the beatitudes. His concern for formation is evident in the subtitle, which accurately depicts the book's accessibility and formative nature. Perhaps its most creative aspect is its proposal of a virtue for each commandment or beatitude. Alignments of various Scriptural "sets" in the Christian moral tradition have a long and distinguished history extending at least to Augustine's alignment of beatitudes, gifts of the Holy Spirit, and petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Chan's effort thus represents a deeply traditional move, and also a way to present the convergence of a virtue-centered approach to morality with the beatitudes and especially the commandments, the latter of which are too often regarded as non-telological norms that are only artificially connected to virtues.

Another recent book, my own monograph *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective*, similarly exhibits characteristic features of recent work on Scripture and moral theology. It obviously focuses on a particular text and evidences the robust engagement with Biblical scholarship that has continued to characterize scholarship in Scripture and moral theology. Like most recent scholarship in this area, its focus is less on method than on what the text at hand offers as to formation in the Christian life. That is not to say it has no method. Similar to other such recent works, it adopts what it calls a "virtue-centered approach to morality." The consistent claim of the book is that bringing such an approach to the Sermon illuminates moral claims that might otherwise be missed. Conversely, this authoritative gospel text does not simply endorse classical virtue ethics claims, but rather offers an account of them transformed in the life of graced discipleship.

This book uses various sections of the Sermon on the Mount to launch Scripturally-informed inquiries into foundational questions in a virtue-centered approach to moral theology. For instance, the beatitudes prompt an examination of the relationship between good action and happiness. The antitheses prompt inquiry not only into the way Jesus fulfills the old law, but how rules can in various ways depict activities constitutive of the goals toward which they point. The Matthew 6 passages on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving offer a sort of disciplined process of habituation endemic to any classical virtue ethics, even as their ordering all things toward love of our heavenly Father

³⁶ See Chan, "Biblical Ethics: 3D," 18–22.

offers an account of charity commanding all our activities that is foreign to classical virtue. The same may be said by the various sayings in Matthew 6 and 7 on the last end, prudence and justice, all of which are classical virtue ethics topics but are radically transformed in the context of faith in a God of provident gratuity. The consistent approach of the book is to deploy the resources of classical virtue ethics to understand the formation offered in the Sermon, a formation radically transformed in the context of faith in and love of our heavenly Father.³⁷

As with Chan's book, this book offers some constructive alignments of virtues with various parts of the Sermon, in a manner that harks back to Augustine even as it focuses on the three theological and four cardinal virtues. The Introduction offers an alignment of parts of the entire Sermon text with the seven theological and cardinal virtues, and the concluding chapter aligns the petitions of the Lord's Prayer with these seven virtues. These alignments are more playful and mutually illuminating than restrictive or reductive, suggesting a "synergy between Scripture and the tradition of the virtues [that] 'breaks open a new space for apprehending and contemplating the beauty of the wisdom that is present in these words.'"³⁸ Regardless of the fruitfulness of that endeavor, it is yet another indication of how heavily virtue is used in recent work to break open the Scriptures for guidance on moral formation.

A fourth and final important recent contribution to Scripture and moral theology that displays characteristics common to such scholarship today is Jonathan Pennington's *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary*.³⁹ Pennington is a Protestant Scripture scholar, and thus this work demonstrates the ongoing ecumenical and cross-sub-disciplinary nature of this field. In fact, it is even evident in the format of the book itself. As befitting a Scripture scholar, half of the book's chapters offer a standard genre verse-by-verse commentary of the Sermon.⁴⁰ Yet the other half of the chapters, which include two on context and structure more common to Scripture scholarship, address foundational moral topics such as

³⁷ For another example of assimilating classical virtue ethics and a Scriptural text on formation, see N. T. Wright's focus on character and formation in *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

³⁷ William C. Mattison, III, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology: A Virtue Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³⁸ Mattison, *The Sermon on the Mount and Moral Theology*, 15, citing Patrick Clark.

³⁹ Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

⁴⁰ For a comparable book from Protestant Scripture scholarship that examines ethics through a particular text in the style of commentary, see Brian Brock and Bernd Wannewetsch, *The Malady of the Christian Body: A Theological Exposition of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2016).

makarios, *teleios*, and a variety of other key moral terms in the Sermon. The climactic chapter even offers a “sketch” of the Sermon’s account of human flourishing, and the (literal) last words of the book are given to Pinckaers. Such is the thoroughness of integration of Biblical and moral scholarship in this book.

Though all of these chapters reward close reading, the chapter on *makarios* as used in the beatitudes—which Pennington chooses to translate “Flourishing are ...”—is a masterpiece of harmonic Biblical and moral scholarship. Through examination of the continuity and difference between the Hebrew and Greek terms for active flourishing of people (*asre*, *makarios*) on the one hand and the terms for more receptive blessing by God (*brk*, *eulogetos*) on the other hand, Pennington demonstrates how the common practice of using the English term “blessed” for both obscures the sense of flourishing. Though the use of a common term is a helpful reminder that it is only through God’s blessing (grace) that people flourish, “*the English term ‘blessed’ is so heavily loaded with the narrower sense of ‘divine favor’ that the sense of human flourishing is almost always lost.*”⁴¹ This early argument of Pennington’s book is not only a linchpin of the rest of the book, but a perfect example of Biblical and moral scholarship in concert, the deployment of virtue methodology for the latter, and a focus on a particular text with concern for formation in the life of discipleship.

It is precisely these features that characterize scholarship on Scripture and moral theology today. In continuity with earlier, post-Vatican II scholarship, we find an emphasis on the contributions of both Biblical and moral scholarship. We similarly find ongoing ecumenical contributions. There is far less explicit focus on methodology and hermeneutics today. This is obviously not to say there is no method. In fact, the use of a virtue-centered approach to morality and Scripture has become rather dominant and seems to focus particularly on the importance of Scripture for formation in the life of discipleship. But surveying various methods and offering encyclopedic coverage of Scripture are far less prominent than in earlier scholarship. Focus on particular texts and a virtue-based concern for formation are evident also in the essays included in this volume, to which we now turn.

Current Scholarship on Scripture and Moral Theology: Enclosed Essays

The first section of essays in this volume perfectly exemplifies the features of recent scholarship on Scripture and moral theology above. Jana Bennett, a Catholic moral theologian, and Jonathan Pennington, a Protestant Scripture scholar, examine faith and mercy in Abraham

⁴¹ Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 50, italics in original.

and Joseph, respectively, focusing not only on particular texts but also on exemplary figures.

Bennett's essay begins with recent research on the increasing number of "Nones," people who self-identify with no particular faith tradition. She finds that such people grasp a rather attenuated notion of the faith, which they disavow. At least as disturbingly, she finds a comparable account of faith even in those who self-identify as Christian. This portends that, to the extent this inadequate account of faith is a contributing factor, there is far more disaffiliation to come. Bennett describes a common contemporary view of faith as deductively rational (or alternatively subjective and internal), individualistic, and lacking in its account of God. In response, Bennett looks to the father of faith, Abraham, and distills four features from Genesis 11-22 that counter this attenuated account. She finds in Abraham an account of faith as an ongoing journey, an encounter with a God both hidden and revealed, a communal endeavor, and a response to God who shares God's own life. Her essay is a perfect example of turning to Scripture to remedy a contemporary need for formation in faith.

Catholic moralists who appreciate Pope Francis's emphasis on mercy will find an ally in Protestant Scripture scholar Jonathan Pennington. Pennington's essay presents a case that the primary project of the Gospels is one of *paideia*, which he translates as "formation," and that a crucial tool in that endeavor is the presentation of exemplars, particularly certain "round" characters throughout the Gospels. Pennington also makes a case for righteousness ("justice") and mercy as the heart of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom in the Gospel of Matthew. Though Jesus is of course the central protagonist of that mission, Pennington explains how disciples of Jesus in all ages are given exemplars of discipleship in the Gospels. He makes a case that

Joseph proves to be the exemplar who sets the tone for Jesus' primary moral teaching—that to enter into the kingdom of heaven one must have a righteousness greater than the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), a righteousness marked by mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and love.

Though we never hear words from Joseph, and he recedes after the first two chapters of Matthew, Pennington documents the ways Joseph exemplifies the justice and mercy that emerge as the heart of Jesus' teaching, particularly as articulated in the Sermon on the Mount.

After this opening pair of essays on exemplar figures from the Scriptures, three essays focus on various aspects of conversion in the life of discipleship, each with a focus on certain Scripture passages. Anton ten Klooster observes that the opening words in Matthew's Gospel for both John the Baptist (3:1) and Jesus (4:17) are calls for conversion, to repent. He uses Lonergan to situate the centrality of conversion for the life of discipleship and turns to recent Biblical

scholarship on these passages as well as Thomas Aquinas's *Commentary on Matthew* to detail both the necessary relationship between conversion and repentance, and the necessity of God's grace throughout the conversion process. These themes, along with his finding that conversion is as much an ongoing process as an initiating event, present an account of conversion that mines the Scriptural witness for ongoing formation in the life of discipleship.

This theme of conversion as ongoing dominates Daria Spezzano's essay on conversion. She examines the Scriptural basis—from Lamentations, John, and especially Romans—for Aquinas's account of conversion. Spezzano demonstrates in her essay that God's grace is needed for all parts of the "progressive journey" that is conversion, not just at its very start, but also through the whole of one's life. As with other essays in this collection, she manages to do rather technical (in this case Thomistic) moral theology in a manner suffused with Scripture, showing how key moves in Thomas' account of grace, even if using terms not found in Scripture, are thoroughly shaped by his understanding of these Scripture passages.

James Stroud continues the emphasis on conversion in this volume through an examination of the inherent connection between repentance and almsgiving. He first examines Old Testament scholarship on the book of Daniel, as well as Gary Anderson's works on *Sin* and *Charity*, to make a case for the ways that almsgiving is requisite for the ongoing process of conversion and in turn further disposes one to receive God's grace.⁴² He similarly examines the tight connection in Luke's Gospel between change of heart and almsgiving, further supporting his claim that almsgiving is "not simply a work of charity or justice but serves as an important formative practice of repentance for the Christian disciple that leads the disciple to place one's faith in God, to seek repentance for one's sins, and subsequently disposes one to the reception of grace."

As should be clear in these three essays, conversion is not a "one and done" phenomenon, but an ongoing, active process powered by God's grace. This is reminiscent of the exemplars addressed in the first pair of essays, especially Abraham, whose faith is presented as a journey. This view of conversion militates against any sharp division between conversion and ongoing growth in the life of discipleship. In

⁴² See Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) and *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013). Anderson's work on morally important themes across Biblical passages has stimulated further valuable studies, including Nathan Eubank, *Wages of Cross-Bearing and Debt of Sin: The Economy of Heaven in Matthew's Gospel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013); David J. Downs, *Alms: Charity, Reward, and Atonement in Early Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); and Anthony Giambone, *Sacramental Charity, Creditor Christology, and the Economy of Salvation in Luke's Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

that sense, the final group of two essays, each of which focuses on an aspect of that ongoing growth, fits seamlessly with the preceding essays.

John Meinert examines the command-counsel distinction based on Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7. As with other contributors to this volume, he exemplifies rigorous attention to both moral and biblical scholarship. Rather than proof-texting these passages to support moral theological positions determined prior to engagement with the text, or simply seeking moral rules in the text, Meinert engages the texts as authoritatively illuminating the difficult moral issue he treats, namely, the extent to which a distinction between command and counsel is necessarily laden with certain assumptions now recognized as problematic in contemporary moral theology. Meinert masterfully salvages the command-counsel distinction, shorn of problematic corollaries such as a “two-tiered ethic,” precisely by reviewing pre-modern and contemporary Biblical interpretation of the relevant passages. Meinert offers an account of the counsels that delineates in what sense they are for all and in what sense they are not. He deploys Pinckaers’s notions of morality of happiness and freedom for excellence to show how the counsels serve a role in growth and perfection (Matthew 5:48 and 19:21) in the life of discipleship.

In certain ways, this volume of essays ends (with Andrew Kim) where it began (with Jana Bennett): namely, by examining inadequacy in a common contemporary notion and turning to Scriptural resources to correct it. Whereas Bennett examined faith, Kim examines addiction, and his essay begins with an assessment of the accuracy and inaccuracy of common contemporary accounts of addiction as a disease. Exemplifying the scholastic dictum that grace perfects nature, Kim turns to Paul’s account of his slavery to sin and freedom through Christ in Romans 7:13–25 for guidance in articulating a four-stage account of a grace-enabled recovery from addiction, understood as analogous with disease but not reducible to it. Drawing also on Romans 1 and passages from James, Kim explores the compatibility of grace and ongoing sin, all with an eye toward assisting addicts on the path of recovery.

Although presented here in three loose groups, the seven essays of this volume are unified not only by the methodological considerations examined in the bulk of this introductory essay. They are also unified in their focus on how Scripture informs the life of discipleship in a manner that is sustained by God’s grace as perfecting nature, and which continues in an ongoing manner—even after conversion—as there ever remains room for growth in faith, hope, and love in this life. To that extent these essays, even while delving into technical issues in moral theology, constitute a common effort to draw on God’s Word to

nourish formation in the graced life of discipleship to Jesus Christ, the Word of God.⁴³ **M**

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⁴³ Thanks to Matthew Levering and David Cloutier for extensive comments on earlier drafts of this essay, without which it would be far more impoverished. Obviously, any lacks remaining are my own.