

Toward an Ethics of Scripture Engagement

A Preliminary Inquiry

[For handout, see:
<https://map.bloomfire.com/posts/1049221>]

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Introduction

- What I have in mind by an ethics of Scripture is not the use of SE to teach ethics, or the question of whether Scripture engagement is ethical, but intentional attention given to the questions, What kinds of Scripture engagement (and approaches to teaching or programming Scripture engagement) are ethical, and what makes them ethical?

Introduction

- I have sometimes been left with the impression that although Scripture engagement is understood differently by different groups or people the underlying assumption is that whatever it is our goal is simply to see more of it going on.
- The assumption is that however we define Scripture Engagement it is always something good, right, and beneficial.

The Bible's Often Troubled Past

- But looking at Christian history, as well as the history of biblical interpretation, we see not only wonderful examples of the transformation of individual lives and of larger societies and cultures through the spread of the gospel, but also the truth that there is a dark side to the history of the Bible both in Western culture and the way the Bible has been used to justify the colonization and cultural imperialism which have left their marks on the geo-political and cultural landscape of the continents of our world.

Leading from Weakness?

- It seems to me that anyone promoting SE from a background with a long Christian tradition probably needs to adopt the posture similar to that of a “wounded healer” – someone who realizes that they have as much to teach others from their culture’s weaknesses and historical failures as from their achievements.

Listening to our Critics (and Victims)

- Being aware of both the good and the harm that have been carried out in the name of the Bible in my own country (including serving as a primary tool in the justification of slavery, then of racial prejudice and oppression, and of the abuse of women, among other issues), I think about what lessons regarding the ethics of Scripture engagement people from other nations and cultures might wish they could go back and discuss with Christians of past centuries in order to try to avoid or mitigate as much of the damage as possible.

Scriptural Texts Not Naïve About This

- Biblical texts themselves remind us that Scripture can be (and has been) used to do harm and to teach unhealthy things.
- Biblical authors do not share our unbridled optimism about biblical engagement always being beneficial.

The Younger Generation Sees My Generation's Blind Spots...

- The younger generations are, thankfully, particularly concerned about issues of justice and equity and also with the perception that Bible-believing Christians have not always been aligned with the side of justice or known for their reflection of the grace of Christ.
- They remind us that what some Christians might think of as faithful Scripture engagement has actually led many to conclude that Christians either know little or nothing about God (or that perhaps God does not really exist after all).

Bible Knowledge ≠ Ethical Understanding

- We sometimes get ourselves into a bind, if we hold the conviction that we can't know right from wrong until we learn it from the Bible and that it isn't until we have exegeted all that the Bible teaches that we know what is right in God's eyes and what is not.

Bible Knowledge ≠ Ethical Understanding

- Biblical texts often imply that readers/hearers should and do know what is right and what is wrong even before having read the whole Bible. When we read, for example, in Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" it is understood that the mortal(s) being addressed does not need a separate seminar on what it means to "do justice" (or an encyclopedic knowledge of every [past and future] text of Scripture to figure it out).

Bible Knowledge ≠ Ethical Understanding

- “Though Christian Scripture speaks often about justice, it neither gives a definition nor offers a theory of justice. It assumes that we know well enough what justice is. What it does do, over and over, is enjoin its readers to act justly and to right injustice. It enjoins them to do so out of love for justice. It sets those imperatives within a theological context that explains why we should love justice, why we should right injustice, and how we should understand what we are doing when we act justly and right injustice. And it establishes priorities for doing justice and for seeking to right injustice.” (Nicholas Wolterstorff)

Bible Knowledge ≠ Ethical Understanding

- We need Christian ethicists, and to remember that to be a great Christian ethicist is quite different from being a great Bible scholar.
- To say Christians do not need to know everything in the Bible to resolve ethical issues is not to say ethical decisions are easy. They are not. They are often fraught with ambiguities, judgments about competing goods and lesser evils, etc.

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- Mainly what I want to do today is to pose some questions and put forward some ethical topics for inquiry rather than to suggesting a resolution to this problem or trying to provide some definitive answer.
- In fact, I tend to think that we would do well if we could come up with a series of questions for SE practitioners to keep in mind as they go about their work, realizing that there may not always (or often) be simple or satisfying answers to some of the ethical challenges that might be raised.

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- Here are some potential and preliminary questions that might be asked as part of an attempt to attend to the ethics of Scripture engagement:
- What hermeneutical approaches are assumed, or how many hermeneutical and interpretive lenses or approaches might be contemplated, and who decides?
- Do we model proof-texting?
- Do we teach a historical approach to interpretation as the exclusive model?

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- Do we teach any approach to interpretation as the only valid approach?
- Is theological interpretation modeled?
- Do we help people understand how narratives shape understanding? Do we teach a narrative approach to Scripture? If so, how many different narratives might be considered legitimate scriptural narratives? Who decides?

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- How much attention is paid to the different ways meaning is made, mediated and nurtured in particular contexts and cultures?
- Is Scripture engagement promoted and carried out in ways that are respectful of the approaches to meaning-making in the local context?
- Do approaches to Scripture Engagement give the impression that biblical texts refer directly to particular people in contemporary society (women, Jews, slaves, chiefs, kings, gay couples)?

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- Does SE give sufficient attention to the cultural location and embeddedness of people, and to the need to seek to determine the values, issues and forces of culture that shape worldview, personal and social identity, and meaning so that Christ might be brought to fresh expression in the lives of Christians-in-community in that specific context and culture?

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- To what extent might the power dynamics of particular contexts and cultures be allowed to coopt the authority of Scripture for agendas that are not consistent with God's kingdom, righteousness and justice? How might that be mitigated?

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- What are the most ethical educational approaches and methodologies that might be applied in specific situations and how do they relate to the identity formation and power dynamics of those who experience it?

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- Do our approaches to SE lead to or reinforce social stratification by using tools that appeal more to certain demographics than others?
 - The South Asia SE survey information suggested the digital approaches were used mainly by those with higher socio-economic status and educational levels.

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- Do our approaches to SE work to the advantage of those who are better at learning individualistically than those who are group learners and dependent upon processing material in community?
 - Much of the discussion about spiritual growth rated people in terms of their use of Scripture in private/personal contexts.

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- How will our approach to SE deal with issues of difference and otherness? Does it promote dialogue between divergent perspectives or serve to shut down dialogue?
- Do we treat the Bible as a source of authoritative answers to our questions, or as a source of important questions that it encourages us to engage in a variety of ways?

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- What educational approaches are used to teach people how to think about Scripture and its application to local problems.
- What conversation partners would illuminate our thinking, what groups are giving or would give push-back on what SE is being done (or planned) and have their concerns been truly heard?
- When carried out in effective ways, Scripture engagement wields great power. And as we all know, with great power comes great responsibility.

Potential And Preliminary Questions

- I want to advocate for an approach in which the ethical responsibility tied to the particular ways SE is promoted and carried out in particular cultural and cross-cultural contexts is given ever more serious attention in light of the power the Scriptures have to do both incredible good and devastating harm when it is used in ways that are not sufficiently self-critical.

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