Cosgrove, Charles H.

*Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules*


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Charles H. Cosgrove’s *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate: Five Hermeneutical Rules* is a successful attempt to demonstrate that contemporary-era Christian interpretative schemata do not preclude a “valid use of scripture in moral argument.” This work is neither an exhaustive study of either contemporary hermeneutics or moral theory nor a setting forth of a case for any particular ethical theory. For Cosgrove and most contemporary moral theorists, the use of Scripture in moral debate is not “prescriptive” or rule based; rather, “scripture speaks to the moral life at the level of basic values and principles, not at the level of moral rules” (5). The rules that Cosgrove defines in this work are not moral rules but rules that “state certain norms for the valid use of scripture in moral argument” (3) in the contemporary era.

Cosgrove’s hermeneutical rules assume a lowest common denominator or “bare minimum” theory of scriptural authority in which the weight given to Scripture in moral debate is whatever weight the interpreter chooses to ascribe to it, with the one restriction that Scripture does carry some weight. For Cosgrove, the authority of Scripture is not absolutistic (Scripture is the absolute authority with no exceptions) or presumptive (Scriptural authority is presumed but may be abandoned in particular cases) but relativistic (scriptural authority is given whatever weight one wishes to ascribe to it).
Cosgrove objectively defines, applies, and evaluates five hermeneutical “rules” that are schemata or methods of applying Scripture in contemporary moral debate. He readily admits that these rules are nontraditional and not exhaustive. Cosgrove does not argue for one hermeneutical rule over any other rule or rules. He simply explains these rules in such a way that allows one to understand why these rules are accepted by some and rejected by others. My perspective is that of an absolutist, both in the prescriptive application of moral rules and in my view of scriptural authority, yet I found Cosgrove’s analysis fascinating and enlightening on how one might use Scripture in moral debate from very different perspectives than my own.

Apart from the “Introduction,” Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate is divided into five chapters corresponding to the author’s hermeneutical rules, along with an excellent appendix of other potential rules. Each chapter ends with an objective and detailed (“Conclusion and Assessment”) evaluation of the hermeneutical rule and how that rule applies Scripture to contemporary moral issues.

“The Rule of Purpose” (ch. 1) argues that the purpose or justification that gives rise to a biblical moral rule is more important than the rule itself. Cosgrove demonstrates the application of the rule of purpose in evaluating the biblical rules against lending (34–37), Old Testament biblical purity laws (44–46), and, more problematically, the “Pauline rule against homoerotic behavior in Romans 1:26–27” (37–44).

“The Rule of Analogy” (ch. 2) asserts that analogical reasoning is the hermeneutical key for applying Scripture to contemporary moral issues. Analogical language or reasoning expresses a meaning that is similar to but neither identical to nor totally different from that from which one is reasoning while having sufficient similarity to that to or about which one is reasoning. Cosgrove’s synopsis of the nature of analogical reasoning (53–66) provides the basis for his application of analogizing from the Bible (66–72) to contemporary moral issues. Cosgrove defines analogical reasoning or analogical interpretive methodology as the “showing of similarity between two fact patterns to argue that one, … the paradigm case, should govern the other, … the problem case.” An example of such an application is the paradigm case of the exodus story analogized to “slavery in antebellum America” (72–81).

“The Rule of Countercultural Witness” (ch. 3) presumes “that where a biblical teaching about a practice differs from the predominant view in the surrounding culture, the difference may be taken as a sign of an especially significant biblical value or principle that should be accorded special weight in the construction of biblical theology and ethics” (90). Cosgrove defines “countercultural” as “opposing something oppressive in the dominant culture” (104). Cosgrove’s application of this rule to feminist hermeneutics
(99–104) is thought-provoking and at times somewhat confusing, especially in the nature of biblical authority assumed by this rule (traditional versus canon-within-the-canon). His attempt to resolve this confusion is the weakest part of the work, and this chapter is the only part of the work that at times is not clear in its reasoning.

“The Rule of Non-Scientific Scope” (ch. 4) asserts that scientific or empirical “knowledge stands outside the scope of scripture.” Cosgrove applies this rule to the moral debates concerning slavery and descent of the races, sexual ethics, and the status of women. Cosgrove contends that modern science has proven biblical ethics, based as they are on nonempirical judgments, to be false (132–40). In effect, the rule subsumes ethics to contemporaneous science. The rule argues a separation of fact and value while assuming a clarity and truth in scientific knowledge that is itself called into doubt by his discussion of the nature of scientific knowledge. In accepting the Kuhnian view of the history of science, with its irreversible epochal changes in conceptual frameworks or paradigms, Cosgrove fails to realize that the empirical facts that he assumes today may be rendered invalid by future conceptual shifts in science. This argument against the applicability of biblical statements in moral debate based on the paradigmatic acculturation to the contemporaneous science and dominant culture is a two-edged sword that may cut back with future paradigm shifts in culture and science. Cosgrove never faces the dilemma of accepting contemporary scientific knowledge as irreversible while accepting that what may be regarded as true today in culture and science may not be regarded as true tomorrow. For Cosgrove, what was true in science and culture in biblical times is not true today, but what he thinks is true today will be true tomorrow. Nevertheless, his discussion of scientific knowledge and the “place of factual claims in moral reasoning” is a clear and cogent challenge to those of us who hold to absolutistic biblical ethics and scriptural authority.

“The Rule of Moral-Theological Adjudication” (ch. 5) reasons that any external moral-theological matrix may be imposed on Scripture as an interpretive framework for understanding passages with multiple exegetical plausibilities. That is to say, when in doubt, one interprets Scripture from one’s moral system. Cosgrove’s survey of the variations of contemporary advocates of the imposition of moral-theological adjudication (liberationists, Jeanrout, Trible, Cosgrove, and Robert Tannehill) is well ordered and easily understandable, even for one not well versed in the literature.

Cosgrove’s five hermeneutical rules are not new or innovative. His view of the separation of fact and value and his imposition of external moral-theological matrices onto Scripture are Ritschlian at their heart, and an existential morality pervades the work. What is innovative to contemporary moral theory is not Cosgrove’s rules but his use of Scripture in the application of these rules. To one who is absolutistic in his ethics and scriptural
authority, it is a sad commentary that Cosgrove must offer these or any rules to validate the use of Scripture in moral argument at all.

Cosgrove’s conclusion does not draw these five hermeneutical rules into a system. The development of a hermeneutical matrix directing the moral appeal to Scripture is not Cosgrove’s intent in this work. He recognizes that some interpreters may accept all of his rules, some may accept some of his rules, some may accept none of his rules, and some may have their own rules. The choice of a rule or matrix of rules is relative to the individual interpreter. What he has attempted to do in this work is to encourage the close examination of some of the assumptions made in the contemporary appeal to Scripture in moral argument. Cosgrove notes in the introduction that he hopes that the reader, either in rejecting or accepting these rules, will “at least come away with a better understanding of the rule and some appreciation for why others embrace it” (11). He achieves both of these goals, even for those of use who are more traditional in our views of biblical ethics, scriptural authority, and hermeneutics.