What would Jesus do?

by Allen Verhey in the May 19, 1999 issue

Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics.
By William C. Spohn. Continuum, 242 pp.

Some of my students wear bracelets bearing the legend "WWJD"—What Would Jesus Do? Sometimes in the midst of a discussion about some hard issue, I ask a student sporting such a bracelet to apply that question to the problem. The replies range from embarrassed silence and empty platitudes to wonderfully astute observations. The astute replies are usually based on the story or stories of Jesus, and exercise what William Spohn calls "the analogical imagination."

Sometimes our discussion leads to another question, "How do we go about figuring out WJWD?" Students report that they try to do so by reading the Bible, by praying, by talking with Christians whom they trust and respect, by consulting their consciences, by following their intuitions. Though such replies sometimes seem like substitutes for the hard work of moral deliberation, some of these students have hold of something important to any communal effort to be disciples.

Like my students, Spohn affirms that "to be a Christian means to follow Jesus," and that "the fundamental norm for Christian identity" is the life of Jesus as told in scripture. He appreciates the complex and intimate connections between the Christian moral life, an "engaged" reading of scripture, and the practices of Christian spirituality. His book is a significant contribution to the growing literature on the relation of scripture and the moral life. Spohn makes (at least) three significant contributions to that literature.

The first of these is Spohn's account of the "analogical imagination," which he calls "the main bridge between the biblical text and contemporary ethical practice." Here he is indebted to the Catholic tradition of casuistry and to Catholic thinkers such as David Tracy. Characteristically, he not only explains analogy but also displays it by considering (and assessing) analogies drawn from the narrative of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Following Jesus is not a matter of replicating his life; rather, by entering imaginatively into his story (and into his stories) we discover images and

paradigms that correct our vision and provide a pattern for our lives.

To Spohn's great credit, he does not give a recipe for the analogical imagination. He does represent it schematically: the New Testament text is to its world as the contemporary Christian community is to its world. The analogical proportion can be represented by the formula a:b::c:d, and it can be illustrated through numerical proportions 2:4::8:X. (Even in that illustration X might be 10 or 16 or 64, depending on how one sees the relation of the first two terms.) When reading the New Testament, however, "no formula can be specified in the abstract." The analogical imagination requires something more like an aesthetic judgment—"spotting the rhyme," as Spohn says. Such judgment "takes more than intelligence"; it takes virtue.

Spohn's attention to virtue ethics as the best way to appropriate the New Testament text for the moral life is his second significant contribution. The point is not that the moral content of the New Testament can be reduced to a list of virtues or is best summarized by listing virtues. Spohn argues that virtue ethics "fits the narrative form of the New Testament" and underscores how the story of Jesus forms character. Virtue ethics "is suited to the New Testament's emphasis on the 'heart'" and attends to the importance of convictions, emotions and commitments. It fits the New Testament invocation of the story of Jesus as a paradigm to shape and direct perception, dispositions and identity.

Virtue ethics sometimes gives little account of how virtues can be fostered. Spohn fills that lacuna with attention to the practices of Christian spirituality. Such practices foster the habits of heart and mind necessary not only for the living of the Christian life but also for "spotting the rhyme" when reading scripture with an analogical imagination. The practices of spirituality sharpen the Christian's capacities to discern what is appropriate. Intercessory prayer, meditation, discernment, forgiveness, Eucharist and solidarity with the poor are (or should be) themselves formed and informed by scripture. They sharpen our perceptions, train our affections and transform our lives.

Spohn recognizes that the practices must not be treated as technologies for achieving either moral improvement or hermeneutical excellence. To reduce them to this is to corrupt them. Even so, they have consequences and implications that ought not be neglected. This attention to Christian spiritual practices is Spohn's third—and most provocative—contribution.