

Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture and the Moral Life
by Allen Verhey. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich.2002.
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Reviewed by Johan D.Tangelder

How do we know right from wrong? What are the most pressing ethical issues of our times? Ask the leading scholars on ethics, and the answers will be multitudinous. What we are witnessing today is the breakdown of what was once taken for granted: a consensus on agreed "moral law." No wonder many people no longer have clarity as to how and why ethical decisions ought to be made. Even Christian scholars disagree on vital moral questions. Instead of providing Biblical guidance, they raise more questions.

Allen Verhey, Professor of Religion at Hope College, Holland, Michigan, is one of them. In his book he addresses current moral issues in five parts. They are:

1. Choices, Churches, and Scripture. A Continuing Tradition and Discernment.
2. Remembering Jesus in the Strange World of Sickness. A Continuing Tradition of Care for the Suffering.
3. Remembering Jesus in Gilead (This title is taken from Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*) A Continuing Tradition of Liberation and Chastity.
4. Remembering Jesus in the World of Adam Smith. A Continuing Tradition of Justice and Generosity.
5. Remembering Jesus in the Strange World of Politics. Revisiting Theocracy - A Continuing Tradition of Justice.

In my article I will concentrate mainly on part three with its focus on gender and sexuality.

Verhey's Theory of Ethics

Verhey discusses his theory of ethics within the framework of choices. "What should I do?" He rightly states that we ask this question when a choice seems amazingly difficult. This is saying the obvious, of course, in our culture, which is less and less Christian, often even anti-Christian. Some of Verhey's students wear bracelets bearing the legend "WWJD?" (What would Jesus do?) "There are reasons to be suspicious of the question," says Verhey.

"It is sometimes asked with the anachronistic pretence that we can or should do precisely what a first century Jesus would do." He is right. We cannot base our decisions and actions on this question alone. There is no substitute for hard thinking about tough moral questions. But what should be our standard of conduct then? How can we know what is ethically right? Verhey urges Christians to follow Jesus. The Christian life is a life of discipleship. How can we be the Lord's disciples? By remembering Jesus - and by remembering the early churches remembering Jesus. It involves "story telling" so that each new generation remembers and comes to own the story, and to let it shape one's character and conduct. Hence, it means to live the story of Jesus that Christians love to tell, to speak "gladly and boldly of Christian integrity in the strange worlds" of our sickness, our sexuality, our economy, and our politics.

The Bible and Ethics

Is "story -telling" sufficient to shape one's moral conduct? The role of the Scripture is a given for Verhey. He acknowledges its status by the prominence it is given by the church and tradition. But he argues it cannot deal with modern moral issues without qualifications. He claims that the church cannot simply repeat the first-century ethical norms as the timeless Word of God. How can it be normative when there is such a diversity of Biblical ethics in the New Testament? In his discussion of gender and sexuality, he says that this diversity should give pause to any who would insist on the authority of Scripture for interpreting sexual ethics. We may not treat Scripture "as a timeless moral code for gender and the sexual life." How then should we interpret Scripture for our modern times? Since males have monopolized its interpretation, Verhey says we should listen to the testimony of women - such as the feminist Margaret Atwood, whom he quotes at length. Because the authors of the New Testament were bound by and limited by their times and cultures, they had great difficulties shaking off their "patriarchal" attitudes. They were "not altogether empty of prejudice against women."

For example, "the social and sexual world in which Paul lived - and which lived in him! -did not suddenly and simply vanish." The apostle Paul lived in a different time from ours. His words are of a man who lived in a patriarchal culture and in whom patriarchy lived. Although his words are part of the whole collection that the Christian community set aside as "Holy" Bible, it does not mean that we may or must repeat these words as a timeless code. Consequently, Verhey contends that due to the (at least largely) male voices in the New Testament, we cannot "permit, for example, the simple repetition of a biblical set of rules for a first-century household as an eternal divine code, or the use of those human and male voices to silence women today or to mute their voices. We may not identify the human words of Scripture with the Word of God (and so use some patriarchal texts to mute women)."

Practical Implications

How does Verhey apply his method of interpreting the Scripture to moral practices? I will mention only two key issues, which are a bone of contention in contemporary society and church: divorce and homosexuality.

Divorce

The Lord said through the prophet Malachi (2:16), "I hate divorce." Traditionally, pastors have linked this passage to the teaching of Jesus, and called their congregations to a new commitment to marriage. Verhey suggests that we may not repeat these words as "a timeless" standard for fidelity in marriage. He suggests that we should look for the intentions behind Jesus' view on divorce as recorded in Mark and Matthew, and referred to by the apostle Paul. He notes that the New Testament cannot "settle directly and immediately a contemporary Christian community's question asked about a particular choice to end marriage." But since we may not read the New Testament as we did in the past, we must have a fresh approach to marriage and divorce. Verhey says "that although divorce is never to be celebrated as a good in itself or as a way God's future makes its power felt, a Christian community may acknowledge that divorce may sometimes be

necessary in order to protect either marriage itself or one of the marriage partners...It might, for example, (and given the promise of God to protect the weak and to defend the humiliated, I think it should) permit divorce in case of abuse."

Homosexuality

The Bible explicitly teaches that sex is God's gift to be enjoyed within the context of a marriage between a man and a woman. It has also straightforward, even blunt, strong prohibitions against homosexuality. Sex outside of heterosexual marriage is against God's will. The German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg has this sober warning for Christians who revise their attitude toward homosexuality:

If a church were to let itself be pushed to point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognized homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would no longer stand on Biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Before the 1960s in North America, homosexuality was considered a sin. In 1970's it was thought of as a sickness. Today it is called an alternative lifestyle. And those who disagree are called homophobic. But instead of proclaiming a counter cultural message, some twenty-first century evangelical theologians set aside the traditionally accepted moral standards, revealing North America's acute moral crisis. Some theologians even justify some homosexual behaviour. Verhey is one of them. Although he argues that the issue of homosexuality never assumes any great importance in the New Testament, he recognizes the need to give it consideration. He claims that the Scripture is silent on the issue in two ways: First, Jesus says nothing about homosexual behaviour. Second, Scripture is silent about "sexual orientation." "No one in the ancient world," says Verhey, "including any author of the Scripture, had such a notion." Furthermore, the sin that brought down judgment Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.18-19) was not homosexual behaviour. The list of vices in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1: 10, two of the many in the New Testament but the only ones to mention homosexual behaviour, may not be used in our discussion on homosexuality.

How can they be used if Paul was indebted to the Jewish tradition's aversion to homosexual behaviour? In his commentary on Romans 1: 18-32, Verhey suggests Paul refers in this passage to homosexual behaviour freely chosen by people whose appetite for sexual pleasure was once but is no longer sated by heterosexual relationships. What are the choices then for homosexuals today? Singleness and chastity are an option for both heterosexuals and homosexuals. But what if celibacy is not one's gift? Verhey argues that intercourse (whether heterosexual or homosexual) within the context of a relationship of commitment and continuity is better than promiscuity and infidelity. And in total surrender to postmodern relativism, he declares, "If we allow divorce in a world like this one for the sake of protecting marriage and marriage partners, and if we allow remarriage after divorce, then we must also consider allowing homosexual relationships for the sake of protecting fidelity and mutuality and the homosexuals partners." He further suggests the possibility of blessing homosexual unions.

Verhey undermines evangelical/reformed moral standards. His position on sexuality and gender reveals a deep chasm between the past and the present. In a 1968 *Banner* article Dr. Marenus J. Beukema, senior staff psychiatrist at Pine Rest Christian Hospital, said, "We know from Scripture that God holds homosexuality to be a great evil and severely condemns it in Romans 1:26-27." He also advises the church to assist homosexuals to overcome their problem, and encourage them to seek help that may lead to a cure. What kind of guidance does Verhey give to all who ask what they should do? He seems adverse to think of the Bible in any sense a book containing specific commandments. They are to be regarded not so much as commands for us but as our response to God's actions.

Compassion, justice, liberation, and finding God's leading in certain situations appear to supersede Biblical commandments. If Verhey is right then the church can no longer say "Thus says the Lord." All what she can say then is: Perhaps it should be this way but it can also be different.

How can we build a Biblical ethic if we are able to disregard the New Testament admonitions and standards? As I read the Bible, I hear God's call to live rightly and to avoid sin. I discover in every part of the New Testament concrete imperatives, with hundreds coming from the mouth of the Lord Himself. In other words, God obviously cares about what we do and assumes the right to tell us how to live. A fully Biblical ethics accepts the Scriptures, the covenant constitution of the Church, which is also revealed to the world, as the final authority.

View of Scripture

Why can't Verhey offer clear guidance to the Church? When the very foundation of the faith - the Bible - is questioned and undermined, one is not able to erect a sound framework for timeless moral standards. In our ethical decision making, Verhey contends, we may appeal to a wide variety of sources, the Scripture can "be counted simply as one of the many sources!" Its rules and laws have "a limited 'usefulness' and authority at the level of deliberation." His view of Scripture shows the influence of liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, and the Social Gospel. For example, he claims that Genesis 1: 1-2; 4a is the literary product of the Babylonian exile. He puts Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings in the same time period. They were written and compiled by "the Deuteronomic Historian, "an anonymous editor or editors. The stories of Ruth and Jonah are probably to be dated to the post-exilic period. When we turn to the Gospels, we notice, according to Verhey, that Jesus challenged the patriarchal world of Palestine. His "unconventional and liberating treatment of women" is attested by multiple sources, including the Q text. But the very existence of this Q text, let alone its content, is a matter of speculation. Yet a group of liberal scholars believe that they can reconstruct the "real Jesus" on the basis of this mysterious document. These few selected references from the Old and New Testament clearly demonstrate that Verhey does not "receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith." (The Belgic Confession, Art. 5)

Conclusion

What if we would accept Verhey's views? In my opinion, they cannot keep the slide to barbarity in North America in check. Then we might as well as write "Ichabod" over the church doors. We would then have little to say to a world desperately in need of the sure Word of God. In the attempt to make Biblical ethics palatable, Verhey surrendered much to the Spirit of our times. The Biblical message does not need to be rewritten. We must adjust ourselves to the Bible - never the Bible to the latest theological fad. "The truly wise man is he who believes the Bible against the opinions of any man," declared the American evangelist and educator, R.A.Torrey . "If the Bible says one thing, and any body of men says another, the wise man will decide, 'This book is the Word of him who cannot lie.'"