

Theological Ethics and Holy Scripture: The Use of Scripture in the Works of James M.Gustafson, R.Paul Ramsey, and Allen D.Verhey. (with a summary in Dutch) by Laurens Wouter Bilkes. Inheritance Publications, Box 154, Neerlandia, Alberta, T0G 1R0.1997. Softcover,274pp. Reviewed by Johan D.Tangelder.

Since Adam's fall into sin, we live in a world where the abnormal has become normal. If abnormality is now the norm, how can we know what is really normative? For example, do we accept premarital sex as normal simply because 50% + one of a community surveyed responded that for them it is normal? On what do we base our standard of morality? Morality can never be viewed from a neutral perspective. There is no neutrality. Conduct is always judged from a unique point of view, with a reference to a simple norm or ideal of right and good. The basis for norms varies greatly.

Dr. Bilkes, since 1988 pastor of the Free Reformed Church at Abbotsford, BC., addresses the questions of norms for behaviour in his dissertation. Usually a doctoral dissertation makes us think of weighty tome gathering dust on a shelf in a university library: a book which is consulted on occasion by students who are doing research. Few dissertations are published with a broader public in mind. Dr. Bilkes's work is one of those exceptions as the subject matter of his work is of crucial importance. It focuses on behaviour as it ought to be in society. It defines the distinction between right and wrong, between responsible and irresponsible.

Although his promoter and co-promoter are the prominent Dutch scholars Prof. Dr. W.H. Velema and Prof. Dr. J.W. Maris of the Theological University in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, the focus of the book is on the role of Scripture in theological ethics within the North American context. Bilkes chose three prominent ethicists for the development of his thesis - Gustafson, Ramsey, and Verhey. He discusses three critical components of their approach to ethical questions, namely, the role of reason and the church community as well as the place of practice. In the first chapter Bilkes gives the historical and contemporary context of the three ethicist and their role of Scripture within the American Protestant scene. He shows how the three elements, the practical, the collective, and the rational can be traced to the influence of Puritanism, the impact of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on the autonomy of the individual, and the Great Awakening. He also points to the profound legacy of Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) and his Social Gospel and to the rise of neo-orthodoxy associated with the names of Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr. In the next three chapters he outlines the thought of the three ethicists.

James M.Gustafson (1925) born in Norway, Michigan of Swedish parents. He earned his Ph.D. at Yale University. He seeks to ground his ethics in the doctrine of God. In his view, ethics aims at ordering all things in relation to God. His view of Scripture departs from the historic Reformed position. In his view scripture is no more than a record of experiences "in which pious people discerned the will of God in various circumstances." Gustafson's view of Christ resembles the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) for whom Christ was the one in whom complete God-consciousness developed. Sin is " misplaced trust or confidence." One develops his ethics within the context of the Christian community, as it discerns, in part on the basis of Scripture, what is the proper God-centered response.

Paul Ramsey (1937-1988) born in Mendenhall, Mississippi, received his Ph.D. degree from Yale University, where among others, H. Richard Niebuhr was his mentor and teacher. His view of Scripture was influenced by the theology of Karl Barth. He also stressed the concept of agape (love) at the expense of moral codes, whether biblical or natural. A keynote phrase of Ramsey was that for the Christian "love transforms justice." Unlike Gustafson, his view of Christ was orthodox. In the debate on abortion he developed a thoroughly Biblical view. In regards to euthanasia he allows for an "exception" to the general rule against euthanasia as long as the exceptions to it within "strict limits" are limited to those patients who are truly beyond the reach of human care and comfort.

Allen D. Verhey was born in 1945, graduated from Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary, and received his Ph.D. from Yale University. Although Bilkes says that he is an ordained minister in the Christian Reformed Church. This is no longer true. He was released from the CRC ministry in 1995 or 1996 to become a minister in the Reformed Church in America. He continues to teach at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Hope College is closely related to the Reformed Church in America like Calvin College is to the CRC.

I am glad that Dr. Bilkes devotes a chapter to Verhey as I had serious questions about his book *The Great Reversal. Ethics and the New Testament* raised in a lengthy review in *Christian Renewal* (March 17, 1986) Bilkes points out that through Gustafson and Ramsey and others the legacy of American Protestant ethics has been handed down to Verhey. And the importance of the influence of Walter Rauschenbusch, who understood Scripture as a response to social questions, should not be underrated either.

This is clearly demonstrated in Verhey's *Living the Heidelberg*, a discussion of the catechism with special attention to the social and ethical dimensions of the catechism. Verhey's view of Scripture shows the influence of liberalism, neo-orthodoxy and the Social Gospel. He considers it wrong to "ask the New Testament" what to decide or how to judge in a particular concrete case. For example, in his discussion on divorce he says that Matthew's teaching on divorce cannot be simply repeated and invested with authority of the Christian community at the present. Verhey uses, therefore, the terms "time-bound and context relative". He recommends "abortion on genetic grounds in those cases in which the fetus is not a potential person because deformities prevent it from coming even close to have God-imaging capacities." Verhey suggests that the construction of moral rules must be the task of the Christian community, rather than that of the individual. Bilkes rightly ask, "How can this be effective in cases where whole communities and churches depart from Scriptures and the Christian faith?"

In the last chapter Bilkes articulates a thoroughly Reformed answer to the three ethicists. The basis for ethics is neither reason, nor community, nor practice. He argues from the position of the Bible as the infallible Word of God. Firstly, God is the center of ethics. That is, everything is derived from God and is to be directed to God. Secondly, Christ is the foundation of ethics. He is the foundation of justification and sanctification, which are applied to us by the Spirit. Thirdly, the Holy Spirit is the bond that unites us to Christ. Bilkes also focuses on the importance of the law of God, which is instrumental in the knowledge of God and our knowledge of sin.

My congratulations to Dr. Bilkes for his fine contribution to Reformed scholarship. His work should be in the library of pastors, seminarians, and teachers.

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March 2000