Ethics in the Presence of Christ

Reviewed by Jason Goroncy


Christian theology is always ethics. To be sure, dogmatics and ethics are not entirely the same thing, but there can be no responsible dogmatics that are not also concerned with ethics, and no responsible ethics that are not equally concerned with dogmatics. Unhinged from one another, both become retarded at best, and tyrants at worst. Put otherwise, ethics is part of the doctrine of God precisely because, as Barth noted, God is responsible for us. So Barth speaks of ethics as a task of the doctrine of God in *CD* II/2, a paragraph he introduces thus:

As the doctrine of God's command, ethics interprets the Law as the form of the Gospel, i.e. as the sanctification which comes to man through the electing God. Because Jesus Christ is the holy God and sanctified man in One, it has its basis in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Because the God who claims man for Himself makes Himself originally responsible for him, it forms part of the doctrine of God. Its function is to bear primary witness to the grace of God in so far as this is the saving engagement and commitment of man.

According to Barth, a Christian account of dogmatics and ethics – both evangelical and catholic – begins with a particular person, Jesus Christ – and in his contemporaneous power, truth and love graciously made available to us by the ministry of the Spirit. This, too, is Chris Holmes’ claim in his delightful and eloquently written essay, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ*. Slaying the dragon of christological exemplarism as a foundation for Christian and ecclesial existence, Holmes seeks to “draw the life of the Christian community into the orbit of the presence and ongoing ministry of Christ, its natural environment, and thus to explore the consequences of his presence for ethics and offer an account of the moral landscape of ethics that is dependent on its environment”.

Convinced that “ethics is a function of Christ’s ‘continually operative’ reconciling and revealing intervention”, and that responsible ethics is as participatory as is life, prayer, worship etc. (i.e. it takes place in the life of the Spirit and from the side of Jesus Christ) Holmes is concerned that we engage in conversations about ethics in light of the contemporary presence and determining ministry of Jesus Christ.

He seeks to take with full seriousness the fact that ethics is a function of christology, the human counterpart to Christ’s vicarious obedience and faith. “Ethics”, he writes, “is simply action evoked by and participant in his saving action and saving obedience. Accordingly, ethics is behaviour that recognises ‘the pioneer and perfecter’ of our faith”. Ethical acts, in other words, are acts aligned to the presence of a particular person, and to what that person – Jesus Christ – is now doing. Accordingly, ethics is not concerned with the good abstractly understood or indeed with any norm or concept apart from a particular living person. And Holmes calls upon Christians to continually turn to the person who speaks through his Word.

*Ethics in the Presence of Christ*, as Holmes outlines in the introductory chapter, is concerned with two basic questions: Is this One as narratively attested present? And if so, what is he doing? When ethics becomes attuned to how God’s rule in the world takes shape through the present Christ and how God intends his rule to take shape in us through patient hearing of the Word, it, Holmes insists, “becomes an enterprise that begins afresh each day, seeking to do God’s will, recognising that the doing of God’s will is a matter of being rendered transparent to what God is already doing ‘to keep human life human in the world’”.

Drawing on the work of Lehmann, Bonhoeffer, TF Torrance, Webster, Hoskyns, Barth, Newbiggin, and others, Holmes offers us a theological reading of three texts from John’s Gospel – 5.1–18; 18.1–19.42 and ch 21 – attending to the themes of the presence of Christ’s power, truth and love respectively. These three passages form the heart of the book, and are introduced by a fine (though somewhat repetitive) chapter on ethics and presence. The final chapter offers a rich account on how Scripture construes ethical reality. Holmes’ decision to attend closely to Scripture is premised on the fact that “a text on Christology and ethics cannot afford to be exegetically thin, precisely because Christology is a description of the person who acts as narratively depicted, and ethics an
account of what the One who acts as Scripturally attested would have of us”. Would that more theologians followed Holmes’ lead here!

In his exposition of Jesus’ healing of the sick man in John 5, Holmes argues that “Christ is acting now among us no less powerfully than he did then; he is present among us by the Spirit in accord with the grain of the universe”. He suggests that Jesus’ gracious healing of the sick man is indicative of the fact that Jesus “does not will that life go on as normal for this man whom he encounters”. The healing of the man is a sign, a sign of “the End” – namely the eschatological enfleshment “of God’s glory and presence to Israel”. Moreover, Jesus’ healing ministry attests his identity as “One in whom God’s life-giving rule is present and effective”.

Drawing on E.C. Hoskyns’ claim (in The Fourth Gospel) that “In Jesus the world is confronted by the End”, Homes suggests that the end is already present and contemporary to us in Christ: “The End – that is, Jesus – is present, moreover, to all times, remaking them in accordance with the will of his Father whom he loves. The hour is no less present to the Jews who sought to kill him because he called ‘God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God’, than it is to us. (John 5.18). We too live in this hour; we too must hear the voice that is speaking to us and live”. He continues:

*This is of course quite difficult for people to appreciate. We are used to and often at home in a world wherein we expect to hear nothing because we already ‘know’ what is real and what can be. But the joy of hearing Jesus is that we realise the extent to which our time is encroached upon by his time. Indeed, Jesus does speak and in so doing he calls ‘into question all the criteria by which – in normal affairs – I [we] judge what is possible, what is reasonable, what is admirable’. As late modern people we find it difficult to believe that the reign of God is present to us and impinging upon us ... The gap between the then and there and the here and now is really not so large. In fact, there is not any gap.*

Holmes argues that in meeting the power at work in Christ, one encounters God’s knowing and willing – the grain of the universe, to use a phrase popularised by Hauerwas. Power, Holmes insists, is never to be isolated from a determination – namely, that of peace with God himself. It is precisely this determination which is the reality-indication ingredient in the person of Christ. What Scripture testifies to is that this determination is an omnipotent determination which withstands the world’s rebellion. So Holmes says:

*If the movement in ethics ought always to be from God to humanity, inclusive as it is of the movement of humanity to God, one must take a moment to reflect upon the eternal basis of such a movement. To talk about the eternity of Christ as what grounds his always ‘working’, matters precisely because without such an account we risk talking about the presence of Christ in purely interventionist terms (John 5.17). The power of this One as the presence of God’s power ‘working’ is his immanent life. That is not to take away from the unsubstitutable character of these accounts, but it is to say that we are not beholding in them a reaction. Instead, in the Gospels, we are witnesses to the enactment of an eternal determination: that ‘all things have been created...for him’ (Col. 1.16). It is the Son of God’s eternal determination which is manifest here: the eternal determination of Son and Father to guarantee for the creature their participation as creatures in the blessings of covenant fellowship with themselves. To be sure, the way in which this eternal purpose is realized is shaped by the fact that we have sinned. But our sin and its fruits do not determine God’s will. God’s will – indicative as it is of God’s being – is to humanise.*

The implication for ethics is clear:

*We do not need by our activity – principally belief – to extend the power at work in Jesus’ ministry into the present or try to make it relevant to our contexts. ‘This is because the question of Christian ethics itself remains malformed unless and until set firmly within a wider acknowledgement that “God has founded the church beyond religion and beyond ethics” by the graciously vicarious fulfilment of the law in the person of the saviour.’ Ethics is to be taken up in light of the person of the Son as subjectivised in us through the work of the Spirit. That is, law or command does not describe resources for conduct internal to the self or of the Christian community, a story, or various pressing contingencies or contexts. Rather, ethics understood Christologically is a destabilised ethics. It is destabilised precisely because it is an inherently revelational undertaking. What is given in Christ – the fulfilment of Moses’ law – ‘subjectively takes shape in the mind of the church through the unique enshrining of Christ’s gospel’. Ethics understood theologically is thus a destabilized or ever relativized ethics because it is not a matter of implementing a moral program of sorts, but rather a question of being formed by the One – by the objective Person – who truly fulfils himself in us via his faith. By believing in his fulfilment of his will, we too are made participants in him who claims us for faith. And his life – his faith, what he is doing, his
present ministry – is done into us. Most importantly, we do not then live as those in a kind of vacuum of our own making. Instead, our life is formed by Jesus who is present in the Spirit’s power to us, whose present ministry claims us, so that we too might fulfil the law of our being by believing.

“A biblical person is one who lives within the dialectic of eschatology and ethics, realising that God’s Judgment [sic] has as much to do with the humour of the Word as it does with wrath.” So penned William Stringfellow in *A Simplicity of Faith*. Translated otherwise, we might simply say that the person of faith is the person who is living in Jesus Christ, God’s eschaton and ethic incarnate, and reigning in his freedom as he who, in the words of the Book of the Revelation, is walking and speaking “in the midst of the lampstands” (ie his people). This is the metaphysic that Holmes seeks to bear witness to in this essay. Clearly, his thesis is grounded on the claim that “metaphysics governs ethics”, a thesis strengthened and made all the more stimulating by a sturdy commitment to the doctrine of creatio continua – a corollary of the church’s claim that in Christ “all things hold together” (Col 1.17), and that in the person of the mediator “that which constitutes our world and indeed our lives is present in such a way that our descriptions of the way things are must be subject to a ‘going on’”.

Each of the three chapters engaging with specific texts from John’s Gospel are a highly stimulating read, sermonic in parts, informed by a maturing dogmatic mind, and laden with pastorally-valuable insights.

The final chapter – On why Scripture construes ethical reality – betrays Holmes’ deep indebtedness to Webster’s and Krötke’s work (Holmes’ doctoral dissertation was on Barth, Jüngel, and Krötke), and engages, I think convincingly, with the likes of Hauerwas, O’Donovan and Wannenwetsch, identifying some achilles heels in their use of Scripture for theological ethics. A couple of passages are simply worth repeating:

*To begin ethics with Christ is not enough: ethics is to stay with Christ, to seek to be present to Christ. I am not interested in only a Christological starting point for ethics: that is, Christology as only a beginning but not also the middle and end point of ethics. Ethics involves our being continually schooled by the prophets and apostles. To not only begin with but to stay with Christ, which is ethics’ task, is to yield to Scripture. By yielding, the church hears and obeys Scripture’s prophetic and apostolic testimony. The church is where ethical agency is nourished, insofar as it is in the church that we are baptised into Christ by the Spirit and nourished by the proclaimed Word and holy table.*

There are a number of places where Holmes makes (over?) statements that demand, at the very least, further clarification or explanation. So, for example, Holmes’ claim that the natural post-Fall world is no longer able to function as a “theatre of life” (a claim, prima facie, I think, which is undermined by this very book), or that Scripture’s display of what is really going on in the world is, “especially the case with respect to John’s Gospel”, (a claim that requires some further argument; it certainly betrays the fact that in writing this book Holmes has been living in John’s Gospel). More significant and obvious by their omission are any sustained discussions on prayer, and on the sacraments. These would, I think, have made this a more satisfying book, building on the already-significant exposition of Christ’s immanent reign among and over his people in his prophetic, priestly and royal ministry.

Still, these really are minor quibbles about what is a well-overdue book. Holmes’ attempt to discern the present reign of the Word is among the best introductions to theological ethics that I have read. I commend it warmly and enthusiastically.