

READING IN COMMUNION: Scripture and ethics in Christian Life, by Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones. SPCK, London, 1991. Pp. 166. £12.99.

Three characteristics of this simple yet scholarly work deserve mention: it is evangelical, post-modern and post-critical.

Eschewing most contemporary academic controversies, the authors are content to expound a simple thesis. The vocation of Christians is to embody scripture in their various contexts. The Bible is not just one more resource for principles, most objectively interpreted by academics. Rather, it is only properly understood within those Christian communities for which it is the norm of faith and practice. Christian ethics requires the formation of character appropriate to disciples of Jesus, rather than the perfecting of scholarly skills.

Disciples of such an *evangelical* faith-ethic usually manifest more fidelity than reason. The book recognises that this may produce some 'strange' behaviour, and seems little concerned about the obstacles to communication and debate with the outside world which such an ethic erects. Indeed there is considerable ambivalence toward 'the world' and its ways. On the one hand Christians must witness to the world, be hospitable to outsiders, and even allow that some might be prophets. On the other hand, too much truck with the world leads to middle-class religion: 'a series of platitudes ranging from the inane to the incoherent'; spiritual banality, triviality and sentimentality; a picture of God as a 'therapeutic nice-guy'; compromise and double standards. The authors' solution: formative Christian communities must retreat to the 'arcane discipline' of spaces away from the world'. This solution might not satisfy those with a more 'catholic' temperament and spirituality, even were it practicable.

In response to pro-Nazi or pro-apartheid churches, the book merely repeats the need for community-formed character, dialectic between the text and the present, and openness to Biblical and prophetic challenge. There is no place here for a critique coming from natural reasoning about human rights, personal flourishing, or the classical tradition's 'laws of humanity'.

The book soundly draws on much that is best in *post-modernism*, such as its emphases on community and virtue. It helpfully identifies distortions wrought by modern individualism and moral isolationism (although the prophetic outsider seems exempt). Moral decisions are never made apart from people's social contexts and commitments; scripture is primarily addressed to communities not individuals; Christians develop their character in and through communities. The content of the notion of 'community' is not well developed in this book, but it seems to mean a small, tight-knit group. The place of the wider church, synods, central authorities, and the wisdom of former times, is little explored. But perhaps we should be wary of expecting too much from community.

Fowl and Jones repeatedly return to the significance of character formation: we need to develop specific patterns of acting, feeling and thinking well. But here, as in much of the recent talk of 'virtue ethics', the classical virtue tradition is rarely in evidence, there is no articulated view of the human person or the good(s) of persons, and all moral principles are regarded as revisable. How then are we to distinguish virtue from vice? How do we know a community is engaging in formation rather than deformation? How can we pick which community to join? How do we identify a genuinely prophetic outsider? Since the right reading of scripture requires prior (if continuing) formation of virtuous character, one cannot without circularity appeal to scripture.

Reading in Communion is well referenced, and reflects a thorough acquaintance with much modern scripture science and Christian ethics (even if there are some surprising omissions). Reflecting this acquaintance, it criticizes fundamentalist attempts to replicate the supposedly unambiguous prescriptions of scripture in the present. But the book shares the scepticism of our post-critical period regarding 'sciences' such as historical-critical exegesis. It recognises that there is no neutral or context-independent method for ethics or interpretation; both are inevitably bound up with particular social contexts and the character of the interpreter. Doomed are attempts by exegetes to isolate 'the meaning' or 'the values' of particular texts, and by ethicists to apply the results. The book identifies convincingly the arbitrariness and question-begging of much scripture science; the interpretative interests and ideological constraints of the scholars; and the socio-political nature of hermeneutics and ethics. This surely does not mean we should renounce all efforts to read scripture 'fairly', to suspend our prejudices and preconceptions as best we can and allow scripture to challenge them, and to be docile to revelation.

Among other results of these insights, the authors propose that our readings would be clarified and enriched by rehabilitating those of Christians as diverse as Origen, Aquinas, Teresa, and Luther, alongside the more recent efforts. There is no single correct exegetical method (although surely there are some wrong ones?). Instead 'the aim of faithful living before the Triune God becomes the standard to which all interpretative interests must measure up.' Yes but.

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SACRIFICE AND REDEMPTION *Durham Essays in Theology*, edited by S.W. Sykes, Cambridge University Press, 1991. pp. xi + 339. £35.00

The fact that 'sacrifice' remains so much a part of everyday language, albeit often in impoverished form, is strange witness to its continuing importance. The essays contained in this volume, of immense range as they are, show why this is so: not only matters narrowly religious, but ethics and the very nature of the human habitation of the world come to be focussed by different dimensions of the topic. The book