Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context

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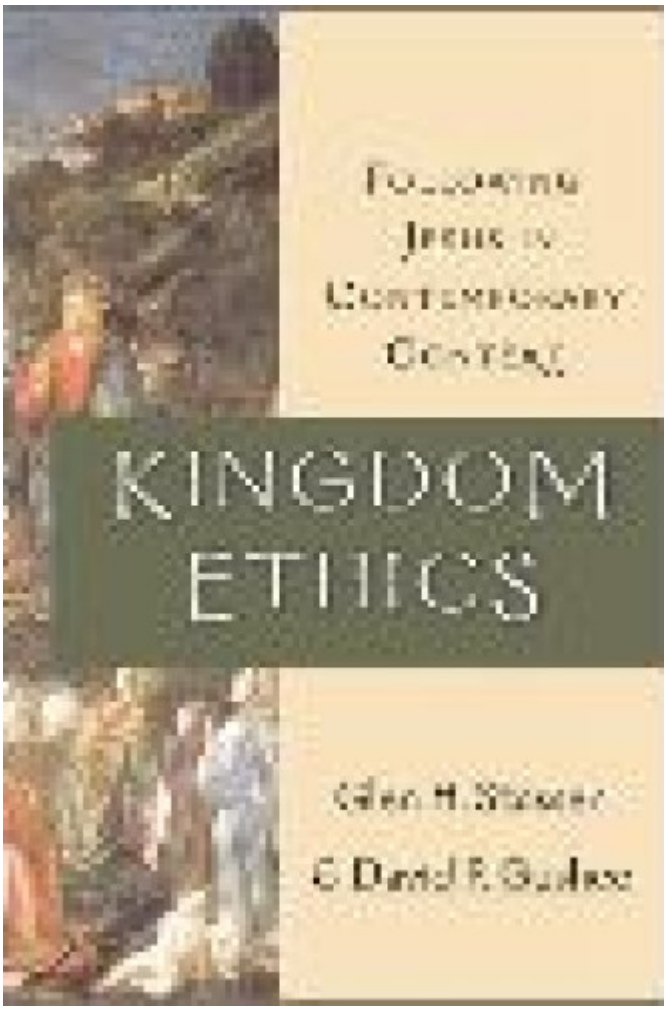
In Review



Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context

Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee
InterVarsity

Since Christians confess Jesus Christ as Lord, one might assume that most Christian ethics texts would ponder his teachings in detail. And since the Sermon on the Mount expounds Jesus' teaching most comprehensively, one might expect such books to treat it thoroughly. According to Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, however, hardly any Christian ethics texts, old or new, make constructive use of the Sermon. Instead, it is routinely ignored or misinterpreted by scholars and preachers.

This clearly written and wide-ranging volume presents a rather programmatic statement of an ethic centered on Jesus, focusing on his Sermon. It contains copious exegesis which may strike readers familiar with other approaches as literalistic biblicism. The authors are furthering an increasingly visible emphasis on Jesus among scholarly ethicists, an emphasis that goes back to John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* (1972). Initially, this trajectory drew much from neo-orthodoxy and the biblical theology movement of the 1940s and '50s, both of which sharply contrasted revelation in Christ with all the philosophies—Thomism, Kantianism—that had influenced Catholic and Protestant ethics, maintaining instead that revelation could be discerned only through God's mighty acts in history (*Heilsgeschichte*). Hence the need for careful biblical exegesis.

By the late 1970s similar claims were made by those who insisted that Christian truth is narratively shaped. Stassen and Gushee follow ethicists like James McClendon and Stanley Hauerwas, who argue that since narratives are received and passed on by communities through traditions, Christian ethics should be mainly concerned with communal practices, not individual decisions. Further, ethics should focus on how virtues and character are formed in historical communities, not on allegedly universal norms and rules for decision-making. Proponents of this approach expect churches formed by the distinctive biblical narrative to be countercultural. Ethics informed by broader philosophies, they claim, align churches with the status quo.

Perhaps most significantly, Stassen and Gushee construe most of Jesus' teachings, and especially those in the Sermon on the Mount, not as "antitheses," or dyads, but as triads. After mentioning received teachings like "You shall not kill," Jesus added statements like "Every one angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matt. 5:21-22). It is usually assumed that the second statements enjoined much more difficult commands, like "You shall not be angry." Since these commands seemed impossible to obey, ethicists frequently supposed that Jesus taught ideals to be

admired, but hardly to be practiced. Ethics, they thought, had to look elsewhere for its main principles.

Stassen and Gushee, however, propose that the second kind of statement is not a command but a description of vicious cycles that entangle people. Jesus did command certain behaviors, but did so in a third step outlining possible transforming initiatives, such as: be reconciled with those against whom you feel anger before you offer sacrifice (Matt. 5:23-24). In this way, Jesus pointed to numerous ways of living out God's kingdom in everyday life without demanding perfection.

Resisting postmodernism, Stassen and Gushee insist that Jesus taught rules—concrete directions for action applying to many situations—and the general principles underlying them. More like postmodernists, however, they consider few principles absolute. But basic convictions about, say, God's nature, are absolute. ("Go the second mile" is a rule; "love your enemies," a principle; God "is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" is a basic conviction.)

The significance of Stassen and Gushee's approach becomes clearest when they discuss nonviolence, an "unrealistic" behavior that Jesus' teaching is usually thought to demand. They review nonviolence and just war theories in detail, but favor "just peacemaking" and outline ten practices which can be undertaken in situations of conflict. But when these practices fail and violence becomes inevitable, what should Christians do? Stassen and Gushee commend neither just war nor nonviolence, but urge churches prayerfully to discern to which approach they are called.

Kingdom Ethics elaborates relatively conservative positions on many issues often considered personal. The permanence of marriage and avoidance of abortion are advocated, but not as absolutes. In some concrete situations exceptions are allowed. Homosexual practice, however, is absolutely proscribed, though homosexual orientation is not, and people so oriented must be treated with utmost love and dignity. Stassen and Gushee are more liberal regarding gender roles and issues often seen as social—war, the death penalty, race, economics and the environment.

The book should appeal to the large, somewhat amorphous but increasingly visible audience that is neither traditionally ecumenical nor evangelical. It should attract many of the left-wing evangelicals its publisher frequently targets. The book should also appeal to mainliners conservative in doctrine but liberal or radical in social-ethical orientation. A kind of ecumenism is growing among such people, and

occasionally it results in some structure, such as the Hauerwas-inspired Ekklesia Project and Christian Churches Together in the USA.