

# Christian Ethics, by Robin W. Lovin

reviewed by [William P. George](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

Introductory courses and treatises can test even accomplished teachers and writers. It is not easy to simplify without compromising, to be comprehensive without exceeding one's limits. The challenge is especially great when it comes to ethics, which, as Robin W. Lovin explains in the preface to this fine text, "involves sorting out some ways of thinking about the good life that are so familiar to us that we do not always realize we are thinking about it at all."

Lovin, dean of the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University and past president of the Society of Christian Ethics, succeeds admirably in helping readers to think about the familiar in unfamiliar ways. Attribute this not only to his years of teaching Christian ethics to graduate students, seminarians, professionals and parishioners, but also to his own scholarly efforts to think things through. Those familiar with his writings on natural law, public theology or the theology of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Dietrich Bonhoeffer will find these topics revisited here. But in this book Lovin's particular scholarly interests give way to an exposition of the broadest, most fundamental aspects of Christian ethics. The book's intent is to help Christians attain an intellectually mature understanding of what it is to live a good life.

Whether exploring traditional approaches to ethics--teleological, deontological and character--or simply explaining whether the noun "ethics" is singular or plural, Lovin joins clarity and economy of words. In an initial chapter on "choices" he sets up the problem: though committed Christians desire to do good, they are often unsure about what to do. Successive chapters weave together the Bible, figures from the past, theological themes, ethical theories, pressing moral issues, and homey examples as they discuss ethics in terms of goals, rules, virtues, church and society.

Lovin always attempts to heighten readers' critical awareness of the dimensions of ethics that are already a part of their lives. So, for instance, he explores the many, often unarticulated, ways in which goals are crucial to human living and to the life of faith. But the point of Christian ethics is not simply to affirm an individual's or a

community's cherished goals. Rather, it aims to reassess and possibly revise them in light of God's purposes. Ethical reflection requires sorting through some thorny issues, such as the problem of competing goals or the relationship of human planning to God's purposes and ways.

A discussion of rules touches on divine-command ethics, natural law and covenant theology. Similarly, Lovin's consideration of virtues deftly covers a lot of ground, including the cardinal and theological virtues and the importance of narrative, and raises pertinent questions without leading the reader into the quagmire of current scholarly debate. Attention to various understandings of church--ecumenical, confessional and missional--confirms the conviction of many Christian thinkers that moral questions are often in fact ecclesiological. Lovin invites us to ask not only, Which morality?, but also, Which church?

Lovin's own ethical convictions are perhaps most visible in the chapter on society. While sympathetic to other points of view, he stresses Christian realism (Reinhold Niebuhr et al.). He knows this tradition well, and judges it the most theologically adequate approach to Christian involvement in the world.

This short text can and should be used in various settings: church study groups, undergraduate classrooms and seminaries. Perhaps best suited to a range of Protestant readers seeking a primer on Christian ethics, Lovin's book also opens up traditional and more recent Catholic moral theology (e.g., Catholic social teaching), and could nicely complement a similarly brief text like Servais Pinckaers's *Morality: The Catholic View* (St. Augustine Press). These guides expertly put erudition at the service of pastoral wisdom.