

The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics

A Review Article on

John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001, ix + 277pp. £15.99

STANLEY HAUERWAS AND J. ALEXANDER SIDER*

Christian ethics is often done in a fashion that makes fundamental theological convictions take a back seat to symbolic abstractions that serve public policy analysis. John Colwell's *Living the Christian Story: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics*¹ not only brings theological convictions into the foreground, but in particular calls attention to the Holy Spirit as chastening practical reason. The book's argument is straightforward, and on analogy to a musical score it is simple in notation and impressive in instrumentation. Throughout, Colwell is concerned to answer two conjoined questions he thinks lie at the heart of Christian ethics: in what does the distinctiveness of Christian ethics consist, and how can that distinctiveness be marked, credibly, effectively and persuasively, by the world outside the bounds of the church? In a word, Colwell's answer to the first question is that Christian ethics is distinctive because it invites people to participate in the story of the gospel. As such, Christian ethics will be accessible to the watching world to the degree that it takes the form of an invitation to enter into the Christian life. If, in other words, the church's voice is to be both hearable and distinctive it will have to be faithful to its calling to witness to the story of Jesus Christ. And that, Colwell argues, will not be merely a matter of setting out a catalogue of claims, beliefs and contentions; it will have to be a matter of life. As he puts it:

To define what it means to be a Christian merely in terms of beliefs, commitments and attitudes is inadequate. My identity as a Christian is just that, a matter of identity, a matter of being, and not merely a matter of belief or opinion.

* Duke University, Durham, 27708 North Carolina, USA.

1 Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001. Subsequent citations will be parenthetical in the text.

To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Christ, to follow him, to be like him, to be indwelt by his Spirit. Consequently, it is not merely that being a Christian implies ethical commitments: to be a Christian is an ethical commitment. (p. 3)

Because the gospel has the form of a story, it is accessible primarily by being indwelt. The gospel, in Colwell's view, is heard as a summons to participate in its perspective on life and creation, and that means having one's life forged in coherence with Christ. Coherence, identity and indwelling are, for Colwell, all focal concepts that organize what it might mean to live the Christian story, and we shall need to return to them. Prior to that, however, we will flesh out the structure and argument of the book.

Living the Christian Story is divided into four Parts of three chapters each. The first Part, 'Particularity and Distinctiveness', sets up the problems to which the subsequent sections offer a response. Chapter 1, 'Morality and Rationalism', begins by rehearsing what have by now become common challenges to epistemological and moral foundationalism, that is, to two characteristically modern assumptions: first of all, that the question, 'What ought I to do?' is subordinate to the question, 'What can I know?', and second, that I can be sure of what I claim to know only when that knowledge is the product of detached, autonomous and universal reason. These two assumptions created the conditions for a massive and systemic delusion, namely, the myth of knowledge-as-such, which stands to be used morally, but is not moral in and of itself. With respect to this delusion, Colwell says that the philosophical, political and aesthetic developments we call 'postmodern' emerged as a much needed antidote to modernity's alleged capacity for giving detached descriptions of the world. Yet, despite this, postmodernism is not so much the cure for modernist epistemology as it is a symptom of its advanced stages. Indeed, postmodernism, Colwell contends, is but modernity gone to seed: while it cultivates a degree of honesty concerning the invested nature of all rationality, it simply replaces universal reason with one of universal skepticism and asserts a radical, irremediable difference between knowing agents. In postmodernity, a new myth reigns: not only can I never assume my knowledge is accessible to all rational agents, but it is not even clear that I can reasonably claim to know what seems transparent to me. This, to be sure, paints a fairly bleak and anxious picture.

On Colwell's account, Christian theology, in distinction from both modernity and postmodernity, asks whether there can be a theocentric epistemology based in the faithfulness of God that puts Christian ethics on a sure footing. The hope is that such a 'God-centred foundation for the dynamic of knowing' (p. 40) will, in a sense, allow one to have one's cake and eat it too: it could expose modern universal reason as the delusion it is, while nevertheless allowing and expecting a degree of commonality to inhabit human efforts at knowing truthfully and living well, thereby flying in the face of certain postmodern appeals to difference. Colwell identifies the task at hand as examining 'the possibilities for thinking, living, and proclaiming the Christian story as "sub-narrative", as that which underlies and offers possibilities for

coherence'. Such a task requires, he thinks, a re-examination of 'the nature of the Christian story itself' (p. 41), as well as an examination of the conditions under which that story may be effectively and persuasively proclaimed.

Colwell recognizes that his task is complicated by the diversity of voices within the Christian tradition, and not only by the competition between Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism. As a Baptist, Colwell is also bitterly aware of the difficulties involved in referring to 'Protestantism' as if it were one voice rather than a cacophony of many voices. Yet, in the conclusion of Part 1, Colwell argues that contemporary Protestantisms all find themselves ill-equipped to proclaim the Christian story because they lack confidence in their ability to speak credibly to the world in which they find themselves. Colwell identifies three possible sources of this insecurity. In the first place, he argues that most versions of Protestantism have misappropriated the Reformation doctrines of *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. They thereby rely on an impoverished account of justification and sanctification that denies the ethical essence of the faith (p. 49), and so have nothing distinctively Christian to say to the modern/postmodern world. Second, contemporary Protestantisms tend to read Scripture as a 'book of rules' (p. 61), rather than as a narrative that invites plausible continuation. And finally, most Protestant churches assume a ghetto mentality that places them in a situation where the moral resources on which they draw are themselves parodic of and parasitic on the very non-biblical and modernist accounts of ethics they seek to criticize (p. 66).

Despite this insecurity, Colwell contends that the crisis of contemporary Protestant churches is not without hope. Because the Bible is irreducibly narrative in form, engagement with Scripture qua Scripture demands the production, not of a compendium of propositions or doctrines of the Bible, but a modified sensibility, the development of interpretive processes that shape our lives as witnesses to the person of Jesus. And if Protestants can begin again to see Scripture as the primary imaginative resource for giving a storied shape to human lives, then there will be no rift between justification and sanctification (since formation in the faith is ethics), and the church can have something distinctively Christian to proclaim in the world (since the proclamation will now be nothing other than the witness of lives lived as plausible continuations of the gospel story). Parts 2 and 3 of *Living the Christian Story* explore the conditions under which the gospel can be seen as shaping lives, while Part 4 examines the way in which lives so shaped can communicate the gospel's story to those not formed by it.

In the second Part of *Living the Christian Story*, 'Gospel and Law', Colwell shows how the processes of engagement with Scripture that shape the Christian life require the recognition that the gospel confronts its hearers both as grace and as command. The good news of Jesus Christ, as external to us, as objectively given, creates the possibility that our lives might become coherent with it. The Christian stands before God solely on the basis of God's mercy, and yet that stance takes the real and lived form of coherence with true humanity, given to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of the givenness of grace in Colwell's argument. The constructivist impulse in modernism and postmodernism alike elicits considerable dis-ease with concepts like donation and mediation. We want to create and give ourselves the world. But, for Christians, mediation, conceived as both the givenness of grace and our capacity to find that our very lives are gifts, is central to God's trinitarian economy of salvation: creation is ordered to the praise of God the Father *through* Jesus Christ the Son *in* and *with* the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Colwell argues, if Christians are to speak good news credibly to the world, it will have something to do with finding in the gospel the gift of a new range of perceptual powers, as well as the possibility of living differently in response to that new perception (p. 136). In other words, and we take this to be the burden of Colwell's third Part, 'The Dynamics of Indwelling', the good news consists in the Holy Spirit mediating to us the possibility that our real humanity might reflect Christ's true humanity.

We wonder, however, whether the very distinction between perception and lived response, despite Colwell's 'not just . . . but also' attempt to keep them together, does not allow in the back door the modernist primacy of epistemology to ethics that Colwell criticized in Part 1. Living differently in response to a new range of perceptual powers lends a certain logical priority to epistemology in Colwell's account of the work of the Holy Spirit that we think renders large portions of his pneumatology epiphenomenal. This is not to say that the development of robustly trinitarian accounts of the faith is unimportant. Indeed, it is precisely the importance of such efforts that leads to our dissatisfaction with Colwell's efforts to display a trinitarian ethic. No doubt this has something to do with the general difficulty in designating a specific temporal mission for the Holy Spirit. In this regard, we are fond of Geoffrey Wainwright's – our colleague and teacher's – wry comment that 'If there is a problem with saying what the Holy Spirit does, then it is his own fault', which is to say that there is an altogether proper reservation to be exhibited whenever one is tempted to give an account of the Holy Spirit's work in the economy of salvation apart from specific contexts of ecclesial discernment.

It is well and fine to say, as Colwell does, that the Holy Spirit is the principal mediator of grace (p. 146, for instance), structuring created being to be receptive and responsive to God's decision for creating in Jesus Christ. But we wonder what work this claim does and why it deserves prime time play in Colwell's book? It is almost as if he has completed a giant jigsaw puzzle only to find himself with one piece, a very pretty piece, left over. No matter how captivating that remaining piece of puzzle is, and no matter how one tries to cram it into the puzzle, it will to some extent remain anomalous, that is, not quite fit. That lack of fit, in the case of Colwell's pneumatology, is apparent in two respects: first, in its functional superfluity and, second, as we have already intimated, in its employment of 'epistemology' as a grammar against which the initial thrust of the book contends.

To the first point, throughout the book Colwell appeals to a version of trinitarian thought, the early sources of which are largely Greek. We suspect that rather than aiding him, a patient attention to Greek patristic trinitarian thought actually defeats,

or at least renders much more knotty, the task with which Colwell thinks it helps – talking about what the Holy Spirit does in the economy of salvation. While Colwell makes repeated and effective use of Irenaeus and Athanasius, we think he would have done well to pay explicit attention to his own admonition, early on in the book, of Jonathan Edwards’ assumption of a ‘predominately Augustinian, rather than Cappadocian, account of the Trinity’ (p. 38 n. 23). The Cappadocians are, if anything, more insistent than Augustine about the pertinence of Augustine’s own theologoumenon, *Opera dei ad extra sunt indivisa*, and this because Nyssa and Nazianzen, in reflecting on the polemical context of Basil’s own pneumatology, are driven to deny that one can distinguish among the persons of the Trinity on the basis of economic activity, that is, their works. Attempts to do so require something like an account of appropriations, apparent both in Basil’s ruminations on the use of prepositions in prayer and praise so as not to imply the isolation of one hypostasis from the others, and also in Nyssa’s meditation on the mutual transference of glory among the hypostaseis of the Godhead, reflections central to subsequent Greek/‘Eastern’ thought about the image of God in humanity and so also to perfection.

On such a reading of the Cappadocians, Colwell’s pneumatology attempts to say more than needs to, or should, be said. ‘What the Holy Spirit does’ in the economy of salvation is simply not *definable* in even the most tentative separation from the activity of Father and Son. And, lest readers of Hauerwas exclaim, ‘Aha! He really does de-emphasize pneumatology’, let us hasten to say that this is neither to give the Spirit short shrift nor to render Christianity binitarian rather than trinitarian. It is simply to reinstate into theological reflection a proper modesty when speaking about the temporal missions of both the Holy Spirit and the Son, if in doing so we are tempted to think that therein they derive some kind of identity characterizable in terms independent of the Father.

This entire line of criticism, we are aware, could be taken to imply the practical indifference of Christian trinitarian teaching. If that were the case, we would simply disagree with Colwell that doctrine is ethics, something neither of us is likely to do. The difficulty is, however, more fundamental, and has to do with our rejection of epistemology as a proper arena for discussing the Holy Spirit’s ‘contribution’ in the economy of salvation, what Colwell calls ‘the indwelling of the Holy Spirit’. To a certain extent, Colwell is on the right track, for he sees that ‘a form of “Spirit Christology”’ is required to speak adequately, that is, trinitarianly, of the Son’s humanity, his temporal mission (p. 132). In other words, we fall into theological incoherence when we suggest a relative independence of the Son’s activity in God’s economy of salvation: it is proper to the Son to become incarnate, yet only God can save, and when I say God, I mean Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We speak of the temporal mission of the Son because the journey of the Son into the far country is historically datable and empirically testable – people saw and lived their lives with Jesus of Nazareth, they were healed, fed and taught by him, they betrayed him to death and watched his agony upon the cross, they were there to be astonished and terrified when he, who had laid his life down, took it up again, and they stood longingly by when he was lifted up into the heavens until a cloud veiled him from

their sight. It is in his promise to send another advocate that our claim for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is warranted. And, the testable, datable quality of the Son's mission ought to give us clues about how best to speak of the Holy Spirit's.

All of this is to say that letting epistemology, even a 'spiritual' one (p. 85), in the back door will not do. If we are to say something specific about the work of the Holy Spirit, then it will be on analogy to what we can say specifically about the work of Christ. It will in consequence be inadequate to maintain with Colwell that the work of the Holy Spirit consists in establishing the possibility of transformed perceptual capacities and thus the possibility of cohering with Christ. You do not need to secure a priori the possibility that the Holy Spirit can grant a new outlook on creation before talking about how lives are transformed by the gospel. When, for instance, the Apostle Paul says, 'No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 12:3), he is not setting out the conditions of possibility for proclaiming the lordship of Christ; he is already dealing with transformed lives. To put it in terms with which we think both the Cappadocians and Thomas Aquinas would be sympathetic, our adequation to beatitude is a matter of habit. None of these theologians can countenance an epistemology that furnishes you with a moral psychology on which is then hung the ethical substance of our lives. Indeed, one of the puzzles about Colwell's position is his underwriting of Rahner's 'fundamental option' (p. 180). That is to accept a dualist account of the self that is modernist to the core, and, what is worse, it undercuts any account of bodily habituation necessary for a coherent vision of the virtuous life. If instead, as we argue, human rationality and morality are about having bodies, no such dissection of the moral life is possible, let alone desirable. This, not incidentally, is also why we take Colwell's turn to Berkeley's idealism to be a dead end. Coherence with Christ is not established in the pneumatologically given possibility that our perception of creation may participate in God's creative perception – or more to the point, if it is, who cares? The Christian life is about being transformed, and that renders the question of whether (and if so, how) one *can be* transformed a non-starter.

Does this mean Christians can prescind from a discussion of transformation? Absolutely not. But it does mean that the grammars Christians use to talk about transformation will start with and stick closely to the givenness of that transformation. In other words, our grammars of transformation will have not to do with epistemology, but with witness, and therefore with the church. It is not, however, clear to us that you either need to or can have it both ways, which is the stance toward which Colwell edges.

Perhaps Colwell's employment of epistemology to discuss the distinctiveness of the Christian life is what provokes our unease with his use of words like identity, coherence and indwelling. Not that this is an inconsequential set of concepts for Christian ethics, especially one that has to do with the formation of character. Rather, the problem has to do with the quasi-formal character these words retain in Colwell's analysis. The work of the Holy Spirit, Colwell contends, takes the form of our being indwelt by the gospel story inasmuch as we participate in the sacramental life of the church. Consequently, Christian identity, coherence with the person of Christ, will

have to be a matter of mediation, it will have to be the timeful product of the development of habits that give to one's life the shape of the scriptural story. And if that emphasis on mediation is fundamental, then, one would think, you talk about Christian identity not by setting out general parameters concerning narrative and continuity, but by pointing to people, that is, to witnesses. Not by talking about the importance of witness or how witnesses warrant claims to Christian identity, but by pointing to actual lives, with all the ambiguity and equivocation that entails. For all Colwell's emphasis on sticking with life as it is actually lived, we find remarkable the extent to which the activity of pointing to lives is absent in *Living the Christian Story*.

Despite these considerations, we think Colwell does make a significant contribution to contemporary Christian ethics by providing, in Part 4 of the book, a clear and carefully accented discussion of the commonality of grace. Because God has but one Word to speak there is not one order of creation and another of salvation. Rather, Colwell argues, creation and redemption are continuous parts of God's one salvific economy, so there neither is nor can be any ungraced nature. We ought therefore to expect continuities to emerge between the church and the world. They are not discrete spheres. Both find their fundamental nature in the fact that they are created. In consequence, a distinctively Christian morality will cohere with an awareness of creation in general that itself is being given by the Spirit and oriented to the Son (p. 226).

Correlative, for Colwell, to the axiom of common grace is the contention that there is not (yet) any finally realized perfection. This means that the church must expect to live in a world that remains on the way to perfection – it cannot pretend to live entirely in the eschatological 'already'; it cannot absolve itself of the responsibility for living in the present fallen context. The story of God's salvation of the world is *in medias res*, such that the church's posture cannot be one of disjunction with the world. Rather, it must stand as a witness to the story of Jesus Christ in the midst of a world that, because of the continuity of creation and redemption, is able to hear, resonate with, and even be persuaded by that story.

Even so, if the commonality of grace secures the possibility that the gospel can be received as good news in a world that has not yet heard it, there is nevertheless no guarantee that it will be so heard. Or rather, on Colwell's account, the only way to receive the gospel as good news is through hearing it as an invitation into the peculiar life of the church. And that invitation might be encountered as a scandal, not hearable as good news at all. Yet for Colwell, this is entirely proper: the particularity of the gospel means that the church must be prepared to be scandalous, not just to appear scandalous to those without the eyes to see or ears to hear, but to risk the possibility of true scandal. That risk finds its intelligibility in the incarnation of Christ. 'Any tendency', he says,

to focus on the doctrinal at the expense of the narrative minimalizes [*sic*] the so-called 'scandal of particularity' and, thereby, issues either in an idealizing of the community of the Church or in a disjunction of the Church's story from the

gospel story of which it is an echo. The phrase ‘scandal of particularity’ refers both to the general and theoretical scandal that God should (or *could*) define himself and humanity in *any* particular, and also to the specific and actual scandal that God *has* defined himself and humanity in *this* particular. (pp. 121–2)

If, in other words, the church sanitizes the scandal of the gospel by severing the confession of Christ’s humanity from the particularities of that humanity, the church will cease to be truly the church. The true humanity of Jesus Christ not only reveals what human life can be, but it is also real – it is human life in the real world, complete with all its concomitant messiness. The church therefore has no license to idealize its own humanity; neither has it license to idealize that of its Lord. But for all this talk of risk, scandal, messiness and compromise, Colwell’s ‘realism’ is remarkably triumphalistic. Indeed, as the book moves into its final chapters these words take on an almost celebratory tone that, to our minds, undoes the equivocation and the agonism for which they stand. There is precious little, for instance, in *Living the Christian Story* of the alienation to and distancing from self that the recognition of Jesus’ true humanity as also real humanity involves. Here we recall Sebastian Moore, whose *The Crucified Jesus Is No Stranger* probes the depths of the refusal to see Jesus’ real humanity as true humanity *without resolving the difficulty* that entails.² What I first find in seeing Jesus’ real humanity as true humanity is my own self-diminution, my repression and immobilization of that true humanity, inflicted out of the sense, which I then find to be erroneous in Christ’s light, that the real humanity I think I inhabit can or should secure itself against its essential brittleness.

Throughout *Living the Christian Story* Colwell stresses the peculiarity of Christianity with frequent reference to theologians such as Karl Barth and Stanley Hauerwas. Yet, as we have just suggested, we wonder whether Colwell’s emphasis on the Christian difference does not flounder on his commitment to ‘realism’. It may seem odd to make these criticisms of a book that makes such a generous use of my (Hauerwas’) work, but because we share so much in common with Colwell it becomes important to suggest where we might differ. The following line of engagement, then, is but our way of extending the reflections of the preceding paragraphs by raising questions, more about internal consistency and coherence than about overall approach. On Colwell’s account, the particularity of the Christian story entails strong ontological claims about Christ’s redemption of all creation, which leads him to argue that Christians cannot opt out of involvement in and responsibility for the world. Yet to our minds Colwell’s argument exhibits a set of reserves about the character of that redemption that grows from his reflections on God’s work in Christ.

Frankly, we have to admit, we are sick and tired of mainline Protestants, who advocate ‘engaging the world’, accusing Anabaptists of ‘sectarian withdrawal’. As Daniel L. Smith-Christopher points out, these same mainline Protestants ‘typically

2 Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1977.

undervalue, or are not even aware of, the worldwide involvement of these supposedly “withdrawn” Christian activists in direct service projects that are not mediated by any state authorities’.³ Those stereotypes were historically inappropriate when they first surfaced and by now are sheerly indefensible, the product of extreme ignorance at best and a cause for the shame of those who perpetuate them.

So we find ourselves in flat disagreement with Colwell’s persistent characterization of the ‘Anabaptist’ strategy of withdrawal from the world as implicitly ‘docetic’ (p. 126 *et al.*). While we do not doubt that such a strategy has, *at times*, become the occasion for a ghettoized mentality of possessive self-directedness, we think it improper to name the strategy itself docetic. Indeed, if we follow Colwell’s own assumption that any distinctively Christian ethic will bear the marks of its correlative Christology, then the claim is almost laughable. It is difficult to imagine a group of Christians since the Reformation more consistently engaged in meditation on the Jesus who lived his life in the realities of this world than the Anabaptists and their heirs have been. They, with the *possible* exceptions of the so-called ‘spiritualists’, can scarcely be considered to hold or have held docetic Christologies, which ought to prompt Colwell to rethink his portrayal of Anabaptist social ethics, perhaps along the following lines. The Anabaptists whom Colwell seems to have in mind – and here we cannot but lament the lack of exegetical engagement with Anabaptist texts, especially when compared with Colwell’s extended expositions of other texts – were characteristically all-too-aware, because experience is the best teacher, that withdrawal from the world is not a *human* goal: what other world is there to which to retreat? So the strategy of withdrawal, as it was employed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anabaptists in North America, for instance, was always – it could be nothing other than – a piecemeal separation from *aspects* of ‘the world’. And surely it is not unfair to analogize this fragmentary strategy of separation from the world with Colwell’s understanding that certain aspects of modern and postmodern constructivist epistemologies are inimical to the Christian life and, as such, must be disowned and challenged by alternative practices internal to the Christian story. Rowan Williams once wrote in connection with early desert monasticism that the monks recognized the extent to which ‘the shared life *must* be a withdrawn life; there are some social contexts in which the only victory is retreat, which so cloud the face of reality that the only way to “unillusionedness” is flight’.⁴ Williams’ sense that withdrawal may itself be part of a sustained attempt truthfully to engage reality we think begins to sketch an important corrective to Colwell’s argument.

3 *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 201.

4 *The Wound of Knowledge: A Theological History from the New Testament to Luther and St. John of The Cross* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1980), p. 104.