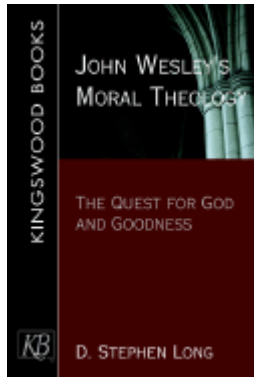


CIRCUITRIDER *Reviews*



John Wesley's Moral Theology

by D. Stephen Long (Kingswood Books 2005
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Reviewed by Darren Cushman Wood, pastor of Speedway United Methodist Church in

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The last thing we United Methodists will tolerate is having nothing to say about a contemporary social problem. Just consider the massive volume of resolutions and petitions which flood every General Conference. This year the General Conference will consider a revised Social Creed and the main argument for its adoption is to make it relevant to today's problems and more useful for worship.

Swept up in this quest for relevance is our understanding of Wesley. Numerous books claim to show how he is still useful for today. And yet, our understanding of Wesley becomes distorted by our attempts to make him a prototype of our modern perspective.

In John Wesley's Moral Theology D. Stephen Long offers a radical proposal: By letting Wesley be Wesley in his context and thus being out of step with ours, Wesley actually has more to say to us in our postmodern context. Here, our problem with making him relevant for today is implied in the difference between "ethics" and "moral theology." As a "moral theologian," Wesley believed that doing and knowing what is good can only be achieved by being united with Christ. In other words, the Good and the True cannot be known outside of God. Thus, there is no separation between ethics and

theology since the former is only intelligible in the light of the latter.

“Ethics,” on the other hand, seeks to find in human nature or culture a universal and timeless foundation for knowing and doing what is right. But the tradition of ethics raises the question of God’s relationship to the ethical principle. Once the basis for doing and knowing the good is no longer rooted in a relationship with God then it becomes possible to separate theology from politics, ethics and economics. We must now make theology ‘relevant’ to ethics.

Even though ethics was gradually replacing moral theology throughout the eighteenth century, “at the end of his life,” Long argues, that Wesley “recognized that ‘ethics’ would be the downfall of Christianity. He was correct, and that makes him all the more interesting to us today.” What does not make Wesley relevant is extrapolating his ethics from his doctrine and spiritual disciplines. As we enter a postmodern era, recovering Wesley’s connection with the ancient tradition of moral theology is what makes him truly ‘relevant.’

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Western thought was undergoing a shift in the way it conceived of the relationship between God and morality. Long does a masterful job of surveying the landscape of different opinions: from the Cambridge Platonists, who saw God and the Good as inseparable; to Kant and Locke for whom God was subordinate to a more universal and primary concept of the Good; to Hobbes and Hume who argued that one can know the Good without assistance from God.

Where does Wesley stand on this landscape? Long traces the influences on Wesley’s theology and shows how the Cambridge Platonists connected him to an older tradition of moral theology. “The Christian Platonism is much more determinative than any specific incorporation of Eastern Orthodox thought in Wesley’s work,” Long asserts. He critiques the belief that Wesley merely reflected Locke’s epistemology. On the contrary, “Wesley never successfully made the transition from a medieval and Anglican sacramental world to a modern epistemological one grounded in human consciousness.” Wesley was influenced by Locke but this influence was shaped by other thinkers who reflected the Anglo-Catholic tradition with its metaphysics of participation in the Triune God and the doctrine of illumination.

One of the most interesting sections in Long’s book is his examination of the selection and arrangement of Wesley’s sermons in the 1771 collection. Wesley placed “The Lord Our

Righteousness” between “The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God” and the 13 Discourses on the Sermon on the Mount and then immediately followed these sermons with several sermons on the meaning and use of the Law. Long claims that this order reveals “an intriguing shape to Wesley’s moral theology.” For Wesley, knowing and doing what is right comes from God awakening our spiritual senses. “Christian moral action begins by participation of God in the soul” for Wesley. Then Wesley shows in “The Lord Our Righteousness” how Christ does this without making us either passive recipients of his righteousness or the originators of our own righteousness. Once Wesley sorts this out he goes on to outline the virtues and practices of righteousness in his examination of the Sermon on the Mount. To conclude, Wesley comes back to the issue of the Law to demonstrate how we as Christians do not abandon the Law but in Christ are able to fulfill it.

The content and organization of these sermons demonstrates the similarities between Wesley and Aquinas. Wesley did not make direct use of Aquinas, as Long points out. Rather, Wesley inherited a tradition of moral theology which came out of and carried on the Thomistic tradition. Both Wesley and Aquinas emphasize participation in the human righteousness of Christ as the animating force for morality; both see this participation as the goal; they share a belief in grace perfecting nature; and they stress that Christian character is formed in the context of the Church and its practices.

Since Wesley, there have been two strategies for relating Methodist theology and ethics, both of which reflect the logic of ethics and ignore the moral logic of Wesley himself. The first strategy was to neglect Wesley altogether, which was seen in the late 19th and early 20th century in Methodist ethicists such as Bowne, Brightman, Knudson and Boston Personalism. The second strategy in recent years has been to make Wesley relevant for today by finding places in his theology which parallel or resemble modern ethical principles. But as modernity comes to an end, Methodism is at a crossroads and the older, modernist strategy of making Wesley ‘relevant for today’ no longer works.

He concludes the book by putting Wesley’s moral theology into conversation with Reinhold Niebuhr’s realism, which remains the inspiration and outline for a wide range of contemporary theological ethics. Niebuhr makes the limitations caused by human sinfulness the center piece of his ethics which leaves us with an irresolvable contradiction of needing to do what is right but knowing that we can never accomplish it. In contrast, because Wesley’s perfectionism is centered in Christ and not on our sinfulness, “we do not know a

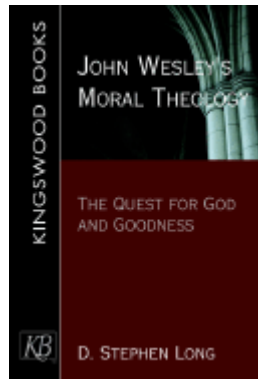
priori the limits in which the good and true cannot be performed.” Thus, we should not settle for accepting an unjust status quo as a bulwark against a greater evil. Long concludes by saying that “Wesleyans must finally not only reject Niebuhrian fallibilism but also sit uncomfortably with any political and economic exchange that flourishes on a doctrine of sin rather than one that bears witness to the exchange God makes with us in Jesus.”

Long has authored a work that should stir academic debate and research on Wesley for years to come. Others will re-examine Wesley’s place among Enlightenment thinkers, scrutinize the similarities between Wesley and Aquinas, and debate the merits of Wesleyan perfectionism over Niebuhrian fallibilism. Still others will give a different assessment of earlier Methodist ethicists. For those who follow developments in Wesleyan studies Long’s book should be read.

But for the rest of us, what’s the big whoop? Long covers a lot of philosophical terrain which is tough going for anyone other than a grad student and at times his writing is only comprehensible if the reader is already acquainted with the theological movement known as Radical Orthodoxy of which he is a representative. Besides, what United Methodist pastor has the time or energy to explore a book that has no immediate ‘relevance’ for our pastoral work?

I think it is worth the hike because it raises a fundamental question at the heart of ministry: What will sustain and guide us in knowing and doing the right thing as pastors who are committed to a ministry of peace, mercy and justice? As an activist pastor, I cannot know or continue to do the right thing without participating in the Triune life of God. As a General Conference delegate I am fed up with passing resolutions which seem to have no connection with our doctrines and, even worse, compromise our integrity because we do not implement them or integrate them into the total life of our denomination.

While John Wesley’s Moral Theology does not offer a direct answer to these questions, it points us in the right direction for finding an answer in Wesley’s writings. It enables us to discover the logic of Wesley’s moral theology which can support and guide us. More than extrapolating a laundry list of ethical principles, what we see in Wesley’s writings is Christ who is the guide and compass for navigating us through the moral terrain of our postmodern context. As I prepare for General Conference this is one book which will be a part of my preparations.



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