

[MJTM 12 (2010–2011)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Timothy J. Geddert. *All Right Now: Finding Consensus on Ethical Questions*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008. Pbk. 229 pp. ISBN 978036194180.

Timothy Geddert, Professor of New Testament at MB Biblical Seminary, has provided a helpful resource for congregations seeking to engage with ethical issues that have been divisive in church communities. Geddert's approach places Scripture at the center of doing ethics, but his goal is not so much to provide the one correct ethical answer from the Bible. Instead, he seeks to demonstrate how a community of believers should use Scripture to inform both their discussions and their attitudes as they seek common ground on ethical dilemmas. The result is a book that I believe is useful for both pastors and laypeople, and is ideal for small group study.

The first part of the book introduces one of the main themes—Geddert's call for a “middle way” approach to using Scripture to inform Christian ethics (pp. 19–20). This approach is a corrective to both a Christianity that is swayed more by cultural attitudes than by Scripture, and a Christianity that adheres to rigid traditions of specific interpretations of the “timeless truths” of the Bible. In this section, and in the book in general, it is the latter Christianity that Geddert spends more time and effort pulling towards the middle. He argues for a more nuanced way of interpreting the text that appreciates the diversity of perspectives in Scripture and recognizes its historical situatedness. The result is that direct application of biblical texts is not always possible. Instead we must focus on principles in the text in conjunction with our own cultural setting.

The other main theme of the book is that debating and enforcing ethics within a congregation requires a certain type of Christian community. Geddert locates the guidelines for this community of disciples in Matthew 18. In this community there is no concern over who is greatest, there is immeasurable forgiveness, there is attention to modelling proper ethical behavior,

GEDDERT *All Right Now*

and there is the God-given authority for the community to discern acceptable conduct. Most interesting in this section is Geddert's interpretation of Matt 18:15–17. When an unrepentant member of the community is to be treated as a "Gentile and a tax collector," it means that he or she must be seen as "someone who needs to be won [back] to the fellowship" (p. 55). The first section closes with Geddert's twelve principles of a biblical ethic (pp. 67–86). Two examples that help provide a feel for his approach to ethics as a whole are "a biblical ethic maintains the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' [of the kingdom of God]," and "a biblical ethic is concerned more with the center of God's will than with the boundary line."

In the second part of the book, Geddert puts his "middle way" scriptural approach to ethics into practice through examining several contentious ethical issues—non-violence and military participation, sexuality (primarily sex outside of marriage), divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, and money and possessions. In each chapter he brings together the most relevant biblical texts and the major ethical perspectives on the issue, as well as his own assessment of those texts and perspectives. Each chapter in this section, as in all chapters, concludes with discussion questions and suggestions for further reading. This part of the book would serve as a useful resource for small group study, gathering together in a concise way the important Scripture passages and arguments on each ethical issue.

It should be noted, however, that Geddert clearly writes from within his Anabaptist tradition, and the understanding of the church as a radical community set apart from the world is foundational in his ethics. This can be seen, for example, in the discussion on Christians and the use of violence, where the prescriptive ethics in the Sermon on the Mount are not meant for humanity in general, but for the separate community of the disciples. This does not detract from the value of this resource for non-Anabaptist church communities, but some small groups may want to pair it with a similar book from within their own tradition.

The final three chapters concentrate on the theme of reaching ethical consensus in community. Acts 15 is presented as a

paradigmatic example of how a community of believers engages in the process of determining ethical conduct. The decision as to whether Gentile converts should obey Jewish laws required time for the community to be together in discussion, an opportunity for different viewpoints to be heard, attention to both Scripture (the prophets) and the cultural context, and the willingness to seek compromise. The parable of the prodigal son demonstrates the prioritization of healthy reconciled relationship over mere correct behavior. And the account of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2–11) challenges communities to “choose the risk of grace over the security of legalism” (p. 213). These three chapters help to prepare the community’s attitudes before delving into potentially tense discussion. In fact, the flow of the book, especially if being used for a small group study, may have been better served by moving this section on attitude to before the middle section on the ethical issues themselves. In the current format, a group may end up in a heated discussion on money and possessions only to discover in the next chapters some attitudinal guidelines that would have made for a more positive experience.

As should be clear by this point, Geddert is challenging the local church community to take up the task of seeking the truth of Scripture in the midst of their cultural setting in order to address the pertinent ethical issues of the day. This is not a book about seeking ethical consensus across denominational or religious boundaries (although certain principles would be useful in that effort), but instead is a resource intended for use within communities—to help them engage in the process of ethical decision making well. In this goal Geddert is successful, and this book would be a welcome addition to both church libraries and seminary courses training future Christian leaders in practical ethics.

Nikola T. Caric  
McMaster University Divinity College