

[1966. Review of *Theological Ethics*, by James Sellers. *Christianity Today* 22 Jul.]

NOTHING FIXED

Theological Ethics, by James Sellers (Macmillan, 1966, 210 pp., \$5.95), is reviewed by Gordon H. Clark, professor of philosophy, Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana

The value of any theological ethics depends on the kind of theology and the kind of ethics. First, the ethics.

The norms of ethics, according to this author, change. Dr. Sellers, professor of Christian ethics and theology at the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University, acknowledges no fixed principles. "We need a new morality," he declares (p. ix), and, quoting from Paul Ramsey with approval, "At the level of theory itself, any formulation of Christian social ethics is always in need of reformulation" (p. 39).

For the present, at least, the main norm is "wholeness." What the author means by wholeness and what actions the principle of wholeness requires are difficult to see. The term is vague, but it has something to do with the appropriation of secular culture (pp. 44, 49-51, 147, 151). For the most part, however, the author prefers to leave the details as vague as the principle. From page 146 on ("Operating Concepts for Fulfillment," "Realization as End of Action," "Sanctification and Eschatology"), the concepts of Calling, Compromise, Commonwealth, Kairos, and Sanctification permit trivialities only and prove concretely inapplicable.

The author's defense against the charge of having omitted all concrete ethics, except civil rights, may be that his aim is to insist that ethics is based on theology. This is an excellent aim.

However, it is not surprising that a changing ethics is based on a changing theology. Most of the book is an attack against the Bible and Reformation theology. "We cannot rely on ... the unilateral authority of the Bible" (p. 22); "To say *sola fide* is to invoke an obsolete view of human capacity" (pp. 43, 47, 48); "We can replace the limp passivity of older theology with a stout doctrine of human ability" (p. 60); "Worse, in some places where it is not silent, [the Bible] gives us advice that is manifestly bad ... As to the theme of race relations I am prepared to defend my own morality over that of the authors and editors of this portion of the Gospels" (p. 88).

Of course parts of the Bible, if not literally interpreted, are of use in ethics; but this source must be supplemented by “the Judeo-Christian tradition,” the “Church” (the author does not say which one), “natural human activity,” and the directive that “our guidelines should be aimed at shaping human wholeness and that alone” (p. 147). Such a combination is obviously impossible as a basis for theology, since it includes no criterion by which we can decide to accept one part of a component and reject another part. Indeed, if we had a criterion, the combination would not be needed.

Throughout the whole argument the author displays a vast ignorance of historic Protestantism. Queer misinterpretations abound. For example, “Protestantism normally has taken for its critical standard ... faith” (p. 32). Normally, historically, the criterion of both theology and conduct – i.e., the critical standard – has been the Scriptures alone.

In rejecting *sola Scriptura*, the author misappropriates the Westminster Confession, X, 2, which does not say, “That natural man is ‘altogether passive’ until he has been ‘quickenened and renewed by the Holy Spirit.’” This section of the confession concerns effectual calling, something that God does, and therefore man “is altogether passive therein, until *being* quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, *he is thereby enabled to answer this call.*” By omitting the italicized words, Dr. Sellers alters the meaning completely (p. 43).

Later, when he contrasts the Protestant principle with Roman tradition and Quaker mysticism, he reworks it to fit neo-orthodox novelties. Historically Protestantism never said that “the written word” is “a witness to the revelation of God to man” (p. 93). The written word is itself the revelation, and Dr. Sellers has a distorted history. He even alleges that “a better description of [Protestantism’s] emphasis than *sola Scriptura* might be *scriptura prima inter pares*” (p. 94). But he offers no support from Luther, Calvin, Knox, Turretin, Quenstedt, or any of our founders to support his allegation.

Finally, eschatology is redefined so as to refer not to the ultimate outcome of history but to matters of ultimate importance at present. It is true that Dr. Sellers regards Bultmann, whose phrases these are, as too existential; but Alan Richardson “is even worse: ‘The scene of the final salvation must be beyond earth and beyond history in the world to come’” (p. 193). The author seems to have no place for the life to come at all. Eschatology has to do with human action, not divine intervention. Eschatology is not eschatology. What wonders can be done with Christian terminology by giving it secular meaning.

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