

# *One New Book for the Preacher*

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN THE PROTESTANT TRADITION, by Waldo Beach. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988. Paper, \$9.95.

There are kairos moments in the life of the church when a person or an event or a book moves us a little closer to God's will on earth. In my experience such a book was *The Christian Life* by Waldo Beach. This book was part of the Covenant Life Curriculum which gave the former Presbyterian Church, U.S. classics such as *The Mighty Acts of God* by A. B. Rhodes, and *Christian Doctrine* by Shirley C. Guthrie, and *In Response to God* by Isabel Rogers.

*The Christian Life* was published in 1966. It is not easy to put ourselves back into the context of that year and the social crisis which threatened us. Martin Luther King was leading a nonviolent revolution. Tempers were short and emotion was high when the subject of race was discussed. Into that heated context, Waldo Beach wrote a book which spoke to the crisis from the perspective of reformed theology.

At the time, my father was the pastor of a church in Columbia, South Carolina. The adults studied the book and the people were never the same. One elder used to refer to "Waldo Beach Christians" and say, "I don't agree with him but I think he is right." In the book, Beach suggested that a class might invite a black leader from the community to address the class on what it was like to live in the community.

I can still remember the calls my father got on the Saturday night before Matthew Perry, president of the local NAACP addressed the class. It was a session that no one who attended has forgotten. If you have not seen the "creed" of Tom Farmer on page 12 of *The Christian Life*, don't miss it. It is still a relevant statement of civil religion in our society.

Waldo Beach retired in 1986 from Duke Divinity School after teaching Christian ethics for forty years. In the first year of his "retirement," Dr. Beach has made another significant contribution to the life of the church. In a time when Christians are searching for answers to sticky moral questions, he has written an excellent introduction to Christian ethics.

In the preface, Dr. Beach says the book is written primarily for use at the seminary level as an introductory text. "It is pitched somewhere between the formidable tones of moral theology and the quick-fix manuals for Christian living." I think he has made a hit for anyone looking for a good book to use with adults in the church. If a group in your congregation works through this book together, I wager it will not only have a positive impact on their lives, but it will also raise the level of moral discourse in the church.

Why? Because he addresses two basic questions: "What does it mean to be a Christian?" and "What is Christian ethics?" He raises these questions in a relevant and interesting way without sacrificing substance. If you have read *American Mainline Religion* by Roof and McKinney, you know the basic challenge the church faces is not from fundamentalism but secularism. In this context, the first chapter is worth the price of the book. He gives a clear description of what "secular" means and the challenges facing the church in a secular culture. I have not found a better brief statement of the problem anywhere. For a more detailed treatment see Beach's *The Wheel and the Cross*.

The rest of the book provides a foundation for Christians in the midst of ever shifting contemporary sands. A helpful discussion of what is happening in the field of ethics is followed by a chapter on the "faith-premises" of Christian ethics. The major ethical norms of the Christian faith are presented with clarity. There is a good presentation of contextual ethics and how love and justice interact. What is missing in much of contemporary ethical thinking, Beach says, is the relating of charity, which is something we do *for* others, to justice, for which we strive *with* others. Too often in the church we are long on charity and neglect the weightier and more controversial matters of justice.

Having clearly expressed the principles, the fun begins. There is a good discussion of how Christian principles might be applied to most of the major issues of the day from abortion to homosexuality to euthanasia to nuclear disarmament. He does not dodge the tough issues and presents them in a way to encourage conversation. There is a thoughtful chapter on "racial and gender relations." Vocation is recovered from the secularization process and the economic crisis is carefully considered in the context of faith.

Once again Waldo Beach shows us what it means to do theology and ethics for the church. He holds the two together, or as he puts it "reconnects Sunday's worship to weekday decisions." Let him speak for himself:

Salvation in the Protestant heritage is not something earned or merited by works but is a gift that turns the self outward from its egocentricity, from its anxious self-dependence into God-dependence, into a new life—one of gracious living, in response to the grace of God, a life of true freedom, which means freedom for a life of moral responsibility.

This book can make a valuable contribution to Christians wrestling with difficult issues in the light of faith.