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Messianic Ethics: Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the Church in Response

Erwin Buck

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In fact, the last two chapters of the book dealing with the Anabaptists may be the best section of the book. Above all, Shaull's book is a work of partisan advocacy. He is not calling upon Protestants to celebrate their heritage in quiet and safety. He is calling for a new Reformation involving discipleship under the cross for the sake of the oppressed and marginalized. All Christians, Protestant or otherwise, need to hear his prophetic challenge. His own words bear rich testimony to that biblical commission:

Committed Christians are citizens of another world. The state is the realm of power and domination; the church, a community of love and service. The function of the church in society is not to legitimate these structures of power but to be a prophetic voice, exposing their injustice and corruption. The church is not oriented toward the high and mighty and the conquest of prestige and power but toward the poor and marginal people of the world and an effort to raise them up. Never completely at home in this world, it lives "in the wilderness," a pilgrim people witnessing to the future reign of God (113).

Oscar Cole Arnal
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

Messianic Ethics. Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the Church in Response

Ben Wiebe

Waterloo, Ontario and Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1992
223 pp.

Ben Wiebe, a pastor and university lecturer, has set himself the task of examining the central significance of the kingdom of God as proclaimed by Jesus. Did Jesus wish to underline the decisive activity of God, or the human ethical response? Did he address his ethics primarily to the individual or was he concerned about the wider issues of justice and community? These are the major questions to be explored.

The author places his discussion in historical perspective by illustrating in chapter one how scholars in the past have differed in their assessment of the ethics of Jesus. From Ritschl to Bultmann, the Kingdom of God has been interpreted as a realm introduced solely at the initiative of God, as a society realized in Christian ethical action in the present, or even as an experience in the human heart. The ethics associated with the Kingdom, accordingly, has been regarded as an integral part of life in the kingdom, or as intended only for an interim period preceding the soon to be expected arrival of the kingdom. It has been characterized as an individual ethics by some, and as a community ethics by others.

As background against which to examine the relevant concepts in the proclamation of Jesus, Wiebe in chapter two explores the idea of God's kingship in the Old Testament and in postbiblical Judaism. He considers Daniel as "the most immediate but not the only source for Jesus' eschatological proclamation." As supporting data for this conclusion he points to the presence of the Son of Man concept in Daniel.

In chapter three Wiebe gets to the heart of the investigation as he pursues the question: "What response does Jesus seek to elicit to his proclamation of the kingdom of God?" To ensure that he is actually in touch with the historical Jesus, the author examines the relevant texts by applying to them the criteria developed by the New Quest of the Historical Jesus. Wiebe is aware that these criteria are not as solid as many would claim. Particularly suspect is the criterion of dissimilarity. On the other hand, Wiebe finds the criterion of multiple attestation most useful and he shows a surprising degree of confidence in his reliance on the criterion of coherence. The (rather facile?) application of the latter criterion allows him to classify as Historical Jesus material many of the traditions (including the Lord's Supper traditions) which others tend to assign to the creative activity of the early church.

As expected, Wiebe finds in the Jesus tradition both *kerygma*, an emphasis on God's initiative in establishing the Kingdom, as well as *didache*, an accentuation of the human response to God's decisive act. He observes, as C.H. Dodd had done, that *kerygma* is always primary. This means that *didache*, whose subject matter is ethics, takes on the nature of a response to God's gracious act. Even repentance (which John the Baptist required as a sign of readiness for the judgment) becomes in the proclamation of Jesus a summons "to repent as a *response* (emphasis added) to the kingdom of God."

God's decisive initiative is experienced in Jesus' free and often unsolicited gift of forgiveness. The corresponding ethics of Jesus is corporate in scope; it is an ethics intended not for all people, but for the life of a community living in expectation of the life of the eschatological future. It is, in short, the "charter of messianic Israel." Its dominant themes are liberation, reconciliation, love, and servanthood.

In chapter four Wiebe reflects on the mission of Jesus as the Messiah. Here it becomes clear why the author focuses so much attention on historical Jesus research. His chief point is that "the ethics of Jesus is utterly inseparable from his personal plenipotentiary authority." This ethics is "the product of Jesus who regards himself as messianic king, intent on restoring a faithful people of God" and demonstrating that God's way is the way of a love which suffers for humanity.

Most scholars will probably be less optimistic than Wiebe is regarding the possibility of recovering the historical Jesus. In this respect many will judge the book to have failed in its objective.

Wiebe evidently has examined the ethics of Jesus not primarily from interest in the ethics as such, but for what light this ethics can shed on

the messianic self-consciousness of Jesus. That is unfortunate, because Wiebe has a lot to offer in the area of ethics. The texts (whether or not they can definitely be assigned to the Historical Jesus stratum) lead him to conclude that the ethics he has investigated represent an ethics of response and gratitude. If these findings are correct, Wiebe will have established an important link between the ethics of Jesus and the ethics of Paul, for whom, too, ethics is a matter of grateful response to the gracious acts of God.

Although "Jesus held to a near-expectation of the end," and although that end has not yet come even now, Wiebe contends against Jack T. Sanders that the ethics of the historical Jesus is all-sufficient for today.

The study is well documented, although one wishes Wiebe had made at least passing reference to the research currently being conducted by the members of the so-called Jesus Seminar. The book contains many fresh and stimulating insights into familiar texts and it is to be recommended for study by pastors as well as by university and seminary students and faculty.

Erwin Buck

Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon

Conflict Mediation Across Cultures—Pathways and Patterns

David W. Augsburger

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992

310 pages \$24.99

David Augsburger, a Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling originally at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries and presently at Fuller Theological Seminary, hails from the Anabaptist, non-violent tradition. Interestingly enough his first books, and he has written many, not only focused on the specialized topic area of anger and confrontation but more specifically on how these aggressive dynamics can and should be incorporated in caring and healing relationships.

In the early 1980s Augsburger started researching a new focus area in multicultural studies and ministry, culminating in a monumental work: *Pastoral Counselling Across Cultures* (1986). In this original and long overdue book Augsburger presents major theological themes (related to, among others, culture and humanness, grace and values, the individual and the family, sickness and wholeness) from cross-cultural perspectives, thereby liberating the Christian consciousness and ministry from being predominantly defined in Western world, if not North American middle class, terms of reference.