

Book Review

W. Ross Hastings.

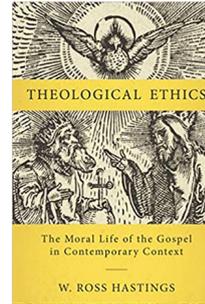
Theological Ethics:

The Moral Life of the Gospel in Contemporary Context

Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021

(xii + 244 pages) \$29.99 hardcover.

Reviewed by Forrest H. Buckner, Whitworth University



W. Ross Hastings, the Sangwoo Youtong Chee Professor of Theology at Regent College, develops a theological framework for ethical reflection and action that is centered in the triune God and God's engagement with the world in Jesus Christ. Hastings works analogously from God's triune being (understood as persons-in-relation) and God's acts to build a framework for Christian ethics and action in the world. I will give a brief overview of the book before providing a few reflections.

Hastings begins the book with three chapters laying the foundation of theological ethics. He first asserts that ethical reflection, contrary to appeals to reason or natural law, must begin by looking to God and thus be *theological*. Hastings says, "Only as we know who God is and what he has done can we know *how* we ought to be and do" (8).

In Chapter 2, Hastings defines what he means by "Trinitarian" theology, a method of theological reflection influenced by Karl Barth, T.F. and Alan Torrance, Robert Jenson, Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, Colin Gunton, Athanasius, and others that centers on God's triune being and acts. In the process, Hastings makes a case for ethics as an expression of personal and corporate union with the incarnate Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Chapter 3, Hastings asserts the Bible as the church's authoritative source for theology and

ethics. Addressing the entire sweep of Scripture, he describes how to interpret the Bible rightly in regards to ethics, particularly highlighting the ways that God's grace precedes and undergirds the commands of the Bible.

In Chapter 4, Hastings explicates a holistic doctrine of creation and its impact on ethical reflection, contending for image-bearing as primarily understood in light of the God who is being-in-relation. That relational center drives the functional (ruling and vocation) and structural (capacity) aspects of image-bearing. This relationality has ethical implications in that humans are made for relationships with God, others, self, and creation.

In Chapter 5, Hastings continues to follow the biblical narrative through the fall, reconciliation, and consummation. Because of the fall and the subsequent shattering of relationships, ethics now must take into account the inclination of humans toward personal and communal sin. In the work of reconciliation and redemption, God in Christ by the Spirit frees the saints to pursue the ethical life, but still, as sinners, "within a life of confession and repentance" (117). The *telos* of the moral vision is a restoration of all four relationships (God, others, creation, self) and freedom to obey God in perfect justice and love as God redeems the whole of creation.

In Chapter 6, Hastings argues that ethics must be *Evangelical* in the sense that they are driven by the grace of God revealed in Jesus

Christ. Calling upon Calvin's double grace of justification and sanctification, Hastings outlines a gospel-centered ethical approach that is initiated and empowered by unconditional grace but is not unconditioned in the fact that it contains the expectation of a "life of faith leading to obedience" (120).

In Chapter 7, Hastings asserts that the resurrection is key to ethical reflection because it affirms God's faithfulness to his commitment to redeem and restore creation according to his original intent. However, because of the fall, people cannot perceive ethics rightly apart from God's Word and works, even though they retain a moral order in their fallen nature.

In the only chapter dedicated to a particular ethical question, Hastings then reflects upon sexual ethics as they relate to his Trinitarian anthropology articulated throughout the book. Hastings rebuts a number of contemporary cultural narratives regarding sex and "sexedness" (i.e. gender) by examining sexuality through the divine-human analogy of humanity as image bearers of the triune God. He argues that "the church is an icon of the Trinity, and marriage is, in turn, an icon or image of the church" (169). Being made in the image of the Trinity implies that humans belong to one another as interdependent yet differentiated (including sexedness). Therefore, our sexual nature, whether we are engaging in sexual activity or not, moves us "out of ourselves toward the human other in fulfilling relationship, and toward God in contemplative worship—where ultimate satisfaction is found" (175). Following this methodology, Hastings draws a number of conclusions, including asserting the goodness of sex, sexedness as part of our human identity, sex drive as a desire that points to a longing for intimacy with God, and sex as an other-centered, self-giving act. He also concludes that,

because of the distinctiveness of the persons in relationship within God's being (and in alignment with Scripture's "clear" teaching), human gender boundaries and the commitment to marriage as defined by the union of a man and a woman are to be maintained in Christian ethical frameworks (189). This leads to a "welcoming but non-affirming" position in the public square (192).

Hastings then makes a case for why and how the church should engage publicly in regards to ethics. The missional God invites the people of God to "bring to completion the mission of the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit." He argues thus that the church is called to humble and loving public engagement through the Great Commission, Great Commandment, and cultural mandate as the chief, visible, communal manifestation of the kingdom of God.

Hastings' concludes with a concise summary of the ethical framework constructed throughout the book. In short, "Housed within the gospel, flowing from its life in the triune God, the church as the icon of the Trinity made up of persons-in-relation, is the primary locus of ethics...[The only sphere] in which moral transformation, discernment in ethical inquiry, and courage and power for ethical action can happen [is] the sphere of participation in the triune God...his love, his life, his justice, his righteousness, his holiness" (225).

I would like to provide three reflections on the book that may help an interested reader know what to expect. First, Hastings' book is self-consciously not a book on applied ethics but instead the development of an apology for a particular approach to Christian ethics that can be applied to various ethical dilemmas in a variety of contexts. Besides the chapter on sexual ethics, Hastings typically comments on particular ethical questions only tangentially

or simply identifies categories of ethics that might relate to the topic at hand. For example, in his chapter on the eschatological ethics of God's creative purposes for humanity, Hastings identifies the trinitarian shape of the Father's creation of people to be human image-bearers as culture makers, Christ's call to conversion and Christlikeness, and the Spirit's gifting and sending into particular vocations. He sees these three levels of human flourishing as coinhering and thus freeing the church from dualisms that separate evangelism and justice or Sunday worship and the Monday-Friday work world. These type of applications occur, but Hastings' central goal is developing the theological framework for ethical reflection.

Second, the book self-consciously adopts a "Trinitarian" methodology of theological reflection that is not universally accepted. Hastings demonstrates awareness of some of the criticisms of his Trinitarian approach, like repeatedly asserting that arguments regarding anthropology based on the divine being must be analogous not univocal. Similarly, he acknowledges the debates around the historicity of the narrative of distinct Eastern and Western emphases in the doctrine of the Trinity. However, he does not choose to address extensively or directly the arguments against methodologies that draw conclusions from supposed knowledge of God's inner life, a methodology that is not universally accepted in Christian theological study.

Third, the book covers an immense amount of ground. The breadth of Hastings' knowledge is impressive as he engages with topics ranging from the *analogia entis* debates to virtue ethics, from Calvin's double grace to gender, from Old Testament theological hermeneutics to models of public engagement. Hastings also often surveys a variety of authors' perspectives on a

particular topic. In light of the sheer volume of information, summaries at the end of each chapter would have been useful. Hastings somewhat ameliorates this weakness with his excellent concluding chapter.

In sum, this book provides a thorough, insightful, and pastoral approach to ethics that is self-consciously centered in the nature and being of the triune God of grace revealed in Jesus Christ that many readers, particularly those with an appreciation for the methodology of theologians like Robert Jenson, Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, and Colin Gunton, will find compelling and useful.

