

Submitted Book Review of William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics for Modern Believing* 2000, 41 (2):51-52.

William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*

New York: Continuum, 1999. Pp. 227. \$24.95

The central and basic Christian confession – “Jesus is Lord” – entails the question with which the North American Roman Catholic ethicist William C. Spohn opens this stimulating and innovative book – “What does Jesus have to do with ethics?”. He offers an exciting alternative to the two (rather caricatured) responses of “Everything” (allegedly given by evangelicals and fundamentalists) and “Not a lot” (whether rooted in liberal scepticism or a natural law ethic).

In the first part, the sources for Spohn’s alternative response are delineated. He skilfully brings together three areas of theological study which have all generated much interest in recent years but never been correlated in such a constructive manner: historical Jesus research, virtue ethics, and spirituality. Insisting that the gospel story of Jesus is the norm for Christian identity and discipleship he argues that instead of an ethic of command or consequences this requires an ethic of character and virtue. The development of this character must, however, be rooted in the traditional practices of Christian spirituality. Furthermore, to ensure the gospel narrative remains foundational, there must also be a “hermeneutics of appreciation” where the gap between Scripture’s world and ours is bridged through the cultivation of what he calls “analogical imagination”. This discipline discerns guiding images, patterns and paradigms linking the biblical story and our situation and these – rather than some ethical theory - then shape our action today so that, in the words of Jesus to the lawyer and the book’s title, we “Go and Do Likewise”.

The book’s second part develops a moral psychology on this basis, examining three inter-related areas: moral perception (what we ought to see), moral dispositions (how we should desire) and Christian identity (who we are). In his reading of the central gospel theme Spohn argues we’re called by Christ to recognise the coming of God’s kingdom and that we’re enabled to perceive this reality correctly by developing a compassionate vision through conversion, the Eucharist, and intercessory prayer. That kingdom was manifested in Christ’s encounters with people and supremely in the cross and resurrection. Through meditating on the Scriptural witness to these, our affections and emotions are challenged and transformed and discernment developed so that we become better disciples. Finally, the Lord’s Supper and the practices of forgiveness and solidarity with the poor which go with it, must shape our identity as a Christian community.

Spohn packs an enormous amount into under 200 pages of text and demonstrates a good grasp of the various theological areas with which he interacts. As he acknowledges, important intellectual questions remain about his proposal such as its relation to other traditions of Christian ethics and its concrete implications for contemporary ethical issues. Nevertheless, this book will prove of value to any Christian believer – and especially pastors, preachers and spiritual directors – seeking to understand, as we enter the third millenium, how the gospel story can still shape us and, through encouraging regular spiritual practices, enable us to become more faithful followers of Jesus Christ in the world.

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