

*THE ETHICS OF HUMAN RIGHTS: CONTESTED DOCTRINAL AND MORAL ISSUES.*  
By Esther D. Reed. Baylor University Press 2007. Pp. 221. \$22.76.  
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Esther Reed's work, *The Ethics of Human Rights: Contested Doctrinal and Moral Issues* is an engaging and creative look at the language of human rights in theo-ethical conversation. Carefully researched and cleverly written, it is a work that deserves attention for its moral instruction and critical engagement with the salient socio-political issues of our day. As one reads this book, one cannot help but recall the now famed adage often attributed to Barth, that good theology is done, "with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."<sup>1</sup> Reed, who is heavily guided by Barth and Bonhoeffer at transitional points in her arguments, skillfully weaves her analysis through a series of theological and ethical thinkers, as well as documents such as the United Nations Declarations of Human Rights, reports by the World Health Organization, the Articles of the Geneva Convention and legal cases regarding the rights of animals. The result is a sweeping theological engagement with many of the important moral issues that daily confront us through the news networks of our time: Guantanamo Bay, torture, reproductive rights and animal rights to name a few.

While this work is timely and merits consideration among churches, it is also a work that will need considerable translation for those with limited theological training. Although Reed is careful to define her terminology and offers an impressive overview of the historical and theological dimensions of this debate, it is the professional theologian, armed with the vocabulary of neo-Barthian divine-command theory and knowledgeable about the dimensions of the "rights" debate, who will best wade his or her way through the heavily theo-technical vocabulary. This is unfortunate, because the moral compass at the heart of this work is engaging and, at certain points, can and should inspire to action. Reed's work is characterized by an ethical agenda intent upon the pursuit of justice—that is, *God's justice as revealed in the person of*

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1. See Princeton Theological Seminary, Seminary Library, Center for Barth Studies, *Where did Karl Barth say...?*, available at <http://libweb.ptsem.edu/collections/barth/faq/quotes.aspx?menu=296&subText=468>.

*Christ*—and despite the many turns of her argument, the needle compass always points to human responsibility in that pursuit of righteousness and authentic peace. There is a message here that deserves a hearing.

The central goal of this work is to provide a new answer to an old problem regarding the vocabulary of human rights in theo-ethical discussion. Theologians from many traditions have long understood that all good things come to humanity as gifts from God, they are not deserved—they are “graces”—thus, in the language of the church, none of these gifts can be understood as “natural endowments.” (67-78) This is an assertion that has complicated discussions of the church’s social agenda, for it puts many theologians at odds with the use of the language of human rights in discussions of justice. In some cases, it has actually hindered would-be advocates of justice from aligning themselves with secular or religious organizations that seek justice under the rubric of “naturally endowed human rights.”

Furthermore, for many scholars, Reed among them, opposition to the language of innate human rights is a Barthian rejection of natural law as the foundation for Christian ethics. Rather, Christian ethics are derived from the revelation of God in Christ; there is nothing inherently *natural* about them. But Reed would not have this distinction hinder advocates of justice from engagement or alliances with those who seek the same goals for human (and animal) well-being. Despite her assertion that the language of natural human rights is largely heretical, she seeks to create a theological bridge that will support ethical engagement with the issues of our times that are often identified as “human rights violations” without yielding ground to alternate theories about the provenance of human rights.

Reed asserts that such a vocabulary is possible if it is carefully constructed from a proper understanding of the incarnation of God in Christ. She proposes a “christologically revised” concept of natural law that is rooted, not in any innate aspect of human dignity, but in the incarnation of God who is Christ. (74) For her, human rights language is employable because it corresponds to what we know of the true and flourishing humanity of the incarnated Christ. What are often called natural human rights are not natural at all, for it is not humanity which is the measure of justice or rightness. Rather, “rights” are derived from a proper understanding of Christ’s humanity, for it is in him that we meet all who long for the justice of God in a world of unjust power structures. Reed claims “there are no rights before God, but the natural, understood as pure gift of God, becomes rights with respect to human beings.” (72)

We may lay claim to rights only because they are guaranteed us in Christ.

Thus, the recognition of natural rights is an appropriate response to God's command; this is what Reed calls a "command-rights dynamic." (102) Discerning the direction of ethical behavior in specific circumstances is no simple matter, however, for divine commands do not translate directly into natural rights; Christian ethics are not a matter of simple Biblicist prescription which can be applied directly to our world's ethical woes. Still, we are not left to drift in a sea of unfounded principles. Reed asserts that the character of God's revelation in Christ leads us to guiding values. These values are: 1) the values of life because of humanity's position before God; 2) humanity's proper exercise of dominion over other living creatures; and 3) human responsibility before God for the exercise of justice. (103) They are part and parcel of Christ's fulfillment of the law establishing covenantal relationship in which the believer participates.

Reed's Biblical context for explicating God's prior call/command to humanity in ethical commitment to "human rights" is that of God's command to Noah. In a tropological reading of *Genesis* 9:1-17, Reed demonstrates how the Noachide laws demonstrate the three above-mentioned values by which Christian ethical reflection is guided. 91-105. This is perhaps the most creative move in her work, yet it takes some reflection to fully appreciate her rationale for choosing the Noachide Laws. One begins this section thinking this an unusual and somewhat rare scriptural choice for ethical/covenantal contemplation, and wonders: why, specifically, *Noah*, why not employ, as do many others, God's ethical mandates to Adam/Eve? But this choice turns out to be pivotal. Her selection of Noah seems to hinge on the fact that God's call to Noah is a universal call, given in a context where sin's dominion over the earth is presupposed. True to her understanding of God's revelation in Christ, Reed does not derive her use of language of rights from the context of creation, but from one of reconciliation. Noah's Ark, as she points out, is a foreshadowing symbol of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ.

But the Noachide Law only serves her purpose well because she chooses to read it tropologically, rather than performing an exegetical, text-critical explication of its understood meaning. Reed chooses a tropological reading because it acts as a filter against literalism and the implication that ethics can be derived from the Biblical texts in a more indirect manner. Thus, the choice is consistent with the case she makes,

but somewhat less consistent with the text itself, for her tropological reading also acts as a filter, allowing her to “gloss over” some of the passage’s more difficult aspects, such as the role and primacy of blood as a foundational factor in ethical instruction and God’s bloody calls for vengeance based on the inappropriate shedding of blood. There is far more textual significance to the role of blood in the ethical admonitions of the text than Reed makes use of; and had they made their way into her reading, one suspects that the direction of her moral compass for the discussion that follows this passage could have been much different—and much less liberating. Her methodology works, but leaves the reader with an unnerving sense that, perhaps her theo-ethical goal has been well served, but the Biblical passage has not.

Following the theological construction of her position, Reed offers us what could easily be called “case studies” on selected topics intended to demonstrate the way that we move between general scriptural affirmations and practical decision-making, given the fact that God’s commands are not directly translated into the language of human rights. This is a careful theology, nothing naïve, with a wide sweep of relevant factors, empathetic reasoning, and consistent with the theological arguments and directive values she made in the first sections of her work. Reed carries her readers through careful, theologically sustained, and yes, even a damning analysis of the incarcerations at Guantanamo Bay and current debates over the practice of torture. Her look at reproductive rights is globally based and seeks to provide a foundation for ethical analysis which does not pit one person’s well being against another; and her essay on the rights of animals demonstrates a rich awareness of the ripple effect such ethical mandates can have on a global economy. Highly critical of the political climate of Western morality, steeped in heightened moral individualism, Reed sounds a clarion call, warning against aggressive militarism and unbridled capitalism of our age. Presenting a limited but accurate comparison between the current political climate and that which precipitated the creation of the Barmen declaration, Reed urges all believers to confront all political configurations which relegate issues of “human rights” only to the arena of individual endowments rather than to the arena of faithfulness to the revelation of God in Christ. She declares, “the history of human rights is so closely allied to Western liberalism that aspects of its global expansion can be construed as yet another form of Western imperialism.” (77) Indeed, while Reed presents no explicit analysis of the dynamics of power in oppression nor liberation, one gets the sense that there are some rich and clarified presuppositions about the nature of

power at work in her theology, and one longs to see her spell them out in her rich, clear, well-thought out manner.

Despite the many virtues of this work, Reed leaves her readers with some unresolved issues. The first is a methodological one, already familiar to the scholars who debate divine-command theory and certainly not one to be solved within the boundaries of Reed's work—that is an explanation of the relationship between human experience and the revelation of God in Christ. For the reader who is unfamiliar with the issues, put very simply, the old debate asks how theology can actually *begin* with the revelation of God in Christ when this revelation comes to us filtered through the lens of our own experience. Putting this question to Reed's work would involve asking, does one *really* understand the humanity of Christ (hence “human rights”) because of revelation, or because one's own humanity reads its own experience and imputes it to this aspect of Christ's being? This issue seems to lie at the heart of her rejection of western individualism which potentially aggrandizes the person's experience of having “‘inalienable’ value or intrinsic rights.”

Second, because of this on-going debate, Reed's work is, to some degree, an in-house debate, defined by the heavily theo-technical languages of dogmatics and offering argument and counter-argument for those who have already made contributions to the field. This is a time-honored and valid approach within her chosen discursive field and Reed does it with mastery. However, Reed makes it clear that it is her desire to create a bridge for discussion and action with those outside divine-command theory, such as secularists or those whose theology often re-centers human experience, like advocacy theologians. Bridge-building discussions require dialogs which, even if they are in-house do not remain there, but cross divides by engaging with those who are not like-minded. While Reed's work secures her own shores in support of a bridge over that divide, there is little engagement with those hopeful dialog partners that is necessary to begin the crossing. The effect of her minimal engagement with, for example, feminist thinkers (one must diligently seek the endnotes for any such engagement) is such that her dialog partners are only invited into the arena after the discursive game rules are set up.

These are caveats, however, which express a desire for *more* engagement with Reed's work, not less. After reading this volume, one longs to see her continue with an analysis of the relationship between public policy and the content of Christian conviction, spelling out the principles and vehicles (and identifying inappropriate agencies) by

which Christian and non-Christian allies translate their hopes for justice into the law of the land.

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