Theology does not simply include mere moral reflection. It is ethics. The study of ethics, specifically Christian ethics, is not just a discourse about a particular set of ethical commands; however, Christian ethics is the study of human moral agents whose actions encounter and reflect the Divine Will to love God and neighbor—that is to be responsible, in the presence of Christ. This relationship is not self-evident but is illumined as one considers God’s own self-revelation, in Jesus Christ who is responsible for us. Accordingly, several theologians, most notably Karl Barth, emphasise the commanding importance of the Word of God as moral truth, which ought to be understood, rather is given for one to hear and act responsibly. This is the ground for which Barth, for example, may argue that the problem of ethics is the proper concern of dogmatics. That is, the inclusion of theology as ethics is vital, for knowing theology without doing theology is simply impossible.

Concomitantly, Christopher Holmes claims that such an interpretation of dogmatics and ethics must begin with Jesus Christ, who gathers through his Word and by his Spirit those who may bear witness to the “presence of Christ’s power, truth, and love” (2). Holmes does this by taking up John’s
Gospel, which does not contain an abundance of passages describing moral imperatives, which many may regard as primary ethical material. This is no more apparent than when one compares John’s Gospel with the Synoptic Gospels, which contain parables, commands, and other evident ethical teachings. This moves many to emphasize John’s Gospel as a theological exposition of the person and mission of Jesus Christ rather than an ethics text. However, I believe with Barth, Holmes, and others, that John’s Gospel is an insightful theological witness which at the same time evidences the complexities of ethics in unity with the Synoptic Gospels.

Indeed, a morally naïve reading of John’s Gospel may disregard the connection between theology and ethics, therefore, minimizing, rather missing altogether, its moral depth. Alternatively, Holmes’ essay aims to offer an illustration of the depth of theological ethics contained within the fourth gospel—specifically three texts, John 5:1–18, 18:1–19:42, and 21, which narrate the power, truth, and love of Jesus Christ, respectively. That is, this essay not only “unfolds” a picture of the world as it is and is becoming in Christ, but also the subsequent, rather simultaneous, imperative to participate in “the real world that is coming to be” (2).

Correspondingly, throughout the treatment of the selected texts, Holmes focuses on the task of determining who Jesus is—“for only when the who is established can we know what it is that he is doing, and what it is that we are to do” (3). However, it is not an attempt to introduce a Christ who is mere example of moral perspicuity, but as the one who summons humanity to participate in the transfiguration of the world—who summons us to act now in his presence as he acted then, as narrated in Scripture. Accordingly, Holmes seeks to remind his reader that “[o]ur joy is to believe that he who has rectified all things before God is our contemporary, calling us through acts of service, hearing and obedience, to become participant in his present ministry and advent rule of power, truth, and love” (25). Holmes, therefore, is committed to a Christological ethics, such that his primary concern is to take seriously the claim that “God who acted then in Christ is confessed to be present to us now in Christ through the Word and by the power of the Spirit” (24, emphasis in the original).

The three main chapters of Holmes’ book are divided into quarters. The first section attends to the narrative and meaning of the respective texts treated. In this, Holmes intends to read the texts such that the One whom the narratives introduce may interrogate us. The second section attends to the identity of Christ, as illumined by relevant texts. This is important, for as indicated throughout, without knowing who Jesus was and is, or has done and is doing,
one would not be able to discern what he has commanded—rather who he has commanded for us to be. This leads to the third and fourth sections of the respective chapters, which intend to explore the “ought” of the command of God. Accordingly, who Jesus is in power, truth, and love has vital and directive significance for the imperative character of the command and its meaning for the details of our moral existence absorbed into the being and mission of God, in Christ and by His Spirit. All in all, Holmes is attempting to articulate how it is that Scripture may be that which speaks of the reality of God, who “includes, clarifies, and sets human beings on a new path of participation in the Scripturally attested work that [God, the Father] is doing together with [his Son] by the Spirit’s power so as to make all things new” (137).

With this, Holmes is concerned with a type of ethics that seeks to be disturbed, or unsettled, by the immanent presence and contemporary work of Jesus Christ. He is committed to Christological ethics, where the narrative of Christ’s being and mission witnessed in Scripture is the rubric, if you will, for encountering the same being and mission today. Humanity may participate, then, in the ongoing salvific and redemptive activity of Jesus as a real, viz. actual, counterpart labouring toward the reconciled future. Such participation, however, is not one built about general moral ideals or commands divorced from context. Rather, it is participation with a particular person, Jesus Christ, with whom, by whom, and in whom we are addressed and challenged anew as moral agents—as those spoken to and formed through his Word. Therefore, Holmes is correct to read theological ethics accordingly: “Ethics understood theologically is thus a destabilized or ever relativized ethics because it is not a matter of implementing a moral program of sorts, but rather a question of being formed by the One—by the objective Person—who truly fulfills himself in us via his faith. … Most importantly, we do not then live as those in a kind of vacuum of our own making. Instead, our life is formed by Jesus who is present in the Spirit’s power to us, whose present ministry claims us, so that we too might fulfill the law of our being by believing” (51).

Accordingly, as Holmes draws from Murray Rae, a theological ethics of this kind invites one to participate, with Christ, on the way toward the transfiguration of the world. Such participations, however, “involves a cost, ‘the cost involved in venturing our beyond the security of objective certainties, worldly possessions, finite aspirations and society’s approval’” (152). The cost involves one living with, rather in the presence of, the resurrection and the life, Jesus Christ, who confirms and commits our relative task to live for others in responsible action.
On the whole, I think Holmes has offered his reader an excellent introduction to theological ethics, which begins with Christ, but also pursues ethics in the presence of Christ all the way down, grounded in the grace of God who has elected to be with and for us. Moreover, Holmes has shown adept knowledge and critical selection of the many various thinkers who have informed this project—including, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Webster, and Bernd Wannenwetsch, among others. He has not only incorporated the insights of many vital voices relevant for any discussion of theological ethics, but has succeeded in offering a provoking and theologically sustained vision of the moral life.

Yet, where Holmes does not succeed, in his otherwise excellent volume, is in the lack of detail and critical acumen regarding the immanence of Christ in the moral action carried out by the Church—specifically the ethical significance of prayer and sacrament as participation in the presence of Christ. Indeed, one might consider such a discussion pertinent for any introduction to theological ethics. All the more so for Holmes’ theological ethics, which celebrates the immanent and ongoing activity of Jesus Christ in and for the world—let alone our participation. Nevertheless, I am prepared to overlook this for his bibliography is replete with sources that may sustain such discourse, both complementing and completing Holmes’ project.

Accordingly, I endorse this book, wholly. Not only is Ethics in the Presence of Christ a thoroughgoing theological ethics, it offer the reader a sustained and well-crafted argument regarding the biblical witness concerning Jesus Christ, who not only calls us to bear witness to but also to participate in his continued work and ministry.

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