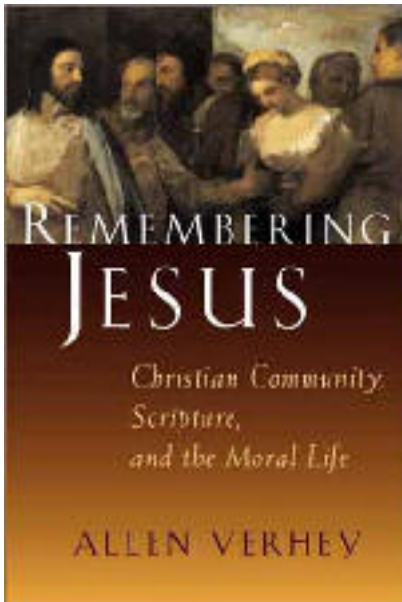


RBL 01/2004



Verhey, Allen

Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. Pp. xii + 526. Cloth.
\$35.00. ISBN 0802803237.

Jennifer Wright Knust
College of the Holy Cross
Worcester, MA 01616

Ethics, Allen Verhey suggests, is primarily concerned with determining how one makes moral choices. Christian ethics, then, is a discipline that seeks to assist believers and churches in their discernment of moral choices. Since the authority of scripture is central to Christian life, scriptures must be given priority in the discernment and deliberation process. Christian moral choice necessarily involves remembering the story of Jesus by reading scripture in the context of the church community. The church community, Verhey proposes, was once and should remain a viable location for the discernment of moral matters. So begins a dense and complex treatment of what it means to “remember Jesus” in light of the fraught ethical issues of today. From medical ethics to gender relations, sexuality, economics, and politics, Christian ethicists are encouraged to take scripture seriously as a source of moral reflection. Believers, pastors, churches, and ethicists alike are to shape their understanding of what constitutes a moral choice according to the memory of Jesus, especially Jesus as he was remembered by the early church. *Remembering Jesus* is an ambitious, well-written book by an accomplished scholar in the field of Christian ethics. From the perspective of this reader, however, *Remembering Jesus* is also deeply problematic.

In part 1 Verhey outlines his methodology, making the case for “remembering Jesus” as a proper guide for moral decision making. Christian ethicists, Verhey asserts, must not

simply adopt Enlightenment-informed ethics. Enlightenment theories are inadequate since they do not account for community, nor are they truly capable of an impartial perspective. Indeed, the quest for an impartial, rational perspective leads only to a minimal account of the moral life and requires an alienation from oneself and one's community. Therefore, Christian ethicists, while humbly acknowledging that the perspective they offer is only one among many, should seek to offer a *Christian* ethics that embraces *Christian* confessional perspectives about Jesus and scripture. Scripture can be difficult to read: it is often silent about contemporary moral quandaries; there is cultural distance between contemporary readers and the cultures that produced Christian scriptures; scripture offers diverse points of view; and the true meaning can be difficult to discern. Still, Verhey argues, such difficulties can be overcome, especially since they are frequently rooted in a basic unfamiliarity with scripture and the interpretive arrogance with which scripture is sometimes deployed. If Christians read the scripture humbly, in community, as a "canon," with exegetical care, prayerfully, and in the context of Christian practice, Christians can and will "remember Jesus" appropriately. "Remembering Jesus," then, will lead to sound moral decision making. Having outlined his methodology, Verhey applies his approach to distinct moral questions in each of the next four sections. Each section begins with an assessment of non-Christian approaches, which are deemed insufficient. The actions and teachings of Jesus are then considered, the responses of the early church to similar problems outlined, and faithful Christian choices recommended.

Part 2, "Remembering Jesus in the Strange World of Sickness: A Continuing Tradition of Care for the Suffering," argues that Christian ethicists, chaplains, and pastors ought to care for the sick by reading scripture, remembering Jesus, and remembering the approach of the early church toward sickness, death, and dying. Verhey adopts an imaginative rhetorical device to make this argument: he describes a hypothetical hospital chaplain in dialogue with a very sick cancer patient named "Sally," who happens to be a medical doctor herself. Reading scripture together during their frequent meetings, they discover that God's cause is life and human flourishing. They further note that Jesus was especially concerned for the well-being of the poor, and death was not God's final answer to humanity. The early church preserved these memories of Jesus by recognizing that care for the sick, especially the sick poor, was a Christian duty. Christian clergymen from the last century followed their example, founding hospitals and participating in the development of medical ethics as a discipline. Verhey concludes by suggesting that Christians should continue to offer their distinct voices to contemporary discussions of health and healing.

In Part 3, "Remembering Jesus in Gilead: A Continuing Tradition of Liberation and Chastity," Verhey offers a Christian approach to sexuality and gender. As an overture to this discussion, Verhey retells Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*, concluding that

Christians must avoid silencing women and “their” voices. Atwood’s Gilead, a nightmare that reduces women to breeders and prevents men from loving women, becomes “the Gilead within,” a patriarchal regime that must be resisted by all Christians today. According to Verhey, the solution to “Gilead” cannot be Enlightenment ethics. The Enlightenment is responsible for the “sexual revolution,” a phenomenon whereby individual preference and consent became the sole remaining criteria for normative sexuality. Christian choices about sexuality and gender relationships must be grounded in scripture. Remembering Jesus, Christians note that Jesus emphasized equality and mutuality between men and women while embracing both the goodness of marriage and a (new) option of singleness/celibacy. Verhey “listens to women” here by engaging the feminist approach to the New Testament adopted by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her ground-breaking book *In Memory of Her*. Though sympathetic to Schüssler Fiorenza, Verhey concludes that her approach makes scripture a secondary authority, so, in the end, her methodology must be rejected. Still, male Christians ought not to monopolize the interpretation of scripture but should be open to feminist voices. Verhey then proceeds to discuss various New Testament texts without citing or discussing even one other feminist analysis. Next, Verhey turns to a discussion of sex and sexuality. Sexual intercourse is good and grounded in creation. Verhey concludes by addressing homosexuality, though, he states, he is reluctant to do so since there are so few passages of scripture that are concerned with homosexual behavior. Moreover, ancient Christians knew nothing about homosexuality as an “orientation.” On the basis of Rom 1:18–32, Verhey argues that, since Paul believed that homosexual behavior involved choice but science suggests that orientation may not be a choice, committed homosexuals may be accepted within the church. Indeed, homosexual marriage may also be permitted, perhaps in a manner similar to the Orthodox Christian willingness to consecrate second marriages. Second marriage and homosexuality are thereby understood as evidence of the “fallen” nature of humanity even as such marriages are blessed.

According to part 4, “Remembering Jesus in the World of Adam Smith: A Continuing Tradition of Justice and Generosity,” contemporary economic relations produce “rich fools” who judge success by the accumulation of wealth instead of by the justice of the society they inhabit. Non-Christian theories of justice do not provide adequate solutions to this problem. Such theories cannot form the character of the “fool,” they do not nurture community, nor can they provide an account of “the good economic life.” Jesus, on the other hand, was concerned with character formation. The Pharisees, well-meaning Jews who sought to democratize the law but, in the process, sacrificed hospitality, are contrasted with Jesus, who did not offer commandments but exhortations. “Remembering Jesus” and “remembering the early church remembering Jesus,” then, suggests that the

Christian community has an obligation to care for the poor. Nevertheless, Jesus' teachings are not legal imperatives; they are moral goals to be "remembered."

Part 5, "Remembering Jesus in the Strange World of Politics: Revisiting Theocracy—A Continuing Tradition of Justice," argues that Christians should be actively engaged in political matters in light of the memory of Jesus. The political cause Christians serve is God's cause. Thus, it is not improper for Christians to understand themselves as theocrats who, on the basis of their Christian faith, work to shape public policy. Israel embraced theocracy; the Old Testament consistently asserts that political power is accountable to God. Jesus held this view as well, though he differed from other Jews of his time. He did not withdraw from the larger community in a manner similar to the Jews of Qumran. He rejected violent revolution and nationalism. He refused to collaborate with Rome or with the temple authorities in the exploitation of the common people. He was closer to the Pharisees in his approach, but he preferred hospitality and a free response to the promise of God's future reign to external observance of the law. "Remembering Jesus," then, involves the anticipation of the just reign of God through the pursuit of justice and peace.

As should be apparent from this brief summary, *Remembering Jesus* is a thorough, comprehensive book that seeks to offer a uniquely Christian perspective on troubling ethical issues. Verhey's call to "remember Jesus" not by citing scripture as proof-text or by interpreting scripture as mandate but by reading scripture in community and with humility suggests a subtle recognition of the complicated process involved in retrieving texts for community formation. Verhey's learned approach engages the insights of ethicists, biblical scholars, historians, economists, feminists, church fathers, political theorists, and even the Heidelberg Catechism and Calvin's *Institutes*. Readers interested in an exhaustive treatment of Christian ethics, especially from a Reformed perspective, will not be disappointed. Still, in the end, *Remembering Jesus* raises more problems than it solves.

Memory, Maurice Halbwachs observed, provides an ideological ground for the present. The call to "remember Jesus," then, can be understood as an attempt to reproduce the sense that contemporary Christianity is in direct continuity with a (blessed) lineage of belief that, from Verhey's perspective, reaches back to Abraham, Moses, the "clarification" of God's purpose by Jesus, and the faithful preservation of Jesus' core teachings by the early Christians. The early church, Verhey claims, "lived the stories," and so must Christians today. The problem with such a position is that memory is selective. The question "What shall we remember?" is not innocent; it is implicated in relations of power that favor some memories at the expense of others. If memory provides an ideological grounding for the present, as Halbwachs and others have argued, then what ideological impulses are served by Verhey's Christian ethics? The language

Verhey adopts provides one key. “We” must listen carefully to the voices of women and struggle against “the Gilead within.” “We” should avoid homophobia, noting that, though God’s version of “good sex” is violated by adultery, divorce, patriarchy, abuse, and homosexual behavior, we all live in a fallen world. “We” have an obligation to be generous toward the poor—though Jesus offered no clear command or mandate regarding the form our generosity should take. “We” should embrace the theocratic politics of Jesus, a politics that trusts in the ultimate triumph of God’s reign. Who could possibly stand in the position of Verhey’s “we”? Only a privileged heterosexual male. “Homosexuals” will find little comfort in Verhey’s exhortation to toleration. Feminist scholars will find little to celebrate in Verhey’s appeal to Christian (men) to listen to the voices of women, but only so long as these voices do not call into question the (male) authority legitimated by scripture. Non-Christians will find little to laud in yet another uncritical repetition of the view that the Pharisees were hard-hearted and legalistic but Jesus was warm and welcoming. Non-Christian ethicists will be even less satisfied with Verhey’s rejection of Enlightenment-informed ethical theory. Interestingly, Verhey makes an almost postmodern move when he claims that Christian ethicists should speak from their own partial, limited perspective since impartiality is, in fact, impossible. Nevertheless, unlike postmodern theory, Verhey pays no attention at all to the power-laden implications of his memory-making strategy, and, therefore, *Remembering Jesus* remakes the very same male-dominant, patriarchal, hegemonic relations of power some of us wish we could forget.