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Review: Repenting of Religion

William E. Brown

Liberty University, webrown@liberty.edu

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Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgment to the Love of God, by Gregory A. Boyd. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004. Pp. 228.

Baker Books packages Gregory Boyd's text in an enticing fashion. In a culture aware of radical Islamic fundamentalism and a corresponding concern about the detrimental effects of all "religion," Boyd's title is appealing. As a professor of evangelism, I constantly encounter confusion over the "religion" of institutional Christianity and biblical Christianity, which is based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. So, any work that moves the reader from a religion to a relationship with Christ would be beneficial. However, a cursory reading of the back cover reveals the real focus of the text. Boyd interchanges the terms "judgment" and "judgmental" and equates real Christianity with unconditionally loving evidenced by ceasing to judge sin. Baker Books and Boyd should have named the work *Repenting of Judgmentalism*; it would have been more descriptive, though still theologically unsound.

Boyd divides his text into four equal parts: "The Trinity and the Goal of Creation," "The Forbidden Tree," "The Lie and the Curse," and "Living in Love." Three chapters comprise each section. Promoting his thesis that the sin that man committed in the garden was the sin of judging "good and evil" while God desired man to live in unconditional love, Boyd strives to remove sin from the church by ceasing to judge others.

Foundational to this work is Boyd's use and confusion of "judgment." In his introduction Boyd relates his epiphany concerning "judging." While seated in a mall Boyd realized he enjoyed watching and judging people. In turn he "was convicted by how many nonblessing [*sic*] thoughts—indeed, how many cursing thoughts—[he] had been entertaining without even being aware of it" (14). This led to his laying aside his judging spirit and focusing on seeing each individual as having "infinite worth" (14). Man eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and becoming judges instead of remaining "centered" on loving as God loves is Boyd's concept of original sin (17). "We are not satisfied being God-like in our capacity to love; we also want to become God-like in our capacity to judge, which is how the serpent tempts us" (68). Boyd states, "I shall show that God's goal for us is to discover a relationship with him and thereby a relationship with ourselves and others that returns us to a state where we don't live by our knowledge of good and evil" (17). Failing to do so results in the Christian religion "[becoming] the defender and promoter of the fall rather than the proclaimer of the Good News that alone can free us from the fall" (61).

In his chapter, "Love and Religion," Boyd displays the result of his theology. He contrasts the way churches discriminate between sins using as one example obesity and homosexuality. He writes, "Is it because homosexuality is more harmful to society? It is not clear what distinct social harm homosexuality causes, if any. But whatever one thinks it to be, it certainly wouldn't rival a sin that is one of the leading causes of death in America [87]!" Boyd's theology equates a sin that negates God's plan of creation and marriage with poor eating habits or

lack of exercise. It resembles intolerance of intolerance. The only sin is judging sin. Boyd narrowly confines sin to one activity, judging, instead of the biblical standard of anything which stands outside God's will.

Boyd's greatest confusion of terms is "love." Boyd presents the primacy of love over all other characteristics of God. His interpretation of Matt. 22:35-40 insists Jesus' statement that love is the greatest commandment trumps all other commands of God (52). In spite of Boyd's position, sound theology requires balance (57-60). If Boyd's view articulates Jesus', then one would have trouble explaining why Jesus or God ever spoke of other commandments. To emphasize one attribute of God over all others results in idolatry. Boyd's love is tantamount to license.

Boyd's foundational mistake lies in confusing "judging" with the sin of being judgmental which involves a self-righteous attitude. However, judging (discernment) is required for doctrinal, ecclesiological, and personal health (1 Thess. 5:14, 17; 2 Thess. 2:6; 1 Tim. 5:20; and 2 Tim. 2:15-18). Paul is able to judge without being present in Corinth and insists that the church must judge to maintain credibility among the unconverted (1 Corinthians 5). Boyd's use of "judge" requires one to ignore numerous passages.

Boyd's use of Scriptures is foundational to his confusion. Boyd's new hamartiology skews Scripture. Instead of a balanced, holistic, orthodox view of God as both loving *and* holy, Boyd creates a God in disagreement with too numerous passages to cite in a review of this length. Boyd attempts to use the life of Joseph as an illustration of his theology, writing, "When finite humans draw conclusions about people other than the one God commands us to embrace (that people have unsurpassable worth because Jesus died for them), we are rebelling against God by acting as though we are God" (108).

Joseph "refused to stand in the place of God and condemn [his brothers]. Instead, with the eyes of love he hid their sin (1 Pet. 4:8) and directed their attention to how God used it to further his own divine plan" (109). In Gen. 50:19-21, Joseph does indeed judge his brothers' sin. He states that they had evil intentions to harm him. To negate the evil intentions would cheapen Joseph's forgiveness, love, and reliance upon God. Boyd assumes that we are to love so much that we do not see the sinfulness. In truth, God expects us to love so much in spite of the sinfulness.

A review should critique the author's work and its merit, discussing negatives while affirming the positives. This review has been replete with the negative and thus violates Boyd's cardinal sin of "judging," but there are several redeeming qualities to Boyd's work. If one realizes the errors of Boyd's preceding chapters, the final two chapters are worthy of attention. Boyd is correct in his condemnation of self-righteousness and the importance of the covenant aspects of the local church. Also, reading *Repenting of Religion* promotes an understanding of Boyd's schemata which shape his better-known theological stance of "openness." Boyd's God is a God of love, a love that necessitates God's limited knowledge, thereby excusing Him of permitting evil. Unfortunately, Boyd's God is not the God of Scriptures. His selective use of passages creates a "god" who is neither omniscient nor holy, and as a result the cross loses its beauty. *Repenting of Religion* reveals the pitfalls of

limiting God by making Him, His Spirit, and His Word incapable of working in the church to sanctify His people and empowering them to love the lost who are ensnared by sin.

WILLIAM E. BROWN

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Christology: A Global Introduction, by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003. Pp. 300.

Kärkkäinen is Professor of Systematic Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. His work comes with “back cover” commendations from Roger Olsen and Colin Brown, and thus I approached the work with curiosity but with a favorable and open mind. I finished it with both appreciation and disappointment. It is a “textbook” pure and simple. It is not an apologetic. The initial chapters review the biblical materials in a basic but fair way. The next section works through church history focusing on the various Christological controversies. Then a series of chapters describe the Christological views of Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Rahner, Moltmann, Pannenberg, Grenz (the only evangelical), and Hick. A final section reviews (again descriptively) process, feminist, black, and postmodern Christologies, along with regional Christologies (Latin America–liberation; Africa–power; Asia–meaning). The final chapter is on “Stanley Samartha: Christ as Universal Savior.” An epilogue outlines Kärkkäinen’s view that the future lies in further dialog with the world religions.

As a textbook, a purely descriptive survey, the book can easily be commended. As a guide to a proper Christology and a defense of biblical truth, I consider it a failure. I agree that we need to learn what we can from world cultures, but I do not consider world cultures to be a source of revelation. I may learn better how to focus my missionary message, but the study of world religions and cultures will not *add to* the “truth once for all delivered to the saints.”

L. RUSS BUSH III

♦ ♦ ♦

Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today, ed. by John Jefferson Davis. 3d ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004. Pp. 360.

Evangelical Ethics: Issues Facing the Church Today was first published in 1985. In the nearly twenty years that have passed since its first appearance, this book has become a standard text in the classrooms of many Bible college and seminary professors—especially those given to a Reformed theological bent. Indeed, the popularity that *Evangelical Ethics* has enjoyed is appropriate, as over

the last two decades this volume, a product from the pen of John Jefferson Davis, longtime Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has been one of the most comprehensive reviews of Christian moral thought in print. This being true, however, and despite a second edition of this work that appeared in 1993, a recent criticism of *Evangelical Ethics* has been that, just as all texts that address contemporary moral issues at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the contents of this work were beginning to get dated. Hence, the production of a completely revised and expanded third edition of this valuable book became necessary.

In the words of John Jefferson Davis, “The focus of this work is on specific issues and cases that are likely to confront the pastor and Christian lay person today, rather than on a general discussion of moral virtues and dispositions or the history of Christian ethics” (14). In other words, this volume is not a study of Christian ethics, but rather a study of topics *in* Christian ethics. Indeed, as was alluded to above, within the 360 pages of *Evangelical Ethics*, Davis cogently reviews numerous pressing moral issues, including: contraception, reproductive technologies, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, abortion, infanticide and euthanasia, capital punishment, civil disobedience and revolution, war and peace, environmental ethics, and the genetic revolution. In sum, there are very few (if any) contemporary social issues that Davis does not touch upon in this work. Undoubtedly, the breadth of this book is one of its greatest assets.

Another strength of *Evangelical Ethics* is Davis’s thorough historical (and sometimes legal) review of each subject that he treats. Although some introductory ethics books are content to present moral issues as if they existed in a vacuum, Davis carefully details how contemporary ethical topics came to the forefront of moral discussion, as well as reviewing what Christians from bygone eras have thought about such subjects. Moreover, in his biblical analysis of the issues addressed in this volume, Davis goes beyond mere quotation of casuistic scriptural texts to explain carefully the moral foundations upon which Christian ethics rest. Therefore, on account of his historical and biblical methodology, Davis gives the reader a framework by which he or she will be able to evaluate novel ethical issues yet to confront the church.

The above accolades notwithstanding, there are a few minor drawbacks to *Evangelical Ethics* of which the perspective reader should be aware. For instance, due to the broad range of topics covered, Davis is unable to delve deeply into any one particular topic. This at times leaves the interested reader with the impression that Davis has prematurely truncated ethical discussion. In regard to several of the topics presented in this book, Davis seems to pass over legitimate moral viewpoints or areas of debate among church moralists.

For example, in the chapter on divorce and remarriage, the only position that receives legitimate treatment is the interpretation that views divorce and remarriage for adultery or abandonment as moral. While this position is surely the prevailing viewpoint among modern Christian ethicists, there are significant dissenting interpretations of the biblical materials that could have at least been