Christopher R.J. Holmes  

A core Christian confession is that “Jesus is Lord.” How often, however, do Christians take seriously the contemporaneous sense of this confession? Indeed, this confession is in the present tense, not the past: Jesus *is* Lord. The risen Christ continues to exercise his Lordship in the present by the power of the Spirit. Many approaches to Christian practice and ethics miss this contemporaneous sense of Christ’s presence. Christ was an exemplar. Christ’s finished work in his life, death, and resurrection had salvific consequences. These are important truths to affirm—but what of Christ’s exercise of his ongoing Lordship? How do disciples of this Lord enter into the activity of the Spirit, who mediates Christ’s presence?

Exploring these questions in relation to the task of Christian ethics, Christopher Holmes, senior lecturer at the University of Otago, has written an important and illuminating book. Drawing upon and developing insights from theologians such as Karl Barth, John Webster, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Lehmann, Holmes seeks to correct what he sees as a Christological deficit in contemporary Christian ethics. Specifically, Holmes sees a lack of attention to “the presence and ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ—in contemporary works in Christian and/or theological ethics” (5). Holmes pursues a corrective by giving a careful doctrinal account of the place of Christian ethics in light of the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. Through this, Holmes seeks to overcome approaches which simply draw principles from Christ the exemplar who was “back there” in history, and instead explore human action in light of who Jesus is and how Jesus continues to exercise his Lordship by the power of the Spirit. Specifically, Holmes makes the connection between Christology and ethics by repeatedly appealing to Christ as the “pioneer and perfecter” of our faith (Heb. 12:2), claiming that “Jesus Christ is the human response to God in which we participate by faith. It is Jesus’ contemporary ministry, the ministry of him who is really One with us in our humanity, that grounds ethics and is the place from which ethics proceeds and by which it is sustained” (15). Thus, Holmes seeks to ground the “ought” of Christian ethics in the “is” of Jesus Christ, his “eternity and contemporaneity,” as “our human response to God” (19). In this move, Holmes is able to draw upon recent reflection in the *pistis christou* discussion, as well as relate it to the notion of Christ’s “vicarious humanity” in Thomas Torrance and others.

After a foundational chapter presenting his methodology, which prioritizes biblical exegesis, chapters 2–4 begin with the theological exegesis of a biblical
passage leading Holmes through his three central topics: chapter 2, John 5:1–18, on Christ's power; chapter 3, John 18:1–19:42, on Christ's truth; and chapter 4, John 21, on Christ's love. In a refreshing way, Holmes does not simply approach these passages asking “what was Jesus doing/saying,” but emphasizes Jesus' eternality and contemporaneity, as a witness to “what Jesus is now doing” (19). Ultimately, he seeks to discern how the ascended Christ continues to be active as prophet, priest, and king by the power of the Spirit (129). Holmes concludes with a chapter “On Why Scripture Construes Ethical Reality”—making a case for the centrality of scripture for theological ethics if one is to recover the focus upon the ongoing presence and ministry of Jesus Christ by the Spirit. “The Bible’s moral authority is inextricably bound up with the present and ministering Christ” (146).

Overall, Holmes' book is a superb contribution to several interrelated discourses: discussions seeking to articulate the foundations of a distinctly Christian theological ethic; the theological interpretation of scripture, and explorations of how to reconnect doctrinal theology with biblical exegesis; and discussions which seek to move beyond pragmatic, human-centered approaches to Christian ministry toward ones which prioritize the action of the Triune God.

While Ethics in the Presence of Christ is an important contribution to these various discourses, the weaknesses of this short, densely argued book are closely tied to those strengths. Holmes' ethical vision sometimes appears as a bold new paradigm for Christian ethics, but there is relatively little direct, concrete ethical description which goes beyond exegetical and doctrinal claims. His approach often appears to have significant implications for Christian ministry, but these are, regrettably, rarely unfolded with much detail.

While Holmes' book does important work re-connecting biblical exegesis and theology, at times he makes wide-ranging theological claims in the course of his exegesis without identifying significant exegetical challenges. For example, in chapter 3 Holmes states a key assumption: “In Christ the whole of humanity is accepted, judged and awakened to new life by God in him through the agency of the Spirit” (89). A few pages later Holmes makes the sweeping claim that a similar idea—that Christ is the human response to God for “all people”—undergirds Paul's language of “in Christ,” John's Gospel, and the Synoptics (92). Bringing this assumption to John's gospel, Holmes claims that “the trial scenes and subsequent crucifixion include me, indeed all humanity, for in them we encounter one who responds to God in our place as our substitute and representative” (93). In the chapter's conclusion, Holmes states that “the world's rejection ... is radically circumscribed” (106). “Elect people live as those for whom their rejection—and also the world's—is slain” (106). Thus, unbeliev-