Michael Root and James J. Buckley, eds.

_The Morally Divided Body: Ethical Disagreement and the Disunity of the Church._


North American Christianity crosses into another post-centennial threshold of ecumenical struggle as emancipatory movements swayed church beliefs and practices in recent decades. While some traditions have fully recognized other ecclesial bodies, the challenge of fuller communion continues to widen as churches disagree on moral issues related to civil rights, sexuality, marriage (and civil union), just-war, church discipline, among other pressing concerns. If doctrinal disagreements were the core concerns behind models of unity in bygone eras, ethical issues divide churches today. Eight contributors in this volume agree that “issues that were once not on the agenda” have fueled ecumenical disagreements (chapter 1). They seek to provide a “pastorally engaged theology” (x) gathered from “Catholics and Evangelicals Together” conference 2010, with entries from Lutheran, United Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian ecumenists, systematicians, and an early American historian. This plurality of backdrops—theological, historical, denominational, liturgical, ethical, ethical, sociological, political, and ministerial—underpin discussions in the book. Reviewing _The Morally Divided Body_, I register that Pentecostals and Charismatics ought not to be left out of this important development, especially when one considers the size of renewal population, not to forget its impact to other traditions and contributions to Christian ecumenism.

Four essayists emphasize the inseparability of doctrine and ethics for negotiating Christian unity, a concept integral to renewal Christianity: Robert Jenson calls this inseparability the criteria for “tolerable unity” (10). The Decalogue provides the meat to his proposition (chapter 1). Examining how moral consensus guided unity in reactions to Donatism and Catholic-Reformation history, Frederick Bauerschmidt argues for a unity that integrates beliefs, ethics, and practices (chapter 3). With Christian unity representing “the eschatological fulfillment of the law,” David Yeago urges that Christian unity necessarily follows Nicene dogma’s substantial agreement about moral teachings, because both Christological dogma and theological anthropology of our _imago Dei_ status reveal God’s unchanging righteousness and the ordered life expected of disciples (chapter 6). Beth Schweiger cautions against an arrogant and hermeneutically erred triumphalism, learnt from early American Christians’ response from opposition to advocacy for racial equality (chapter 2). He argues that good theology (which weighs on major themes adequately) deepens a “true unity of difference” (23).
But when churches do not conceive ethics and doctrines together, are remedies possible? Joseph Small explains how the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s quest for compliance with public ethics, which impinges upon moral faiths, became morally divisive, with significant disagreements and splintering along natural and theological lines (chapter 4). He further analyzes that majority votes in American Reformed traditions had historically created schism without considering the whole denomination. When churches failed to see their mutual responsibility to faith and withdrew themselves from those who differ, the results are ecclesial self-deceit. Small’s resolutions are to love truth purposefully, consistently, articulately, and organizationally. To stall further divisions, he recommends that denomination allow “parallel structural possibilities” and “parallel ecclesial polis” (58–59).

Three contributors further recommend other ethical resolution. Susan Wood argues that liturgy is an instrument and exemplar of ethics and a means for moral character formation even as liturgy is itself ethics, which also verifies liturgy. The theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet shows that liturgy is not just a means of giving God a body in the world but it requires a commitment to scripture, sacrament, and ethics (chapter 5). Retrieving Robert Bellah’s idea that civil religion subordinates religion to ethical principles and Walter Kasper’s optimistic pessimism in the Harvest Project to show how the convergence of consensuses were formed amidst disagreements in Christian history, James Buckley urges the learning of morals by embedding issues of personal, marital, familial, social, political, environmental ethics in Trinitarian, Christological, ecclesiological and sacramental contexts of finding shared practices and common good through a theology of conversion to each others’ agendas, issues, and tensions, and by issuing statements of common grounds. Buckley’s exemplar is The Evangelicals and Catholics Together project even as he cautions against Marian excesses and narrow-mindedness, and urges attentiveness to three gaps—occasion-specific, occasion-comprehensive, and the God-difference in discourses (chapter 7). Finally, Michael Root urges that ethics must not be neglected however church-dividing and difficult the conversations would impact unity. In multilateral official dialogues, ethics are not separate. He reminds readers of ARCIC’s (Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission) position on differentiated consensual issues and the weakness of preferring generality over particularities. He calls for an ethical method of natural law as agreed by revelation, an exploration of critically complementary methods to deal with diversities, and a clear headed-need to distinguish between the more binding (Magisterium) from the less binding documents (freedom) as he surveys a range of topics, terms used, and discussions on ethical dimensions in ecumenical dialogues (chapter 8).