

## BOOK REVIEW

**Thomas Noakes-Duncan, *Communities of restoration: ecclesial ethics and restorative justice*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, 288 pp., ISBN: 978-0-56767-153-0 (hbk).**

This book is timely because it seeks to make two important theological correctives: first to address the lack of attention in theological reflection to ecclesial ethics and second, to address the lacuna in ecclesial ethics concerning the justice of God. The author's primary aim is to engage directly with the church and its vocation, to witness to the justice of God as restorative. This conviction is inspired by covenant theology and in the narrative of the faith as encountered through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The author's dialogue with restorative justice theorists and practitioners is an important but secondary aim.

The author takes as his starting point a description of the rationale for the ecclesial turn in Christian ethics in the later part of the 20th century. He critiques the drift in secular ethics towards decisionism: i.e. the agency's power of choice to make or not make the right decision. This decision-making emphasis privileges individualism and rationalism – so beloved of the enlightenment thinkers – at the expense of a more Aristotelian ethical perspective where character is integral to moral agency. The so-called turn in ecclesial ethics is towards a virtue-based approach, but it is more than this, because, as Noakes-Duncan recognises, virtue ethics can also be highly individualistic. Rather, the argument in the new ecclesial ethics tradition is that the convictions, beliefs and hopes as well as rituals and practices of the faith tradition, which the Christian inhabits, all contribute to a much richer, more complex description of moral agency.

Noakes-Duncan's survey of ecclesial ethics relies heavily on the peace church theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Howard Yoder but also on the more recent work of Sam Wells and Ben Quash, who crucially identify different trends and streams of influence within ecclesial ethics. Acknowledging these different streams, Noakes-Duncan recognises the distinct and formative contribution made by Alistair McIntyre. A little more direct reliance on McIntyre would have had the benefit of demonstrating clearly how ecclesial ethics is not a new idea, but one which has roots in many quite ancient movements in church history. In 'After virtue', McIntyre famously points to the time of Benedict as an era when ecclesial communities consciously nurtured restorative habits and practices. McIntyre also argued with great effect that theology has sold out to secular ethics, and that in the current moral maze the habits and practices of the church can provide unique and distinctive space for the formation of the moral character. These insights from a distant cousin within the ecclesial ethics tradition would have broadened and strengthened the appeal of Noakes-Duncan's own important argument, which is that the church has too often bought into theories of justice that have more to do with secular rational thought than with the justice of God.

By envisioning the justice of God as restorative, Noakes-Duncan argues that the church needs to attend to the paradigm of justice, which the early pioneers of

the modern restorative justice movement set out. He outlines how Mennonites, in particular, seized a moment in their own development when they departed from a more pious other world stance to one that engages with the world, and did so at a point of crucial intersection, with the criminal justice system. This story is very well told and corrects a gap in the modern restorative justice literature where the origin of the movement in the church has been discarded by academics and practitioners, who presumably regard this fact to be inconvenient and/or eminently forgettable. Given the story of the roots of the modern restorative justice movement within the life of the church Noakes-Duncan poses the question: what, if anything, was distinctively Christian about restorative justice in its modern origins and what – if anything – may be lost in restorative justice theory and practice through the current distancing of the movement from those religious roots. Is the shift in language away from reconciliation and forgiveness towards empathy and closure significant or just a question of semantics? Is the Christian contribution to restorative justice simply a matter of personal motivation or do the principles and practices based on the biblical vision of shalom make a difference? These are really important questions and Noakes-Duncan does well to put them firmly into the contemporary restorative justice debate.

To help answer this question Noakes-Duncan turns to linguistics and biblical hermeneutics. His linguistic research reveals the way the word justice in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Septuagint texts have over time been increasingly read and translated through a Hellenistic or Romans cultural lens. This offers a very important insight into how the Hebrew concept of Justice as shalom (right relationship) was lost in the process of history through translation and through theological interpretations of justice that preferred Greek and Latin etymological roots where the focus was more individualistic and retributive.

When it comes to Noakes-Duncan's reflection on the meaning and place of justice in scripture there is a slight tendency to want to remove or downplay the ambiguity and tension within the biblical texts. While he rightly stresses a deep integral link between justice and mercy, and how this points to the restorative nature of God's justice, a more nuanced critical engagement with texts that give rise to the covenant theology would have been helpful. Precisely because covenant theology undergirds restorative practice, understanding the tension in covenant texts between conditionality and unconditionally is vital. In short, covenant love within scripture is not always unequivocally unconditional. Moreover, the tension between conditionality and un-conditionality in the covenant tradition is a creative one. It demonstrates moral seriousness and the necessity in moral repair – not for retribution or vengeance but for some pain and suffering. This tension is important for restorative justice, especially when it comes to responding to those critics who say restorative justice is soft on crime. Braithwaite's place for shame and shaming within the context of a loving and reconciling community demonstrates that restorative justice involves some conditionality, and some suffering and pain is experienced by all parties. Redemptive suffering is the price of moral seriousness.

Theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and Howard Yoder are particularly identified as bringing the biblical inspiration to the writings of the restorative jus-

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tice pioneers such as Howard Zehr. Their focus is away from abstract doctrine and universal ethics towards the church as an ethical community in which the narrative of faith nurtures the habits and practices of the moral character. What surprises Noakes-Duncan, in the hermeneutical work of these ecclesial ethicists and others more recently such as Wells and Quash, is the frequency with which they speak of peace and reconciliation and of the role of forgiveness in this quest, but the term justice is largely unexplored. This is troubling for Noakes-Duncan and he seeks to correct this through an in-depth reflection on biblical passages including an excellent exegesis of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This exegesis – which draws heavily on the writing of Chris Marshall – is a clear example of how the arc of God’s justice moves towards mercy. While commending all that is said here, I would want to further highlight that in this paradigmatic parable of reconciliation, forgiveness may be all-pervasive but it is not unconditional and reintegration carries with it considerable pain. The party thrown by the father to welcome home his son into the community was – as Noakes-Duncan says – a complex occasion in which the community and the elder son were challenged to embrace forgiveness. But it was also a difficult and demanding experience for the younger son. This parable can be read as a restorative ritual or reintegration ceremony, which involved for the son a measure of public humiliation and shame *en route* to forgiveness and reconciliation.

This well-researched and timely publication concludes with two very accessible examples from contemporary practice: first ‘the Sycamore tree project’, run by the prison fellowship, provides an example of restorative justice work done by church volunteers in prison settings, and then a local example is given of restorative practice within the inner life of a congregation. These accounts both point towards good practice and encourage churches to embrace restorative justice practice both in their congregational life and in their mission work. The chapter would have benefitted from some consideration of ways to evaluate restorative practices. Being able to measure impact and to reflect on where and how different situations have or have not been receptive to restorative practice can ensure that congregational life will continually grow and develop as an environment in which restorative habits and practices become an everyday occurrence. When this happens – as Noakes-Duncan eloquently argues – ethical decisions are not simply moral choices in moments of crisis, but moral reflexes that are built up on a daily basis so that when crisis occur the instinct to do what is right will win the day.

The strength of this book is the bold manner in which it challenges the church to rediscover the justice of God as restorative and to let the insights of restorative justice shape faith and practice. It also poses a distinctive challenge to the wider restorative justice movement, to revisit the roots of the movement in the peace church tradition and to reflect on whether ditching the biblical vision of

shalom has a negative impact on theory and practice. Not a popular message but all the more important for that.

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