

Forrester, Duncan 1997 — The true church and morality: Reflections on ecclesiology and ethics

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Reviewer: Prof I W C van Wyk

Duncan Forrester is dean of the Faculty of Divinity, New College, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. His book arose out of his involvement in the World Council of Churches' Ecclesiology and Ethics study project. The main reason for this project was the need for a clear vision on the relationship between doctrine (including the doctrine of the unity of the church) on the one hand and social witness and action for peace and justice on the other. To be able to come to an understanding of the relationship between ethics and ecclesiology, the WCC held two consultations on the theme in 1994 in Jerusalem and in 1996 Johannesburg. The outcome of those consultations is reflected in this book. The book is divided into six chapters:

- * Church and ethics yesterday and today
- * Cheap or costly unity?
- * Ethics and ecumenism: A journey together
- * Worship, ethics and unity
- * Baptism, Eucharist and ethics: An Indian case
- * Formation, Reformation and discernment.

It would be fair to say that this book is a picture of World Council of Churches thinking on this theme. It would also be fair to say that this book is proof that Calvinism is the main source of influence within the WCC. What we find in this book on the relationship between church and ethics is typically Calvinistic. It is Calvinism which stated throughout the centuries that dogmatics and ethics, faith and morality, church and politics should remain united. Forrester, as Presbyterian, defends his theological tradition in this book. He makes statements like these: 'In the Bible moral and doctrinal teaching are interwoven in a subtle and significant manner, suggesting that you cannot have one without the other. The indicative and the imperative are inseparably bound together. The command is rooted in the story'. (2). 'Like grace, this unity [of the church] is a precious gift which requires a costly response. Although it has been achieved for us by Christ, we need to demonstrate its reality in a world that is still full of division, conflict, suspicion and hostility. We need to live out the unity and the *shalom* that Christ has won. We must become the people and the communities that we already are in Christ' (15).

Although no Calvinistic theologian would disagree with the basic idea that ecclesiology and ethics should remain a unity, there will be difference in opinion on how church unity and moral struggles should complement one another. To argue (13-25) that a common political agenda improves the unity of the church, is to my mind an overstatement and, as a matter of fact, uncalvinistic. Our teaching tradition holds that unity is unity in faith and confession. A common political struggle does unite certain people, but does not unite churches. Karl Barth (KD IV/1) should be consulted again on this point

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In spite of this point of disagreement, there are lovely chapters in this book. The last chapter, which deals with ethics, is a joy to read. With this chapter one realises again that, although we as Afrikaners and Scots are worlds apart, we are one in faith and education of this faith. We who are brought up in Christian homes indeed have a lot in common. It is wonderful to discover people in a distant country with the same family values as you. This chapter reminds us again that Christian morality must be learnt. It must become part of your lifestyle through education at home and at church. Leaving people to make their own choices some time in the future, is simply not good enough. Only through a loving family and persevering in the faith can people learn how to become new creatures in Christ who will follow Him in every thing.

This is a good and interesting book. It is good because it contains good Calvinistic theology. It is interesting, because, for example, I never knew that the Scots had their own apartheid system and that the Presbyterians saw the Irish as an inferior race (87). Like this interesting piece of history, many other informative facts and perspectives can be found in this book.

This is a highly recommendable book, and should be read by all who are interested in ecclesiology and ethics.
