

Invitation to Christian Ethics: Moral Reasoning and Contemporary Issues

Kenneth Magnuson, Kregel Academic, 2020.
ISBN: 978-0825434457, 672 pages, Hardcover, \$44.99

Christian ethics and moral decision-making can be complex and intimidating to non-theologians. In addition, the authoritative scriptures do not directly address every possible ethical issue. This problem is especially true in bioethics, which evolves continuously based on medical, scientific, and technological advancements. How should Christians view such issues as artificial intelligence, gene editing, and bodily enhancements? Pastors, healthcare professionals, and lay congregants need help. *Invitation to Christian Ethics: Moral Reasoning and Contemporary Issues*, by Kenneth Magnuson, gives moral guidance to the Christian community to navigate these problems. While not perfect, it offers a solid philosophical and practical approach to Christian ethics.

Magnuson, a professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Seminary, does not present this work as a textbook. Instead, his target audience is anyone who claims the name of Christ, regardless of profession. In his preface, he states, “Christian ethics involves the intersection of several disciplines, including theology, biblical studies, philosophy, history, law, sociology, and science, as well as pastoral care, counseling, and preaching” (p. 10). His writing style is therefore clear and understandable while retaining academic rigor.

Invitation to Christian Ethics brings together essential pieces of the philosophical disciplines to its approach to ethics. The book is broken into five sections. Part One is an introduction to ethical theory, philosophy, and teleology. Part Two discusses the use of Old and New Testament scriptures in ethics. Part Three then applies these concepts to examine a biblical view of human sexuality and how it impacts bioethics. Part Four then dissects the *imago Dei* as an argument for the value of human life. Finally, Part Five closes the work by applying the author’s Christian ethics framework to ecology and sociology.

Magnuson’s approach offers several key insights into modern ethical discourse. The first is that Christian ethics is unique because it harmonizes deontology, virtue ethics, and teleology. In contrast with other authors, he argues that Christian ethics is incompatible with consequentialism, because the end results of Christian moral decision-making may not bring about overall happiness. Avoiding this pitfall requires a combination of reflection and moral deliberation using all of these philosophical perspectives.

The author then provides a second critical insight: the Bible is an authoritative resource for Christian decision-making and a reliable source for all ethical decisions. In the process, he reasonably addresses common arguments against such a conclusion. He defines the “moral field” for ethics to include God as Creator, human beings, and the world that created beings

Robert Drew, review of *Invitation to Christian Ethics: Moral Reasoning and Contemporary Issues*, by Kenneth Magnuson, *Ethics & Medicine* 37, no. 2–3 (2021): 158–160.

inhabit. Moral responsibility is not simply a command or a moral principle, but comes from a personal and relational God. He further argues the Bible clearly distinguishes between particular commands, limited to specific persons or situations, and universal or general commands, applying to all people at all times (pp. 74–80). This approach helps the reader harmonize the ethical teachings of both the Old and New Testaments.

A third significant insight of this text is an overall practical approach to moral decision-making. Magnuson highlights ethicist Scott Rae, whose model includes seven steps: 1) Gather the facts, 2) Determine the ethical issues, 3) Determine the virtues/principles that impact the case, 4) List alternatives, 5) Compare the alternatives with the virtues/principles, 6) Consider consequences, and 7) Make a decision (p. 52).¹² Magnuson builds on this approach, dividing his expanded model into three categories with added clarifiers. The first part, “Pre-Reflection,” considers worldview, biblical perceptions, and contextual matters. The next part, “Reflection and Deliberation,” places Rae’s first three steps into the reflection category and puts steps four to six into the deliberation category. To all this, Magnuson adds an understanding of purpose and virtue, which drives alternatives and consequences. Finally, Magnuson’s third part, called “Make a Decision,” begins with a preliminary decision open to evaluation and critique. By stretching out Rae’s model and adding clarifiers, Magnuson has slowed down the process of moral decision-making while pursuing efficiency, clarity, and application to real-world circumstances.

Throughout the rest of the book, Magnuson applies these insights to the issues of marriage and sexuality, human personhood, and dominion and stewardship. When it comes to marriage and sexuality, Magnuson concludes that God created marriage and sex as a gift for His glory and for the human good; it is more than mere pleasure. He then uses this understanding to consider divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, and gender.

Regarding human personhood, the author begins with an argument for the full humanity of human beings from conception onward, and then applies that conclusion to infertility, abortion, and even medically-assisted death. In the book’s final section, Magnuson uses his insights regarding human value to discuss capital punishment, just war, race relations, and stewardship of the environment.

Magnuson aims to derive all of his conclusions from Scripture. In his view, the Bible is the ultimate source for Christian reflection and direction, shown on every page. Nonetheless, he is careful to address opponents to this position fairly and to weigh their arguments. He therefore allows the reader to consider both sides of the argument and to decide for themselves.

Overall, Magnuson’s summary of Christian ethics is helpful and valuable. However, this reviewer feels that his additions to Rae’s decision-making model lack precision and may lead to vague conclusions that might interfere with a common consensus for ethical outcomes. Magnuson’s model also seems to lead to different moral decisions with changes in culture, working against the pursuit of truth and guidance he hopes to achieve.

In summary, *Invitation to Christian Ethics: Moral Reasoning and Contemporary Issues*, by Kenneth Magnuson, is a solid contribution to the philosophical and practical discussion around Christian ethics and its application to bioethics. The author establishes a clear pathway for

individuals to engage in Christian ethics, while maintaining the promise, presence, and power of other prominent bioethicists. This text would be a solid addition to the library of any theologian, scholar, or ethicist trying to discern the vast and complicated aspects of Christian ethics.

REFERENCES

1. For more detailed discussion of Rae's approach see Scott Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018); and Scott Rae and Paul Cox, *Bioethics: A Christian Approach in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Reviewed by Robert Drew, MA, Central Groups & Enrichment Pastor, Scottsdale Bible Church (Arizona)