
Anything written by Allen Verhey is sure to be a pleasure. His writing is clear, careful, and theologically profound, and he is happy to challenge various sacred cows of both the conservative and liberal wings of Protestant academic circles. His latest book is no exception to that rule and is a worthwhile read for anyone in the Christian community who is trying to make sense of the com-
plexities and weirdnesses of contemporary medicine. Verhey begins the book by discussing how and why to read Scripture, and then states that the purpose of this book is to offer “an effort to read Scripture within the context of the Christian community and for it, and especially within the context of churches as communities of discourse about bioethics and for their discernment” (67). The book is written for an audience of believers and is unabashed about it, though those who are not members of the Christian community might well learn from listening in to the conversation. It is a book that copies the Jewish tradition of midrash—of reading and interpreting Scripture in the community of faith, striving not for the one, scientific, literal meaning but instead listening for the many voices of wisdom in the sacred text, the voices that speak to different places and times, that reveal bits of God’s love and God’s direction for the community of God.

All of this is well and good, of course, but how, exactly, does one go about reading Scripture in the strange new world of medicine? Verhey first addresses the issue of why medicine is strange and what that strangeness means for the believing community. He begins by noting how medicine involves a distancing of the person from the body. The distancing occurs partly because the conditions for which medical interventions are needed are very often conditions that alienate one from one’s body and make it feel more like an enemy than a self. Because of this, calls for holism, for reconnecting the person to the body rather than treating the body as an object of scientific knowledge, can be found early on in the bioethics literature. Medicine also produces distance because of the increasingly technical and biological sophistication of medical techniques. Much of the focus of this book is on the new and increasingly odd ways that medicine allows persons and bodies to be separated so that babies are produced in test-tubes or in rented wombs, bodies without consciousness are kept alive by complicated machinery, and the heart or lungs or liver of one individual can become part of the body of another through transplantation.

Christianity can be an essential part of public policy discussions about such issues in part because Christian doctrine avoids the twin extremes to which ethics is tempted: identifying the person with either the intellect or exclusively with the body. Those who identify the person with the mind or intellect cannot see the worth and importance of those persons who lack some central intellectual abilities. Those who reduce the person to the material body are unable to see that we are created for more than this life and can properly sacrifice aspects of bodily existence for more important goods. Verhey reminds us that as Christians we need to hold on to the tension between the two notions that humans are embodied, and properly so, and that humans are also spiritual beings, and properly so. Keeping those two thoughts in mind, simultaneously, can lead to better responses to those experiencing the alienation that is a common feature of contemporary medical treatment; it can also lead us to provide better care because we do not forget that people are both spiritual and embodied.
Alienation from one’s own body is not the only strange feature of contemporary medicine. We also live in a world where new technologies make it possible to separate the various steps in reproduction from each other so that individuals can purchase sperm or ova over the Internet, contract with a surrogate to carry a child, and use numerous other interventions in the course of using assisted reproductive techniques in getting a child. We live in a world where there are incredibly effective new techniques for treating conditions such as kidney failure, heart disease, and cancer but where the cost of those techniques makes them inaccessible to the uninsured. In all these situations (and others), Verhey reminds us that for Christians, our reasoning about these strange lands must be informed by the Christian stories found in Scripture. Sometimes he uses very specific stories, thinking about the problem of scarcity of medical resources from the vantage point of the story of the Good Samaritan. Other times the story is more general; the story of a God of life and love in the context of euthanasia, for example. Even here the stories of Judas’s and Peter’s betrayal of Jesus offer a context within which to think about what it means to follow a God who is a God of life, while also recognizing one’s own finitude and limitations.

Verhey’s book points back to Scripture constantly. We cannot be faithful followers of Jesus unless our lives are shaped and determined by the stories of the Old and New Testaments. He offers an exemplary model of how reading Scripture in the context of the Christian tradition and the new, strange world of medicine can guide our reasoning and moral deliberations. The book covers many of the most hotly disputed topics in contemporary bioethics carefully and in depth. One of its important strengths is that it also offers an overview of the current bioethics literature on each issue, noting why the central debates on various topics are important debates but cannot be resolved in terms of the resources that secular bioethics offers. He then prods the reader to move beyond a minimalist analysis to a richer, more adequate account informed by Scripture.

From what I have said so far, I hope it is obvious that I think this is a marvelous book and worth reading for anyone concerned with contemporary medical issues, scriptural interpretation, or pastoral care for those who need medical interventions. That said, one quibble could be raised. The book does occasionally repeat itself, largely because each chapter is written as a free-standing essay. This is a virtue for those who use this book as a browsing resource because one can turn to a topic of interest and get a self-contained discussion in one chapter. It is less of a virtue when one reads the book straight through because occasional themes and interpretive paradigms repeat, but this is a minor criticism at most.

Christians debating difficult moral and social issues can fall into one of two errors: that of resorting to legalistic proof-texting or that of adopting a laissez-faire, “let the Spirit move where it will” attitude. (There are surely other errors, but these are among the more common.) Verhey offers us an example of how Christian moral reasoning can be done right. This is not to say that his reason-
ing can substitute for our own. Readers will most likely disagree with various and sundry of his conclusions. It is to say that he offers us a wonderful model of how to reason, how to discuss, how to use discernment in the strange new world of medicine.

—Ruth Groenhout