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Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice, Church, and World (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice, Church, and World*. Eds. Mark R. Gornik and Gregory Thompson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. 440 pages. ISBN 978-0-8028-6525-0. Reviewed by R.D. Henderson, PhD, now researching and writing in The Netherlands.

Years ago I was convinced for quite some time that there were two authors with the name N. Wolterstorff, one writing on art and aesthetics and another on theories of knowledge and rationality. Now this collection of thirty-nine articles written over a period of forty year shows that there are six or seven—at least as far as breath of interest and depth of insight go. Two editors, in consultation with the author, have put together a well arranged, coherent collection of essays—some previously unpublished [See end note]. The collection contains revealing words of a father writing in grief over the death of a son; a son being instructed by a father out on the Minnesota plains; a brother speaking for the poor; a disciple spreading the message of the master; a political philosopher speaking for the rights of the oppressed; and a husband arguing on behalf of women in church office. Remarkably enough, the collection remains the work of one writer, the voice of one speaker! You may not like or agree with everything said—I don't—but the author speaks with an honest voice on hard topics. The book discusses real and difficult, not ephemeral or luxury, issues. There is a down-to-earth and direct quality to much of the writing. Its style shows care for clear communication and contact with the reader. Most of what is written intimates uprightness and a sense of goodness that is hard to resist.

Two of the sections in the book are about the author himself; they give the reader some of the background and context of the articles. They reveal that he was taught to seek what is good and right and demonstrate how he, as a long time professor of philosophy, taught others to do the same. These qualities and this carefully conceived collection put a burden on the reader to face various challenges, for example, to seek justice, to care for or about the poor, to seek beauty or aesthetic fittingness in architecture, ordinary life and worship. However, the labor of reading this collection is light, and the reward potentially great.

The book contains valuable stories, observations, and morals and demonstrates by example how to put together an argument and make a persuasive point. It makes some of Wolterstorff's other more technical writings easier to understand. A good place to start is at the front or the back of the book, reading these sections first. "The Grace That Shaped My Life" and the "Afterword" are personal stories about a writer who is reticent to talk about himself. Yet from them much can be learned and many insights gained.

Most of the book's contents are within the reach of

the ordinary reader; few presuppose technical training or expertise though some do have technical sections. The essays contain many valuable quotations from both modern and ancient authors, including Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Weber, H.R. Niebuhr, A. MacIntyre, and Walzer, as well as some lengthy passages from the Bible. It is fascinating to observe Wolterstorff's unfamiliar way of formulating familiar Christian doctrines and beliefs. The article "Seeking Justice in Hope" gives valuable glimpses into what real faith is, true Biblical hope in contrast to mere secular "optimism." It advises doing our work in hope even when the outcome is very uncertain. "The Political Ethics of the Reformers" lays out a clear and revealing contrast between Medieval ideas about human fulfillment and the sixteenth-century Reformers' ideas about the human responsibility to hear and live by the word of God. There are discussions that engender real appreciation of liturgy and music and invite deep reflection on their place in life and worship. A consideration of different approaches to church architecture, based on the author's own experience, is given in two articles.

"Letter to a Young Theologian" offers a fascinating glimpse into what is expected of a Christian theologian—and an academic quite generally. It is instructive and shows some of Wolterstorff's own theological leanings and theoretical proclivities. It is one of the most revealing essays in regard to his own scholarly work and practice. The article "Has the Cloak Become a Cage? Love, Justice, and Economic Activity" offers informative commentary on current economic realities and moral dilemmas created by them. In this 2006 article, Wolterstorff as much as predicts, in a very general way, the 2008 economic bank collapse. He also provides a short but valuable characterization of some of Max Weber's most influential ideas about secularization, economics, and modern society.

Besides commenting on these public issues, the book contains some personal reflections on Wolterstorff's own grief and his thoughts about the nature of lamentation as presented in the Bible. It argues for the propriety of honest grieving over a loss and against trying to cover up or analyze away our suffering into steps and phases identifiable by therapists. Wolterstorff's reflections here are informed by the writings of John Calvin on suffering—in his "The wounds of God: Calvin's Theology of Social Injustice." This and other essays in the collection are written in the shadow of the loss in 1983 of his own son Eric. Calvin's

criticism of the Stoic negation of grief is presented, and following him, Wolterstorff advocates “*giving voice to the suffering that accompanies deep loss*” (81). He explains lament as “*the bringing to speech of suffering*.” In the Bible, he says, there are many examples of upright lamentation. He quotes Calvin again, arguing that rather than being indifferent or apathetic towards our suffering, God is moved, sharing our sadness and is Himself pained. At the end of his “If God is Good and Sovereign, Why Lament?” he wrestles with Calvin’s thought that “the suffering that comes our way is for our good and that we must, accordingly, endure it with grateful patience” (92). But “what about my son?” Wolterstorff asks. Didn’t God want continued earthly existence for him? Like many people in Scripture, he does not understand why things have gone awry. “So I join the psalmist in lament,” he says, and “I voice my suffering, naming it and owning it,” yet endure in faith.

An issue written about in many contexts and with great passion is justice, or love and justice; it has occupied Wolterstorff for many years, and the book chronicles various times and places he has spoken up for people who were being wronged. Wolterstorff conceives of justice in terms of all people possessing natural human rights. “Every human being,” he affirms, “has a natural right to genuine and fair access to adequate means of sustenance” (391). The basis of rights is that all human beings are made in the image of God and are objects of God’s love and care. Wolterstorff sees justice and natural human rights as inextricably linked. In a number of articles including “Why Care About Justice?” Wolterstorff cites many familiar Biblical passages demonstrating God’s enduring concern for justice. He believes that Scripture from cover to cover drives home the message that we too are to care for and to work to lighten the burdens of the poor, the blind, the oppressed, the captive.

In his article “The Troubled Relationship between Christians and Human Rights,” the lack of an explicit language of rights in Scripture is mentioned. The link between justice and rights, to Wolterstorff, is the Biblical teaching about being wronged and being forgiven; these, he says, presuppose a notion of human rights, “even though the concept itself may not be employed” (151). Wolterstorff believes the cause of justice (for all) is well served by thinking and speaking in terms of human rights, and that failing to do so is a serious error. On this difficult subject I beg to differ with Wolterstorff. To my mind, the absence in Scripture of a language of rights is significant. In the gospels the (second) command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is always linked to and follows from the first, namely, to “love God with your whole heart . . .” Speaking of a human “right” or “rights” alone loses this

connection. Is there ever a right without a corresponding responsibility—to God? To my mind, “rights talk” is one-sided. It conjures up a universe of discourse foreign to Biblical religion, positing the basis of a claim in man himself alone. It also has the problem of implying that we do not need to say “thank you” to anyone because what we enjoy is ours by right.

One clue to the idea of human rights concerns this question: what and who make up a community? “Natural human rights” seems to imply that all people are one community. And, while in a limited sense this is true, still clearly, not all people are of one nationality, one family, one faith, one language, etc. Important distinctions are rightly made based on such membership. As a member of the human race I am universally forbidden to murder any (and every) fellow human being. But am I thereby equally legally bound to provide “genuine and fair access to adequate means of sustenance” to everyone? All of this, including the idea of “access,” seems ambiguous to me. The need for discretion and good judgment are also strangely lacking in the picture here suggested.

As I see it, the idea of universal human rights confuses a universal ethical with a particular legal notion. Wolterstorff affirms an ethical connection that imposes a legal obligation on and between all people. However, legal obligations depend upon (something like) a constitution or set of laws spelling out legal ties, rights, and responsibilities within some specific community. Am I legally obliged to provide for one or more impoverished communities in India or China?

Two minor shortcomings of the book are its lack of index and system. The conclusions drawn in one article that could be applied in a similar context in another are often missing. Although unpopular today, isn’t giving voice to your own *system of thought* still a philosopher’s duty, especially for a gifted one like Nicholas Wolterstorff?

Given its broad scope and practical character, this book has a wide educational value and can be read fruitfully in either a casual or a studious way. It discusses some of the most difficult, basic human problems in a careful, committed, and elevated manner. It reflects the beauty and pain of a many-faceted reality discussed with insight—conceived and spoken about in a single voice. In it I have found myself, and I suspect many others will also find themselves, *bearing the call*.

[Note: One of these, “The Political Ethic of the Reformers,” is undated, but the author comments, “I would guess, from the 1970’s.” That was indeed a guess, since two books discussed in this very valuable article were not published until 1981 and 1982.]