
Pro Rege

Volume 17 | Number 2

Article 8

December 1988

Kingdoms in Conflict (Book Review)

Charles Veenstra
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Veenstra, Charles (1988) "Kingdoms in Conflict (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*:
Vol. 17: No. 2, 34 - 35.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol17/iss2/8

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

ted Relationships," treats commitment in friendship, marriage, and family, Part II. "The Crises of Commitment," sensitively handles problems when commitments collide, when trust is broken, and when bad commitments are made. The crucial element of forgiveness, which the author has examined in much more detail in another well-known book, figures prominently when relationships suffer because people have been unable to do all they promised. He ends by showing that "in the keeping of commitments, we take charge of the future by sustaining the personal relationships that make our life most worth living" (152).

The subject of this book is vitally important, yet the problem I find in Smedes' work is his starting point. Why should one keep commitments? His response: "Commitments are worth the effort, and sometimes, the sacrifice, because, when all is said and done, people are almost always better off because of them" (25). Notice that this answer is essentially a utilitarian one. In such a perspective, one looks to the consequences to determine what is morally correct. The utilitarian criterion is whether or not a particular action promotes the greatest good for those involved. Just exactly what a utilitarian means by "the greatest good" may vary from one person to another. What does Smedes mean when he says people "are almost always better off"? There is less stability in this position than there would be if he had chosen a different starting point for his recommendations. What he says about commitments being good for people in the long run is, of course, true. But that reason alone may not always be convincing to human beings, who, as Smedes clearly states, are not able to look into the future. Therefore, to follow the author's logic, if people are too weak to look beyond a present situation in which a marriage is faltering, how could anyone blame them for calling it quits?

In my opinion, the author misses a wonderful opportunity to show how commitment, particularly in marriage, is a norm which God laid down in the beginning. Since it is a creational principle, Smedes could have argued, people would naturally be better off in the long run if this principle were obeyed. Then he would not have floundered as much as he does in his chapter entitled "When Marriage Cannot Be Forever." He convincingly shows the importance of a caring community to help those who struggle to keep their commitments in marriage. But because the

consequences of commitment have priority for him, he has a hard time drawing the line as to when a marriage should be dissolved. In an earlier chapter, "Why Should a Marriage Be Forever?" he answers his own question, not from Scripture, but by arguing that what we need most is trust. While I do not deny the importance of trust, he could have shown that trust in marriage is a natural consequence of faithfully following a normative standard instituted by God. Instead, his conclusion is that "our own need for trust is why a lifetime commitment is right for marriage" (69).

Smedes tends to focus more on commitments than he does on caring. While he says several important things about caring, he could have elaborated on how caring could revive commitments which are on the rocks. Perhaps more practical helps on how we could implement caring in our communities would have strengthened his book.

A final question that troubles this reader is this: Whom is the author addressing? Is it the Christian community? Is he addressing anyone who might be interested in this topic, irrespective of that person's perspective? My sense is that he wants to address more than the Christian community and thus he does not give explicitly the biblical principles drawn from his worldview. Apparently he wants to make a strong case for commitment to a secular audience. But I think he cannot do that successfully because then he argues extensively from the position of one who does not recognize the critical importance of a Christian worldview in understanding correctly the place of caring and commitment. As a result he has little room to show how caring and commitment are grounded in creation. That Smedes is influenced by his Christian faith is clear in the book. Yet, his position looks as if a Christian perspective can be merged with other perspectives and they will come out at the same place. Such merging I believe to be impossible. At some point in the book he needs to ground caring and commitment solidly in a Christian worldview and show this worldview as the reason we care and commit. Then, if he wanted, he could show how it therefore makes sense in the long run for people to care enough to commit themselves to others.

In spite of these reservations, the book deserves a careful reading. It may provide significant help for those who struggle with commitment.

Kingdoms in Conflict. Charles Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn. Copublished by William Morrow and Zondervan, 1987, 400 pp. Reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Professor of Communication.

This book is hard to put down. Filled with examples, it moves quickly from scenario to scenario as the author develops his thesis that tension between church and state is inevitable unless each fulfills its respective roles. He writes: "The kingdoms are in conflict, both vying for ultimate allegiance. By his nature man is irresistibly religious--and he is political. Unless the two can coexist, mankind will continue in turmoil. Tragically, we have lost sight of both the nature of man and the nature of God and His rule over the world. To put it simply, humanists--using that term in its best sense--fail to understand humanity and Christians fail to understand the message of Christ" (49).

A lengthy prologue, which is a fictionalized description of a misguided American president who attempts to bring

Armageddon in Israel because he considers it his duty to fulfill his interpretation of biblical prophecy, sets the tone for the book. Too many Christians, Colson argues, fail to see their proper political role in being a salt and light where they are. Some abandon politics, others marry their Christian faith to a particular set of political policies which are not clearly developed from their faith, and others are caught by the perils of power. When the church fails to be the prophetic voice in the lives of the nation, the state usurps power and tramples on human rights. Christians, urges Colson, must be deeply involved in the political process. The church as institution must preach the gospel for all of life rather than aligning itself in the political system. The state must promote justice and civic order for all.

Colson's selective review of history moves very quickly, perhaps too quickly for some historians. Yet, his purpose is not so much to write history as it is to prove what happens when church and state become entangled, when each does not keep to its respective role. Rather than detailing scholarly argument to develop his thesis, the author provides story after story. Each story contributes to his thesis, but more precisely defined terms would have been helpful. For example, he defines power narrowly in terms of official control. Too often, people—in both church and state—become enamored with power, he says. I would have preferred to see him define power in terms of dependency, as many social scientists do. Then he would not have needed to argue that Christians do not need power. Instead he would have given even more support to his major point that “little platoons” of Christians working in their small corner are the forces God uses in bringing his Kingdom. Real power, the author could have said, lies in these seemingly insignificant forces which perform mighty works for the name of Jesus. A similar problem occurs in his use of the term “Judeo-Christian values” which he should have defined clearly, especially because the term has been used in such a loose way in society that we are never sure what is meant by “values.”

These small problems, however, are far outweighed by the strengths of this book. Its most significant values lie in two areas. First, he wrestles honestly and extensively with questions of what a Christian should do in the political process, whether that be as a private citizen, a member of the clergy, or a government official. His own experience as an insider during the Nixon administration equips him to

speak on these matters with much credibility. He gives no easy answers but he clearly shows what questions one needs to ask.

The second significant value, which by itself justifies reading the book, is his extensive and moving description of how faithful Christians can have fantastic impact in the political process. He draws on many stories of how converted prisoners have influenced others for good in ways that no one could have dreamed. His wealth of experience with Prison Fellowship testifies to the power of the Kingdom of God. These examples range from Benigno Aquino's conversion in his Philippine prison cell to the story of a converted Irish Republican Army terrorist who helped to heal the family of the victim of I.R.A. terrorism. He travels far beyond the prison walls to find many other exciting stories of the impact faithful Christians have. For example, he shows that large one-time programs will not solve problems of poverty, but John Perkins' work among the poor has lasting results. The stories of the lives of these people should encourage all Christians to get busy working for the Kingdom of God wherever he calls them. As Colson sees it, “The fact that God reigns can be manifest through political means whenever the citizens of the Kingdom of God bring His light to bear on the institutions of the kingdom of man” (371).

While political scientists and clergy will benefit much from this book, so will people who are not trained in political science. Extensive notes and his list of recommended works encourage the reader to move beyond the book. In the words of Gordon Spykman in a recent commencement address at Dordt College, “Colson deserves a good hearing.” Get this book, read it, and then pass it on.

Chosen for Life: An Introductory Guide to the Doctrine of Divine Election. C. Samuel Storms. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987, 142 pp., \$6.95. Reviewed by Helen Petter Westra, Associate Professor of English.

The author of this little paperback does not claim to resolve Christendom's sinewy, centuries-old debate on the doctrine of election. In his effort to lead the “theological beginner” through a complex theological question, Storms deliberately avoids subtle argument, technical jargon, extensive documentation, or heavy use of Hebrew or Greek. The strength, and at times the limitation, of this book is its simplicity.

The occasion for Storms' work is his expressed desire to offer clarity and guidance for the average Christian layperson seeking to understand the crucial doctrines that relate divine sovereignty and human will.

In his defense of the doctrine of divine election, Storms asserts his perspective as one which is “decidedly Calvinistic” (11), although to this claim he might as well have added “Lutheran” for in his work *The Bondage of the Will* Luther, like Calvin, battled against contingency and forcefully stressed God's purposive, unchanging will. Further, Storms' agenda is “to persuade . . . (with the Spirit's help, of course) that the doctrine of unconditional election . . . is biblical doctrine” (11).

According to the Calvinist view, God chooses individuals regardless of their adverse will at any stage of salvation, but

according to the Arminian view, God chooses only persons who at some point are first freely willing to be chosen. Using quotes from numerous Arminian authors, Storms documents their objections that the Calvinist belief in divine election inevitably places people in a position of having to accept a God who is unfair and partial (21, 22, 24).

With remarkable restraint, Storms resists any impulse to answer the Arminian accusation with acrimony or countercharge. Instead, in direct and lucid language, he explicates various biblical passages (Matt. 11:25-27; Matt. 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-13; John 6:37-40, 44, 65; John 10:14-16, 24-30; Acts 13:44-48) which outrightly express or strongly imply the Calvinist view of election.

Likewise, in answering the classic Arminian objections (how can the Calvinist God of unconditional election be just and loving? and what is the use of evangelism if all depends on God's sovereign will and choice?) Storms does not so much debate the issues as repeatedly stress the total depravity of humans and the astounding grace of God who sacrificially redeems his people through the suffering and crucifixion of his divine Son.

One limitation of Storms' abridged discussion is that it somewhat glosses over the mystery of human will as well as