Echoes of the word: Theological ethics as rhetorical practice

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> *Some seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity; others seek knowledge that they may themselves be known: that is vanity; and there are still others who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others, that is charity.*
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> *Bernard of Clairvaux,*
> *as quoted by Mark Schwehn (Huebner, 2005, p. 255)*

Sometimes the best preparation for reading a book is by reading the last chapter first. This was the case with Harry Huebner's recent work, *Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice*, a book that seeks to envision how the church as an agent of hope is to be in a world marked by violence, fear and despair. In the concluding words of this book we see the crux of the matter where ethics are concerned: ". . . we do not know everything, hence we have to act on faith. The only question is which faith: the faith of scientific rationalism, the faith of pure mystery, or the faith of God in Jesus Christ" (Huebner, p. 255). These concluding thoughts in the last essay of Huebner's book are an apt summation of his goal. Which faith, indeed? Huebner, a theology professor at Canadian Mennonite University, writes to Mennonite church leaders, but he also writes with keen awareness of the manifold gospels that vie for the allegiance of Christian leaders everywhere. How one views the world will shape the leadership trajectory in critically ethical ways.

In this review, I indicate Huebner's main ideas and his ethics as rhetorical practice. I then situate Huebner's theological and philosophical framework within the broader theological spectrum. I conclude with reflections on the usefulness of his book as an ethical guide for Christian leaders.

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Echoes of the Word is a compilation of 13 essays and 5 sermons written by Huebner between 1991 and 2004, updated for publication in this volume. This can cause a lack of unity. Huebner acknowledges this problem, "It is clearly an overstatement to suggest that this book is governed by a carefully developed logic" (p. 12). Nevertheless, Huebner collects these hardworking essays and sermons, not only as a reflection of his life's work, but because "the church and the academy need each other" (p. 12).

Huebner organized his book as a dialogue between the academy and the church as necessary partners in doing ethics. Three essays form the first section on the function of the Word. Here he seeks to "make it clear that it matters less where we begin. It matters more from where we come and hence where we are headed and, perhaps even more, what we say along the way" (p. 13). Even here the reader receives a glimpse into the author's commitment to narrative theology. The second part of the book, entitled "Church/World," speaks to "issues of the church, namely, how we narrate our being in the world" (p. 13). In the third section of the book, Huebner addresses four Christian virtues—patience, hope, peace, and wisdom—using three essays for each. In turning to the issue of virtues, the author is attempting to offer a corrective to contemporary theological inquiry. Citing the influence of his teachers, MacIntyre and Hauerwas, Huebner affirms that "the shift away from the language of virtues has made the Christian life fragmented and largely unintelligible" (p. 13). The approach to virtue ethics and morality is focused in terms of behaviors and practices.

The author names his biases unapologetically in the introduction and it is this open-handed approach that serves as a model for authentic Christian leadership. Rooting himself in the philosophical tradition of Wittgenstein, Huebner states his main argument most tersely by saying "Language constructs worlds" (p. 1).

> When we tell a story, or describe an event, or say a prayer, or preach a sermon, or confess a creed, we are not describing a set of facts; we are participating in a rendition, a performance, as it were, a way of envisioning the world. (p. 1)

The next level of ethical formation follows Alasdair MacIntyre who rejected Enlightenment approaches to ethics in favor of a "tradition-based rationality, which states that there is no way of speaking about truth other than from within a particular tradition" (p. 11). Building on Wittgenstein and MacIntyre, Huebner

summarizes the theological ethics of John Howard Yoder and Yoder's student, Stanley Hauerwas, throughout the book appropriating their theology to the state of the church and current world affairs. Modern ethics are often characterized by an Enlightenment-era rationalism. Rather than theoretical rational argument, Yoder and Hauerwas have argued that the Christian faith should be shaped by a set of distinctive practices, skills, and habits rather than mere doctrinal litmus tests. Huebner skillfully defends this brand of narrative theology against those who accuse Yoder and Hauerwas of "withdrawal ethic" sectarianism (p. 66). If Yoder and Hauerwas are guilty of sectarianism, it is an "epistemological sectarianism" that is a result of a tradition-based, rather than a scientific, sociological, or rational, beginning point for "knowing." In this way of knowing, Yoder says that the "church precedes the world epistemologically. We know more fully from Jesus Christ and in the context of the confessed faith than we know in other ways" (p. 64). Huebner writes,

> It is also interesting that, historically speaking, Radical Reformer churches had displayed a proclivity for pluralism and communitarianism because both readily accompany a countercultural/religious self-understanding. They have not pretended to do theology for everyone in the sense that they shared a common viewpoint with everyone. Nor were they thinking for everyone in the sense that they accepted an account of universal reason. And yet they believed their position to be grounded in truth. This is why it is not a contradiction for these churches to say that, although it might well make sense for someone to have a certain war fought, nevertheless they will not fight it . . . . They believe that Christian ethics are for Christians 'not for everyone,' and the ethic that is 'for everyone' (Kant's categorical imperatives) is not necessarily binding for faithful Christians. (p. 64)

For Huebner the key to understanding God's truth is to enter "God's dramatic story" (p. 65). The church's way of doing ethics "should address not only the word side of the word-deed unity, but the unity itself" (p. 53). This understanding can inform a way of leading that is consistent with the relationship between God and the church. It is "invitation-participation" rather than "command-obedience." We can "more readily resist the seduction of thinking that we must choose between sect and church-type models of faithfulness" (p. 82).

If one is comfortable with this approach to narrative theology, it has freeing and profound implications for the worldview of Christian leaders and how they lead. The implications are *freeing* because the "discerning community is placed at the center of [the] epistemology" (p. 127). The community as the locus of scriptural discernment is free to approach the scriptural texts with a "straightforwardness" that does not need to "appeal to some other criterion outside it" (Yoder, 2001, as quoted by Huebner, p. 127). Yoder suggests further, in agreement with MacIntyre, that this "would be a denial of the community's being itself if it were to grant a need for appeal beyond itself to some Archimedean point to justify it" (Yoder, 2001, as quoted by Huebner, p. 127). The implications are *profound* because this approach goes to the very nature of one's ontology, or what one considers most basic or real. "Christians believe that since gracious God created the world, peace and wholeness are ontologically more fundamental (more real) than violence and brokenness. The violence and injustice around us, although real, are transitory" (p. 98). If James Sire is right, that ontology precedes epistemology (Sire, 2004, p. 73), then an ontology of wholeness and peace informs an epistemology in which the church seeks to "describe a 'whole new creation' which we believe was embodied in Christ (auto-basileia)" (Huebner, p. 98). This ontology and epistemology will inform the methodology of leaders who understand that the way to be in the world is to re-narrate the original story. This leads Huebner to a profound conclusion:

> What passes for ethics must be itself transformed. There can be no "categorical imperative" or "principle of utility" that grounds the good; this is not possible when it is acknowledged that there are competing views of the world: competing ontologies, competing rationalities, competing goods. (p. 101)

As a result of this ethical framework grounded in a particularistic narrative theology, the church's way of being in the world is the community that attempts to embody a story. Christian leaders will want to equip the church to construct a world through four ways of being: modeling, demythologizing, ad hoc partnering, and repenting and re-reading our own stories (pp. 102-105). By *modeling*, Huebner means that the church is called to the hard work of living "by a different rationale, ontology, ethics, that is, literally live in a different world" (p. 102). By *demythologizing*, Huebner helps

Christian leaders imagine a third way of relating to the powers of this age by avoiding either the politicization of the church's agenda or withdrawing from the public square. He suggests that the role of the church in the world is to demythologize the nation's proclivity for self-glorification. "This does not mean that we attack the state, or even denounce it, but we unmask its status" (p. 103). The church reminds the nation of its provisional status. The third ethical behavior of the church follows the second by limiting its relationship with governments and other worldly powers to *ad hoc partnerships*. "So while the work of the church and the government intersect, they can never coincide. The church's role in partnering should serve the role of 'stretching the imagination of the state'" (p. 104). This level of partnership should be the limit of the church's partnership with the powers of the world. It is the way that the church provides prophetic leadership to the world. The fourth practice of the church prescribed by Huebner is to *repent* and "re-enact the very being of Christ" (p. 105) by showing up in the broken places of the world "with a redeeming and hence strange-making posture" (p. 106). The discomfort of being present in these places makes us want to run away. But as the author rightly posits (leaders, heed the warning!), "comfort isn't the point, presence is" (p. 105).

Theological ethics as rhetorical practice renounces the idea that ethics can be done in a vacuum. It is perhaps too commonplace in our postmodern individualistic society to make all ethics personal and individual. Ethics as rhetorical practice requires sociality. "What we say along the way" (p. 13) matters. This is the approach suggested by Deuteronomy. How do you maintain the ethic of the *Shema*? One develops an ethic of loving the Lord with all one's being by talking about it "when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when your rise" (Deuteronomy 6:7). This rhetorical way of doing ethics helps us to navigate the minefields of the modern age and requires leaders who are adept at imagining a different world. In a culture that is increasingly being characterized by divisions—conservative/liberal, red/blue, etc.—Huebner offers a "third way" option that informs how leaders view the communities which they lead:

> Both liberals and conservatives are children of the modern age in that they have assimilated so well the individualism, utilitarianism, and reductionism characteristic of our time. This is an imagination which makes the church the problem precisely because it makes the individual the standard of truth. (p. 230)

By appealing to the classic writings of Hauerwas, Willimon (1989), and Yoder (1992), as well as recently emerging Christian coalitions such as the *Ekklesia* Project (p. 229), Huebner drives his stake in the ground that the church remains God's chosen means of revealing God's reign.

> It is precisely the unity of spirituality and politics that Jesus Christ can be our model and we his disciples. The incarnation means that there is a godly manifestation of life on earth and that it comes in the form of the creation of a whole new community—new relationships, new structures, new ideas, new laws, and so on. (p. 231)

Working out what it means to be "in Christ" then is a social task among a particular people who are trying to re-narrate and embody the story of the incarnation. This is the ethical task: to become "a theological people" who bank their lives, "and that of the entire human family, on hope; believing that resurrection, transformation, and miracle are the very stuff of personal, social, and historical change." (p. 231). Leaders who set this kind of hope as the agenda for the community are like gems: precious and rare.

This approach to ethics rescues us from the cynicism that characterizes so much of our culture's worldview. In postmodernity's rejection of metanarrative, cynical views toward organized religion abound. Huebner suggests that "cynicism is perhaps the most common of all trick responses to the Christian faith. The refusal to commit to a stance is popular because it comes with the illusion of safety. No commitment, no responsibility" (p. 254). There can be no room for cynicism as the default mode of Christian leadership. Narrative theology relieves us from the need to base our ethical framework on scientific, rationalistic understandings of truth dependent on external verification. It saves us from settling for the fatalistic view pervasive in the world that evil is a more fundamental reality than good. It calls us to a posture of trust rather than defense. We do well to ponder with the author why it is that we "know much of the power of evil, but we appear to know so little of the power of God in Jesus" (p. 253).

Echoes of the Word is best read leisurely. The first two chapters tone the muscles of rhetorical practice to prepare the mind to see the world in a particular way. From there, each essay and sermon offers theologians, pastors, and all church leaders an ethical forum for discerning what we say to one another on the way. For what we say

to one another on the way "is the medium through which the world becomes the world to us" (p. 1).

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