

Reviews

Decisions

A Situationist View?

John Brunt. *Decisions: How to Use Biblical Guidelines When Making Decisions*. 96 pp. Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1979. \$4.50 (paper).

reviewed by Daniel Augsburger

When asked about moral issues, Christians commonly answer simply, "Do what the Bible says!" But on closer examination, the Bible says nothing on many topics, on others, seems to give conflicting answers (e.g., on divorce), and on still others offers opinions that appear to be time and culture conditioned (e.g., on the status of women in the New Testament). In the light of such difficulties, it is a pity that so little has been written on the role of the Bible in ethical decisions, and to make bad matters worse, that so much of what is available is written in technical language or appears in journals that the average person is unlikely ever to use. For those reasons, one will appreciate doubly the simplicity, the clarity, and the brevity of Brunt's book. It is an easily read but always thought-provoking work that meets a real need.

Brunt's thesis is that the Bible is relevant to modern problems, but that the determination to obey God's will is not sufficient. It

must be accompanied by moral insight and reflection. Because of his central assertion that to obey is not enough, it would be very easy to misunderstand Brunt. The reader, therefore, should finish the book before passing judgment, because many statements of the first chapters are only clarified fully in later pages.

Scripture, Brunt asserts, has two main roles — it shapes the values and principles by which we live, and it guides our critical reflection when we face a specific problem (p. 76). Brunt discusses his thesis in the setting of the gospel and the relationship that it creates between God and man and devotes helpful chapters to the value of the law and the biblical narratives in guiding or facilitating the process of decision. In the last chapter, he illustrates his method and clearly reveals the degree to which he seeks to be practical and simple.

What for many readers will be a serious flaw in Brunt's work appears most clearly in the last chapter. To demonstrate his method, he asks whether milk-vending machines should be closed on Sabbath in Seventh-day Adventist dormitories — one of those perennial Sabbath-keeping issues. The author gathers all the applicable material from the Bible and suggests after each text a set of questions that should lead to the solution of the problem. Brunt, however, does not reveal the "proper" answer, which would be contrary to his approach to ethical decisions. But faced with that long series of questions, the average reader will likely feel terribly frustrated, so much the more so when the

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author says that all those texts must first be studied carefully in their original setting.

Obviously, equally conscientious readers will give different answers to the questions suggested by Brunt, and this leads us to ask ourselves whether the author relativizes all ethical decisions. The author provides his own answer: "By the Good News of God's grace our actions acquire a certain relativity — *not* the kind which says that since all things are relative, it doesn't really matter what you do. Not at all. But what *is* of ultimate significance is not our specific decisions and acts, *as such*, but the way that our actions express our response to God" (p. 17). If Brunt is right that it is not our specific decisions and acts, *as such*, but the attitude they express that carries ultimate significance, then one may well question the worth of spending so much time trying to reach the "right" solution. Is not Brunt forced to accept the situationist answer that any loving act is right?

Undeniably, we find situationist consonances in *Decisions* (pp. 25, 32), but does he go so far in that path as to say that it may become advisable to break one of the commandments? Brunt denies that categorically (p. 56), and in the chapter "Summary" he rejects several other models of moral decision, for example, the "just obey" model, the "do what Jesus would do" model, and the "do what the Spirit commands" model. Yet, one may wonder what substantial difference there is between his approach and situationism.

The real role of the law for Brunt is not so much to dictate actions but to shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us (p. 59). That internalization of the law will protect us from rationalizing any act, good or bad, as an application of the principle behind the command. The law, therefore, primarily serves an educative function (p. 60).

Does Brunt rely too much on man's rational capacity to decide what is right? Is the ethical decision really logical, or is it not rather intuitive, depending more upon character, mind, and emotion than intellect? Jesus said: "You shall love . . . with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind," thus calling for the involvement of

the total being in the ethical response. Adventists traditionally have placed little stock in conscience, choosing rather to emphasize the duty to obey all the commandments. However, is not that capacity to set values on actions, even if it appears to be more reliable in what it condemns than what it permits, a vital aspect of the image of God in man? The promise of the new covenant is the law written on the heart, rather than the capacity to wrestle with the law in the book, for when the intuitive process is baffled, reason finds itself helplessly torn between many solutions. Thus, Brunt's emphasis on the influence of the law in determining our values may be more valuable than his effort to show how "to think through" a decision. *Decisions* should be read by many, for it cannot help but challenge certain misconceptions and help one to understand better what is involved in an ethical decision.

A 'Thinking' Posture?

John Brunt. *Decisions: How to Use Biblical Guidelines When Making Decisions*. 96 pp. Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1979. \$4.50 (paper).

reviewed by Ricky E. Williams

John Brunt, in *Decisions*, is as insightful about how *not* to use the Bible in making decisions as he is about how *to* use it. In fact, the book likely frustrates the many readers who choose a book like this to help them find "absolute" answers. Brunt is aware of this potential frustration, but is justifiably nonapologetic, since what the reader gains instead of neat answers is still very worthwhile.

The first half of the book attacks the decision-making philosophy or methodology of the stereotypical Adventist (if such a person exists). Brunt basically uses a straightforward, didactic approach to ac-

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compish this, but occasionally resorts to tongue-in-cheek statements such as, “After all, our own weak and sinful reason is hardly competent to show us what to do” (p. 24). The book powerfully, but professionally, asserts that it is balderdash to believe that we do not use “our weak and sinful reason,” regardless of the manner in which we use the Bible as an aid. The reader quickly discerns that the book defends a “thinking” posture. Such statements as “responsible Christian action varies with time, place, culture,” may be hard for some to hear who prefer not only a God, but also answers that are changeless through the ages. Brunt presents a landslide of opinion from Ellen White recommending abstinence from the flipping of coins to obtain important answers. Unfortunately, he is strangely silent on the story of Gideon — a narrative that frequently forms the backbone for many Adventists who make decisions via “fleece testing.”

One weakness of the book is the paucity of overt discussion regarding the power of the Holy Spirit to aid in making decisions. One might have the impression that it is reason, and reason alone, that can help us understand the biblical passages. In a quiet way, the book establishes a pattern that supports the work of the Holy Spirit, but Brunt could have enlightened the reader about the role that conscience performs.

For the most part, Brunt lucidly presents his material and exhibits a gift for finding illustrations that are particularly apropos to his abstract discourse. Not only does he use excellent examples from the Bible, but his selection of illustrative material from

common-day events contributes to the reader’s comprehension.

Late in the book the reader does discover that there are indeed “rules” to follow when looking at Bible examples. The methodology or “rules” include such insights as: “before we ask, ‘What is the relevance of the passage for my problem?’ we must first ask, ‘What was the biblical writer trying to say in *his* circumstance?’ Before we inquire what a passage of Scripture *means* for us we must ask what it originally *meant* for the author and those to whom he wrote” (p. 67). We can then follow up with questions that lead to personal insight: “To what extent is the issue confronting me similar to and/or different from that addressed in the text? To what extent can we generalize the story? Are there inherent principles that I should consider in my case?” (p. 69). Alas, for some, the work of chasing down the answers to these appropriate questions will seem too monumental, but for those who persist, the book ends with practical, contemporary examples.

The book reminds us that God understands our weaknesses and continuously loves us, and that we present our choices as a response to His love rather than as a necessity for salvation. One comes away from the book with an increased desire to refrain from passing judgment on the decisions of others, which in itself makes the book valuable reading. As Brunt says, “the Bible is relevant for our decision-making not only as it helps us make particular choices but also as it transforms the character or the kind of person we are, for that, in turn, conditions all the future decisions that we make” (p. 66).