

Charles, J. Daryl. *The Unformed Conscience of Evangelicalism*. Doners Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002. 277 pp. \$20.00

### **Introduction**

Every Sunday in pews around the nation there are a plethora of Christians who gather to worship and possibly fulfill what they think is their Christian duty. Some attend churches who strive to teach and disciple their members, but unfortunately the majority of Christians in this country, including a large portion of pastors, cannot articulate an explanation of ethics. In this book J. Daryl Charles does an excellent job of providing an “first word” about ethics (11). The purpose of this book review is to summarize the book then examine the good things that are said about ethics and a few that are a cause of concern for those to read this book.

### **Summary**

In the preface of this book Charles describes contemporary American evangelicals as being absent from ethical debates and ignorant of ethics in general. He follows with his thesis that this book is an attempt to understand why American evangelicals are absent from ethical debates (11). This book is written by an evangelical to evangelicals and is intended to cause the readers to reflect on the future and the past (19).

Divided into ten subsequent chapters and the epilogue Charles covers the culture, ethics in evangelical history, the necessity of forming ethics, the need for a “retooling” of the evangelical’s mind in several aspects, Biblical ethics in the writing’s of Paul and Peter as well as for the disciples (primarily in Matthew), and finally a brief outline on

how to educate not only pastors and theologians, but the layperson (7-9).

In chapter one Charles makes some very astute observations about American culture in general. He quotes Philip Rieff as saying “How one feels, not what one believes” is what has become the ethical guide and that this system places self-esteem in place as the society’s cardinal virtue (29). He goes on to explain changes in the biological model of behavior gives a good explanation of tolerance and how it is pervasive in this American culture.

Charles goes to give a history in chapter two. He spends time talking about the errors in twentieth century thought and how it has tended to lean toward errors that are both equally bad but opposites (57). He finishes the chapter by telling the story of William Wilberforce.

There should be no doubt that ideas have consequences and in chapter 3 Charles explains this idea but not before discussing some other ideas. He discusses wisdom, virtues and values, and self-government.

Chapters four through eight are the part of this book in which Charles makes a case for evangelical’s need for retooling their thinking and then giving Biblical resources for ethics. Chapter six outlines resources for ethics in the Pauline epistles, chapter 7 in the Petrine writings, and finally chapter eight gives resources from the gospels but mainly focuses on Matthew.

In chapter 9 Charles discusses different polarities such as justice/mercy and holiness/accommodation. Then in chapter 10 he outlines his plan for teaching ethics in three arenas: the church, the university, and the seminary.

### **Critical Evaluation**

Dr. Charles in this book makes some excellent remarks about the American evangelical status, the exegesis and explanation of several sections of scripture and the call for evangelicals to be more educated. No matter how many excellent thoughts are in this book one cannot ignore the few things that may be seen as questionable.

First a few of good ideas in the book will be examined. Dr. Charles does an excellent job of assessing the American evangelical culture in this book. In chapter one many of the observations are found. He says that the “Age of Sentiments” has given rise to a culture that is therapeutic and sensate (27). In this society, Charles says, the private feelings of individuals has become more important than what is known. For example people now will say that they “feel” rather than “think” or “believe” (27). Spend any time in the public school system and Charles criticism is seen clearly. Students frequently appeal to feelings and it seems to be pervasive even in university level as Charles gives examples of his students (27). He goes on to rightly add that this line of thinking has become the spiritual and ethical guide (29). One cannot help but to ask what the future may hold if sinful heart becomes the standard for ethics.

Dr. Charles spends several chapters discussing the retooling of the evangelical mind (chapter 4 & 5) and then following that he gives three chapters to Biblical resources. All three of these chapters are done quite well and do a great service for evangelicals who may not have ever considered ethics, which if he is correct in his assessment, are most evangelicals. However two sections stand out. First in chapter seven on the Petrine model he discusses typologies while tracing the Petrine model. Specifically he explains how Balaam is a warning to contemporary readers that it is possible even for a prophet to be “ethically divorced from the message that he bore”

(161). This is an excellent explanation of this piece of scripture.

Secondly, in chapter eight Dr. Charles takes on the task of explaining Matthew 5. This is no easy task as it is described as one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament (178). Throughout the entire chapter the text is examined from an ethics standpoint. He finishes on a high note by discussing punishment. Notably, referring to C. S. Lewis' *God in the Dock* Dr. Charles states that we affirm human worth when individuals are held accountable as moral agents who have been made in the image of God (201-2).

It is encouraging to see that Dr. Charles not only calls for evangelicals in this country be educated about ethics he also outlines a plan to get the task done. This is very helpful that he is inclined to do more than criticize the uneducated state. However his approach leaves something to be desired. To start his section on this he describes the past approaches of evangelicals to be through legal and political means by referring to Os Guinness. He goes on to say that moral persuasion is the preferred way to change the culture and affect the ethical landscape of this country (226). In his explanation and rationale there is not mention of the gospel. It is only by the gospel that people are changed and moral persuasion alone should not be the focus of evangelicals. This is a scary and disheartening statement given the excellent portions in the rest of the book. If evangelicals were strictly concerned with molding the culture, with no mention of the gospel, the end result may be no different that the social gospel. It can only be hoped that Dr. Charles assumes that people know the gospel of Christ changes people.

Dr. Charles goes on to outline how evangelicals should go about equipping their own. His assessment that ethics classes do not show up enough in universities and

seminaries is valid (229). He is correct in saying that the priorities of pastors have changed (228-29) and that the lack of theology and ethics has led to gimmicks (241). His plan and ideas on education are overwhelming. His reading and course outlines for seminaries seem more like curriculum for ethics majors than for future pastors. For example there seems to be little reason for pastors to take a class on “The Christian Stake in Contemporary Bioethics” (237). These are good things to know but should they inflate an already large MDiv degree with more classes that are very narrow in focus? Basic ethics classes should be part of seminary degrees but not the point where they replace language and theology proper classes.

In chapter 4 Dr. Charles discusses formulating a worldview that can be articulated. Unfortunately, there are a few statements that are not fully explained and come off upon first reading to diminish the Bible as authoritative. He rightly asserts that in our “post-Christian” culture many people are Biblically illiterate. However, he says that since the Bible is meaningless one should argue, like Paul, from a “biblically informed and philosophically robust apologetic” (109). I agree that when trying to talk with a non-Christian simply beating them over the head with the Bible like a robot is not the best approach; I disagree with two points. First, in this section he once again fails to mention the gospel as forming the evangelical worldview or used to change other’s world view. Secondly, the notion that arguing with what the Bible says can be meaningless is simply not true. We may not want to use the verbiage “Thus says the Bible” when trying to communicate the gospel, but using the Bible’s teachings should be our foundations. With his explanation Dr. Charles comes across as diminishing the Bible’s authority although he may not have intention.

Finally, the last point of concern with this overall well written book is the liberty with the term Christian. At one point he calls Quakers Christians (63). Most evangelicals would not group the Society of Friends in category of Christian because they reject major tenets of the historical Christian faith. From reading this book I doubt that he believes as a whole the Quaker's teach the true gospel, however to an uneducated Christian this could be damaging.

### **Conclusion**

Overall this book has done a great service for evangelicals who choose to read it. The assessments of the culture along with the excellent Biblical discussions are reading that most Christians would benefit from. The distracters from the book are minimal and in the grand scheme of the entire work are minor.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY