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Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context

By Glen H. Stassen, David P. Gushee



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A Christianity Today 2004 Book of the Year In this masterful and innovative book Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee join profound ethical reflection with faith in Jesus Christ, a life of discipleship and the hope of the present and coming kingdom of God. The result is a challenging, comprehensive treatment of Christian ethics centered on the life and teachings of Jesus. Drawing on detailed studies of the Sermon on the Mount, Stassen and Gushee shed light on the whole of biblical ethical teaching as it relates to a wide range of issues, including peacemaking, just war, nonviolence, sexuality and gender roles, marriage and divorce, race, economics, care of creation, prayer and politics. Their work yields neither an impossible idealism, nor an abstract ethical system, nor a generic religious legalism. Rather Stassen and Gushee set forth a holistic ethic that motivates us and provides us with a practical basis for living under the lordship of Jesus Christ.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Working out of a self-confessed blend of baptistic traditions, but including interpretive secondary materials from a broad range of different church traditions and scholarly perspectives, Glen Stassen and David Gushee creatively construct a Christian ethics modeled on an ethics of virtue. This model of virtue ethics is firmly grounded in the centrality of Jesus' proclamation of God's reign and its correlate moral teachings gathered in the Sermon on the Mount. The result is a rendition of Christian ethics that is focused on the cultivation of a person's virtuous character-in-community, and that is ecumenical in tone, experiential in nature, and salient in granting ethical insights, perspectives and guidance on contemporary moral issues. This book merits widespread use as a textbook for courses in Christian ethics in universities, colleges and seminaries, as well as a study guide for church-based educational programs desiring to engage class members in an informed and serious discussion of Christian moral life." (Murray W. Dempster, President and Professor of Social Ethics, Vanguard University, Costa Mesa, California)

"*Kingdom Ethics* is a wonderful contribution to the community of Jesus' disciples. Guided by the dominant theme in Jesus' proclamation, the authors teach us that the issue is not the relevance of the kingdom of God to us but our obedient participation in its continuing activity. They accomplish this with accessible scholarship, perceptive cultural criticism and practical wisdom. Moreover, they manage the nearly impossible feat of introducing students to the range of issues in Christian ethics without losing the kingdom as the key to following Jesus. *Kingdom Ethics* should become an indispensable resource for discipleship in congregations, colleges and seminaries." (Jonathan R. Wilson, Professor of Religious Studies, Westmont College)

"This book is one I return to again and again. Stassen and Gushee have provided a clear and fruitful biblical framework for each contemporary issue. The exploration of various points of view is insightful and always gives me perspective?sometimes troubling, sometimes confirming. *Kingdom Ethics* is like a set of biblical and ethical spectacles to see through the fog of media and ideological distractions." (Suzi Paynter, executive coordinator of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Christianity Today, January-February 2015)

"This is an important book for our times, when many Christians are once again looking to Jesus as someone who has something of unique significance to say about human life. For more than a century he has been regarded as someone to be right about, in one way or another. But his detailed teachings have for long not been taken seriously, within the church or out. They have been regarded as simply nothing essential to faith or to life. But he became the force he has been in the world precisely because those who initially took him seriously understood that who he is was a conclusive reason for regarding his specific teachings as the key to turning their concrete existence into a life in the kingdom of God--the only life suited to the human soul. The relevance of faith in him for the world of today and tomorrow will depend on those identified as his people reclaiming that same understanding of what it means for him to be Savior and Lord." (Dallas Willard)

"*Kingdom Ethics* is distinctive in the way that it takes biblical perspectives seriously. Rather than letting contemporary issues and agendas limit the number of biblical texts that are considered relevant for ethics, it allows the Bible itself to define what matters most in contemporary life. While it doesn't shy away from arguing that particular actions or practices should be made illegal, it is far more interested in helping us understand why people should not desire them in the first place. Even better, it constantly encourages the reader to keep in view the kingdom vision that majors in constructive alternatives rather than mere ethical

condemnations. All who are serious about glorifying God by the life they live will benefit greatly from reading this book." (John F. Kilner, Ph.D., President, The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity)

"*Kingdom Ethics* is a profound call to Christian discipleship based on probing, incisive and illuminating reflection on the Sermon on the Mount. This is a very important book--a major contribution that provides a radically unique, compelling way of doing Christian ethics grounded in the teachings and practices of Jesus--and deserves to be used across denominational and cultural boundaries. I particularly hope that it will get serious attention from Asian American congregations as they seek to become faithful and prophetic communities of sojourners in the North American context." (Joon-Sik Park, E. Stanley Jones Associate Professor of World Evangelism, Methodist Theological School in Ohio)

"Stassen and Gushee provide a book on Christian ethics that is both 'deep and wide.' It is deep in its focused attention on Jesus as the defining reality and continuing source for Christian living. It is wide in two ways. It is wide in its focus on both the teachings and practices of Christ. Second, the majority of the book is given to a creative search for how the life of faith, informed and inspired by the life of Christ, can find expression across the spectrum of contemporary moral challenges and conundrums. From bioethics to gender role, politics to worship, and more, this book will inspire and inform those who take being Christian seriously." (Daniel B. McGee, Professor of Christian Ethics, Department of Religion, Baylor University)

"The most basic question of ethics is not, How should we live? but rather, To whom do we belong? This important book tackles both of these questions in the light of discipleship-based biblical faith. Both David Gushee and Glen Stassen are activists as well as theorists, and this book reflects their passion for following Jesus even when it means swimming against the stream. Not all will agree with every solution proposed here, but no one can ignore this contribution to the evangelical conversation." (Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University and executive editor of Christianity Today)

"Many Christians in America have accommodated themselves to the values of a secular culture, either acquiescing to a materialist/consumerist ethos (on the ideological right) or a relativist 'I'm OK, you're OK' ethos (on the ideological left). *Kingdom Ethics* is a clarion call to the church to be the body of Christ on earth, to live incarnationally and be as unique today as Jesus was in his day. Stassen and Gushee have reclaimed the centrality of Jesus and his teachings for the distinctiveness of the Christian and the church in the modern world. They have written an exciting book that clearly and concretely demonstrates the Christian ethos is not some kind of quixotic idealism but is truly a radical but practical way of living. At a time when Christians everywhere are asking 'What would Jesus do?' Stassen and Gushee have provided searching answers to the moral questions of the day. *Kingdom Ethics* is an outstanding contribution to the field that should be read by every serious Christian." (Dr. Carlos R. Piar, Professor of Religious Studies, California State University Long Beach)

"With *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, Stassen and Gushee invite us to confront anew the radical nature of Jesus' teachings as set forth in the Sermon on the Mount--teachings that often rub modern sensibilities the wrong way--yet teachings that are indispensable for Christian moral consciousness. The book challenges us to consider the Christian ethical life as one oriented to this message of the kingdom--a way of life characterized by prayer, passion and fidelity to specific practices consistent with the will of God, or as they put it, 'holistic character ethics.' Readers will find the discussion of such practices in their view of the Christian moral life to be informed, energetic and engaging." (Samuel K. Roberts, E. Hervey Evans Professor of Theology and Ethics, Union Theological Seminary-Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, Virginia)

"Groundbreaking, current, biblical, simply superb." (Ronald J. Sider, President, Evangelicals for Social

Action, Professor of Theology and Culture, Eastern Seminary)

"Gushee and Stassen make a compelling case for how the way of Jesus and his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (in continuity with the prophet Isaiah) are normative for Christian life and practice. The general reader will appreciate the concrete, practical relevance and breadth of inquiry on issues like war and peace, sexuality, marriage and divorce, gender roles, race, economics, and the care of creation. The book will become a benchmark for the guild of scholars in Christian social ethics for the way it creatively engages the diversity of methodologies and perspective in our discipline with the question of what we do with Jesus." (Duane K. Friesen, Professor of Bible and Religion, Bethel College (KS))

"*Kingdom Ethics* reaffirms and deepens the challenge raised a generation ago by John Howard Yoder to bring Jesus back into Christian ethics. This is an impressive book, scholarly yet accessible, wide-ranging yet consistently returning to the moral and theological vision of Jesus for guidance. There is much to learn from its careful construction of a kingdom-based character ethics, its clear-sighted approach to the methodology of Christian ethics and its intelligent examination of contemporary ethical issues. If ever there was a time the Christian community needed to recover the moral meaning of following Jesus, this is it, and *Kingdom Ethics* will go a long way in helping us do so." (Christopher D. Marshall, Tyndale Graduate School of Theology, Auckland, New Zealand)

"*Kingdom Ethics* promises to become a cherished resource for a diverse audience of modern readers who hunger for the recovery of the ethics of Jesus for our times. Because of its balanced approach to theory and application, this book works equally well as a textbook for teaching and as a guidebook for living." (Cheryl J. Sanders, Professor of Christian Ethics, Howard University School of Divinity, Senior Pastor, Third Street Church of God, Washington, D.C.)

"*Kingdom Ethics* is an excellent demonstration of how helpful it is to orient Christian moral reflection around Jesus' teachings and emphases. The authors' sustained engagement with the structure and substance of the Sermon on the Mount allows its grace-based guidance to speak powerfully to contemporary questions and concerns. Working adeptly with the Scriptures, Christian tradition and contemporary data, Stassen and Gushee have crafted an exceptional book. The chapters shine with insight and clarity. Complex issues are handled with careful analysis and pastoral sensitivity; the result is an ethics text that is courageous, thought-provoking and life-giving." (Christine D. Pohl, Professor of Social Ethics, Asbury Theological Seminary)

"When two of today's leading evangelical Baptist ethicists team up, we would naturally expect a book that views the Christian ethic as our response to Jesus' call to discipleship... Drawing from the narrative approach and the focus on virtue or character ethics indicative of contemporary moral thinking, Stassen and Gushee engage with a wide range of formidable ethical questions, doing so, however, with Jesus' ethical teaching in the Sermon on the Mount always close at hand." (Stanley J. Grenz, Distinguished Professor of Theology, Baylor University and Truett Seminary)

"Stassen and Gushee provide an exceptional guide through the thickets of the vexing ethical dilemmas thrust on us by our contemporary age. Their work is informed by solid biblical scholarship, up-to-date scientific insights and astute analyses grounded in the teaching of Scripture. Creative, comprehensive and lively, it is certain to give readers a more profound understanding of Christian ethics and ethical reasoning." (David E. Garland, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Professor of Christian Scriptures, George W. Truett Theological Seminary)

"An invaluable teaching and preaching resource to help the church improve its disciple-making efforts." (Light & Life, July/August 2010)

From the Author

IVP: Kingdom Ethics has been quite a collaborative project for you. How did you two happen to connect around this project?

David Gushee: Glen had the original idea while we both were teaching in our short stint together at Southern Seminary, from 1993 to 1996. As I recall, he had already written up a proposal and presented it to IVP before asking me to join him as coauthor in late 1995. Over the ensuing six years of research, writing, conversation, editing and reediting, the book developed into an extraordinarily rich collaborative piece that extended far beyond what I, at least, ever imagined it could become.

Glen Stassen: Well, I was so impressed with Dave's outstanding book *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust* and so pleased with our collaboration in an article for *Sojourners*, "Disciples of the Incarnation," that when Dave expressed interest I jumped at the chance. Glad I did!

About the Author

Glen H. Stassen (1939-2014) was Lewis B. Smedes Professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He was a tireless advocate for social justice and peacemaking, and a prolific writer and international speaker about topics related to ethics, peace and discipleship. He was also highly honored and beloved by his many students during a university and seminary teaching career of more than a half-century. Stassen graduated from the University of Virginia with a degree in nuclear physics, and he studied theology, Christian ethics and political philosophy during graduate work at Union Theological Seminary and Duke University, where he earned a PhD. Before serving at Fuller, he taught at Duke University, Kentucky Southern College, Berea College and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. While at Duke University, Stassen was a co-organizer of a Christian interracial association that worked with other civil rights groups. He also coordinated two buses that traveled to the 1963 March on Washington, DC, where Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his powerful "I Have a Dream" speech. In the classroom, Dr. Stassen received Fuller's "Faculty Award for Outstanding Community Service to Students," as well as the Seabury Award for Excellence in Teaching at Berea College and the Weyerhaeuser Award for Excellence in Teaching. Among his many writings, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (coauthored with David Gushee) received Christianity Today's Award for Best Book of 2004 in Theology or Ethics. His most recent book was *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age*, which was named among the top ten recommended books of the year by *The Christian Century*. He is also the author of *Living the Sermon on the Mount* and *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, as well as the editor of *Authentic Faith: Bonhoeffer's Ethics in Context*. He coedited works such as *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for Ethics of Peace and War*, *Peace Action: Past, Present, and Future* and *War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*. An American Baptist layman, Stassen was named Baptist of the Year by EthicsDaily.com, and was awarded the Denton and Janice Lotz Human Rights Award by the Baptist World Alliance. Stassen served in leadership positions within the Council of the Societies for the Study of Religion, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, American Academy of Religion and Society of Christian Ethics. He was a member of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign and of the Strategy Committee of Peace Action, the largest grassroots U.S. peace organization. He is survived by his wife, Dorothy, their three sons and six grandchildren.

David P. Gushee (PhD, Union Theological Seminary) is Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics and director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia. Widely regarded as one of the leading moral voices in American Christianity, he is the author or editor of twenty books and hundreds of articles in his field, including *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, *Kingdom Ethics*, *The Sacredness of Human Life* and *Changing Our Mind*. Gushee is a scholar, activist and churchman. His research interests focus on the ethical teachings of Jesus Christ and the Christian theological-ethical tradition, together with its contemporary implications for Christian discipleship and public witness. He

currently serves as senior columnist for *Baptist News Global* and as a member on the Death Penalty Committee & Detainee Treatment Taskforce of the Constitution Project. He serves on the board of directors of Sojourners and as vice-chair of the board of the Public Religion Research Institute. He has most recently become a faith consultant for the Family Acceptance Project. As an activist, Gushee was the principal drafter of both the Evangelical Climate Initiative (2006) and the Evangelical Declaration against Torture (2007). He is regularly quoted in major national media of all types, including NPR, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* as an authority on the role of religion in American public life and as a voice for civility and dialogue across our cultural divides. An ordained Baptist minister, Gushee and his wife, Jeanie, attend First Baptist Church in Decatur, where he teaches a weekly Sunday school class, as well as Holy Cross Catholic Church. They reside in Atlanta.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Flora Young:

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