Book review

David W. Boshart

Echoes of the Word: Theological Ethics as Rhetorical Practice, by Harry Huebner. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005.

The best way to read *Echoes of the Word*, a deeply insightful collection of Harry Huebner's work in theological ethics, is to begin with the last chapter. In it he writes, "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" (255). Which faith, indeed?

Echoes of the Word has three parts. The first focuses on the function and role of Word. Here Huebner 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" (13). The second part of the book, "Church/World," speaks to "how we narrate our being in the world" (13). In the third section of the book, Huebner addresses four Christian virtues: patience, hope, peace, and wisdom.

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Rooting himself in the philosophical tradition of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Huebner states his main argument most tersely as "Language constructs worlds" (1). For him the key to understanding God's truth is to enter "God's dramatic story" (65). Huebner's approach has freeing and profound implications for how we see the world and how we are in the world. The implications are freeing because the "discerning community is placed at the center of epistemology" (127). The implications are profound because this approach goes

to the very nature of our view of reality: "Christians believe that since gracious God created the world, peace and wholeness are ontologically more fundamental (more real) than violence and brokenness" (98).

Understanding our call to embody a story relieves us of the need to base our ethical framework on scientific, rationalistic understandings of truth dependent on external verification. It saves us from settling for the pervasive fatalistic view 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" (253).

Echoes of the Word provides an important link that is often missing in theological-ecclesial conversation. The author is an effective interlocutor who bridges between scholarly theology and the life of the Christian community. In this work we see why the academy and the church need each other.

Pastors are sometimes tempted to present a version of the gospel that attempts to help people manage in this world just a little more easily. This book renews a mandate to remind the church that we live toward hope. As a collection of essays, Huebner's book provides excellent material for a theological book club or a pastor-peer group study. For an energetic Sunday school class, *Echoes of the Word* could provide an invigorating elective option.

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Echoes of the Word is best read at a leisurely pace. 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 or sermon offers theologians, church leaders, and church people 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" (1).

About the reviewer

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