

# Book Review

Dennis P. Hollinger, *Creation and Christian Ethics: Understanding God's Designs for Humanity and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 296 pp. \$29.99

Reviewed by Nils Borquist

The Case for Divine Ethical Inheritance: *Creation and Christian Ethics*

THE OPENING SENTENCE OF DENNIS HOLLINGER'S *Creation and Christian Ethics* asks, "What has creation to do with ethics" (1), a question he states he will answer by arguing that in the acts of creation, God purposefully constructed a schema of ethical principles directly meant for humans to recognize and apply in their own lives and interactions. Throughout his book, a main theme repeatedly emerges: the principal role of each individual is to act in a caring manner, serving as a steward for the self, the other, and the natural world within which life exists now and into the future. Hollinger not only utilizes the initial creation but also scripturally relevant accounts throughout the Bible that highlight parallel themes and expand on ideas found in Genesis to demonstrate the interconnectivity of the overall text as well as the teaching of ethics therein, which are valuable to both contemporary Christians and non-believers.

Taking on such an enormous task may seem daunting, but Hollinger offers five fundamental and grounding points that serve to maintain and support his purpose. He argues that the Bible's meta-narrative would be insufficient without creation. Creation exists as a thread throughout the Bible and provides an overall ethics that refers to the doctrine of the Trinity. Hollinger notes that there is a fluid connection from Creation to the End Times and that Creation delivers prominent ethical themes to readers. As such, the orderly effect of God's creating leads to the laws as delivered by Moses, as well as the grace, glory, and teachings of Jesus Christ that follow.

God's design and creative acts involve substantially more than planning, structuring, and the setting in motion of time and space as the modes of being. Continuity and perpetuity reside as ingrained aspects of the all-encompassing divine narrative. For Hollinger, this idea of the narrative as a living and moving story stands out as a key part of his argument. He believes that God creates out of love, that God considers the interlocking elements of existence, and that the speech act in the beginning resoundingly relates to revelation and supreme understanding of how humans are meant to live and sustain life. The revealing nature of the scriptures as they unfold, allows readers to see and process the stages of creation and the interconnectivity with the intricate aspects of life, as well as the human role of earthly stewardship.

Regarding love, Hollinger offers an interesting perspective, stating that the recognizable implications of God's care taken through the act of creation move us to reciprocate God's love and seek His glory; in turn, this prompts us to care for and about the entities and places made by God.

Hollinger addresses three specific categories that are often seen as ethically problematic for people: sex, money, and power. With each act of creation in Genesis, God declares the goodness of the outcome, and Hollinger concludes that God's judgment also indicates the symbiosis of the interconnected developments. While this may seem obvious to the author, he also recognizes that many people focus on the finitude of existence. Human awareness of physical death and decay can lead to a belief in the expendability of overall being, causing confusion regarding the ongoing human role in perpetuating the responsibility given through God's creative powers and gifts. With an impending end of life, pursuing sex, money, and power in nefarious ways easily sidetracks people from their ethical/stewarding duties.

To address these concerns, Hollinger first references St. Augustine's affirmations of "marriage and sex as gifts of God from creation, to which Jesus himself gives confirmation" (52). God provides humans with the understanding of the beauty and responsibilities of the sexual relationship. Ultimately, sex's role centers on procreation, and bringing into existence new life, fosters greater care for the personal community and society at large in which the child must live. Money offers opportunities for reduced stress and greater comforts, but the accumulation of wealth also enables individuals to make a positive impact on the Earth through caring actions. "Families are cared for, the poor are fed, educational institutions are built...missionaries go to the unreached, churches are established, the gospel is preached, and people...participate in God's sufficiency for all humanity" (60). Although focusing on power as employed in a negative or damaging context seems easy, Hollinger points out that power also resides in the authority, willingness, and capability to "exert influence" in a positive way (65). From the words people choose to the thoughts they focus on and the actions they undertake, humans are gifted with the will to care, love, and do good works—all of which come from the traits given by God, yet require personal intent and action.

Hollinger believes that recognizing and valuing the inherent dignity of humans, which comes from being made in God's image, should prompt people to treat others and the world in which they exist with respect and care. In fact, he includes scientific evidence that shows the genetic connections humans share with each other, various animals, and even plants, all demonstrating the consistent links that connect all living beings. Naturally, the relationship between dignity and stewardship is strongly built and reinforced, and Hollinger introduces various contemporary issues that involve ethical considerations about acceptance or exclusion. These include cultural, racial, and social sex concerns, along with discussions about euthanasia and abortion rights.

Hollinger stays within bounds by addressing these issues as ongoing focal points of ethical dialogues over the past few decades.

The author further emphasizes stewardship in the latter half of the text, reinforcing this idea as the crux of his argument. Once again, since people are created in *imago Dei*, existence is described as having a “theocentric foundation” (105), with God as the focal point of reality. As a result, “creation care” (105) emerges as a theme for Hollinger regarding human ethics. Creation care essentially refers wholly to stewardship, and the deliberate attention to the Earth and its myriad creatures should be among the highest priorities for those fortunate enough to exist. The idea of dominion taken from Genesis is also part of the conversation, but Hollinger notes that there is a difference in how “dominion” is interpreted—as domination” rather than “subduing,” which is the author’s preferred translation. The former suggests the subservience of non-human beings, while the latter implies a carefully managed interaction. Hollinger recommends several actions to steward the Earth in productive and positive ways, including fostering quality personal habits, churches responding to crises, and philanthropic public policies (118-119).

Expanding on positive stewardship, Hollinger emphasizes that when he discusses ethical human interactions, he begins highlighting marriage and family as the foundation of community and the backbone of the formation of law and its enforcement. Marriage carries a significant responsibility for couples to have and raise children within a state of matrimony, with the most important aspects of this union and structure being the formation of trust, modeling of behavior, and proper teaching. Although such beliefs were widely accepted until recent times, contemporary views on sexuality, friendship, social justice, and acceptable daily person-to-person interactions have produced substantial confusion regarding ethical norms and expectations, especially for Christians who must live by a standard of principles and laws that remain stable in the face of consistent social malleability. To counter this fracturing of society, Hollinger refines his view by asserting that cultivating productive habits, involving congregations in crisis management and intervention, and having the government develop helpful policies can be effective through three additional approaches: deeply exploring and fully adhering to Christian ethics, increasing the amount and value of pastoral care, and considering Christian values when devising public policies (127). Much like the marriage between a man and a woman and the familial household that follows, the bonds formed between citizens, clergy, and government also foster greater trust, better behavior, and higher-quality instruction, which leads to overall improved stewardship.

In the latter half of the book, Hollinger broadens his focus, specifically scrutinizing societal institutions, the idea and application of working life, and the potential long-term existence of life, along with its inevitable end. He concentrates on five key institutions: government, economy, education, religion, and the family. While each

operates independently, their connections and mutual influences are clear. A crucial aspect of people's lives is the consideration of overall public opinion regarding the institutions and their positive impact on citizens; Hollinger provides an alarming graphic indicating that public approval for all five institutions has declined over time. Only one notable institution, the military, shows an increase in approval. This is problematic, especially since the role of a quality government principally involves making and enforcing laws. A biblical parallel seems relevant here, as God's inherent order, established during creation and continued in perpetuity, similarly concerns the implementation of laws and the consequences when they are ignored. A third element, though directly related to the law, involves protecting freedom (168); this also fits into the creation narrative and further connects humans with practices of stewardship.

Hollinger states that humankind's undertaking of the responsibilities of work runs through the early books of the Old Testament, including Genesis, and the theme of labor persists throughout the text. God creates and then rests, and his blueprint applies directly to proper stewardship of one's environment, which includes the self, family, and community, in terms of overall well-being. As in general life, work involves dignity and respect, and ethical principles such as integrity, justice, honesty, empathy, and social responsibility assist in maintaining both one's personal sense of worth as well as holding others in high regard. According to Hollinger, the very act of creation and the work innately connected with that act epitomize the ethical life and pursuits. Order, reliance on the other, reliance on nature, and investing in work form a quality, synergetic relationship that requires consistent cultivation and reflection to conserve and grow. The human willingness to treat the other as the self factors into nearly all aspects of a cohesive and empathetic being.

Humans completely rely on nature for their limited survival on Earth. Caring for nature and all aspects of life not only helps people live healthy and content lives—such ethical care is an absolute necessity. In order to address their own physical limits, people care for the self; their dependence on others and vice versa means they must care for the community; and their reliance on God means they must show care for their Heavenly Father. Since Hollinger firmly believes that an ethical life is deeply connected to the earliest periods of life on Earth, he ultimately employs the metaphors of salt, light, and leaven in the final pages of the book to represent preservation, illumination, and transformation (271-273). These metaphors combine the ideas of the human effort to sustain life through faith, ethical actions, and continuous learning in order to positively influence society.

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