

Joshua A. Kaiser, *Becoming Simple and Wise: Moral Discernment in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Vision of Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co., 2015). xiii +200 pp. paperback.

This is a book which has the potential to get readers more deeply engaged in the question of discerning and doing God's will. It is a revision of the author's doctoral dissertation which explores Bonhoeffer's understanding of discernment because this was perceived to be unploughed ground "and because the practice of moral discernment had not received adequate attention in the field of theological ethics" (ix).

In the introduction Kaiser sets the foundation for his study by asking, what does it mean to discern God's will? Through this question he reflects what he perceives to be "the best window into [Bonhoeffer's] mature ethical thinking [wherein] answering this question was central to the Christian life and required a process of moral discernment . . . [but] moral knowledge gained through universal ethical principles [was insufficient]; instead, one had to carefully discern God's will afresh on every new occasion in order to act faithfully" (1).

Kaiser highlights Bonhoeffer's concern with the practicality of discernment in the situations and contingencies of everyday life. He proposes that he aims to show that Bonhoeffer's theology of moral discernment engenders both simplicity and reflective moral deliberation from a Christological perspective, i.e. since the unity of these two concepts reflects the relationship between Christ's human and Divine natures. Moreover, he suggests, as one becomes increasingly aligned with the form of Christ, particularly through the spiritual disciplines, the same conceptual unity becomes an effective reality in the lives of believers.

The introduction concludes with Kaiser's declared intention to examine the seeming contradiction between simplicity and faith, and the deliberacy required by a reflective approach to discerning God's will. To this end, his book proposes to dissolve the tension by reconciling these opposing themes and show that "Bonhoeffer's understanding of simple obedience does not reject all manner of moral reflection but redefines its purpose and purview" (19).

Following the introduction of Chapter one, Kaiser arranges his material in a further six chapters.

Chapter Two is entitled "The Problem of Moral Discernment" and begins by attending to the two different approaches to moral living and the tension between them, i.e. the first being, as of the Pharisees of Jesus day, having knowledge of good and evil so as to make appropriate choices through reflective practice on the morals involved, and the second, as modelled by Jesus, simply obediently living according to

God's will without the need for reflective practice. In addition, Kaiser acknowledges Bonhoeffer's approach to Christian discernment has both an outer and inner dimension. The former seeks to discern God's will and the latter examines one's self.

Thus Kaiser has established his perception of the platform inherent in the question of Bonhoeffer's moral discernment ethics i.e. the tension between living in simplicity versus practicing reflectiveness.

In Chapter three Kaiser turns to Christology and its being the foundation of Bonhoeffer's understanding of moral discernment. Despite the acknowledged difficulties with Bonhoeffer's coverage of who Christ is (i.e. human and Divine) versus how this can be the case, Kaiser points to "Bonhoeffer's important description of Christ as Word, sacrament, and church-community" (59) as possibly providing an answer, along with "creation [being] grounded in Christ" so that speculation and reflection cannot replace faith in one's quest for understanding reality "and [the] risen Christ [who] makes real all that exists" (62). Moreover, Kaiser suggests that this aspect of Bonhoeffer's Christology shows how "both the ultimate [i.e. God's reality] and the penultimate [i.e. the reality of the world] find their origin in Christ" (71). Finally, that "Christ's form embodies both simplicity and moral reflection without conflict" and so do Christians as they grow in conformity to Christ (76) becomes the underlying principle for Chapter four which attends to Christian formation in relation to the practice of discernment.

Kaiser draws from a range of primary and secondary sources to engage with the issue of formation and conformation, and to show that Bonhoeffer's writings affirm that moral discernment, along with discernment of God's will, increases as one becomes more conformed (*Gleichgestaltung*) to the form (*Gestalt*) of Christ. Of the conformation process, Kaiser refers particularly to Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and *Discipleship* texts, and points to the need to look away from self and recognise own one's connection with all of humanity (103), and "understand discernment not as an isolated spiritual activity, divorced for [sic?] the reality of the natural world, but as a human activity fully embedded in the world" (104).

Kaiser next argues his own case for the place of following spiritual disciplines in Bonhoeffer's work as a factor in growing in conformity to Christ: "spiritual exercise is significant for Bonhoeffer because it gives him the language to speak about a kind of moral reflection proper to the life of simplicity . . . [but] although he does not articulate the details of the relationship, it is clear that spiritual exercise helps to facilitate moral discernment in several ways" (107). From this, and with reference to a primary source, Kaiser argues that whilst "the disciplined practice of spiritual exercise . . . might seem an affront to Christian freedom, [it] is

actually a means to Christian freedom, insofar as true freedom exists only in doing God's will" (117).

Chapter five sees Kaiser return to the question of "whether simplicity and simple obedience . . . eliminates space for any practice of moral reflection for Christians" (120). Following a chronological study of Bonhoeffer's writings concerning obedience as commanded in scripture, Kaiser concludes "Bonhoeffer believes that Christ's disciples must combine both simplicity and wisdom in order to act rightly . . . [but whilst he] does not fully explain how simplicity and wisdom are held together in the life of a disciple, he does assert that both are grounded in the word of Christ [and hence are part of obedience]" (137). Not unreasonably then, for Kaiser, wisdom is the result of reflection so that "simple obedience, far from eliminating moral reflection, actually creates space for it insofar as the reality of Christ both shapes and focuses it" (139).

In Chapter six Kaiser turns to engagement with the realm of the penultimate. Since, for Bonhoeffer, all creation is grounded in Christ, and the world around all living beings provides the context in which God's will is discerned, Kaiser offers that, aside from the importance of simple obedience along with wisdom that comes from moral reflection, Bonhoeffer's theology of the natural order of the penultimate environment of the world suggest it further provides a complementary guide for moral discernment.

In the concluding chapter, Kaiser summarizes his points, particularly that Bonhoeffer's conception of discernment has Christology as its foundation, so that "the stronger one's connection to Christ in simple faith, the more deeply one can draw upon the natural world and natural human ability [i.e. reflective practice] in the task of moral discernment"(183).

Kaiser has used a comprehensive range of primary and secondary sources, notwithstanding the inevitable complexities that can arise when attempting to reduce one language into another, along with the potential for unconscious subjective interpretative bias that such a process may possibly engender.

As an attempt to draw essentially unprovable connections (in terms of Bonhoeffer's actual intentions) from a literature review, Kaiser's is a noble effort that brings convincing conclusions, and which provides a rich addition to the field of Christian ethics.

Reviewed by Dr. V.J.D-Davidson