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Chapter 1 : James M. Gustafson (Author of Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Volume 1)

"Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective will surprise some, shock others, and unleash a flood of speculation about what has happened to James Gustafson.

Joseph Selling proposes a contemporary revision of natural law ethics, making it more person-centered. Earlier James Gustafson insisted that natural law ethics was too egoist or anthropocentric, so his work proposed theocentrism as a corrective. It contrasts secular and religious ethics, with the latter incorporating cooperation in communion with God. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord.

Introduction As I began my career as a theologian, I was fortunate to have the famous Christian ethicist, James Gustafson, as a colleague. I was deeply influenced by a particular polemic that he, like a modern day Jeremiah, waged against any and all. On other occasions, I witnessed Gustafson becoming red in the face as he argued that Christian ethics had lost its center, namely, God. A common Protestant and biblical approach is to view God as Sovereign Commander, an authority whose will we must obey. Likewise one typical Catholic focus is to image God as creator whose wise design we should follow. The first has been central in Divine Command ethics and the second has been central in religious versions of Natural Law ethics Vacek I develop the radical claims found in 1 John 4: Joseph Selling challenges the adequacy of natural law. Selling sets down the foundation of ethics in the following way: I propose a new standard. The criterion for determining right from wrong is what befits the love covenant we have with God and with one another. The difference between my own view and that of Selling is the centrality of God, and the difference between my view and that of Gustafson is the centrality of love Gustafson , p. This is theocentric love ethics. These are real targets. Moral theologians have, for example, read Genesis 1: That means our own human fulfillment is not our primary duty. Jesus says that those who lose their life for his sake will gain their lives. But the life gained is not earthly fulfillment. Theocentrism is full of theological challenges. To the contrary, Anders Nygren argued that we should not love God at all because such love is so self-centered. To many people, theocentrism seems superfluous for moral living. We can live our individual lives and we can form groups as if there is no God. Ordinarily, as Selling notes, our daily moral task is just to deal appropriately with the many different kinds of situations in which we find ourselves. We are, of course, ordinarily the person most responsible for developing our own selves and the groups we belong to. Needless to say, for most if not all of us, actively centering our lives on God is an ever changing activity. It tends to be episodic. Extending episodes into a consistent pattern is sainthood. Gula aptly describes the ideal of this covenant: Membership Christians have often employed the analogy of the Body of Christ, of which each of us is a member. Members are the free source of their own activity, but their activity also belongs to the corporation. We are not the center of the corporation, though we may be central in some subgroup. The corporation has a mission that is affected by and affects every member. To stretch the analogy a bit further, all of us members have direct as well as mediated access to the head of the corporation. Stretched even further, we are or should be bound by love instead of contracts we have rationally agreed upon. If this or that member leaves the corporation, it continues to exist. Put more generally, participation signals a union in which its members are both independent of and dependent on the union that unites them. Their union both differentiates them and is differentiated by their membership. Given human limitations such as embodiment, each of us can and often does tend to look upon all else as if we are the center. Nevertheless, we are also able to take up the perspectives of others, and our hearts can feel what other people feel. Each of us can realize that we are not the center of the world, but only a tiny, tiny, tiny part of that world. When we are forgetful of this participation in the lives of other people, we live a shrunken life. When we are forgetful of our participation in God, the core of a finally meaningful life is hollowed rather than hallowed. To be creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, God must love each creature and each group of creatures. Of course, the identity of God is not exhausted in these relationships, since God is also related to God and is transcendent to creation. Thus, theocentric love should be directed not only to God in relation to the world but

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also to God as wholly Other. That participation of God in us and we in God greatly magnifies and alters our role. We are worshipers of the transcendent God, and this is holy mystery. Presumably, Selling does not mean to suggest that we simply add language. Instead, I am arguing, the addition of a reference to God should radically revise the project of ethics and of moral living. Charles Taylor in his magisterial book, *A Secular Age* Taylor , has alerted us to the way secularism now does not refer to a battle between theists and atheists. Rather it refers to a relegation of God talk and God belief to the private sphere. Some people go to Church on Sunday and some people go bowling; both are equal, optional, private choices; and their respective value claims are not worth arguing about. In this cultural context, Selling is understandably hesitant to name God, since talk of God tends to drive people away from the conversation Selling , p. As I have noted, we do many, many things in our lives without experiencing any relationship to any ultimate destiny or project. Other animals get along without experiencing these ultimates, and we are animals. Similarly, most of our thinking and loving and willing can take place in biological, psychological, or spiritual mental realms without being religious. That is, the reference of these acts is ourselves and aspects of our world, without even tacit reference to God as Horizon or Ground. We can possess a secular attitude that has solely secular goods. Our secular age contains many people who claim to have no relationship to God. They experience no affection towards God. They do not intend to live consonantly with God. Rather, they simply want to do good Gustafson , p. Many even do far more good than those who want to be in relationship with God but who, for various reasons, including weakness and sin, do not live out that desire. Nevertheless, it is one thing to be a decent human being and it is another to act intentionally and freely in union with God. Absent that intentionality, at least in an implicit form, their activity bears no religious merit Aquinas , [hereinafter ST] II-II. Still the inclusion of religious intentionality does make a difference in our lives. Aquinas notes that civic virtue is an imperfect virtue when it does not take place within our affirmation of God. In this sense, charity perfects the ordinary virtue by making it an aspect of our relationship to God. In religious experience, we can move from creatures to God and from God to creatures. Aquinas rightly argued that love for God does not necessarily include love of our neighbor and that love of neighbor or self does not necessarily include love of God ST II-II. Still, love of God inclines us to love ourselves and our neighbors as an enactment of our friendship with God. And love of self and neighbor can incline us to love God. Cooperation involves union not replacement. Below I will emphasize a more distinctly Christian strand. The change is from eros to philia. Loving God as communing with God shifts our intention from our own self to our friendship or covenant with God. Thus, when we love God we are animated to participate in the creative, redeeming, and sanctifying power of God. Aquinas describes this union: A more contemporary way to make the same claim is that, when we enter the mind and heart and will of God, this union will reshape or wither many of our current loves. This is a process of conversion, growth in holiness, and cooperation. Like all emotions, love for God cannot be simply willed by us; rather it arises in relating us to its object and is dependent on that object. The distinctive character of our loves depends on the type of object we love. Religious Discernment Love moves us to know those, including God, whom we love. When our loves are in order, they do much the work of ethical discernment. Thus, harmony or lack of harmony between our affections and God provides the primordial basis for discerning what is to be done and to be avoided. This connaturality is crucial for a properly Christian moral life. He says that many people have to use reason equipped with a set of norms in order to act chastely. But a virtuously chaste person just feels what is appropriate without reflection. Aquinas adds, however, when this love is enacted in this world, this union with God must then be combined with reason in order to make good practical decisions ST II-II. Such decisions are not purely reasonable, nor are they immediately given as part of union with God. Rather they are a product of both. In this, Aquinas offers parallels with St. As Selling observes, this communication or grace is best understood not as a thing but as the offer and acceptance and enactment of a relationship with God Selling , p. Dangers of Identification In this last section, I need to warn of significant dangers in stressing affective union with God as central and disclosive of our moral obligations. Love, I have argued, is an affective form of participation, of unity-in-difference.

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