

[1944 Review of *The Principles of Christian Ethics*, by Albert C. Knudson. *Westminster Theological Journal*. 214-215.]

Albert C. Knudson: *The Principles of Christian Ethics*. New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press. 1943. 314. \$2.75.

This book on ethics, following two volumes in the field of apologetics and four on Christian doctrine, is intended to complete a loosely organized series covering the three main divisions of systematic theology. Some indication of Knudson's philosophic position in the earlier works may be found in *The Westminster Theological Journal* for May 1943 (Vol. V, pp. 188-192). But unfortunately Knudson's treatment of ethics makes little systematic use of his philosophic principles and lacks the interest of the earlier studies. Dr. Brightman says, "This truly great book has stimulated my mind on every one of its pages": but the reviewer regards the large middle section dealing with concrete moral problems as a lukewarm espousal of dull platitudes. War is evil, but pacifism is unjustifiable. The family is an order of creation and monogamy is best. In the church purity of faith is more important than unity of organization, but the phenomenon of two hundred denominations in this country is a manifest scandal. A modern state is not likely to admit the sovereignty of the church, but the church has an inherent right to develop its own life. With few exceptions, such as his approval of mercy-murders (pp. 188 f.), his views are so broadly phrased as to be superficially acceptable to all but the most radical of people.

The chief criticism of this middle section is that these platitudes are not sufficiently grounded in the more general principles discussed at the beginning and at the end of the volume. There is no system. The nearest approach to systematic connection is his adoption of the doctrine of sinless perfection on the ground of his view of freedom (pp. 148-153). And this brings us to his more basic principles presented in chapters one, two, three, and thirteen.

The most basic principle of all no doubt is that ethical problems are to be solved without any appeal to an external standard of truth – the mind itself is the only standard (pp. 33, 283 f.). Morality is not founded on the will of God; in fact a divine command would have no authority unless it awakened within us a moral response. Further, an appeal to the will of God is circular, for any alleged divine command must stand the test of our conscience before it can be known to be divine. "An act is not right because God wills it. Rather it is true that God wills it because it is right" (p. 285). Knudson does not argue for the propositions, he merely states them as self-evident. Compare the statement of Calvin (*Institutes*, II, xxiii, 2): "For the will of God is the

highest rule of justice; so that what he wills must be considered just, for this very reason, because he wills it.”

But Knudson is no Bible-believing Calvinist. His Arminian conception of freedom dominates his mind. Ability limits obligation: theological determinism is unsuccessful; and God, in order to be moral, must be free to choose evil (pp. 79-82). It follows that sin cannot be inherited or imputed (p. 85), and that the doctrine of original sin is a mistaken, sub-moral attempt to explain the universality of sin (p. 264). The true explanation, as he holds it, is curiously similar to Finney's (*cf.* B.B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, Vol. II, pp. 180-183); babies form non-moral habits which upon the dawn of moral consciousness become evil (p. 89). Knudson's statements may not be as unguarded as Finney's, but they are still open to Warfield's objections.

If Knudson is patently not a Calvinist, it is also questionable whether his views are even Christian. Certainly there is no adoption of the Scriptures as the infallible rule of practice, and there is nothing in the contents of his views that would offend a respectable Hegelian. The technical criticism of the book, however, is that it lacks systematic unity. And it also fails to cover the field, though perhaps it was not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of the subject. There remains therefore a need of a volume on ethics to take the place of the older but thorough works of Newman Smyth and I.A. Dorner. And would that there might be a truly Christian production the equal of Sidgwick's *Methods of ethics*.

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