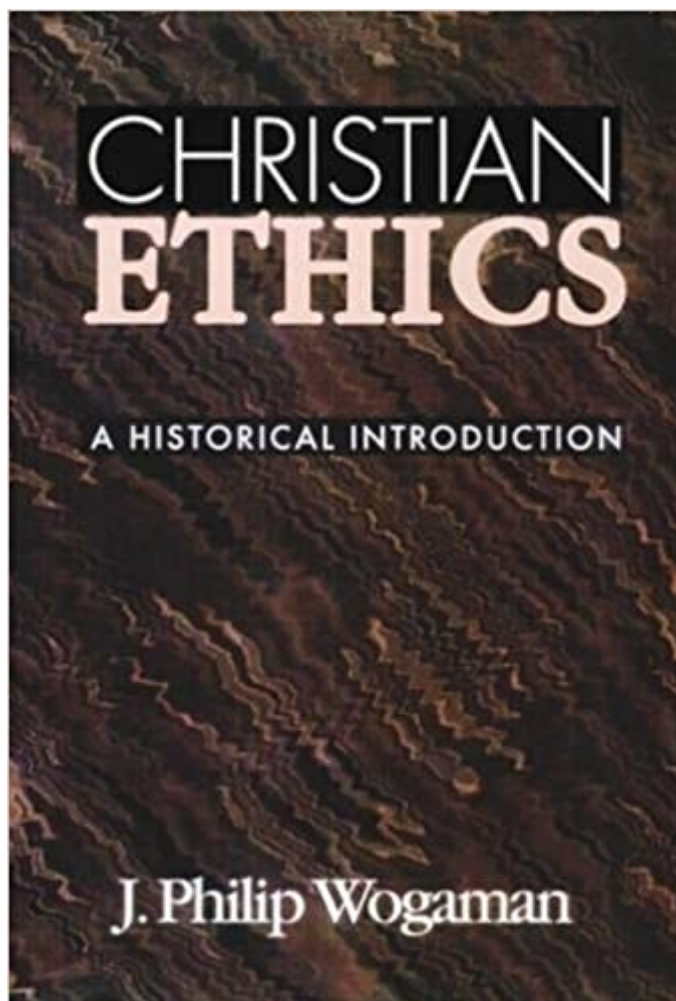


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# Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction



## Synopsis

This one-volume history of Christian ethics is the only comprehensive resource currently available to survey major thinkers, movements, and issues from the early church to the present. Topics discussed are: the legacies of Christian ethics, the ethics of early Christianity, the Reformation and Enlightenment, eighteenth and nineteenth-century rationalism and evangelism, Christian ethics in the twentieth century, and Christian ethics toward the third millennium.

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## Customer Reviews

"With its new and revised sections, this second edition of *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* is a magnificent survey of every important era in the rich, and contested, history of Christian ethics. Phil Wogaman draws on a lifetime of study to offer incisive, and nuanced, analyses of the major figures, movements, and issues in the field. Better yet, Wogaman couples his sharp analyses with thoughtful arguments that not only stake out his own ethical positions but invite the rest of us to struggle with unresolved issues and ongoing debates. The result is a magisterial volume that should be required reading for anyone wanting to understand the roots, historical expressions, and future directions of Christian ethics." Michael G. Long, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies, Elizabethtown College --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

J. Philip Wogaman is former Senior Minister at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. and former Professor of Christian Ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

Wogaman is a past president of the Society of Christian Ethics of the United States and Canada and the author of several books on Christian ethics.

Christian Ethics moves in a linear fashion throughout history and successively builds upon prior ideas in order to display the progression of Christian ethics—uniquely characterized by the influence of theology on moral values—through the ages. Wogamann begins with the foundations of Western ethical thought in Ancient Greece, and from there moves on to the early Christian Church, then to the Reformation, the Enlightenment, rationalism, and finally ends with contemporary ethics with a look toward future eras. With very few exceptions, Christian Ethics covers all the bases and highlights the chief players that have shaped the ethical dialogues then and now. Some individuals (e.g. Luther and Calvin) are given substantially more attention than others (e.g. Jonathan Edwards) but the reader will come away with a general idea about the key players and their influences. Because the book's scope is broad, it often tends to oversimplify some of the arguments for the sake of inclusion. Luther and Calvin, for example, have both written a plethora of material that illustrates their perceptions of ethical behavior from a Christian standpoint. To assume that one chapter (

Christian Ethics, A Historical Introduction by J. Philip Wogaman, long-time expert in Christian (primarily Protestant) Christian Ethics, represents one of several different methods for presenting Christian moral thinking. Here, Dr. Wogaman presents a high level summary of Christian moral positions from the influences of the pre-Christian Greek philosophers to the beginning of the 21st century. For those of you who studied "Ethics" in college, there is an ambiguity in the way that word is used. In the secular Academy, "ethics" is "moral philosophy" and is thereby different from "morality". In most Christian thinking, that difference disappears, and the place of "moral philosophy" is taken by the discipline of theology. Dr. Wogaman's book is a general overview of both the interaction of theology with morality as it affected social action. It was not surprising to find 10 pages dedicated to St. Augustine, or 14 pages dedicated to St. Thomas Aquinas or 17 pages devoted to Luther and Calvin. What impressed me about the book is that it devoted three pages to Jonathan Edwards (1703 - 1758) and his principle work on theological morality, "The Nature of True Virtue". Wogaman gives a nice, 2 page summary of Edwards's argument, but this item is an example of some of the weaknesses of this level of coverage. First, Wogaman makes no mention of how intimately Edwards's moral theology is connected to his sophisticated notion of the Trinity. In this, Edwards's Trinitarian theology and moral thinking is very similar to that of Peter Abelard (1079 -

1142), who also wrote extensively on Christian ethics. It is unfortunate Dr. Wogaman could not find more space for that, and for the affinities between Abelard and Edwards. A second weakness in such an overview book is the absence of a good, up to date bibliography in general, and possibly less than the best references for his quotes. For example, the first edition of this book came out in 1993, and yet his quotes of Edwards are not from the authoritative Volume 8 of the Yale edition of Edwards's complete works (volume 8 published in 1989). Another symptom of the relatively high level of Wogaman's survey is that there is no mention of Edwards's dialogue with the primary ethicists of his day, John Locke and Francis Hutcheson or how his views contrast with contemporary, John Wesley, although books have been written about these connections. There is no bibliography in which such books can appear. Back on the positive side, Wogaman has about a page and a half on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but with no mention of his highly influential book "The Cost of Discipleship". But it does, briefly, illuminate the foolishness, in Bonhoeffer's view, of preaching grace, or even worse, the endurance of suffering, to the poor, when you can do something about their suffering. Another positive aspect of the book is the critical approach taken by the author of "situation ethics". He gives good space to a critic of Situation Ethics, Paul Ramsey. "Situation Ethics" has always seemed to me to be a result more of theological fatigue than of good theology and careful reflection. It's nice to boil all Christian morality down to a Beatles song, but that simply won't work (...in most situations.) Having studied moral philosophy on and off for about 40 years, I wish someone would come out with the starting point that "moral thinking is messy" and that attempts to reduce it to one or two principles will almost invariably leave loose ends. The irony is that "situation ethics" does capture one (but just one) traditional point of view, of the intuitionists, who claimed that there is a moral sense which detects basic moral facts in a situation. The problem is that deeper thinkers on Christian moral theology, such as Jonathan Edwards, have pointed out that such a "moral sense" is flawed, unless it operates on a very special basis, the love of the Whole, in itself. Given the connection between theology, moral thinking, and atonement, I am surprised that in the original edition of the book, "atonement" does not even appear in the index. It does have a 1 page reference in the new, 2011 edition, but with no discussion, for example of the theological issues which have been raised about it by feminist theologians. To end on a very positive note, the book's coverage of 20th and 21st century issues is strong, including such things as the writings of the Niebuhrs, John Howard Yoder, the second Vatican council and following encyclicals from Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, and the contextual (liberation) theologians for Latino, Black, Asian, and Female interests. The existence of very real tensions between traditional Christian Ethics and the "contexts" is covered in depth and with great insight. The book also has a

reasoned approach to the moral relation between church and state. In some ways, this is easy, since virtually every book of the NT which addressed the question was favorably disposed to live in a symbiotic relation with the state (the Roman empire), especially since at that time, Christianity was a very small fish in a very big pond. Martin Luther and John Calvin made the path easy by allocating a separate and important role for state law and power. Oddly enough, those issues are more alive in the U.S. than they are in countries where there are national churches, such as England, Germany, Eastern Orthodox countries such as Greece, and the Islamic states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. In the U.S. there is no state religion, on principle. Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and so on have as much a say in the moral thinking of the country as Catholics or Baptists or Methodists or Presbyterians. This is a good book. It's latest edition is better; however, it is not a perfect guide to further research on the history of Christian Moral thinking.

good

Very thoughtful and well written. A carefully laid out explanation of Christian ethics.

This is a required reading text for a Christian Ethics course that I am taking. As Christian Ethics does take into account Church History and Theology, this text does a great job of providing a quick train ride through Church History and sprinkles in within that vacuum theologians and the development of thought that has resulted in Christianity today. The final chapter provides forward thinking ideas for Christian Ethics.

Very interesting read. Insightful to inspire thought as well as alternative perspective. Must be open to consider various questions. Can take you out of your comfort zone.

Purchased for textbook in class.

This book will be used for the seminary class when my goal is to be a Reverend. The book was received before the reading due date.

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