Ministerial Ethics: Moral Formation for Church Leaders

The latest edition of Ministerial Ethics is a welcome revision and expansion of the original 1993 edition. The insertion of a new Chapter 7 on clergy sexual abuse is very timely in light of the Catholic Church sexual-abuse crisis revealed in 2002.

Authors Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter indicate a desire to help slow alarming statistics of moral failure among clergy practitioners. References to recent high profile corporate executive failure, such as Enron and numerous clergy failures, make the reader feel very comfortable with the current relevancy of this revision.

The first two chapters written by Professor Trull develop a strong biblical and theoretical ethic for the more practical sections. His discussion of “The Minister’s Vocation” and the term “professional” help clergy, especially young divinity students, form an understanding of “call” as serving God and being more than a career. The text is destined to continue as a popular classroom text for seminaries and divinity schools.

A very informed dialogue in Chapter 2 helps the reader examine “the ethics of conduct.” Trull begins the discussion with the question, “Are minister’s moral choices endowed or acquired?” The writer builds a strong case and concludes that moral character is a lifelong growth experience known as “discipleship.”

The middle section of the work is primarily the work of Dr. Carter. His decades of pastoral and denominational leadership have prepared him well for this assignment. The author treats the various contexts of life in which the minister lives out his or her moral life. The important issues of personal spiritual growth, family and finances are included. A very helpful section on roles, responsibilities and relationships with colleagues is extremely helpful. This reviewer believes more attention should be placed on these practical issues in seminary classrooms.
Professor Trull returns to the pen in Chapter 6 and builds on the classic work of Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*. The discussion of a minister’s responsibilities to his community is a great challenge. The introduction of sexual misconduct and childcare are too brief, but the new chapter on sexual abuse is extremely helpful.

Few issues cause denominational executives more concern than the threat of child abuse within the church. In an increasingly litigious society and a moral decaying culture, Chapter 7 will be a most valuable addition for church leaders. I cannot express how important this chapter is for the times we live in.

The updated research on sexual impropriety among clergy is alarming. The information on codes of ethics will be very helpful and should be considered by every judicatory.

The writers are inclusive and ecumenical in their work. Their obvious knowledge and experience in Southern Baptist work is evident and may limit a broader audience. My biggest criticism is more out of personal concern for the less-than-adequate emphasis for clergy to understand the potential harm to children and the broken trust between church and community when moral failure occurs.

This revised edition is a must for all clergy and those charged with guiding the ministerial formation of young clergy. I am grateful for the book and recommend it without reservation.

*Jim Royston is executive director/treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.*

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