

The Lifetime Achievement Award

This afternoon, the Society of Christian Ethics bestows its first Lifetime Achievement Award for “creative and lasting contributions to the field of Christian ethics,” and the uniquely deserving recipient is James M. Gustafson. Professor Gustafson’s publications were path breaking, and include 16 books, and more than 200 articles, sermons, interviews and chapters. At Yale, Chicago, and Emory, he trained a truly exceptional number of leading Christian ethicists. No one has done more in recent years to advance and define the field – and not even I am foolhardy enough to attempt a summary of his accomplishments here. Instead, let me make a few unsystematic remarks.

An enduring theme in Professor Gustafson’s work, from early projects undertaken with H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel Day Williams, to mature reflections on the implications of his own theocentric ethics for pastors, is the church and its ministry. His first book, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (1961), combined theology with insights of the social sciences to fashion a realistic understanding of the church. Nine years later, essays collected in *The Church as Moral Decision-Maker* (1970) offered rich interpretations of what Gustafson called “the church as a community of moral discourse.” The persistent commitment to church and ministry came through in his teaching. Candidates for ministry at Yale and then Chicago, often sought out Professor Gustafson for training and counsel; and, indeed, very many of the theological ethicists he taught have continued to engage things ecclesial and ministerial.

Professor Gustafson’s contributions to the increasingly specialized area of medical ethics consistently engaged with rigor and precision important substantive issues, such as the treatment of infants born with Down’s Syndrome and the issue of abortion. What often set his contributions apart was that they transcended the merely technical to address lived experiences, and to raise wider and perennial questions. What is normatively human? What is the moral and emotional equivalent of life-threatening harm?

The title of an important book, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement* (1975), indicates another major theme. Professor Gustafson was keenly aware (as perhaps few others were) that, while historic divergences remain, there are also important convergences among Roman Catholics and Protestants with respect to moral reasoning as well as philosophical and theological bases for ethics. His awareness was reflected in the exceptional mix of church affiliations among his students. Professor Gustafson taught a storied seminar on the theological ethics of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth, during one iteration of which, I met more Jesuits than I knew growing up in New Jersey. (Indeed, if I marveled as my new-found friends explicated the Seraphic Doctor on natural law and on virtue, I also recall a sense of calm bordering upon satisfaction, when they later searched for points of contact with dogmatic assertions about the divine command.)

From the beginning of Professor Gustafson's career, with his work on church and ministry, cross-disciplinary activity was prominent. It was prominent again for his reflections about the normatively human occasioned by issues in medical ethics. It was also fundamental, for Gustafson's magisterial work, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (1981, 1984), where he argued that theological statements ought to be congruent with well-attested scientific findings. Cross-disciplinary reflection later became the explicit theme of his book, *Intersections: Science, Theology, and Ethics* (1996) – a volume that also reflected Gustafson's work in Luce Seminars with faculty from fields and schools throughout Emory University.

The church and its ministry, an examination of broad questions in medical ethics, convergences in Protestant and Roman Catholic ethics, intersections between theological ethics and other disciplines – each of these themes is important for understanding Professor Gustafson's exceptional contributions to the field. Today, however, let me give pride of place to another theme, namely, the importance of theology for ethics. This is finally, I think, a key to all the rest. After all, regardless of how often it is neglected, theological reflection remains endemic to the church and its ministry. Broad questions raised by modern medicine commend themselves to the

theologian who appreciates that ethics depends, at least in part, on assumptions and beliefs about reality and human existence, and it is precisely these assumptions and beliefs that Gustafson insisted should be responsive to findings of multiple disciplines. Prospects for rapprochement in Protestant and Roman Catholic ethics, and thus for a more ecumenical, comprehensive, and coherent account of Christian ethics, also point to theology.

In my judgment, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (1975), remains the most careful and systematically satisfying study of how Christian believing and theology may influence our ethics. More generally, it indicates how morality is shaped by a variety of convictions and assumptions about human life and the world. The critical point, then, is that the rationale of theological ethics rests in part on an account of God, humanity, and world. No one has made this point with greater clarity and vigor than Professor Gustafson did; and it is this point that he elaborated with depth, creativity, honesty, and boldness in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*.

A last note. When Professor Gustafson taught a student, she or he had better bring her or his best game. Not so much because of what the good professor required, although he sometimes required quite a lot, as because of what he embodied. One result is that the accomplished scholars he trained have made compelling contributions at universities, seminaries, and colleges. They have advanced the field in a dizzying variety of areas from theology, Bible and ethics, medical ethics, the ethics of war, and sexual ethics, to exploring the human, and interpreting church, ministry, and society. When it comes to Christian ethics it is virtually true that, if you can name it, scholars trained by Professor Gustafson have explored it. To obtain a representative sample, you need only look around this room. These are scholars who have made their many contributions with a commitment, analytical rigor, and attention to argument that often recalls their teacher. But they have done so – and this is a point that deserves very special emphasis – while advancing their *own* traditions, their *own* analyses, and their *own* constructive positions in theology and ethics. Jim Gustafson didn't clone Christian ethicists; he taught them.

For all of these reasons and very many more, on behalf of those assembled here and of many others who cannot be, it is my very great privilege, honor, and pleasure to present this Society's first Lifetime Achievement Award to Professor James M. Gustafson. Jim . . .