

Nicolson, Ronald 1995. AIDS — A Christian Response

Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications. 84 pages. Price: Unknown

Reviewer: Dr R M Naudé

The main purpose of this book is to provide a theoretical framework of theology and ethics to undergird pastoral plans with regard to formulating an appropriate response to the problems posed by AIDS. It is emphasized that theologians and Christians in general do not take AIDS seriously. Churches are largely silent on this matter and the book makes it clear that it is morally inexcusable that churches are not involved in actions to actively prevent AIDS and assist its victims. This booklet aims therefore to alert and guide Christians to a structured plan of action.

The theoretical framework is based on a situation analysis which takes the social conditions of Africa and South Africans into consideration. This results in a theological and ethical framework which is underpinned by the method of doing theology *a la* Liberation Theology, namely, that God is the God of the oppressed who has mercy on those who are suffering due to social and structural circumstances. Social causes are seen as the root of the AIDS problem in South Africa. Therefore, not only personal sexual morality should be addressed by the churches, but social morality as well. The rapid spread of AIDS is therefore viewed as a consequence of disordered human life in all its facets. From this point of view a theology of sexuality and sexual ethics is developed which emphasizes the love of God for sinners. In line herewith it is stated that morality cannot be compressed into neat codes in a legalistic manner, but that a love ethic should rather be practised.

Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

The theology of AIDS deals with dogmatic and ethical matters, such as AIDS as punishment of God, sexuality and marriage, forgiveness and compassion, homosexuality, alienation of people with AIDS, and the common cup at Holy Communion.

The ethical issues focus on the rights of the individual versus the rights of the community. The ethical model aims to balance God's concern for the individual with the need to do what is best for the community as a whole. To this end a mixture of prescriptive ethics, imitative ethics, situation ethics and utilitarian ethics is adopted as a method for Christian ethics. Consequently, a Christian ethical response to AIDS emphasizes love and responsibility, forgiveness and service to the community. Within this model aspects such as the use of condoms, compulsory testing, abortion, and unborn babies with AIDS are discussed.

The second last chapter considers several questions which have a bearing on legal ethics. Practical situations are dealt with such as compulsory tests for AIDS performed by the State, deportation of seropositive individuals, enforced disclosure of names of partners of HIV positive individuals to authorities, the right of insurers to insist on tests, limitation or refusal of treatment by Medical Aid policies, and testing without knowledge or consent.

Although theological and ethical arguments could be questioned, the value of this booklet lies in the fact that it timeously identifies the church as the most important role player in preventing AIDS. Achieving changes in behaviour is viewed as the responsibility of the churches in South Africa. The church is often the only organization active in rural areas. Churches have, therefore, a unique facility for providing education and for organizing community responses. In this regard it is emphasized that the church should be a loving community, not only taking care of AIDS victims, but also changing the attitudes of the community with regard to them. The core message which is presented to preventing AIDS is sexual abstinence or absolute sexual faithfulness to the partner within marriage. In order to change attitudes to this effect a theology of AIDS is required which would provide the basis for actions and the active involvement of the church in respect of the prevention of AIDS, changing of attitudes towards and assistance to infected people.

The author succeeds in stimulating reflections on the very essence of the church in this world. The following remark should be taken note of: 'If the churches fail to provide leadership, their claims to preach the gospel are brought into question'.
