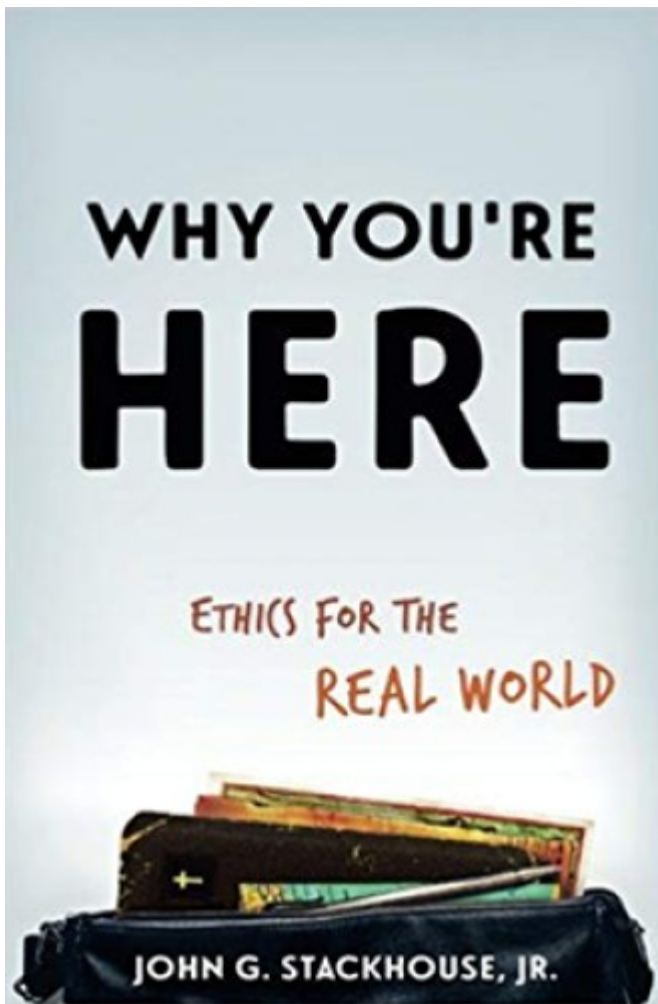


A book about ethics—and nearly everything else

John Stackhouse's real-world ethics primer covers just about every subject, but it leaves out an important one.

by [David P. Gushee](#) in the [July 18, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Why You're Here

Ethics for the Real World

By John G. Stackhouse Jr.
Oxford University Press

John Stackhouse is one of North America's most significant evangelical theologians. An erudite, witty, and ambitious scholar who has written over a dozen books in a career spanning three decades, he should be better known on the U.S. side of the border. A longtime faculty member at Regent College in Vancouver, he now teaches on the other side of Canada at Crandall University,

Why You're Here appears aimed at building the Stackhouse brand not just as an evangelical theologian but as an evangelical ethicist, and a Christian realist ethicist to boot. A popularizing of his much larger book *Making the Best of It*, it aims to offer "ethics for the real world." In the end it turns out to be a book about everything—not just ethics but also scripture, church, theology, mission, culture, science, politics, and so on. That is the nature of the field, of course. But the book does sprawl.

Methodologically, Stackhouse operates from within a somewhat modernized Calvinist-Kuyperian framework. This kind of approach confidently frames all of reality within a creation-fall-redemption (expressed here as redemption-as-shalom) paradigm and then slots different kinds of human organizations, institutions, and projects within their proper spheres. This paradigm seems to offer a sure way to perceive and respond to reality. It also positions Stackhouse to float above various left-wing or right-wing temptations in our polarized age.

The strengths of this approach are many, especially when compared to popular evangelical and fundamentalist alternatives. Stackhouse elevates the category of creation over salvation, humanity over church, and this world over the next world. The "permanent human calling" is to maximize shalom by contributing to human and creational flourishing. The "temporary Christian calling" is to (attempt to) make disciples, which involves bearing witness, serving as an example, and being agents of the Great Commission. We pursue that provisional Christian calling while facing the ethical challenges of living in a fallen world, in this in-between time after Christ's first coming and before his second. Meanwhile, the broader human challenge of being a shalom-maximizer in our various roles and responsibilities occupies us—as it does everyone else.

This approach enables Christians to refocus attention on both the goods and the problems of this world, to participate fully in the richly diverse spheres of this world's existence (such as the arts, sports, and business), to see ourselves as part of (not superior to) the good-yet-fallen human community, and to pay attention to making this world better rather than seeking an escape hatch to the next world. I can think of many conservative Christians whom I wish would download the contents of these exhortations directly into their souls.

Stackhouse is keen to reject any kind of Christian perfectionism or Anabaptist sectarianism, though he doesn't use these labels. Over against perfectionism and sectarianism he adopts a posture of what one might call Augustinian or Niebuhrian realism. Christians are called just to try to "make the best of it" in the "real world."

In this vision, Christians are humans, not angels. We try to do God's commands but often our obligations are obscure. We face "borderline" situations and sometimes must obey God's voice even when it seems to violate God's command. (The example of Bonhoeffer and his role in an anti-Nazi conspiracy help Stackhouse here.) We come out of our churches and engage the world, even when politicians disappoint us, as they inevitably will. Our worldly engagement requires us to live without clean hands and the moral purity we so often seek.

For example, we cannot eschew violence when it is required of us in making the best of bad options in a particular situation. We grant our neighbors the liberty to make bad choices and allow God to sort it out in the end; thus, we can be good liberal democrats, in view of the alternatives, none of which are better. And so on. The overall tone is that of the senior statesman who has seen and heard all the arguments and is convinced that sober realism is the best overall rendering of Christian moral obligations.

That's all fine, as far as it goes. The book is chock-full of wise apothegms and keen observations.

It is less satisfying in other ways. It combines a check-the-box evangelical, often literalist, biblicism with a remarkable dismissal of the actual moral relevance of the Sermon on the Mount, claiming that "while Jesus is announcing the Kingdom of God, he alone lives totally within it." This means that instead of trying to live by the ethic that Jesus actually teaches, "we need an ethic that is consistent with this liminal period in which we live"—that is, some kind of realism. This is the old Niebuhrian

error, dismissing Jesus' teaching as somehow lovely but impossible in the "real world."

Stackhouse rejects the idea of giving the teachings of Jesus more significance than other biblical materials. He does not raise serious critical questions about the horrors attributed to God in the Old Testament. He offers no close exegesis of biblical texts or citations of biblical scholars on such crucial matters.

Further, *Why You're Here*, which covers almost everything, almost doesn't touch issues of race. Pretty much every one of its repertoire of scholarly sources is white, male, American, or British. Many people are wondering, these days, whether evangelical thought is shaped by its white-male social location more than by its claimed biblical sources. This in many ways excellent book will not put such questions to rest.