

With this essay by [Ann White](#) the Institute continues a new series begun in September that will appear monthly (the second Wednesday of the month), with contributions from members of the [Company of Teachers](#) designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce and circulate these pieces as you see fit.

Drones and Sparrows

In the novel *And West Is West*, U.S. Air Force drone pilot Jessica Aldridge aims at terrorists in Somalia from her trailer in Nevada. She hesitates before shooting, but her colonel, looking over her shoulder, commands her to fire. Her shot pulverizes some children along with the armed men who are the target. Afterwards, miserable with guilt, she wanders into the Nevada desert with a single bottle of water and nearly dies of dehydration.

Ethan Winter, the book's other main character, works long hours writing currency-trading algorithms for a Wall Street bank. His computer codes make money from terrorist activity; they also make money from anti-terrorist activity. When his former girlfriend, Zoe, phones him in distress about her parents' deaths, he works all night, then takes time off to be with her. Returning to work, he learns that he's been fired because there was a mistake in the code he wrote during his all-nighter.

They're likeable young people, Ethan and Jessica -- sensitive, smart, eager to do well at work. And they want to live moral lives. They want to do what's right, to be responsible citizens, to care about other persons. In their desire to live lives of goodness, their fictional selves mirror the real-world selves of a myriad Americans. So does their separation from religion. Of course they're not churchgoers; why would we expect them to be? We all know how many people checked "none of the above" in questionnaires about their religious preference; we all know how the church has failed to "attract" young people.

Jessica and Ethan, like their real-world counterparts, look inward for their moral standards. Resources outside themselves are thin at best, nonexistent at worst. When Ethan voices reservations about making money from killing people, his boss says, "The world's going into the shitter, pussy. Man up and do your job."

The Bible, from the Garden of Eden to John's Apocalypse, proclaims that the world operates according to moral standards. "You shall not kill," for

example. Jesus understood this. “Be perfect,” he said. God’s standards brook no exceptions.

What if Jessica walked into a church instead of into the desert? Would we say, “It’s okay. God forgives you”? Forgives her for what? For being an upstanding member of the U.S. armed forces? Does God forgive our own complicity in the killing of innocents? We pay the taxes that buy the drones, and we elect the president who has the authority to order drone strikes. “You shall not kill.” But maybe killing non-innocent terrorists is okay. Can we make exceptions even though Jesus didn’t? Does there exist a Presbyterian pastor who has studied these difficulties -- who will preach and teach and discuss these difficulties -- who could intelligently discuss them with a real-life Jessica Aldridge who walked in the church door?

Presbyterians talk a lot about how our faith doesn’t dominate culture any more. But what *does* dominate culture? Science and technology dominate our culture. We love and use scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs. Every day of our lives we rely on the fruits of scientific research. Still, in the mind of any thoughtful Christian, a question lurks: How can our science-dominated selves flourish in God’s moral universe?

The science-dominated world depersonalizes human beings. Ethan Winter got paid well for his long hours. He could afford a glass-walled Manhattan apartment with a view of the Hudson River. (When Zoe agreed to move in with him, he wondered if it was because of him or because of his apartment.) But well-paid Ethan was a cog in a technological machine, an extension of the computers that fed the banks that fed the international currency-trading system. When he made a mistake, the technological machine chewed him up and spit him out. Mistakes cost money. Mistakes are unacceptable.

Jessica hesitated to shoot because some of the figures that suddenly appeared on her screen didn’t look like adult men. But her colonel said, “Fire. That’s the goddamn order out of Langley.” In that moment, Jessica wasn’t a person. She was a cog in the technological machine operated by the CIA.

Jesus said that human beings are more important than sparrows -- and God pays minute attention to sparrows. Human beings are more important than anything else, presumably even in our technology-dependent U.S.A., with our stem cell transplants and our computers, our genetic engineering, in vitro fertilization, drones, smart phones and surrogate mothers. Though Jesus talked about God and sparrows in a pre-scientific culture, his words remain God's moral standard for our own time: human persons matter more than anything else.

Our technocratic culture kills innocent persons. That's not fiction – you can read it in the newspaper. Our technocratic culture harms persons who serve it. That's not fiction, either; observation confirms it. Yet millions of Americans accept these inhumanities as unfortunate “realities,” as a price of technological progress that they're willing to pay. Millions of Americans passively discard the moral standards of God's universe.

Jessica was kicked out of the Air Force because she told one person that she had killed innocents. She buried her camouflage cap and her military ID. Her sense of herself as a protector vanished with her Air Force insignia. What could she do in the future? Though Ethan was disgusted with banking, he feared he had to try to return to it. Banking was all he knew, all he had.

What should these two young persons do now? How should they think about themselves? If one of them asked for your help in deciding, what would you tell them?

If you want to know what the fictional Ethan and Jessica decided to do, you will have to read the book: Ron Childress, *And West Is West*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2015.

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October 23, 2016