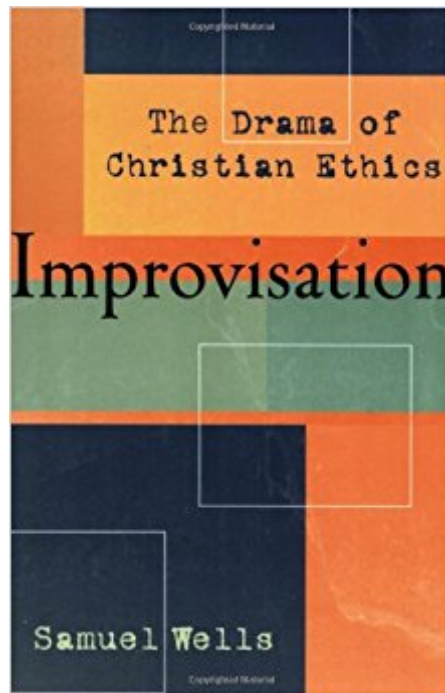




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Improvisation: The Drama Of Christian Ethics



Synopsis

In *Improvisation*, Samuel Wells defines improvisation in the theater as "a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear." Sounds a lot like life, doesn't it? Building trust, overcoming fear, conducting relationships, and making choices--all without a script. Wells establishes theatrical improvisation as a model for Christian ethics, a matter of "faithfully improvising on the Christian tradition." He views the Bible not as a "script" but as a "training school" that shapes the habits and practices of the Christian community. Drawing on scriptural narratives and church history, Wells explains six practices that characterize both improvisation and Christian ethics. His model of improvisation reinforces the goal of Christian ethics--to teach Christians to "embody their faith in the practices of discipleship all the time."

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Customer Reviews

"This is one of the most relevant, stimulating and lucid books on Christian ethics to appear for some time...it is in many places profound and original, and it deserves to be widely read and discussed". Duncan B Forrester, University of Edinburgh "Improvisation indeed. Bold, creative, and yet showing a deep mastery of his craft, Samuel Wells charts a fresh course for Christian theological ethics that is at once artful, contemporary, and faithful, both to the Bible and to the best of Christian ethical reflection." Michael Hanby, Baylor University. "This extraordinarily sophisticated book can be read for profit by those well schooled in the literature of theology...this book will satisfy those who hunger and thirst for an account of what it means to live as a Christian in our day." Stanley Hauerwas, Duke

Divinity School." --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Samuel Wells (PhD, University of Durham) is vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Anglican Church at Trafalgar Square in London. He previously served as dean of the chapel and research professor of Christian ethics at Duke University. He is the author of *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* and coedited, with Stanley Hauerwas, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*.

Wells' use of story-telling is gripping. His explanation of habit was the best part of this book. In my opinion, the clarity and practicality diminishes throughout the final chapters.

Dense and difficult reading. We read it in a church Bible study group and we found the reasoning and references were hard to follow.

Samuel Wells compares his vision for Christian ethics to theatrical improvisation. Wells defines theatrical improvisation as unscripted drama done by actors schooled in their art and seasoned in their practice. Such skilled actors can approach various and unknown situations without fear, with humor and confidence. Wells calls his idea of Christian ethics a "study of how the church may become a community of trust in order that it may faithfully encounter the unknown of the future without fear." (11) His idea of improvisation for Christian ethics gives Christians "uninhibited freedom" in their lives. Christians are encouraged to do and say the obvious based on their formation in a Christian community that discerns and practices life in Christ. Wells patterns his drama of ethics not only on improvisation in the theater but on his interpretation of how God is revealed working in Jesus Christ. Wells sees God as overwhelming humanity in the incarnation. In the resurrection, God has saved humanity through what humanity has rejected. Wells calls the first action "overaccepting" and the second action "reincorporation." For Wells, these are the two most significant practices in improvisation and provide the pattern for how Christians should imitate God. He also employs terms like "blocking" and "accepting" to describe Christian posture toward the world. Improvisation is not mere spur of the moment or spontaneous behavior by Christians; rather, it is a methodical approach to Christian ethics based on Christian community and formation through regular study of Scripture, prayer and liturgical practice. Improvisation requires preparation and practice, so that in the moments of decision or action there is no ethical crisis. Wells cites three types of Christian ethics in contemporary writing: universal, subversive and ecclesial. He approaches

Christian ethics as ecclesial ethics or "ethics for the church." (34) He writes, "What is needed is for the church to be restored as the primary location of theological and ethical enquiry." (41) This moves the focus for Christian ethics from the world and the individual to the worshipping community that consists of faithful saints rather than individual heroes striving against the world. A significant element in Wells' approach to ethics is the five-act play which is a revised model of Anglican Bishop Tom Wright's Christian drama. For Wells, Act One is creation, Act Two is Israel, Act Three is Jesus, Act Four is the church, and Act Five is the eschaton. Wells stresses the need for Christians to see themselves as within the five act drama and to see themselves in Act Four, the act for the church. This is after Jesus has come and before the eschaton when God restores all things. The church is not the savior of the world (Act Three) and is not responsible for making all things well (Act Five). The church's action is worship and discipleship while accepting God's grace at all times. This prepares Christians for improvisation in the world. Wells argues, "Most of the Christian life is preparation for an unknown test." (80) It is the preparation that matters. This takes place in the Christian community. He continues, "Ethics is about forming the life of the agent more than it is about judging the appropriateness of the action." (81) Wells emphasizes that the Christian life should be filled with humor and liveliness that can only arise out of improvisation based on preparation and grace. In addition to explaining the key elements to his Christian ethics, Wells provides case studies on how this method applies to real situations. These offer valuable insights to the challenge of improvisation on large and small scales. Wells interprets some of the lessons from these case studies. Wells sees his Christian ethics of improvisation as imitating the gospel story by its request, invitation, challenge and gift. He respects the authority of the Bible and the discernment of the Christian community. He returns ethics to the church and returns the church's vision to the eschatological hopes of God's kingdom. I think he gives Christians freedom to unload the burdens of having to be right and do right all of the time according to the world. He recognizes that by being only in Act Four of the Christian drama Christians can fail without destroying God's plan and purpose. His Christian ethics however lay appropriate responsibility on the church and on individual Christians. The church must practice spiritual formation, training and discipline, and individuals must commit and submit to the church. I think a potential weakness in Wells' method is that a lack of discipline or structured community can easily lead to Christians improvising ethics apart from the discernment and discipline of the church. This is a relevant danger in the free-church tradition that values individualism rather than corporate life. Craig Stephans, author of *Shakespeare On Spirituality: Life-Changing Wisdom from Shakespeare's Plays*

Samuel Wells, a priest in the Church of England, has written this thoughtful and thought-provoking book at a time when we're facing ethical dilemmas on all sides. This isn't a mere skim of the typical concerns like forgiveness, adultery, and greed. He puts his template to the test in the final chapters of the book by working through issues of terrorism, disability/handicap, cloning, and genetically altered food. I was all the more intrigued by this book when I saw it mentioned by N.T. Wright in his book, *After You Believe*. Wells takes as his starting point the practices of improvisational actors. Many of us are familiar with "improv" from the television program "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" My delight in improv comes from an improv comedy venue in Raleigh that I went to as a high school student. Improv seems random, chaotic, always on the edge of crashing. Anything - the wrong word, the wrong time, the wrong person - can kill the momentum and bring the story to a grinding halt. But the actors keep it going with a few crucial rules and actions. I remember when I first came across this insight. I was reading *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell, and there it was: "[T]he truth is that improv isn't random and chaotic at all....[I]mprov is an art form governed by a series of rules" (*Blink*, 113). It's an exercise in structured spontaneity, where the structure is formed through effort and the spontaneity emerges through habit. The connection to ethics is made when Wells insists, "Ethics is not about being clever in a crisis but about forming a character that does not realize it has been in a crisis until the 'crisis' is over. Improvisation is not about being spontaneous and witty in the moment, but about trusting oneself to do and say the obvious" (*Improvisation*, 12). But this book goes beyond the sphere of personal ethics to engage the church at-large. Wells says, "Improvisation means a community formed in the right habits trusting itself to embody its traditions in new and often challenging circumstances; and this is exactly what the church is called to do" (12). Or again, "When improvisers are trained to work in the theater, they are schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they learn to act from habit in ways appropriate to the circumstance. This is exactly the goal of theological ethics" (65). The opening section gives a quick sweep of how Christian ethics have been shaped by six specific eras of history: 1) Early Church, 2) Christian Empire, 3) Decay of Empire, 4) Middle Ages, 5) Modern, 6) Postmodern. But the mention of ethics, even "Christian" ethics, can mean different things for different people. So Wells draws a distinction between 3 strands of contemporary ethical thought among Christians: 1) Universal ("Ethics for Everybody") This strand desires to work within the methods and "givens" of the culture to treat and resolve questions and dilemmas in the public stage. The goal for this group is to make Christianity reasonable and useful so it suits all people in all places in all situations. 2) Subversive ("Ethics for the Excluded") This strand announces that the winners are the ones who write history (and, in the church's case, theology/creeds). With regard to the group putting forth "Ethics for Everybody," this group points out

that the ones who benefit most from that ethical arrangement are the ones who have the power/authority to make the rules. The goal for this group is to make Christianity listen to the voices that are typically suppressed, and consider what those people have to say.³) Ecclesial ("Ethics for the Church") This strand protests that the universal approach doesn't account for the particularity of the Church's history, story, or practices. It also recognizes that the subversive approach is too narrowly defined within the contours of individual experiences. The goal for this group is to develop people who embody the church's life in prayer and service. Wells identifies these as "witnesses," and says "[They] are the church's truth claim - it has not purchase on truth that is detached from the transformation of lives and communities brought about by its narrative and practices" (41). Ecclesial ethics and the life of the church must be situated in context if they are to make any sense at all. So Wells slightly modifies N.T. Wright's hermeneutical model of a play with five acts to include: 1. Creation, 2. Israel, 3. Jesus, 4. Church, 5. Eschaton. This framework reminds us that we are not at the end of the story, and we do not have to usher in the ultimate final establishment of God's Kingdom on earth as in heaven. That's God's prerogative and he will see to it that it happens how and when he wants. Because we aren't in the final act, and because this story has more than one act, we are called neither to effectiveness nor success, but to faithfulness (55). Faithfulness is formed through training. Training requires effort. Wells explains, "Training requires commitment, discipline, faithfulness, study, apprenticeship, practice, cooperation, observation, reflection - in short, moral effort" (75). But practice forms skill, skill forms habit, and habit forms instinct/character. This is the language of virtue. Therefore, Wells, continues, "In every moral 'situation,' the real decisions are the ones that have been taken some time before. To live well requires both effort and habit. There is a place for both. But no amount of effort at the moment of decision will make up for effort neglected in the time of formation" (75). The training ground for Christians is in common worship: Gathering in the presence of God, listening for the word of God in Scripture, interceding on behalf of one another, confessing sin, passing peace, breaking bread, and being sent out (82-84). Pages 1-86 are the most helpful and understandable pages in the book. The concepts get complicated quickly and at times I found myself thinking, "Where is he going with this?" Sometimes his seemingly wandering thoughts came out making sense; and sometimes those wandering thoughts left me scratching my head. The book's basic premise is this: Christian ethics is less a matter of making right or wrong decisions, and more a matter of Christians (individually and collectively) rooting themselves in their traditions and practices so their ethical decisions will grow organically out of who they have become.[...]

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