

Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics

by Samuel Wells.

Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, Mich. 2004. Pb. 236 pp.

Ethics is concerned with what one ought to do. It is not simply descriptive, but prescriptive in character. Dr. Samuel Wells, a Church of England priest in Cambridge, England, joins the debate on current ethical questions. He calls his book an essay in theological ethics. He locates theological enquiry and ethics within the practices of the church. He argues that it is "this people, the sacred community, that is the centre of ethic reflection." But he doubts that there is such a thing as an ethic to which anyone can subscribe regardless of tradition. He states that theological ethics requires the written word, but it is not limited to the written word. He believes the Bible is not so much a script which the church learns and performs as a training school that shapes the habit and practices of a community.

In Wells' view of theological ethics the Eucharist is crucial. He says that the Eucharist is not just a sacrament sealing salvation, but also a practice forming the habits and instincts of the common life of the body. He also calls the Eucharist the technology God uses for constructing a new society. "God gives his church not more food, but a way of distributing food that shapes the way it henceforth thinks about power."

Wells is a pacifist. He argues that by being and working with the poorest and the most vulnerable, by talking and negotiating with the most powerful and influential, and by seeking to bring all to understand and embrace the Christian faith, the church maintains conversation and seeks to practice nonviolence. And Wells seems to believe that conservative Christians overreact in their opposition to homosexuality. He argues that Jesus talks more about the inclusive kingdom than he does about the exclusive relationship of marriage. He thinks that the needs of the most vulnerable – the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner – and the relationships that they require should be more normative in Christian ethics than the paradigm of marriage.

Although Wells discusses some pertinent ethical issues, I find his response to them lacking an orthodox Biblical and a Reformed confessional perspective. Furthermore, this academic book is meant for those who are acquainted with the latest literature in theology and ethics.

Johan D. Tangelder

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