



Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics

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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."

Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics Details

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David says

I wish Wells had done a little better at sorting through stories and models - it feels a bit random in places. But wow-- great stuff overall. Really inviting models and practices of the Christian life, particularly the practice of "overaccepting."

Jared says

I really liked a lot of the ideas presented in this book. I really feel like the author is onto something. I really just wish he had been willing to spell it out a little bit more. He did give two examples of his ethical beliefs in play, but even then it was not always clear what he thought the church should be doing. He wanted to hint, and encourage more than flat out proclaim. Had he been more bold in a few parts the book would have been better.

Amy says

This book has some excellent food for thought but I found it difficult to get through. I would have liked it much better if it were condensed into about 40 pages.

Gary says

Wells presented some of this material at a gathering of the Ekklesia Project several years ago, and I then skimmed the book and put it away. Picking it up again, I was reminded of the general themes, but I think the topics presented here might be better in a presentation/workshop format. Since Wells wants us to look at Christian Ethics with a perspective based on improvisation, working through some actual improvisation, or at the very least, seeing some, would give this added depth. Still, it's a good book.

Ryan Linkous says

This book started off promising but got more disappointing as it went on.

I applaud Wells desire to create an ethic for the church and for his desire to help Christians "improvise" on certain issues.

But I think it doesn't succeed for a number of reasons:

1) I think it is strange to impose improvisation as an alien norm upon Christian ethics. I understand that other ethical models may also be alien norms, and this creates a problem for them at points too. I think

improvisation can be helpful, just not normative.

2) As Wells got into specific case studies in the final section of the book, his ethical solutions seem to be elaborate "Jesus-jukes." Somehow the Eucharist is the church's answer to so many problems, but that does not actually solve the problem (such as GMO's and world hunger).

3) I was unconvinced that Christians should not engage in deontological or consequentialist ethics in the world. Why retreat into the church to create an ethic for the church when so much of the Christian life is spent in the world? What about being salt and light in the world?

Perhaps I am being uncharitable or totally missed the point, but I am unconvinced of the thesis.

Christina says

Recommended by Gillian Lisenby.

Nyssa says

So the end got kinda wonky....but I like how he simplified and built upon his previously stated guidelines. It was incredibly confusing for the first chapters until I better understood where he was going, and overall found it to be a good book. I appreciate the way that he incorporated many different facets in a way that expresses improvisation in ethics. I must say I would not have thought through these precepts without having read this book.

Mark Oppenlander says

This book is an approach to Christian ethics using theatrical improvisation as a lens by which to view them. As both a Christian and an improviser, this book was a natural for me to pick up. I have often told people that I think improv has much in common with faith, especially the mystical elements of the Christian tradition.

However this book is very mixed. I really wanted to like it - and much of it was quite good. If I were reviewing just the first half of it, I think I would be inclined to give it four or five stars. But the second half falters, and that portion I would not give more than two stars. Hence the mixed review.

Wells begins strong, building his case, chapter by chapter, for why improvisation makes sense as a model by which to explore Christian ethics. He discusses how theology is narrative and that narrative is drama and that improvisation is one of the most "true-to-life" forms of dramatic invention. He also explains why many of the other approaches to Christian ethics have been problematic, especially those that consider ethical dilemmas as equations to be solved using a pre-existing set of theological or philosophical tools. Wells thinks that such approaches will no longer work (if they ever did) in a pluralistic world. In narrative theology in general and in improvisation specifically, he sees a set of practices that are more in keeping with an "embodied" and "enacted" approach to Christian ethics. He encourages his readers to consider a form of virtue-based ethics, fostered by the church universal through spiritual habits and disciplines that have much

in common with improvisation. He even examines a few common improv practices and ideas (e.g. status transfers, accepting offers, blocking, etc.) and applies them to Christian formation.

So far, so good. But in the last few chapters Wells tries to apply his approach to several current ethical questions facing the world, including cloning and genetically modified foods. I found his discussion of these topics abstruse and his application of improv principles a bit off the mark. As an improviser, I had already inferred how the "habits" Wells suggests forming might play out in situations presenting ethical dilemmas to create innovative "third way" solutions such as Jesus would have devised. My experience of these solutions in my own life (and my experience of improv performance for that matter) is that they are always unique to the situation. So the very act of trying to give a written example is a bit problematic. In some ways, I felt that Wells used ideas from improvisation to try to justify his own pre-existing answers to particular ethical questions. I don't know if that's fair, but that's how it felt to this reader.

SO, if you're interested in the topic of improv as a window on Christian ethics, read the first portion of this book. But you may want to avoid the latter portion, especially chapters 11 through 14.

Kathryn Bahn says

Thoughtful clear work. Lots of links between praxis and faith- great metaphors for the drama teacher
