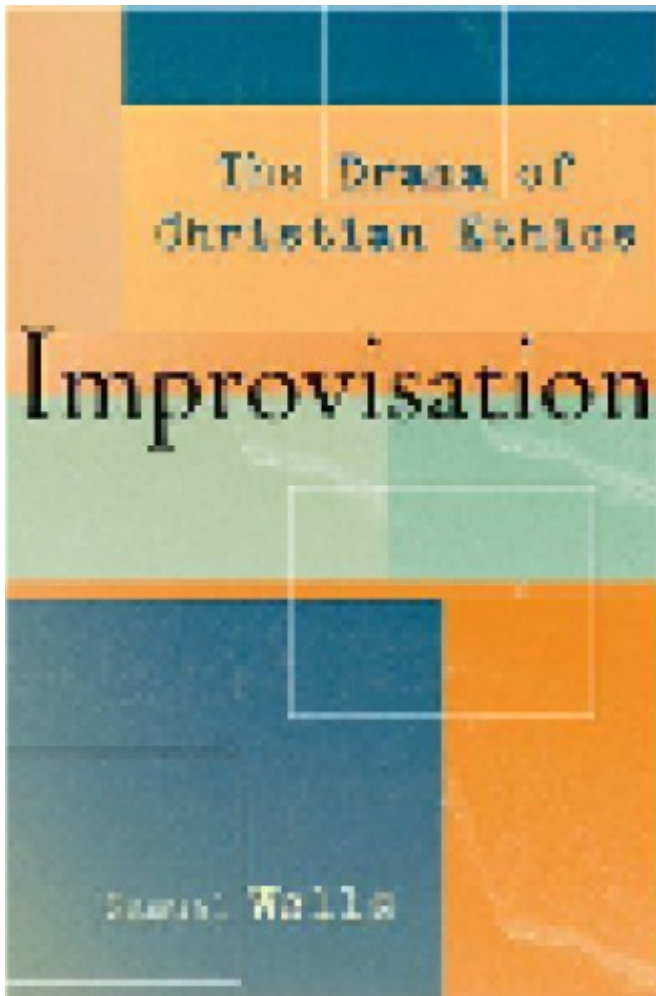


Improvisation

reviewed by [Gayle Gerber Koontz](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics

Samuel Wells

Brazos

The art of improvisation in theater—a kind of jujitsu of the imagination—shapes Samuel Wells's fresh, engaging approach to Christian ethics. Like actors doing

improvisation who must develop trust in one another in order to perform unscripted drama, Christians must develop trust in self, church and God so that they “may faithfully encounter the unknown of the future without fear.”

Discipleship is not simply the performance of a script. Christians do not simply act out scripture or try to repeat a golden era of the past. Instead they improvise—“the only term that adequately describes the desire to cherish a tradition without being locked in the past.”

Wells, an Anglican priest who has written a book about Stanley Hauerwas, keeps character, drama, imagination, worship, nonviolence and care for the marginalized at the center of ethical improvisation.

Particularly striking is Wells’s description of six improvisational practices which, he argues, illuminate the way the Christian community discerns and acts. Perhaps his most creative contribution is the suggestion that the practice of “overaccepting” provides a metaphor for the preferred approach of the Christian community to new actions or concepts, and especially to discord in the world.

When an actor says or does something in improvisation, he or she makes an “offer.” The other players can respond by blocking, accepting or overaccepting it. Wells illustrates these three practices by telling a story about a concert pianist. During a concert a child in the audience began to cry and run around the auditorium, dramatically disrupting the event. The pianist stopped and moved away from the piano to maintain concentration. Before anyone could get to her, the child ran up on the stage, sat down at the piano and began making random, discordant sounds on it. The pianist listened, then moved behind the child, and putting his arms on either side of her began to improvise notes that caught up and transformed her noise-making into new melody. Wells explains, “To have thrown the child out would have been to block, to have let her play on would have been to accept; to weave a wonderful melody around her was to receive her as a gift, to overaccept.”

In theater, blocking stops the action—sometimes with hilarious, sometimes with frustrating results. In ethics, Wells believes, blocking—resisting the new or the unwelcome—often quickly leads to the use of violence. Thus his call for developing vision and habits that foster the practice of overaccepting, including strong but nonviolent ways of responding to discord in the world.

The Christian community, which continues the drama of the Christian story, is the place where such vision and habits should be nurtured. But the church often has been wary of creativity, surprise and humor—qualities essential to overaccepting.

Also, when Christians lack imagination, ethical discernment too readily accedes to the fateful “givens” of conventional boundaries such as time, death, sin and bodily limitation. Wells encourages us to trust God, the only true “given,” and treat the givens in our contemporary world as “gifts.” Ethical acts are done by people who are on the *receiving* end, Wells writes. The emphasis is on how the receiver responds to and accepts the offer of God’s abundant gifts.

Wells structures his book in three sections. After outlining a general approach to Christian ethics through the lens of drama (plowing) and examining ethical practices in light of improvisational ones (planting), he offers examples of how this approach might reframe responses to contemporary ethical issues (reaping). For this purpose he selects two threats (systematic oppression in Chile; chronic disability and illness) and two promising offers (genetic cloning; genetic modification of food).

Wells’s unusual combination of Anglican and Anabaptist thought is provocative. He has a strong sense that moral formation must be liturgically rooted, particularly in the Eucharist. His emphasis on the close relationship between worship and ethics and on attending to the moral formation which prepares Christians for ethical improvisation is a critical matter for all communions. How worship is carried out and how moral formation takes place, however, vary in different ecclesial traditions. Extending this conversation further with Wells could be fruitful.

Wells further challenges Christians who hold political power (or who wish they did) to expand their imaginations regarding the role of the church in social and political ethics—moving beyond influencing legal or political decisions.

At the 2005 Society of Christian Ethics meeting, Wells mentioned that he is more interested in what people are for than in what they are against. Resistance or blocking as a primary, conservative mode of response to new actions or concepts, in fact, might lead us to reject what God is doing among us. While this is an important reminder for a staid church, Wells’s assessment of blocking does not leave much room for “conscientious objection” as a valid ethical option. While he is right in claiming that resistance should not be the only or dominant form of ethical response, in some situations where it is not clear what overaccepting might entail,

blocking might be an appropriate mode for Christians “acting in character.”

Another aspect of Wells’s approach to ethics that some might question is the buoyancy of his assumption that in the drama of life the Christian community can surely receive givens as gifts and overaccept both evil and promising developments. It is true that through Christ the Christian drama is established as a comedy, a movement through the cross into resurrection. Great hope is warranted. And ethics should be primarily guided by this hope. But for the apostles, hope emerged slowly and was reshaped over time by Jesus. It was dashed at the cross and then flickered into life again after the resurrection. It flamed on the road to Emmaus, burst into fire at Pentecost and lingered as coals during persecution, dying and rising in a costly and confusing as well as joyous enterprise.

Within the overarching, ongoing Christian drama, Wells needs to recognize more fully the small tragedies that mark ethical discernment and action. Overaccepting is a remarkable practice, one that Wells rightly recommends we focus our gaze upon and prepare ourselves to exercise. But we also need a theological ethic for the times when we cannot imagine our way, when the givens do not appear to be gifts, however hard we try to receive them as such. Perhaps there are times when blocking or passively accepting life’s “offers” are not simply failed attempts to overaccept, but appropriate ways to express discipleship in God’s already-coming-but-not-yet-present new creation.

With this book Wells makes us an offer. As teachers, pastors and thoughtful disciples of Christ, we would do well to overaccept it.