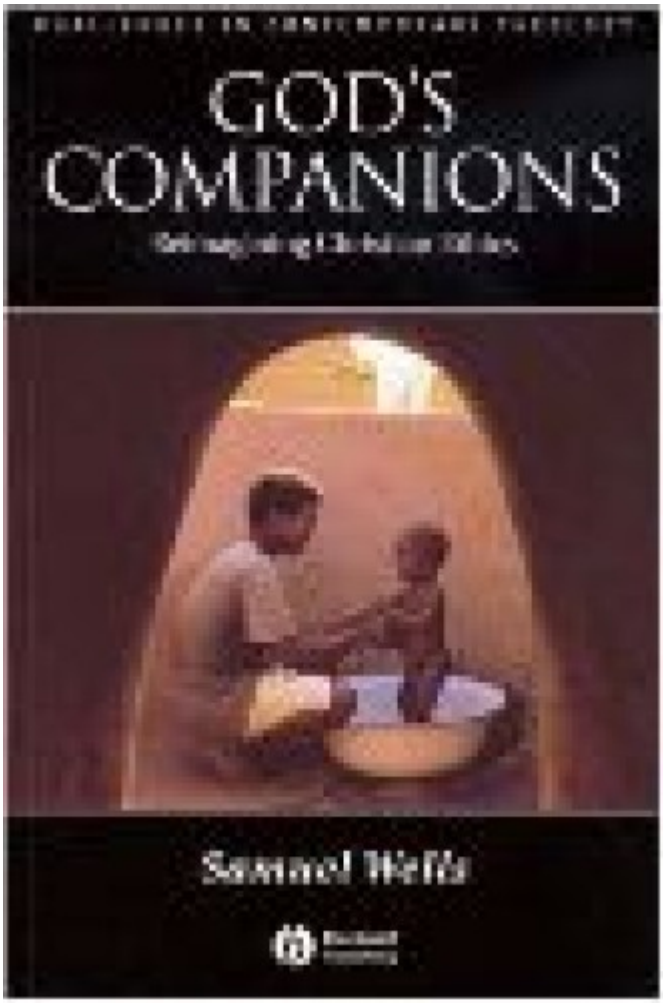
Ethics of abundance

By Jason Byassee in the February 20, 2007 issue

In Review



God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics

Samuel Wells
Blackwell

To reimagine Christian ethics, Samuel Wells draws on the liturgy as his chief resource. That he does so in accessible prose without pausing to wrangle with other

ethicists is welcome enough—all pastors and many laypeople could read this book profitably. But his elegance of phrase and a wisdom steeped in pastoral experience are what make this book a genuine “call for the renewal of the church.”

If Wells’s goal is not modest, his tone is: “The principle rhetorical device used in this book is the list.” On every other page or so, a paragraph begins “one church found that . . .,” and a story follows that not only illustrates his point, but makes it unforgettable. One church demonstrated the importance of children to the congregation by sending the adults to a side room and leaving the children in the main sanctuary. One church demonstrated Christianity’s prophetic nature by turning down an offer from a health clinic to use its facilities and guarantee the congregation’s financial future, choosing instead to remain “a distinct but friendly identity” in relation to all modern forms of therapy, however helpful. One church had a funeral that demonstrated the importance of catechesis this way: “George was carried into this building as a baby, for Baptism; he was carried in again today, for his funeral. In between, he carried pretty well all of us, at times, when we thought we couldn’t walk any further.” The lists are the book’s greatest strength.

Not that it lacks others. Wells’s complaint about his fellow ethicists is that they concentrate on scarcity—the perceived gap between God’s gifts and what people really need. Wells’s riposte to ethics-as-usual—repeatedly offered, mantra-like, throughout the book—is that “God gives his people everything they need to worship him, to be his friends, and to eat with him.” The genuine problem worthy of our wrestling is that “there is too much of God.” The incarnation and the practices of the local church, above all the Eucharist, represent a tidal wave of grace, and our difficulty is navigating this flood without being drowned. The local church comes in for criticism as well, though gentler and more implicit: how often do we notice “the empty seats more than the full ones”? Much of our trouble with resources and lost influence since the demise of Christendom can be attributed to neglecting the deluge of resources with which we have been gifted.

Each of the book’s three parts attends to one of the forms of the body of Christ: Jesus, the church and the Eucharist. The first section offers extensive readings of John’s Gospel, attending to its insistence on the rich abundance that God gives in Jesus. Wells is a gifted reader of scripture, consistently seeing in Jesus’ parables retellings of the whole of salvation history: the pearl of great price is not the gospel, for example; it is the person treasured by God and bought in baptism.

The second and third sections, on the church and the Eucharist, crackle with insight into the moral life. Baptism is the natural context for the church to think through asexual reproduction, such as cloning, Wells suggests. The church's way of listening to the psalms and responding with joy is a context for thinking about abortion—a child's ability to kick in utero suggests the joy that marks creation's glory. The breaking of the eucharistic bread helps us to think about violence, for it shows the particular manner of God's sovereignty. At the two key moments of Jesus' life he is, "by nails and by swaddling clothes, literally disarmed. Jesus is God disarmed. The disarmed and disarming love of God. This is the sovereignty disclosed at the breaking of bread."

Wells's observations are peppered with pastoral insight for the local church: when two parties simply cannot reconcile (as the restoring practices of the church suggest they should), Wells encourages each to "do something beautiful" for the other that "transcends those circumstances by pointing toward a truth greater than sin."

There is plenty here to keep academics busy too. Wells's chapter on restoration opens not with the standard problem of theodicy, but with much bigger questions: "Why did God bother to create in the first place? The second mystery is why, given the mess his people made of things, did God continue to bother? . . . The third is perhaps the greatest mystery of all. Why do his people not bother—why can they not be bothered?" There's enough here to resituate an entire subfield within theology.

Wells regularly offers bald challenges to Christian ethics as well. The field ought not be about what is right or wrong in itself, but rather about the question of what builds up the church. For example, diversity is not primarily a matter of all people having the right to be present in or lead the church, but about the church itself needing all kinds of people in order to hear its diverse scripture aright. Stories of Mary and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, Peter and Cornelius suggest that the church needs pregnant and elderly and racially distinct persons present to hear scripture in its fullness. The key moment in ethics is not the deliberation before a difficult decision, but the long history in which one learns to take the right things for granted. If all this ever starts to feel too academic, Wells returns to a poignant example born of ecclesial experience: "If making the whole world a Eucharist is too broad or vague a commission, the place to start is by washing feet."

Amid this deluge of insight there is cause for a quibble or two. Wells's lists can occasionally feel plodding: three points on this, five chapters on that. He structures his work like Karl Barth did *Church Dogmatics*—he chooses major themes and then circles around them. Yet Barth allowed his prose to run wild and grow exuberant (to the tune of 10,000 pages). Wells could stand to let his language match the exuberance of the raucous God he describes. One also wishes occasionally for more in-depth wrestling with present-day issues. As soon as an insight into a contemporary moral concern is illuminated with a liturgical insight, we're on to the next point in the liturgy.

These criticisms are rooted in a desire to hear more from Wells—which we will be able to do shortly because he has several important books forthcoming. (He is also dean of Duke Chapel and professor of Christian ethics at Duke Divinity School; one wonders when he sleeps.) Thankfully, there is so much more to say.