

**Samuel Wells. *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. (viii + 232 pp.) [9781405120142]**

Samuel Wells is known to many for his earlier work *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (2004), in which he outlined a bold new way to conceive of Christian ethics as a dramatic participation in God's ongoing story and involvement with the world. In that work Wells constructed an ethic which was attractive and compelling, and yet left many readers with a sense of 'how do I *do* this though?' In *God's Companions* Wells provides a tour de force on how to live out a Christian ethic developed along the lines of improvisation. The work is divided into three parts. Part One is on the Body of Christ as Jesus and explores what it means to worship God in, with, and through Jesus Christ. Over three chapters Wells explores the themes of scripture and the role of memory, kingdom and the presence of hope, and the Holy Spirit and the presence of God. Part Two is on the Body of Christ as the Church and explores what it means to be called companions (friends) of God. Central to the development of this theme is the sacrament of baptism and its role of forming, incorporating, performing and restoring humanity to God. Part Three is on the body of Christ as the Eucharist and explores what it means to eat with God as we meet, hear, respond, share, and then go out into the world.

The contents of this book can be stated in a sentence: 'God gives his people everything they need to worship him, to be his friends, to eat with him.' Wells briefly explains each part of this statement in the Introduction. These three things form the basis of this book – God establishes a friendship with humans and this makes us 'God's companions.' Companions are friends of God (the church) and share table fellowship or commune with one another. Central to the realization of this companionship is Jesus Christ. Adopting Barth's statement Wells affirms a central axiom: 'God's original choice never to be except to be for us in Christ' (p. 1). Because of the incarnation God has access to humanity and humanity has access to God so that to be God's companions is the nature and destiny of humanity. This gives Wells' ethic a christological rigor and as such leads him to affirm that:

This study is an exercise in ecclesial ethics. It believes that God's call is to all people, but it does not take for granted that all people are therefore the same: it locates their sameness in their shared humanity with Christ, rather than in something significant they share with one another. It believes God's call

turns the world upside-down, but that that subversion finds its power not in numbers or guile but in running with the grain of the universe, that is along the contours of cross and resurrection, remembering God's surprises and anticipating God's transforming future (p. 4).

In order to recommend this ethic Wells adopts the method of description rather than comparison or persuasion. In his words, 'I simply intend to overwhelm the reader with examples' (p. 2). And this he does with grace and gravity. This is a work of beautiful prose where illustrations are eloquently retold, and the lives of many of God's companions - the often mundane and mangy - are held up as a lens through which the love of God in Christ shines. Wells is not simply an ethicist, he is a pastor and a poet. The ethic Wells adopts is a Christianized version of virtue ethics combined with a character ethic (see what he says about the fruit of the Spirit p. 49!), shaped by Christ and the Spirit, in which practices (what were once called 'habits') play a central role. The practices Wells recommends are those first enumerated in his *Improvisation*: status, overaccepting, and reincorporation. Being ethical is not simply doing the right things, it is being the right sort of people - God's companions - and on that basis, doing the right things for the right reasons, namely, worship, befriending, and eating (fellowshipping).

Those committed to a more deontological approach to ethics will find Wells' work confronting and perhaps frustrating. This sort of confrontation and challenge is essential if the church is to continue to explore what it means to follow Christ faithfully in the world. Throughout Part One especially Wells develops a fascinating account of God's abundance in contrast to our sin of only seeing scarcity. In the face of suffering, poverty, and pain Wells shows us in scripture, history, and today how God has provided all we need to worship him, be his friends, and eat with him. This leads him to conclude that 'Christian ethics is truly the practice of abundance' (p. 54). Whether or not Wells has answered all the questions raised in *Improvisation* will have to be left to the reader's judgment. Perhaps this was not his intent. He does say this present work has many gaps which something like the *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* is meant to fill. As such he considers *God's Companions* as a 'companion to the *Companion*' (p. 13). The work is heavily reliant on a liturgical ecclesial context, but even Baptists and other nonconformists will find this a treasure trove of insights and wisdom which may be applied to their contexts with little difficulty.

Questions notwithstanding, this is a truly outstanding work on ethics and, as Wells puts it: 'this book is intended to be a constant interweaving of display and challenge, enticing to inspire and dismissing to embody' (p. 12). May many take up and embody.

**Myk Habets**

**John A. Studebaker Jr. *The Lord is the Spirit: The Authority of the Holy Spirit in Contemporary Theology and Church Practice*. Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series 7. Oregon: Pickwick, 2008. (xiii + 391 pp.)**

Using Lloyd-Jones's 1958 work *Authority* as his catalyst, Studebaker sets out to define and articulate a doctrine of the authority of the Holy Spirit in evangelical theology, specifically to recover the authority of the Holy Spirit in and over the Church and to meet the challenges posed by postmodern misconceptions of 'Spirit'. Studebaker applies this doctrine to the church practically by showing how the Spirit's authority is brought to bear with respect to hermeneutics, the structure and guidance of the church, and Christian spirituality (p. 5). Motivated by the lack of direct articulation on the Spirit's authority Studebaker sets out to offer a 'new' doctrine of the Spirit's authority for those working within Evangelical commitments as opposed to modern and postmodern thinkers.

Following Ramm, Studebaker identifies the Christian *principle* of authority as 'the triune God in self-revelation', and the *pattern* of authority he presents as the Father as the *author* of revelation (establishing its authority), the Son is the *focus* of divine revelation (establishing its content), and the Spirit is the *revealer* and *executor* of divine revelation (revealing God's authority in the world) (pp. 9-10). Given these commitments the pattern of divine authority revealed in the New Testament now includes the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the sacred Scriptures which are inspired by the Spirit and witness to Christ. Thus Studebaker follows Ramm in keeping the reciprocity between Word and Spirit in the closest proximity. This is clarified through a historical survey in which the *filioque* is affirmed and a generally Reformed perspective is adopted.