Introduction

Summary of the Argument

Improvisation in the theater is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear. *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* is a study of how the church may become a community of trust in order that it may faithfully encounter the unknown of the future without fear. It is a treatment of how the story and practices of the church shape and empower Christians with the uninhibited freedom sometimes experienced by theatrical improvisers. It is an account of the development of trust in self, church, and God. In the process it is a renarration of Christian ethics, not as the art of performing the Scriptures but as faithfully improvising on the Christian tradition.

Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics is in three parts. In the first part I propose that improvisation is an appropriate mode in which to understand the nature and purpose of Christian ethics. In the second part I outline six practices that characterize improvisation in the theater and that I suggest might characterize Christian ethics also. In the third part I offer four examples of how these practices enable Christians and the church to engage with particularly significant contexts and issues.

In proposing that improvisation is a helpful way in which to understand the practice of Christian ethics, I take the argument in four stages. The first stage, chapter 1, questions the notion of "ethics" as a discrete discipline by showing through a sweeping historical narrative that what constitutes ethics has always been subject to the church's understanding of God and to its location in society more generally. Thus the rest of this volume, being concerned with ethics, will always have an eye to the imitation of God's action and the recognition of the social location of the church. The second stage, chapter 2, takes another broad sweep, this time across the

contemporary field of Christian ethics. I distinguish between three strands, universal, subversive, and ecclesial, locating the present study in the third strand. I then maintain that an ecclesial ethic is properly characterized by a narrative understanding of doctrine. This leaves the third stage, chapter 3, with the burden of showing that, given that it portrays the action of God and the nature of human response, doctrine, particularly in an ethical vein, is inherently dramatic, rather than simply narrative, in character. Here I set my argument alongside those of others who have argued this point, and I outline the broad dimensions of the Christian drama. Finally I break new ground in proposing that even drama is too static an understanding of theological ethics. Ethics cannot be simply about rehearsing and repeating the same script and story over and over again, albeit on a fresh stage with new players. This does not do sufficient justice to the unfolding newness of each moment of creation. The Bible is not so much a script that the church learns and performs as it is a training school that shapes the habits and practices of a community. This community learns to take the right things for granted, and on the basis of this faithfulness, it trusts itself to improvise within its tradition. Improvisation means a community formed in the right habits trusting itself to embody its tradition in new and often challenging circumstances; and this is exactly what the church is called to do.

In outlining the practices of theatrical improvisers and showing how they inform and describe the discernment and practice of a Christian community, I develop six modes of activity. I begin in chapter 5 with the vital role in ethics of the formation of habits. Ethics is not about being clever in a crisis but about forming a character that does not realize it has been in a crisis until the “crisis” is over. It is just the same for improvisers in the theater. Improvisation is not about being spontaneous and witty in the moment, but about trusting oneself to do and say the obvious. The key to both ethics and improvisation is what the players regard as obvious, and thus the real issues in both lie in the imagination. In chapter 6 I reflect on status, a key notion in improvisation, and a neglected notion in Christian ethics. I suggest the benefits that consideration of status might make to writing on Christian ethics and offer humorous examples to demonstrate the significance and the universality of status transactions. In chapter 7 I describe perhaps the foundational notions in theatrical improvisation, those of accepting and blocking offers. I begin to suggest how these notions help to display the frustrations of much ethics in the contemporary context. Chapter 8 is a more

theoretical chapter, less explicitly linked to specific practices in improvisation, but necessary to the argument because it explores the difference between gifts and givens, which is central to the subsequent chapter. In a sense, chapters 7 and 8 are introductory chapters to chapter 9, perhaps the key chapter in the book. In chapter 9 I outline the practice of overaccepting, in which a community fits a new action or concept into a larger narrative, into the greater drama of what God is doing in the world. Finally, in chapter 10, I introduce the second key practice, reincorporation. This is an eschatological practice in which discarded elements in the drama are woven back into the story, and it is particularly appropriate in relation to those whom Jesus' Jubilee came to restore.

By this stage the community of readers is perhaps yearning for worked examples of how these practices may shape their imagination and habits. In part 3 I have two aims in mind. The first aim is to show that the practices I commend, though they have not been given these names before, are not "original." I am not trying to commend "a new way of doing ethics," but to offer a coherent and suggestive series of practices that describe what the church's faithful social response has always been. And so I have taken two contexts in which particular authors have, like me, tried to show what faithful discipleship means under extreme pressure, and I have demonstrated how these authors' understanding of faithfulness is almost exactly the same as what I have portrayed, albeit without the explicit categories I am proposing. I begin with William Cavanaugh's remarkable discussion of the role of the Roman Catholic Church in Chile under the Pinochet regime. I chose this treatment because, after several years of outlining to individuals and groups the practices of improvisation and their significance for Christian ethics, the most common response is anxiety that I am advocating that the church capitulate to evil, or at least offer no robust response to it. Cavanaugh's book is exactly on this theme: how does the contemporary church engage with human evil? I have no intention in this chapter of providing a comprehensive, objectively balanced account of Chile in these years: I quote no other source, although I am aware that many Christians in Chile during this period saw events rather differently. My point is simply to show that a respected scholar, in a widely acclaimed treatment concerning this key context of the church's role in relation to political oppression, advocates a series of perceptions and proposals that resemble my own argument remarkably closely.

The second example is not so much about human sin as about flawed creation. It considers what it means to cope with acute mental and physical neediness. The chapter centers on the experience of the theologian Frances Young in bringing up a son who has multiple special needs. But partly because seeing the story entirely through the parent's eyes causes problems in relation to my understanding of status, and partly because a comparison of the issues of illness and disability seemed constructive, I have treated Margaret Spufford's account of her own and her daughter's severe illnesses alongside the story of Frances and Arthur Young. Again the principal aim here is not to shed new light on how Christians and the church engage with these distressing contexts, but simply to display how faithful treatments of these issues already follow the pattern of reflection to which this book seeks to give more systematic expression.

In the last two chapters I make constructive engagements with two further issues. Unlike the two previous, they do not threaten to destroy faith and/or the church: on the contrary they offer to take away frustrating limitations to human life and promise a flourishing future. One is the question of human cloning, which promises to overcome the limitations of the human body and bring a kind of salvation short of heaven. The other is the case of genetically modified foods, which promise to solve the world's food shortages at a stroke. The response to these issues in Christian circles has not been coherent, and the arguments used have in many cases not been theological ones. My treatments in these two chapters are an attempt both to use the practices proposed in this book to portray a theological response to these issues and meanwhile to test this book's proposals in two contexts of pressing public concern.

What This Book Is

As I have talked with individuals and groups about the relation of theological ethics to theatrical improvisation over the last ten years I have been aware of a variety of enthusiasms and anxieties evoked by the subject, some of which are central to the concern of this study, but many of which belong elsewhere. Many of these reactions concern the popular understanding of the term "improvisation" and the associations it provokes in people's imaginations. But there are a number of other concerns

frequently expressed, and I have already referred to the misplaced anxiety that I am suggesting that the church has no response in the face of aggressive human evil. The purpose of this and the next section are to attempt to address some of these concerns so as to enable the community of readers to engage with the argument with an imagination characterized more by expectation than by suspicion.

This book is an essay in theological ethics. That is to say, it doubts that there is such a thing as an ethic to which anyone can subscribe, regardless of tradition. It sees the principal role of Christian ethics as describing how Christians have formed habits by maintaining a tradition over centuries, largely embodied in written texts and in key practices, particularly the practices of worship. Christian ethics is not about helping anyone act Christianly in a crisis, but about helping Christians embody their faith in the practices of discipleship all the time.

This is an essay in constructive Christian ethics. A whole generation of writers in Christian ethics has spent the last three decades establishing the principles outlined in the previous paragraph.[1] Much of this work has been in critical mode, exposing the internal flaws in more conventional modes of ethical writing and pointing out that these modes left much to be desired from the point of view of faithful Christian discipleship. While I touch on these debates in the first four chapters, the purpose of this book is not to go over those debates again. It is to describe constructively what Christian ethics might now look like, in an era where character, narrative, imagination, worship, nonviolence, and the voice of the excluded are taken seriously as themes that shape the discourse.[2]

This is a constructive essay that values the place of the imagination in ethics.[3] It assumes that essential to a notion of the kingdom of God is a perception that things might be different from how they are. In other words, when a community is in Christ, there are no “givens,” no nonnegotiable facts about existence that one must simply accept, other than the great gift of the gospel.[4] To be a Christian is to see the gift of the gospel as one’s only given. This is whence the church derives its power. It is not constrained by a conventional “realist” list of “givens”; it exists in a wonderful moment of possibility, in the Easter moment of resurrection, when all things are possible but not all things, on this side of the eschaton, have yet happened. Thus it is appropriate that the central section of the book has plenty of humor, because that humor should be a feature of the

inbreaking kingdom. It is to inspire that sense of wonder and joy, that playful, spirited sense of possibility, and to inspire those practices that flow from it and renew it, that this book has been written.

This essay seeks to inspire the imagination of communities. It is assumed that a healthy community has a blend of thinkers and doers, of practitioners and reflectors. This is designed to be a book that brings together academic theologians, those in formal ministries, and those whose vocation is to serve the church in a more conventional career but who seek to do so in theologically informed ways. My hope is that the academy, the altar, and the marketplace will all find in this book a reason, an encouragement, and a method for exploring their theological imagination together. Hence I have carefully located my proposal within the contemporary academic discourse and used a minimum of jargon; but when justification for bolder claims is required, I have used the appropriate apparatus to support them. The use of both academic argument and accessible illustration is intended to draw Christians into conversation, to foster the discerning communities that the argument seeks to empower. The assumption of the argument—which is made explicit in chapter 13—is that the unit of Christian ethics, the "body" whose integrity and flourishing it seeks to promote, is not the individual or the world but the church. The body that matters is the body of Christ. The last thing this book is intended to make possible is the ability of the detached ironic observer to make pleasing patterns with the world's stories and assumptions in order to support a clever disengaged superiority. The retreat into the indulgently cerebral is a denial of the incarnation; theological reflection must always be in a spiraling dialogue with embodied community. This has been the context in which this book has taken shape. The only reason why the reflection on the author's contexts has not been materially incorporated into this volume is that plenty of such reflection has been published elsewhere and there comes a time when discussion of current lived communities of faith needs to stop out of respect for those communities' ability to live under God and not under the constant intrusive scrutiny of theologians.[5]

This essay seeks to explore how the Bible can shape the imagination of communities in ways that lead to fruitful corporate life. It stands, humbly, in the tradition of writers such as Hans Frei, David Kelsey, and George Lindbeck, who have sought to trace how the broadly narrative character of the Bible can shape the imagination of the reading community.[6] It may

then be asked how I can justify using extrascriptural categories (the six practices of improvisation) in an essay that seeks to affirm the central place of the Bible in Christian ethics. I have two answers to this. The first is that I see these practices of improvisation as true to the narrative of Scripture, and I have accordingly sought to illustrate my argument from scriptural stories and church history at every stage. Overaccepting is at the heart of the incarnation and the resurrection; reincorporation is at the heart of the parousia and the kingdom of God; status transactions are all over narratives like the Joseph saga and Jesus' passion; forming habits is what Paul's letters are constantly appealing to his readers to do.

The second answer is that I see the biggest danger in the use of the Bible in ethics in the church is to make it some kind of Gnostic system of law or philosophy, which exists primarily in the mind of the believer and in the believer's personal life of devotion. The practices of improvisation I see as helpful because they foster a process of communal discernment and practice, and it is this, rather than written documents, that I see as the heart of the church's life. In other words I see the Bible as making the conversation that is Christian ethics possible, rather than concentrating on command and making conversation impossible.

Last, this essay seeks to inspire the imagination of communities in such a way that it renews their engagement with the pressing issues of the world around them. Some strands in theological ethics have attracted an unfortunate and unjustified label of being "sectarian." This volume takes for granted that interaction with all that is in God's world that has not yet recognized his sovereignty is a dimension of almost everything the church does—and the chapter on status makes clear that the church does not engage in this interaction with any sense of superiority or distaste. To withdraw from engagement with wider society on the grounds of the preservation of purity or dedication to holy living would not be in the spirit of the incarnation, in which Jesus, fully human, interacted with all kinds of people, the devoted, the hostile, and the indifferent. But meanwhile to advocate engagement without also clarifying the character and identity of the church that engages would not be in the spirit of the cross, which constantly reminds the Christian that following Jesus will in the end lead to conflict and suffering. This book is intended to inspire engagement, but also to sustain the church when that engagement is demanding.

What This Book Is Not

This book is not saying that Scripture and tradition count for nothing in ethics, or that improvising means spontaneous anarchic autonomy without regard to serious outcomes. That much should be abundantly clear already, but the popular perception of improvisation dies hard, so it is worth stating this denial explicitly. Christian ethics and theatrical improvisation are both about years of steeping in a tradition so that the body is so soaked in practices and perceptions that it trusts itself in community to do the obvious thing. This book sets out to be an imaginative, suggestive, and stimulating contribution, but not a revolutionary one. At the heart of its argument is the assumption that these practices have been true to the faithful discipleship of the church since the beginning.

This book is not an anthropological study in how human beings in specific contexts conduct certain forms of behavior that come under the general term improvisation. I make no claims for whether improvisation is a helpful term for understanding ethics in general. My claim is simply that its disciplines and practices resemble the disciplines and practices of Christian ethics sufficiently closely that a detailed treatment may be highly illuminating. It is for others to judge whether improvisation is a helpful category for ethics in general. My expectation is that, unless one is assuming that there is a tradition to which a community is endeavoring to be faithful, and unless there is a certain mischievous and subversive character to that tradition, improvisation will have little to offer. I take Christianity to be that kind of mischievous and subversive tradition.

Neither is this study a detailed exploration of the role of the theater in relation to Christian theology and ethics. When I use the term “theatrical improvisation” I do so to refer to the methods and traditions employed by actors when they improvise; I make no wider study of the theater, nor do I reflect in any serious detail on notions such as the stage, the audience, and the author in relation to either theater or ethics. Nonetheless there are some practices of the theater, such as rehearsal, that do seem germane to this study, and I refer to them in chapters 3 and 4.

Perhaps most importantly, this essay is not a consideration of musical improvisation. The analogy between the way improvisation may be seen in Christian doctrine and the way it is practiced by skilled instrumentalists in an orchestra or jazz quartet has been considered by a number of authors. I

have nothing to add to their work, not just because of its thoroughness, but more importantly because I simply have no qualifications to do so—my grasp of musical practice being so limited.[7]

I confess a certain frustration that, when a constructive interest in improvisation is taken, attention often quickly focuses on preaching. Preaching is a vital aspect of worship, and is an important practice in the shaping of the church. But to focus on the preacher as the one who improvises on the scriptural text is to miss two significant dimensions that this study seeks to highlight. One is that improvisation is not primarily about words: the first two practices I note, forming habits and assessing status, are not primarily cerebral or verbal practices. The second is that improvisation is a corporate activity: preaching always presupposes a period of corporate discernment and embodiment, which in most church services lasts little longer than the time it takes for the preacher to return to the stall. This study considers that process of corporate discernment and embodiment as central to the mission and worship of the church.

This book is not intended as a comprehensive survey of the conventional pantheon of issues in Christian ethics. It does conclude with four studies of particular contexts and issues. The first two are intended as illustrations and the final two as worked examples, but there is no attempt to apply the theoretical exposition to the full range of issues habitually discussed in classrooms and home groups and consultation documents and textbooks. It will no doubt emerge that the methods advocated in this study work more straightforwardly for some “issues” than for others. There is no panacea for resolving tragic questions of what to do when whatever one does seems to be wrong. This book is not proposing a new and rigid system for treating all issues in ethics: it will be seen that the different practices are taken in a different order in each of the final four chapters, as appropriate to the issue in question. It needs to be remembered that this study is part of a more general movement that is trying to move the center of gravity in Christian ethics away from “issues” toward the formation of habitual assumptions and practices. Concentration on “issues” implies that the church and the world are swimming along together nicely, and that it is only when one or the other approaches some rocks (declaration of war, innovation in biotechnology) that enquiry needs to begin. I am assuming that such an easy coexistence can never be the perception of the Christian community—that the world (and the church) is riven by sin, abounding in fear, mistrust,

injustice, inequality, unreconciled relationships, and unacknowledged grace, and altogether far from the glory and enjoyment of God for which it was made. Any engagement with "issues" can only be in the context of a more general response to this alienation from God and the kingdom, which the church exists to address.

And again, lest it not be obvious, this volume is under no illusions about the flawed character of the church itself. In every generation the church has confronted—or has been forced to confront—the fact that its own practice has sometimes been worse than—or indistinguishable from—that of those forces in society that have taken God's freedom not yet to believe. This generation is no different. And yet the gifts God has given for redemption—himself in his Son and the Spirit, the Scripture and the sacraments, the hope of the kingdom and the practices of mercy—are ever new, and salvation without recourse to them is no salvation at all. This essay is a consideration of how to use the gifts God has given for the church to participate in the salvation and the redemption of the world; but it knows how clumsy the church can be in using those gifts.

Ethics: The Practice of God and the Practices of the Church

Enough of loosening the muscles and clearing the throat: it is time to begin. As the community of readers ponders the chapters that are to follow, it may be helpful to bear in mind one insight from Mark's Gospel as a signature tune to accompany the words.

Mark's Gospel comes in two halves.[8] There is a description of Jesus' ministry, largely in Galilee, and his acclaim by some and rejection by others. And there is a passion narrative, beginning with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Each of these halves has a key parable early on, which shapes the readers' understanding of the events and characters that follow. In the first half of the Gospel the key parable is the sower (4:3–20). The sower parable tries to come to terms with why not everyone responds to the gospel with glee. Satan carries off some (the scribes and Pharisees); others are crippled by fear (the disciples); others simply love other things more than the gospel (Herod, the rich young man). How does God address the problem of human resistance to the gospel? He *overwhelms* the land with a superabundant harvest. He does not destroy but astonishes. In the second

half of the Gospel the key parable is the tenants in the vineyard (12:1–12). This parable tries to come to terms with why Jesus is about to be killed by the very people he came to save. It places him in a long tradition of those who proclaimed God's sovereignty to Israel. It knows he will, like them, be rejected. How does God address this profound human wastefulness of his gifts? He stops giving more gifts but *uses the ones they have thrown away.* The stone that the builders rejected becomes the cornerstone.

These represent God's two primary ways of working in Mark's Gospel. In the incarnation he overwhelms humanity with the abundance of his grace. And in the resurrection he uses what humanity has rejected to save humanity. The first kind describes what in this book I call overaccepting. The second kind describes what in this book I call reincorporation. They are the two most significant practices in improvisation. If they are the way God works in his gospel, should they not be the principal ways in which the church seeks to imitate him? That is the thesis of this book.