IMPROVISATION

The Drama of Christian Ethics

Samuel Wells
With a New Afterword by Wesley Vander Lugt
and Benjamin D. Wayman

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• To Jo •

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Preface to the 2018 Edition

In 2004 I thanked the good company of those who had offered me opportunities to explore in detail the ideas raised in this book. I thought of many groups, classes, and congregations who had engaged and challenged me, but especially of the following: Clare Goddard and the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich; Ben Quash, Nick Adams, and the students of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge; Michael Stagg and the clergy and people of his deanery in Norwich; Wanda Standley and the students of Emmaus House, Norwich; Jo Wells and the community of Clare College, Cambridge; Stephen Barton and the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics; and Jeremy Begbie, Trevor Hart, and the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts in St. Andrews. I also expressed gratitude for the support of Graham James and David Atkinson in perceiving the connections between this project and the program of social and spiritual regeneration in which I was engaged in Norwich.

I was particularly grateful for those who made this a better book than it would otherwise have been by reading and commenting on chapters and by offering expert advice. Ann Loades took the original idea seriously. Rick Simpson and Ben Quash offered early dialogue. Lynda Waterson and Rex Walford offered timely comments, especially on the theatrical dimensions of the argument. Jo Hartley and Philip Jones improved the chapter on human cloning considerably. David Warbrick, Mary Ellen Ashcroft, and Craig Hovey provided helpful comments on style. And Rodney Clapp and Rebecca Cooper at Brazos Press proved to be marvelous editors.

I was most grateful of all for those without whom there would have been no book. John Inge introduced me to the work of Keith Johnstone at a time when Stanley Hauerwas was beginning to do for me what I hoped this book

would do for its readers. Jo Wells always knew that behind the sometimes desultory offers of her pusillanimous husband lay a yearning author seeking permission. And Ernie Ashcroft told me to cut out the excuses, sit down, and just write the thing.

Now, fourteen years later, I am very happy to recognize that this book has indeed had the effect on many of its readers that Keith Johnstone's work originally did on me. I am grateful for the imagination of Dave Nelson at Baker Academic for perceiving it was time for an updated edition. When I looked over the first edition, I realized that, while I still speak to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I no longer speak of God in gendered ways. I also realized that some of the language I use to refer to sexuality has changed, and for assorted reasons in a handful of other places, the vocabulary or expression no longer seemed as felicitous as it once had. There were one or two examples that no longer seemed well chosen or that professors revealed sat uncomfortably with some readers. But looking over the first edition, I was surprised to find that on the whole I still held to the convictions expressed in it.

I am thrilled and delighted with the work of Wesley Vander Lugt and Ben Wayman in conceiving, crafting, and compiling such a winsome and intriguing afterword. Ben and Wes are particularly apt writers of the afterword because they represent the two communities within which the book seems to have had the most lasting resonance. Ben was a member of the class I taught at Duke Divinity School in the fall of 2006. Many of that class, and of my students then and subsequently, have gone on to far-flung lives, ministries, and careers but continue to tell me and to display in their personal narratives the indelible influence of this book in shaping their moral imaginations. Wes I hardly knew, but he wrote a PhD on drama, theology, and improvisation, which, among much else, helpfully described how this book played a role in triggering what he calls the "theatrical turn" in contemporary theology. He represents the community of scholars for whom this book is part of a subdiscipline in contemporary theological ethics.

It's hard to believe now, but the main reason why it took so long to sit down and write this book was that for a good while I thought it would best be presented as a series of workshop outlines for group study. What happened was that instead I wrote the book, and my students and readers have created those workshops, formally or informally, in their classrooms, parishes, communities, and lives. That it has thus become a blessing not just to me but to them and to those they serve and encounter is a greater joy than I could have imagined fourteen years ago.

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 over many years with individuals and groups about the relation of theological ethics to theatrical improvisation, 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 several 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 when 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 God's 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—the 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 is an essay written in awareness of 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? By *overwhelming* the land with a superabundant harvest. God 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 abundant gifts? Not by giving more gifts but by *using 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 humanity is overwhelmed with the abundance of grace. And in the resurrection God 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 the gospel, should they not be the principal ways in which the church seeks to do likewise? That is the thesis of this book.

Part 1

PLOWING

1

Ethics as Theology

Aristotle and the Early Church

This chapter tells the story of how Christian ethics came to be where it is today.

Aristotle saw humans as political beings.[1] He saw the city-state as the unit of corporate life. Human flourishing lay in the appropriate conduct of these corporate relationships. This is politics. Politics concerns the discovery of common goods that would not have been identifiable without the discussions between people who might otherwise think of themselves as strangers. Politics thus makes possible the art of resolving issues in ways that do not lead to violence. Nonetheless Aristotle regards violence as inevitable too, and the virtues he commends are ones that are particularly suited to the soldier.

There are four significant statements here, of which the early church found two straightforward to accommodate, two more difficult. It was straightforward, first, to share Aristotle's assumption that human flourishing is best understood corporately. Paul's proposals to the Corinthians are that they consider what will build up the church. His frustration with them is that the stories he has heard about them concern destructive activities that are bound to be very damaging to corporate life. The notion of *polis*, city, could thus with some ease be translated into the notion of *ekklesia*, assembly (or church).

More difficult, second, was the character of the city-state. Humans may well be political, but this was not to be, for Christians, an abiding city. The New Testament was based around two stories: the journey of Jesus and his companions to Jerusalem, bearing the cross, and the journey of Paul and

his companions to Rome, bearing the gospel. The *ekklesia* was a tent not a castle: it was not built on abiding foundations. The people of God were a pilgrim people—traveling light, on the move. Jerusalem was no longer the focus of the Promised Land; its temple was no longer the place where sin was forgiven and grace restored. Israel had lived by spatial notions of home and exile. The church was to transform these into temporal notions of past atonement and future reunion.

For a people sharing a common journey, Aristotle's third conviction, that of virtue, was particularly appropriate. Virtue is a kind of power, the power of being good at something—a power that cannot be acquired overnight. Virtues are derived from repeated practices that a community continually performs because it regards them as central to its identity. Repeated practice nurtures skill, an excellence that derives from repeated performance. Skill develops habit, a disposition to use skills on occasions and in locations different from the times and places where the skill was developed. Habit develops instinct, a pattern of unconscious behavior that reveals a deep element of character. This is the language of virtue. The early church quickly developed key practices that became central to its identity. Chief among these were baptism and the Eucharist. The virtues required for a pilgrim people were ones that could be derived from a correct understanding and performance of such practices. A community like the Corinthians who were not practicing the Eucharist faithfully had little prospect of developing the subsequent virtues of justice, temperance, and love.

Where the early church most decisively parted company with Aristotle was in his fourth assumption, that virtue was bound to be shaped by violence.[2] Pilate gave the crowd in the Praetorium a significant choice. They could take Barabbas, the man who offered a rapid solution through seizing control, or they could take Jesus, who claimed to be already a king. They chose Barabbas, but the early church chose Jesus. Thus the early Christians' paradigm of virtue was not the soldier embodying the love of power but the martyr embodying the power of love. To the powerful Roman Empire, citizens who would not take up arms to defend the state were more insidious than revolutionaries who took up arms to destroy it.

The emergence of the church exposed what Aristotle had taken for granted. Now the character of the church was to be transformed, as in the fourth century the Roman Emperor and, in due course, the whole empire embraced the formerly subversive Christians. This revolution gradually exposed what the early church had taken for granted. The early church believed that its own fragile and vulnerable state was deceptive. In fact Christ had conquered the powers by his death and resurrection and ruled as sovereign. They demonstrated this faith

by maintaining nonviolence, the practice of confronting evil using only the weapons that Christ himself used. The early Christians also believed that they were a distinct people with a special vocation. Their form of life was dictated by no criterion other than faithfulness to Christ. This identity was expressed in baptism. They believed their common life and servant practice were at the heart of the gospel. They believed their calling was to show what kind of life was possible when communities lived in the light of God's providence, and they embodied this faith in their celebration of the Eucharist.

The Sources of a Reasonable and Useful Church

The new Christian empire challenged these three assumptions. It challenged the commitment to nonviolence. Loyalty to the empire became the test of loyalty to Christ. One could hardly be loyal to the empire if one was not prepared to fight on its behalf; and in any case the struggles of the empire were in the service of Christ. Thus whereas for the early church faith in God's sovereignty was expressed by nonviolence, for the church under the Christian empire faith in God's sovereignty required fighting God's battles.

Likewise the identity of the church was transformed.[3] Far from being an often-persecuted minority, it became the government. Baptism gradually ceased to be a statement of membership of another country and became an affirmation of citizenship of the empire. The church became the arbiter of truth and justice for all people, not just those who by commitment and conviction shared its faith. The church became invisible.

And the heart of the gospel shifted. From being located in the common life of a pilgrim people seeking to discern God's providence in their interactions with one another and the world, it came to be located in the imperial palace. Now that a Christian at last had the opportunity to exercise authority, the significant aspects of the New Testament seemed to be those that best informed the use of power. Thus the paradigm of the Christian moved from martyr to soldier or magistrate, and the beginning of Christian life moved from baptism to birth.

The Christian empire did not have long to develop these assumptions. The barbarian invasions and the breakdown of the Western empire took away the security offered by a single rule and a single faith. Christian life became a specialist pursuit, particularly associated with those in monastic communities and the ordained life, together with outstanding individuals, including Christian kings. Once again, the assumptions of a previous era were exposed. There was no longer the hope that one individual could unite Christendom

under godly rule. The location of the gospel thus moved again, this time to the monastery. The conflict with the pagan and Muslim world meant that baptism was a statement of allegiance, and violence was a necessary resort to ensure survival. There was a deep sense of a precious civilization that had been lost; whether that world had been one in which the church had been faithful seemed not to be the key question.

The revival of the culture of western Europe that followed this turbulent period was based partly on the recovery of much of the classical heritage. The culture of the church was a mixture of the culture of the two previous eras. In some respects Christian life exuded the confidence of a powerful Christian ruler, a secure citizenship of an earthly kingdom, and a philosophical assurance that the fruits of human reason coalesced harmoniously with the gifts of divine revelation. In other respects Christian life seemed a precarious struggle against the pervasive enemies of war, famine, and disease, and consequently future judgment, promising heaven and threatening hell, proved the greatest stimulus to faithful living.[4]

The great conflicts within and between states and nations that erupted in the wake of the Reformation illustrated the rival notions of Christian life and the rival sociologies derived from them. The new world that emerged in western Europe in the seventeenth century once again exposed the assumptions of its predecessors. The two rival cultures of the Middle Ages, as I have described them—the secure and the precarious—shared an underlying sense of their place in history. They both understood that the classical period was a golden era, and that the more that could be recovered from it, the richer life would be. (They differed over the extent to which that was possible.) But now a new perception arose: progress. Scientific and philosophical developments encouraged the notion that the golden era might lie in the future, not the past. Salvation lay not in archaeology and theology but in biology and geology.

Religious wars appeared to have seriously dented the moral authority of Christianity.[5] But in any case the movement was away from maintaining authority in external institutions, seeking instead to locate it in the moral individual. The seeds of salvation were now regarded as lying within the self, in the moral law written on every heart; those seeds were no longer assumed to lie outside the self, in the possession of one institution, the church. The drama of the universe ceased to be God's unfathomable forces of life, death, and judgment, and the church's negotiation of them through the preaching of the biblical narrative and the ministration of the sacraments. Now the center of attention was the human individual, the new self, and the drama was humanity's struggle to know and command its environment.

When the center of gravity lay in the common life of the church, the Christian life consisted of faithful participation in the practices of that body in the light of the story of Israel and Jesus. When the center of gravity moved to the seat of political power, the Christian life was directed to ensuring that political power was governed by a greater authority. When the center of gravity was a lost and mourned golden era, a valid Christian life could be offered as a lone heroic gesture amid the encircling gloom. But when the whole notion of external authority and definitive practices was questioned, how could Christianity maintain a call on the new center of gravity—the choosing individual?

Many denied that anything had changed. It was still possible to argue that the center of gravity was political power. After all, the church remained visible at or near the center of government in many western nations. But for those who realized that the church's feast was over, there were two ways of ensuring that Christianity maintained a place at the table. One way was to show that Christian faith was reasonable. Thus there was much work in historical and archaeological veins to demonstrate that the story told in the Bible was plausible and broadly (or wholly) true. Meanwhile there began to be work in a more psychological vein designed to show that religious experience was often genuine and may well correspond to the philosophical claims of the church. The other way was to demonstrate that Christianity was useful. It became common to show how the historical Jesus embodied and espoused the virtues most highly valued by contemporary society; the church could be seen as a community of ordered love promoting a society of sustainable peace. In short, whether or not Christianity was true, it certainly made people behave better. In an industrializing society where the ability of the urban poor to organize themselves was ever increasing, this argument proved very attractive to many of those in power.

These two strategies for securing the abiding relevance of Christianity, reasonableness and utility, share some assumptions. They share a sense that the convictions of the early church are largely unhelpful for informing ethical debate today. An ethic that is based on God's sovereignty, on the affirmation of the distinct identity of the church, of the significance of its practices of baptism and the Eucharist—these convictions are seldom introduced into contemporary ethical discussion. If the center of ethics is the choosing individual, the theories that will prove reasonable and useful are those that make no distinction between persons and treat circumstances and issues regardless of the identities and characters of the people facing them, regardless of notions of overarching providence or everlasting destiny, regardless of the habitual activities of those involved. In this form of argument there may be a valid place for Christianity, as a system and tradition of thought that advocates certain

values, but there is little or no place for the church—for the church, like all corporate institutions, seems to represent the tradition of external authority, which has been rejected by contemporary ethical thinking.

The two strategies do, however, differ in a way similar to the way I have described the difference between the Middle Ages and the modern era. The former looked back to restore a lost security, whereas the latter looked forward to establish a new possibility. The claim that Christianity is reasonable is based largely on the reliability of its historical evidence. It is thus principally a retrospective argument. It corresponds with the conviction that ethics is an intrinsic matter, that is, actions are inherently right or wrong in themselves. This intrinsic view of ethics accords with the notion that a natural law, or law of created order, has been established, and the moral life is simply a matter of identifying it and sticking to it. Even when all theological reference is removed from the description of natural law, there is still a strong retrospective force at work. The sense is that there *is* a proper state of things, which *has always been so*, and that departing from it will violate, infringe, or unbalance this proper state.

By contrast the claim that Christianity is useful is not so much an appeal to the past as a commendation for the future. It is principally a prospective argument. It corresponds with the conviction that ethics is an extrinsic matter, that is, that actions are not necessarily right or wrong in themselves, but they should be judged by the likelihood of their bringing about desirable outcomes. This extrinsic view of ethics accords with the assumption that the person acting is the center of the moral universe, and that there is no agreed moral good other than the free activity of each individual so long as it does not impinge upon the free activity of another individual. It is the task of individuals to take their destiny in their own hands. The future is a land of opportunity that can be secured by appropriate action in particular circumstances.

These two approaches, the intrinsic (or deontological) and the extrinsic (or consequential), are the two principal forms of ethical argument today. They are the contemporary "establishment," the norm in reference to which any other approach must define itself. The former could be called "ethics for anyone," since it sees the individual as a universal category, the principles of whose actions could apply to anyone, anywhere, at any time. The latter could be called "ethics for everyone," since it has a more democratic impulse, looking for outcomes that suit the most people in the most circumstances.

These are not the only approaches. They rest on the assumption that ethics is "for anyone and everyone," that the same principles and procedures apply to all people in all situations. But as the modern era gives way to the postmodern, a growing number of voices point out the suppressed power

relations that underlie these approaches. The ideology of "ethics for everybody" is challenged by the conviction of "ethics for the excluded." Feminist ethics, for example, points out the way conventional approaches frequently confirm the marginalization of women. Other voices speak with and for people excluded by race, class, or sexual orientation. Some of these advocates are modernists, as concerned for individual expression as the conventional approaches—they simply want individual liberty to be extended more justly. They accept the notion of ethics for anyone and everyone, but they want to see equality established so this ethics can take effect. Others regard the excluded group rather as the early Christians saw the church—as a minority community whose practices offer a rival model to the patterns of mainstream society. Environmental ethics extends the representation of the voiceless to the animal, vegetable, and mineral order. Sometimes these and other ethical issues are pursued by particular interest groups as single-issue questions. This represents a loss of confidence in the just conduct of the legislative process; it bypasses party politics in an effort to focus justice on particular questions isolated from all other considerations. It thus recalls some of the cultural breakdown that followed the demise of the western Roman Empire.

Recovering the Resources of Church History for Ethics

The foregoing account has told the story of Christian ethics in six broad eras. For the ease of the narrative (I make no broader claim) I have called these eras early church, Christian empire, decay of empire, Middle Ages, modern, and postmodern. Each of the eras has its own characteristics and assumptions about the nature of the Christian life. Each era emerges from and overlaps with its predecessor. The contemporary scene in Christian ethics is made up of remnants of all the previous eras. There are those who are guided by the modern need to make Christianity reasonable and useful, as a discipline that seeks understanding that suits all people in all situations. There are those who seek to rescue some cause of righteousness amid the chaos of contemporary life. There are some who seek an ethic for rulers, perceiving the church's role as guiding the ethical conduct of government. And there are those who concentrate on faithfulness and common life, whether as the early church understood it or in a new quasi church of marginalized values.

The approach advocated in this book seeks to learn from all of these developments. With the emerging postmodern era, it acknowledges the difficulty of doing "ethics for everybody." It recognizes the tendency of overarching systems to marginalize particular groups. With the modern era, it understands

the tension between the Christian tradition and the prevalent emphasis on the thinking individual as the subject of ethical reflection. With the medieval period, it takes seriously the notion of judgment and the precarious characteristics of the Christian life. With the era of the decay of empire, it values the place of exceptional lives of holiness as signs of hope. With the Constantinian period, it accepts the need for the church to recognize its political power. But the era with which it has most in common is that of the early church.

In common with the early church this book's approach seeks first to understand ethics specifically for Christians, rather than more generally "for everybody." It restores baptism, rather than birth, as the entry point to the body in question. Because of this it attends to Aristotle's notion of virtue. This is by way of recognizing that ethics is about making good people who live faithfully, rather than about guiding actions so that any person can act rightly. Ethics is about forming lives of commitment, rather than informing lives without commitment. In common with the early church this approach seeks also to understand the common life of the church, its internal "politics," and its relationships with all who are not its members as the heart of God's concern. It restores the Eucharist not just as a sacrament sealing salvation, but also as a practice forming the habits and instincts of the common life of the body. By attention to the regular details of life, it emphasizes that the approach to apparent crises of decision lies in attending to the regular habits and practices already embodied by the community. Dependence on God's providence is a demonstration of faith that, in Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the Father has already given the church all it needs to cope with any crisis that might come along. The church practices that faith by the mode of discernment it adopts—that is the subject of this book. By learning from the early church's practice of nonviolence, this approach insists that the practices of peace—conversation, negotiation, arbitration, reconciliation, celebration—are always involved in the discernment of truth. Thus, though the approach reasserts the church's identity, it can never be one that isolates itself from the rest of society. By being and working with the poorest and most vulnerable, by talking and negotiating with the most powerful and influential, and by seeking to bring all to understand and embrace the Christian faith, the church maintains conversation and seeks to practice nonviolence.

Most of all this approach learns from the early church because it stresses that ethics is theological. Ethics is not about using power, restoring former glory, or fulfilling individual freedom; it is about imitating God, following Christ, being formed by the Spirit to become friends with God. Baptism marks the entry to Christian life because it is the sacrament that enacts entry to new life through Christ's death and resurrection. The Eucharist characterizes the

common life because it enacts the way peace and daily bread come through Christ's broken body. Nonviolence is significant because it enacts the way God in Christ chose to save the world and it affirms the victory of the cross. God's life has been broken open that we might become God's friends by using God's gifts. Ethics considers the best use of these gifts. The way a community discerns the use of God's saving gifts is the subject of this book.