

Denney's approach, nevertheless his appreciation of Denney's legacy shines through at every point. Theology – more than most disciplines – is a discipline of fads and fancies and in the current climate there is a tendency to overlook or even diminish the contribution of scholars of that period such as Denney, Orr, Bruce, Drummond and others of that ilk. To be sure the questions that they faced are not the questions that we face, but we have more to learn than perhaps we think from the way in which Denney and his contemporaries combined both critical and engaged scholarship with commitment to the historic substance of the Christian faith in their attempts make faith meaningful for their age. James Gordon has done the church community in Scotland a great service in reminding us of the importance of Denney's contribution to the ongoing conversation that is the discipline of theology.

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God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics, Samuel Wells, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, pp. viii, 232, ISBN 978-1405120142. £19.99

All personal letters are interesting. The letters of the Church Fathers naturally have an especial attraction, for in these epistles we are confronted with a lively – if not intimate – fullness of wisdom that continues to speak to us through the stories of the Church. Sam Wells' book is an attempt at such an epistle. That he has written in such a mode makes it impossible to think of Wells only as a theologian – inevitably we think of him as something even more interesting than a theologian, we think of him as a *companion*, and as a certain kind of companion: a minister. That is, we cannot think of Wells as a companion without thinking of him in his vocation of a minister. At the same time, when once we have read these stories as letters, we cannot help knowing that his being a minister *is* his chosen way of being a companion.

The manifest charm of Wells' stories is vast, and we can scarcely outline it wholly or to name all its joys. Yet we can be sure that some

part of its charm derives from his conscious desire to tell the stories of the Church and her saints; to tell it faithfully and to tell it well. Wells is nothing if not a companion for story-telling. If we have to be more specific, its central joy rests in its way of being written without public intent, but for a group of close friends, as if preparing for company at one's home. It is written for and to a community that understands the purposes and legitimate aims of its members. The stories of these companions are told in that characteristic voice – simply, quietly. It is a voice many readers have come to trust.

With the latest instalment – along with his *Transforming Fate Into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (1998) and *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (2004) – he has reached a Trinitarian symmetry. These books are similar in kind (post-liberal, narrative theology, Hauerwasian) but not similar in effect. Many will be sufficiently aware of the tradition in which Wells writes, but upon a close reading some may feel that Wells is trying to write an epistle – a sermon, even – without any of the moral insights which is so clearly evident in his two previous books. Unfortunately, while the joy and the truthful witness of these lives are told with constancy, the sober diligence of theological analysis is at times wanting. To be more precise, Wells at certain points of the book becomes a sort of companion for story-telling who does not easily reconcile being both a theologian and a minister. While Wells entrusts us with the first thoughts of his companions through the stories, he himself struggles to give us not merely his second theological reflections.

Of course *Transforming Fate Into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* stands as a prefiguration of Wells' whole writing career; it gave its readers the terms of the post-liberals' long quarrel with the liberal culture, which, more than any other book, put him on the theological map. We cannot read Wells without learning a little better how to read Hauerwas. In short, Wells' three books have had the effect – in a very significant way – of bringing to light, of further developing our sense of the 'Hauerwasian' project. But the comparison that is made between Wells and Hauerwas, while

suggesting something of his quality, also unveils Wells' limitations, which are not insignificant in this book. Wells cannot have, and does not try to have, the large dramatic lyrical appeal of Hauerwas. It is the nature of his achievement that he should not, for the conscious and even boyish modesty that marks this work is a positive element of his style. And almost in the degree that the reader may admire a Hauerwas and defend his theological project, the reader may be tempted to resist Wells' latest book. This may be in part attributed to the fact that Wells writes like a minister who is trying to prove that he has not lost purchase on daily parish life. And perhaps nothing could more immediately suggest this element of hyper-reality than Wells' part in the brief transaction of introducing many of his stories with 'In this one congregation ...' which has all the atmosphere of 'This one time in band camp ...'. The more Wells tries to say about these companions, the less alive they become, and less *real*.

Few theologians nowadays have a good word for liberals, and I – who am not, I had better say, a liberal – have no doubt that liberals are in most everyone's bad books for the right reasons. Besides, a significant number of post-liberal Christian ethicists nowadays have been, as people say, 'brought up' on Hauerwas, or at least they have been brought up on the myth of being brought up on Hauerwas. As a result, many of the post-liberals' (who have 'gone Hauerwas' like Wells) representations of liberalism remain terribly bitter. But these ways of polemical story-telling have never been – to my mind – exactly reassuring, but they could be set aside in most cases in light of the remarkable cogency which Wells so often achieved in the past. But as they now appear in his latest book, they stand in the way of what Wells means to say and cannot be easily set aside. Yet this narrative tactic may very well be attributed to the specifically pastoral courage with which it was conceived and executed, a courage which implies Wells' grasp – both in the sense of awareness and deep spirituality – of the daily encounters that claim us. And insofar as this, it should not occur to his readers to alter our first estimate of Wells' unique intellectual quality or our judgment of the particular importance of his earlier works.

Further still, I think we must have the charity and the clarity of mind to see that in un-categorically resisting his latest work, or in even trying to reject it, we may be resisting and rejecting a valuable contribution to extend the theological discourse. As I have tried to suggest, there is in these pages an inchoate, even delightful gesture to make a learned post-liberal scholarship accessible to the Church. He seems to be suggesting that if we are to understand the deep moral failings and injustices of our society, we have to consider the readiness of people to be implicated in companionships that make real and uncomfortable demands upon our ways of living. His way of telling a story is not to escape reality but to represent it, to signify it, and to ultimately – with the help of companions who discover each other – reorder it.

And this – this quiet passion to write *for* the Church and not merely *to* other academics – is something which we have to take serious account of, and respect for what it is: the sign of a deep spiritual and intellectual commitment and an involvement in the very great matters of our salvation. It is not a coincidence that Wells' commitment becomes apparent whenever he speaks of the commonplace, the common people, and the community which should almost always be the desired object of living out our Christian faith. We certainly cannot speak of Wells without some degree of respect. He has brought to this latest book a strong if limited theological intelligence, notable powers of pastoral analysis, and a genuine desire to connect academic theology to an actually *peopled* Church. And if only for this reason, he remains one of our cherished companions.

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Conversations with Barth on Preaching, William H. Willimon, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2006, pp. 266, ISBN 978-0687341610. £12.99.

In the spring of 1971 Professor Alec Cheyne of New College, Edinburgh concluded the first year course on the highlights of 2000