

Book Review

Incarnational Ministry: being with the church

Samuel Wells

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In this book, Wells seeks to reclaim 'incarnational' as a key means for conceptualising all of Christian life, not limited to mission. Building on arguments formulated in his previous books, *Living without Enemies* (2011) and *A Nazareth Manifesto* (2015), he argues for the importance of the word 'with' for Christianity. He divides the Christian life into three parts: discipleship, ministry and mission. Discipleship is primarily about developing one's relationship with God, ministry, for him, means building the church, while mission entails relating to those outside the church. In this book, he expounds on the ministry of being 'with' in terms of ministry and discipleship. In a subsequent book, *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World* (2018), he will look specifically at mission.

The primary aim of his writing is to invite the church to move away from typical frameworks of engaging with others toward this sense of being with. In his previous works he has identified four models of what he calls 'social engagement':

- Working for – he describes as the standard model for engagement, which applies the skills and resources of the privileged to help the disadvantaged.
- Working with – also focuses on problem solving like working for, but places the power in partnerships between groups of people, emphasising their assets.
- Being with – rejects a problem solving framework (unlike the two previous models), begins with people's assets, rather than deficits, and sees its goal as 'enjoying people for their own sake' (p. 8).
- Being for – focuses on having positive attitudes and ethical practices, but is often not strong on action.

Wells characterises the working for models as having a 'stranglehold' on the Christian imagination (p. 11). He argues that Jesus' ministry was weighted toward a being with model, as evidenced by the bulk of his time being spent in Nazareth, rather than in Galilee or Jerusalem. He then outlines eight dimensions of what being with entails: presence, attention, mystery, delight, participation,

partnership, enjoyment and glory. These eight dimensions are then used in the subsequent chapters to expand upon what being with looks like within different discipleship and ministry contexts, e.g. being with God, oneself, God together, child, called, troubled, hurt, afflicted, challenged and dying.

'Being with God' is a chapter about personal prayer, in which Wells emphasises that prayer is not so much about problem solving and fixing situations as it is about enjoying and being enjoyed by God. Being with Oneself is a chapter full of insights about self-awareness and being present to oneself. In Being with the Creation, Wells notes that relating to the creation in godly ways is a matter of discipleship, not mission (p. 63). In his 'Being with God Together' chapter, where he concludes the discipleship chapters and moves into engaging with ministry, Wells develops a unique ecclesiology, arguing, '...to be the church Christians must first and foremost enjoy God and, in enjoying God, enjoy one another. The church exists for prayer, and prayer is fundamentally people coming together to enjoy God enjoying them.' (p. 98) The 'Being with Child' one might think would be a chapter about ministry among children, but instead reads more like a call to be an attentive parent who enjoys and delights in learning from one's own children. Although there are many pearls of wisdom within, it seems a shame in a book of this nature that the topic is divorced from the ecclesial context.

The final six chapters focus on the more obvious recipients of pastoral ministry. In 'Being with the Called', Wells advocates that all should seek to participate in their discipleship and enjoy God as they work out their vocation. In 'Being with the Troubled' (that is, those who have brought troubles upon themselves), Wells contrasts two pastoral encounters from literary fiction (George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *Burial Rites* by Hannah Kent) highlighting the value of presence and attention. His advice for being with the hurt (those who are suffering from troubles that are not of their own doing) is to attend to a process of peace. He then returns to his eight-dimensional formula as a shape for the final three chapters, concerning being with the afflicted (those whose troubles cannot be attributed to anyone), the challenged (those facing permanent difficulties) and the dying. In each of these, there is a very real sense of paying attention to the person in the present. Being with does not mean the minister is trying to fix the situation (although Wells does admit elements of 'working for' may be required), but attending to the image of God in that person and bringing the presence of God to them.

The book finishes with a beautifully written and moving epilogue. Although it is not a conclusion and as such does not draw together the threads of the book, nor does it mention 'being with', Wells does offer a thoughtful reflection on five central truths of the Christian life, based on Is 43.1-7:

- God created you
- God set you free
- God is with you
- God gives up everything for you
- God loves you - you are precious and honoured in his sight

As Wells notes, these can function as helpful personal reminders of what it means to be with God. But I would argue that additionally they can be used to frame the message for those who we invite into the Christian life.

Overall, the book has a sermonic tone. Although the text is full of examples and stories, few are given a personal dimension, which means instead of a personal reflection on ministry and discipleship in Wells' own experience, the third person account reads like an abstract exposition of principles. It is difficult to imagine this book being read by those who are not in church leadership or who have a position of oversight. As such, although at no point does Wells indicate that this important ministry of being with is limited to the clergy, alongside the increasing day-to-day pressures that church leaders face, this form of incarnational ministry may seem like an ideal that would be difficult to achieve in practice.

It is also difficult to read this book without its companion, *Incarnational Mission: being with the world* to be published later in 2018. Without it, from a church leader's point of view, one feels that we are only reading half the story.

One final point – the book title would indicate an engagement with a theology of the incarnation, but in fact it is actually setting out how to be present to people, just as Jesus was present with people during his life in Nazareth. It does not consider later aspects of Jesus' ministry, such as his death and resurrection, nor the ultimate aim of his incarnate work, to bring salvation. Wells does not discuss what aspects of the incarnation are unique to the work of Christ, as opposed to those that can be a pattern for human ministry.

However, despite all this, the book is a delight to read. Steeped in scripture and Christian tradition, Wells' own vocation as a priest and theologian is clearly evident, revealed through his deep understanding of local church ministry.

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