ALWAYS IMPROVISING:
Wells, Vanhoozer And Benson
On Moving Beyond The Sacred Page[*]

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Introduction

The church of Christ Jesus in every age, as theologian Jürgen Moltmann prophetically said long ago, has always been facing the challenge from a double crisis: the *crisis of relevance* and the *crisis of identity*.[1] Moltmann believes that this *identity-involvement dilemma* is complementary: "The more theology and the church attempt to become relevant to the problems of the present day, the more deeply they are drawn into the crisis of their own Christian

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson & John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 7.

identity. The more they attempt to assert their identity in traditional dogmas, rights and moral notions, the more irrelevant and unbelievable they become."[2] This tension is inevitable and has to be dealt with wisely by Christians everywhere and in every age. The inevitability of this tension comes from the fact that the Gospel itself has both universal and particular elements. As people who live to embody this Gospel, Christians must constantly deal with this universal-particular tension. Andrew Walls, a theologian and missiologist, tries to explain this tension by what he called "pilgrim" principle and the "indigenizing" principle.[3] The "pilgrim" principle reminds us that the Gospel has universal dimension that transcends any cultural/social particularities. The "indigenizing" principle, on the other hand, reminds us that the Good News does not meet us in vacuum, but in particular contexts and circumstances. Putting an imbalance emphasis on the "pilgrim" principle to the expense of the "indigenizing" principle will make the Gospel we try to embody irrelevant, while stressing only the "indigenizing" principle is no different from "turning to another gospel" (Gal. 1:6). How can Christians wisely navigate this seemingly difficult tension; maintaining their identity without losing relevance, and vice versa? Revisionists emphasize context in their desire to be relevant, while traditionalists emphasize church tradition to maintain solid identity. Still, primitivists, in disregard to the two millenniums of church tradition, try to keep their identity based on the Bible only (especially New Testament).[4] Surely these three positions are not

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2. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 7.

3. Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 7-9.

4. James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 128-9. In Smith's view, primitivism is the position of Christians who "retain the most minimal commitment to God's action in history (in the life of Christ and usually in the first century of apostolic activity) and seeks to make only this first-century 'New Testament church' normative for

the options for evangelicals who believe in the high view of the Scripture, the importance of church tradition, as well as the significance of making the Gospel intelligible to contemporary context. If mere repetition is not our option, then moving "beyond" the Bible is imperative. The question then is how to move beyond the Bible biblically (as mere revision is not an option either)? I believe that the model of improvisation (as found in the theatrical and musical world) has something valuable to offer in trying to resolve this problem. In recent years, some scholars have been trying to use improvisation models in their respective fields. This paper aims to assess how three different scholars understand and use improvisation as a model to move beyond the Scripture: Samuel Wells in the field of theological ethics, Kevin Vanhoozer in theological prolegomena and Bruce Ellis Benson in philosophical hermeneutics. The strengths and weaknesses of this improvisation model will then be assessed, concluded by a synthetic task of formulating principles for good improvisation.

What has Performance to do with Moving beyond the Scripture?

To determine the right way to move beyond the Scripture to hermeneutics, theology, or ethics, one must first understand the nature of Scripture itself. In other words, the interpretation, use or the functioning of Scripture in the life of the church must always derived from Scripture's nature of authority. Talking about text in general, Nicholas Lash says that "for different kinds of text, different kinds of activity count as what we might call the primary or fundamental form of their interpretation."[5] For some texts, like TV

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contemporary practice." This anti-creedal and anti-Catholic position springs from "a rigid distinction between Scripture and tradition (the latter then usually castigated as 'the traditions of men' as opposed to the 'God-given' realities of Scripture)." See p. 129.

5. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 37.

manual books, the fundamental form of their interpretation involves in "'digging' the meaning out of the text and then, subsequently, putting the meaning to use, applying it in practice."[6] However, the appropriate strategy of interpretation is somewhat different in the example of a judge who creatively uses the law to make judgments on a particular case. In this case, "what the law means is decided by his application of it."[7]

What then, about the Bible? For Lash, using the Bible is more alike to interpreting the law than using a manual book. Lash further likens the practice of using the Bible to performing Beethoven's musical score, Shakespeare's *King Lear* script, even the American Constitution. He believes that these texts "only begins to deliver their meaning in so far as they are 'brought into play' through interpretive performance."[8] Understanding happens at the moment of the enactment/performance of the text, not prior to that. Another similarity among these texts is the fact that all requires *faithful* or *truthful* creativity on the side of the interpreters/performers. Drawing from the field of performance studies, Shannon Craigo-Snell states that the notion of performance always involves "a peculiar kind of doubleness, in which there is a gap between what someone does and an ideal, model, or remembered version of the same action."[9] Lash then concludes that the fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of scripture is "the life, activity and organization of the Christian community, *construed as performance of the biblical text*."[10] The merit of looking at the use/interpretation of Scripture as performance is to remind

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6. Lash, *Theology*, 38.

7. Lash, *Theology*, 38.

8. Lash, *Theology*, 41-42.

9. Shannon Craigo-Snell, "Empty Church" in *Living Christianity* by Shannon Craigo-Snell & Shawnthea Monroe (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 126.

10.   Lash, *Theology*, 45. Italics mine.

us that it is an action and that it involves an interaction.[11] Moving beyond the Scripture is not an abstract/cognitive principlizing of Scripture done by individuals, but a communal/corporate enactment of Scripture by the whole church with all their hearts, souls, minds and strengths. "The performance of scripture is the life of the church."[12]

In addition to that, it must be said that as we are *performing* Scripture, at the same time we are also *continuing* the drama of Scripture. David Ford states that this drama "has to be followed, entered into, and meditated upon as it unfolds. Its purpose is not just to give factual knowledge (though some is given) or enable a new self-understanding …, but above all to enable the continuation of the drama in a life of faith that acts out the direction of Jesus: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21)."[13] Our action and interaction as a church today is a response to God's prior actions which are revealed to us primarily in Scripture. N.T. Wright draws an analogy between the Bible and Shakespeare's script whose fifth act had been lost. To perform the fifth act, the actors would then need to "immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language of culture of Shakespeare and his time."[14] Wright divides the Bible into five-acts: (I) Creation; (II) Fall; (III) Israel; (IV) Jesus; and (V) the era beginning with the Pentecost and the story of the church up to the eschaton. We are now living in the fifth act,

11. Craigo-Snell, "Empty Church," 127.

12. Lash, *Theology*, 43.

13. David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 32. Ford further says that "the 'as … so' of the sending connects the earlier with the later acts of the drama. It authorizes the search for analogies and resonances between the earlier and the later."

14. N.T. Wright, "How can the Bible be Authoritative?" The Laing Lecture 1989, and the Griffith Thomas Lecture 1989. Originally published in *Vox Evangelica*, 1991, 21, 7–32, http://ntwrightpage.com/ Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm (last accessed December 6th, 2013).

between its first scene (Pentecost and the early church) and the finale of the drama (Wright admits that unlike the Shakespeare's script whose the fifth act is totally lost, the New Testament gives hints as to how the play is supposed to end, e.g. in Rm. 8, 1 Cor. 15, parts of the Apocalypse).[15] Our task is to continue this biblical drama in a manner which is consistent with the prior four acts and the final scene of the drama. The challenge is that "there is no canonically established script"[16] that gets us from the first scene of this fifth act to the final scene, hence the need for improvisation (be it hermeneutical, theological/doctrinal, or ethical). Walsh and Keesmaat say, "it would be the height of infidelity and interpretive cowardice to simply repeat verbatim, over and over again, the earlier passages of the play."[17] Our task is to do imaginative improvisation that is fitting both to the canonical script and to our changing cultural context. For this reason, Walsh and Keesmaat think that it is not enough to immerse ourselves only in the biblical text, we must also immerse in the world.[18] Through this double immersion, we will be able to negotiate between "stability and flexibility, fidelity and creativity, consistency and innovation"[19] while avoiding "missteps and dead ends."[20] In performing this "faithful improvisation," Christians must remember that they are not left alone, for they have the Holy Spirit as their Director (though not a new writer!)."[21] Ford says that the giving of the Spirit (Jn. 20:19-23) "encourages not identical repetition, but rather improvisation on

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15. N.T. Wright, "How can the Bible be Authoritative," (last accessed December 6th, 2013).

16. Brian J. Walsh & Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 133

17. Walsh & Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 134.

18. Walsh & Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 136.

19. Walsh & Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 135.

20. Walsh & Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 136.

21. Walsh & Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 134.

the biblical patterns in order to do justice to new people and events."[22]

Seen from this perspective, it is obvious that the task of performing the Scripture is never ending, because our contexts and circumstances are perpetually in motion. Continuing Lash's analogy, the meanings of the American Constitution, Beethoven's score, or Shakespeare's script are never final, "each new performance … is a new event in the history of the meaning of the text."[23] Applied to Scripture, it can be inferred that although the text/the canon is finished, the "history of the meaning of the text continues indefinitely …"[24] Nevertheless, as Lash is quick to reminds us, "the range of appropriate interpretations of a dramatic or literary text is constrained by what the text 'originally meant.'"[25] In other words, "as the history of the meaning of the text continues, we can and must tell the story differently. But we do so under constraint: what we may *not* do, if it is *this* text which are to continue to perform, is to tell a different story."[26]

Improvisation as a Model for Moving Beyond the Scripture

We are now ready to look at three scholars who use improvisation as a model to explain the move beyond the Scripture in their respective fields.

Samuel Wells: Improvising without a Script

Writing on the field of theological ethics under the heavy influences of Stanley Hauerwas, George Lindbeck, Hans Frei and David Kelsey, Wells believes that "there is no such thing as a universal ethic to which anyone can subscribe, regardless of

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22. Ford, *The Future*, 33.
23. Lash, *Theology*, 44.
24. Lash, *Theology*, 44.
25. Lash, *Theology*, 44.
26. Lash, *Theology*, 44. Italics in original.

tradition."[27] The main role of Christian ethics, according to the Anglican priest, is to describe "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."[28] For Wells, ethics is not so much about informing Christians how to make the right decision in a given critical situation. Rather, ethics is about consistent habit formation. Ethics, therefore, is about being rather than doing. With this communal "ecclesial ethics," Wells is trying to find the middle-way between a "universal ethics" that "does not do justice to the particularity of the Christian tradition"[29] and the "subversive ethics" that is "stronger on particularity, but has an anthropology that still tends to be wedded to individual autonomy or self-expression."[30]

How does the improvisation model help Wells in achieving this goal? Wells finds similarity between the ethics he tries to propose with improvisation in the theatre. He says, "when improvisers are trained to work in the theatre, they are schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they learn to act from instinct in ways appropriate to the circumstance."[31] For Wells, this is exactly the goal of theological ethics.[32] In theatrical context, improvisation is "a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear."[33] As we always face new circumstances that require ethical decision-making, improvisation model can help us to "become a

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27. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 14.

28. Wells, *Improvisation*, 14-15.

29. Samuel Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre as a Model for Christian Ethics," in *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, ed. Trevor A. Hart & Steven R. Guthrie (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 147.

30. Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 147.

31. Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 148.

32. Wells, *Improvisation*, 65.

33. Wells, *Improvisation*, 11.

community of trust, in order that we may faithfully encounter the unknown of the future without fear."[34]

Although Wells acknowledges that performance is a "fruitful way of understanding the relationship between the life of the Church and the text of Scripture," he thinks that it has certain shortcomings.[35] In an interview, Wells said that, "it's wrong to say [Christians] 'perform' a script, as if we can do that over and over again. 'Performance' suggests a woodenness, a repetitiveness and a lack of dynamism that isn't true to the church's experience."[36] The notion of improvisation, for Wells, "meets all the concerns that the notion of performance was intended to fulfill, but without the drawbacks."[37]

Drawing from the field of theatrical studies, Wells divides the practices of improvisation into six parts:[38] (1) *Forming habits*; refer to the way improvisation is not about being spontaneous, witty, or clever in the moment, but about developing trust and practices over time so that in the moment on relies on habit rather than resorting to inspiration. (2) *Assessing status*; addresses the

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34. Wells, *Improvisation*, 11.

35. Wells, *Improvisation*, 62-65. Wells mentions four shortcomings with the notion of "performing the script": (1) The script does not provide all the answers; (2) The script is not finished; (3) the idea of a script can suggest a recreation of a golden era; (4) the notion of a script can militate against genuine engagement with the world. See Wells, *Improvisation*, 63.

36. Samuel Wells, "Samuel Wells: Improvising Leadership," Online Interview with *Faith & Leadership*, March 27th, 2012, http://www.faithandleadership.com/multimedia/samuel-wells-improvising-leadership (last accessed December 7th, 2013).

37. Wells, *Improvisation*, 65.

38. Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 150-64. The brief explanation for each points are incorporated from Samuel Wells, "For Such a Time as This: Esther and the Practices of Improvisation," in *Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption*, eds. Randi Rashkover and C.C. Pecknold (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 169-71.

element of power and role in every single interaction between people. (3) *Accepting & blocking*; accepting refers to any response that accepts the premise of another actor's "offer" while blocking refers to any response that denies the premise of that offer.[39] (4) *Questioning givens*; refers to the way improvisation keep the story going by subverting/dismantling the power of apparently dominant forces that appear to be "givens" (including death, sin and time). (5) *Incorporating gifts*; the only "given" for Christians is the gospel, everything else in all creation is "a gift" that needs to be overaccepted by fitting them into a much larger story—the story of God's ongoing relationship with his people.[40] (6) *Reincorporating the lost*; refer to the "ending" of the story when discarded elements from earlier in the narrative begin to reappear, especially at moments when redeeming these discarded elements offers the resolution to what seemed insurmountable problems.[41]

Wells believes that these six practices of improvisation, although coming from theatrical categories, are biblical and "true to the narrative of Scripture": "Overaccepting is at the heart of incarnation and the resurrection; reincorporation is at the heart of 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."[42]

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39. For Wells, it is imperative that the church learns to always accept the offers and never block them. "The heart of improvisation is the ability to keep the story going. … Improvisation springs to life when the Church realizes it cannot and should not block society's offers indefinitely, and when Christians are inspired by the vision of a community committed to accepting all offers." See Wells, "For Such a Time as This," 170.

40. Thus, "transforming the fate of accepting givens into the destiny of *overaccepting gifts*." See Wells, "For Such a Time as This," 171.

41. "The key factor in reincorporation is memory. Memory is much more significant than originality." See Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 163.

42. Wells, *Improvisation*, 16.

Improvisation itself is scriptural; Wells sees the Council of Jerusalem as an improvisatory attempt of the early church to maintain the particularity of God's call to Israel in the new context of the Gentile mission.[43]

Does the Bible play a unique role as a resource for doing improvisation? On one side, Wells admits that the Bible has a role in shaping the habits, practices, and the imagination of Christian community.[44] The Bible (together with the history of the Church) is part of the earlier parts of the Church's story that needs to be remembered and reincorporated.[45] On the other side, Wells sees that the biggest danger in the use of the Bible in ethics is "to make it some kind of Gnostic system of law or philosophy, which exists primarily in the mind of believer and in the believer's personal life of devotion."[46] Wells sees the practices of improvisation 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 church's life."[47]

Kevin Vanhoozer: Improvising with a Script

Kevin Vanhoozer uses the improvisation model to maintain both Christian identity and relevance, trying to answer the question of how to be faithful to the normativity of Scripture in theology (*Sola Scriptura*), while acknowledging the need to continue the theo-drama in new and different circumstances.[48] He asks, "How does one know that the church continues to preach the *same* gospel

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43. Wells, *Improvisation*, 66.
44. Wells, *Improvisation*, 12, 16.
45. Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 164.
46. Wells, *Improvisation*, 16.
47. Wells, *Improvisation*, 16.
48. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2005), 124-33.

as it moves to new times and places? How do we know that we are participating in the *same* drama when the cultural scenery and language are so different?"[49]

To explain the nature of Christian identity, Vanhoozer uses Ricoeur's distinction between *idem*-identity (the identity of sameness or permanence in time) and *ipse*-identity ("soft" identity; identity of a person/self that allows for development, growth, and perhaps even a certain degree of change).[50] If we understand the development of theology in terms of *idem*-identity, it is hard not to fall into the danger of "immobile traditionalism" that leaves no room for any dialectics between sameness and difference.[51] While traditionalism is not an option, neither is revisionism. The danger of revisionist theologies is that they "so privilege contemporary values and beliefs that traditional, and often even biblical, claims are altogether eclipsed."[52]

Unlike *idem*-identity, *ipse*-identity leaves some room for improvisation. Agreeing with Samuel Wells, Vanhoozer also says that improvisation should not be equated with "sheer novelty or with simply being original."[53] Improvisation is not to be confused with *ad-libbing*, "the equivalent of heresy, where one person stubbornly insists on going his own way instead of playing the

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49. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 124. Italics in the original.

50. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 127.

51. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 127. Vanhoozer gives three reasons why the dialectic of sameness-difference is inevitable: (1) some kind of difference is inevitable because the church moves through space and time; (2) certain differences threaten sameness and undermine faithfulness; heterodox doctrine orients us to another gospel and invites us to participate in another drama; (3) the most important reason: some differences are expressions of faithfulness and may be productive of greater understanding. See Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 126.

52. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 129.

53. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 128.

game."[54] On the contrary, improvisation "depends on training, narrative skills, and a sense for what is appropriate to say and do in a given situation."[55] "Improvising well requires both training (formation) and discernment (imagination)."[56] For sure, there is still an element of spontaneity in improvisation, but that spontaneity comes as a result of disciplined training. Vanhoozer warns improvisers to avoid *preplanning*, an attitude that totally rejects the spontaneous element in improvisation. Preplanning is the temptation to think out a course of action before saying or doing anything, thereby trying to control the game by manipulating the situation according to one's preplanned mental map.[57]

Like Wells, Vanhoozer borrows the categories of improvisation from theatrical studies like offering, accepting, overaccepting, blocking, and reincorporation. However, Vanhoozer puts more emphasis in showing that improvisation is not merely a model to explain the same-difference dialectic, because he believes that the Gospel itself is basically improvisational: "The theo-drama itself develops largely through divine improvisation on a covenantal theme."[58] Vanhoozer believes that improvisation is true to the whole theo-drama, the triune communicative action for communion, as recorded in the Bible. The theo-drama is itself improvisatory "to the extent that the divine grace that propels the action does so by alternately offering to, overaccepting, and reincorporating the human response."[59] In his words,

> It is God who begins the play by offering himself as covenantal partner to humanity; the play continues despite repeated attempts by various human beings to block the

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54. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 338.
55. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 128.
56. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 337.
57. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 337.
58. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 340.
59. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 341.

divine initiatives. … God overaccepts even human blocking by incorporating it into the broader covenantal comedy. … The greatest divine improvisation is, of course incarnation, when the word of the Lord comes in a way that is different yet at the same time continuous with previous words. … All the significant persons and events in the earlier scenes—creation, exodus, temptation, prophets, priests, kings, sacrifice, sin offerings, miracles, wisdom—are reincorporated into the word-act that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

With regard to Christian relevance, improvisation is needed because the same Gospel needs to be brought to people in different contexts (contextualization). For this reason, good improvisation required *double competence*: canonical competence and cultural competence. Vanhoozer says that "every attempt to render Christianity playable today involves improvising the canonical-linguistic action in new cultural-linguistic contexts."[60] Seeing this way, it can be said that improvisation is both missional and phronetic, "a creative means of rendering for a new situation the same judgment made in an earlier situation, thus ensuring both the identity and the relevance of the claim being made."[61] Here, doctrines are proven to be very helpful, because they "help us to improvise judgments about what new things to say and do that are nevertheless consistent with our canonical script."[62] Vanhoozer gives an example of the early church's decision to use the term "homoousios" as an improvised response to render the same canonical judgment with different conceptual tools that was available and intelligible in their day.[63]

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60. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 341.
61. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 344.
62. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 335.
63. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 342-44.

The unique feature of Vanhoozer's use of dramatic analogy of improvisation in his theology is his insistence that we must improvise "with a script." Here, agreeing with N.T. Wright, he wants to emphasize the normative value of the first four-acts as our authority in continuing the drama of God's redemption.[64] "The Script" is essential because to secure a faithful performance, our minds must be cultivated and nurtured on the canon.[65] Scripture is "a medium of divine communicative action whose purpose is not only to inform but to transform: to nurture right vision, right attitudes, right actions."[66] For Vanhoozer, canonical reading of Scripture will foster "theodramatic vision – the 'mind of Scripture' and, ultimately, the "mind of Christ."[67] We must become "the apprentices of the canon" if we want to continue the same story of Jesus Christ in changing cultural circumstances.[68] At the end of the day, "improvising with a script" is "no theological oxymoron"; "faithful performance and creative improvisation need not be at odds with one another."[69]

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64.   Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model: Always Performing?" in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 174. However, Vanhoozer modifies Wright's five-act play, refusing to see "the fall" as an act on its own, but as the conflict in the first act.Hence the five-act in Vanhoozer's view: (1) Creation; (2) Election of Israel; (3) Christ; (4) Pentecost and the church; and (5) Consummation.

65.   Vanhoozer, "Always Performing?," 170.

66.   Vanhoozer, "Always Performing?," 171.

67.   Vanhoozer, "Always Performing?," 171.

68.   Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "'One Rule to Rule Them All?': Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, eds. Craig Ott & Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 113.

69.   Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 344.

Bruce Ellis Benson: Improvising with Jazz

Different from Wells and Vanhoozer, Bruce Ellis Benson borrows his model of improvisation not from the world of theatre, but from music, especially that of black spirituals and jazz. He uses this improvisation model primarily in the field of philosophical hermeneutics and the arts.[70] His use of this model in hermeneutics was motivated by the desire to find a model that does justice to the role of the text, the author, the interpreter, and the interpretive community. He finds that in the world of philosophical hermeneutics, a theory of interpretation usually privileges one (e.g. the author or the text) to the exclusion of the others. He believes that jazz improvisation "provides a model of something at least *approximating* a 'hermeneutical justice.'"[71]

Benson defines improvisation by comparing it to other sorts of "creation."[72] He quotes how Jerrold Levinson defines musical composition as "a godlike activity in which the artist brings into being what did not exist beforehand."[73] If composition is defined this way, then the author will be privileged as "demiurge" or genius, and by implication, "the act of performing or reading should be conceived *primarily* (even if not *exclusively*) as 'repeating' what the demiurge has created."[74] In other words, if the composer/author is seen as "demiurge," then the goal of the performer/reader is

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70.   As part of the limitation and the purpose of this paper, the author will only discuss Benson's use of improvisation in the field of hermeneutics.

71.   Bruce Ellis Benson, "The Improvisation of Hermeneutics: Jazz Lessons for Interpreters," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K.A. Smith & Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 194. Italics in original.

72.   From here, it is obvious that for Benson, the model of improvisation can be used not only to understand the process of interpretation (hermeneutics) but also to understand the process of the text creation (how the text comes into being).

73.   Benson, "The Improvisation of Hermeneutics," 194.

74.   Benson, "The Improvisation of Hermeneutics," 195.

"merely to discern the composer's or author's intention and then translate that intention into sound or meaning."[75] Two distinct responses follow from this model of "extreme faithfulness" to the composer/author in the past half-century:[76] (1) the conception of the performer as mere "transmission station" and the ideal of an "authentic" performance is one that attempts to bring the score to sound in such a way that listeners would hear music of the past "just as the composer intended." (2) the rebellion against this strong sense of authorship in the proclamation of the death of the author.[77] The question is: should we understand composer/author's creation as Levinson defines it? Benson believes that Levinson was wrong, the composer and author as demiurge must die."[78] Real composers and authors are not demiurges and do not compose or write "out of nothing." Instead, Benson claims that we should define musical composition/creation of a text in terms of improvisation, which he defines as "fabricate out of what is conveniently at hand."[79]

How does jazz illumine Benson in his project of philosophical hermeneutics? Benson starts with a claim of similarity between jazz and Christian texts. For him, "both jazz and Christian texts arise through improvisation and that subsequent interpretation of them is in turn improvisational."[80] Benson sees similarity between the logic of Call/Response in jazz with God-

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75. Benson, "The Improvisation of Hermeneutics," 195.

76. Benson, "The Improvisation of Hermeneutics," 195.

77. As Roland Barthes claims, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."

78. Benson, "The Improvisation of Hermeneutics," 195.

79. Benson, "The Improvisation of Hermeneutics," 195.

80. Bruce Ellis Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities: Jazz, Interpretation, Heterophony, and the Ekklēsia," in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, eds. Jeremy S. Begbie & Steven R. Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 306.

human relationships in the Bible. Throughout the Bible, God starts his covenant with human beings by calling them and they in turn are expected to respond by "readiness to hear and to act."[81] To improvise in jazz is "to respond to a call, to join in something that is always already in progress."[82] The beginning of jazz is improvisatory; it is difficult to find an exact moment of origin. From its beginning, jazz has been characterized by heterophony, which can be described loosely as the presence of "differing voices, dissonance, cross-rhythms and multiple versions of melodies."[83] Jazz started with "what was conveniently at hand": "Black spirituals, ragtime, European folk music, even opera."[84] Christianity, too, has an improvised beginning, according to Benson, "it is hard to know exactly where to begin."[85] Benson tries to explain that Jesus' words and deeds can be seen as improvisations of the long-established Jewish practice of textual improvisation. The four Gospels is another perfect example of the practice of improvisation, and there are more than just polyphonic, but heterophonic—"they have somewhat contrasting melodies that cannot simply be harmonized with one another, except by overemphasizing similarities and underemphasizing differences."[86]

For Benson, there is no clear-cut line between the improvisatory formation/creation of the Bible as text and the improvisatory practice of performing/interpreting that text. Influenced heavily by Hans-Georg Gadamer, Benson explains how texts come into being, how they continue to exist, and how we

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81. Bruce Ellis Benson, "Call Forwarding: Improvising the Response to the Call of Beauty," in *The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts*, eds. Daniel J. Treier, Mark Husbands & Roger Lundin (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 72.

82. Benson, "Call Forwarding," 76.

83. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 307.

84. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 307.

85. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 307.

86. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 311.

interpret them in terms of an interactive play between text and community.[87] For Gadamer, "the *ergon*—a product, whether an artwork, a jazz tune, or a biblical text—has its existence within the *energeia* (activity) or play of a community."[88] It is implied in this concept of play that all an interpretation of text is "*an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event*."[89] The relationship between text and the interpretation of that text is never "one-sided." Gadamer (and Benson) believes that we are affected by the text; but "the text is also affected (ontologically) by us."[90] Furthermore, Gadamer understands that the play itself (and the interpretive community behind that play) is not static, but always in motion. Thus, "it is not just the text that undergoes the improvisatory movement; it is also the game itself."[91]

Because of this indeterminacy of the text, the notion of improvisation is better and stronger than the term "performance" (as it is used today) to explain the event of interpretation. Benson says, "if interpretation is seen as 'transformative' (in the sense that it both adds to and narrows a text), then interpreters might better be thought of as 'improvisers'"[92] In the Renaissance and medieval era, the term "performance" means something like "to make up or supply (what is wanting)." This definition is closer to Benson's idea of improvisation than the common definition of performance today, which is associated more with "following a score." However, agreeing with both Wells and Vanhoozer, Benson says that improvisation is not a "spontaneous creation" (Romantic sense of improvisation). When he uses the word "improvisation," he has in mind what classical rhetoricians called "inventio." *Inventio* involves

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87.   Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 301.
88.   Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 301.
89.   Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 301.
90.   Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 301.
91.   Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 302.
92.   Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 299.

both repetition and transformation, imitation and invention, repetition and elaboration.[93] Benson believes that both the process of creation and interpretation of Scripture is created and sustained by God: "the Holy Spirit plays a role in both the improvisational writing and the improvisational interpretation of Scripture."[94] Further than that, he also believes that there is a "cantus firmus," that supports and guides the process. Augustine's Rule of Love is definitely part of that cantus firmus, but more than that Benson says that "we would do well to expand and modify this notion of the cantus firmus to include not merely the love for and being in communion with God but also (and even more important) the cantus firmus of the revelation of God to us by way of the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, and—most significant of all—Jesus Christ himself."[95]

Assessing the Improvisation Models

Commonalities & Differences

First, some words about terminology. In spite of differences in their domain of use, the three scholars agree that moving beyond the Scripture is more than just mere repetitiveness. For this reason, Wells and Benson explicitly reject the notion of "performance," because that term can give wrong impression on what actually takes place in the movement "to the front of the text." For Wells, performance suggests woodenness, repetitiveness, and lack of dynamism. For Benson, performance suggests strict adherence to a score which leaves not much room for creativity. Therefore, they prefer the notion "improvisation." Vanhoozer would agree with them that the authoritative functioning of Scripture involves much

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93. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 300.
94. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 303.
95. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 303.

more than mere repetition, and he would be happy to use the term "improvisation" (he indeed uses the term), but it does not mean that we should stop using the term "performance." The key is to understand Scripture as a discourse and realize that when we are performing Scripture, "we are not performing the discourse per se, but the theodrama it describes and enacts."[96] Vanhoozer draws from Ricoeur to explain that "to understand a written text is to follow its movement from sense to reference: from what it says, to what it talks about."[97] To understand a discourse is to move to the world that is projected by the text; "it is a matter of 'appropriating' the vision of the author lays out 'in front of' the text."[98] Strictly speaking, *"we do not perform the text/script but the world/theodrama that the text/script presupposes, entails, and implies*."[99] Performing a script is therefore "not a matter of replicating the author's situation (the world behind the text), or of repeating the author's words, *but of unfolding what the author says (about the theodrama) into one's own situation (the world in front of the text)*."[100] If understood this way, then the term "performance" is assuredly not as contradictory with the term "improvisation" as Wells and Benson wanted to believe. Improvisation is a species within the genus of performance, after all.

Having said that, it is important to note that these three scholars also agree that improvisation is not about trying to be clever, witty, or original. Both Wells and Vanhoozer agree that in improvisation, especially in the work of reincorporation, "memory is more important than originality."[101] Benson's concept of

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96. Vanhoozer, "Always Performing?," 165.
97. Vanhoozer, "Always Performing?," 165.
98. Vanhoozer, "Always Performing?," 166.
99. Vanhoozer, "Always Performing?," 167. Italics in the original.
100. Vanhoozer, "Always Performing?," 167. Italics in the original.
101. Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 163; Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 339.

improvisation as *inventio* fits well with this idea. On the contrary, they agree that improvisation needs hard work, discipline, training, practice, and formation. However, they differ on answering the question of *what counts as the most important and authoritative component in that improvisatory formation and training*. For Wells, the most important component in that formation is being immersed in church story and church practices, especially the practice of worship. While the practice of worship is indeed important to shape the habits of Christians, it seems that Wells does not give the same emphasis and authority to Scripture in this formation. While describing his "ecclesial ethics," Wells says that ecclesial ethics defines theology and its key location as "being in the practices of the church." More importantly, he states: "This is *only secondarily about a sacred text*, sequence of events, or set of doctrines; it is primarily about the formation, development, and renewal of sacred *people*."[102] When discussing "the resources for improvisation in the Church," Wells says that the Church "has ample resources for every eventuality it faces and it finds those resources among the discarded elements of earlier parts of its story."[103] We might want to wonder that Wells have Wright's four-act as an authoritative script in mind, but no, his next sentence is exactly this: "Church history is theology teaching by examples—good examples like St. Laurence and St. Francis, bad examples like the Inquisition, the Crusades and the Holocaust."[104] He then emphasizes the importance of memory to remember the tales of the good and the bad, and especially the story of the losers—those who have not written their own history.[105]

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102. Wells, *Improvisation*, 37. First italics mine, second italics in the original.

103. Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 164.

104. Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 164.

105. Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 164.

What is the most important and authoritative component for improvisatory formation in Benson's view? This question is more difficult to answer, since Benson's project in philosophical hermeneutics is more phenomenological, more describing rather than prescribing. Nevertheless, at least it can be inferred that Benson's motive is to balance the importance of the author, the text, the interpreter and the interpretive community. In his discussion of the "cantus firmus," he gives the privilege to God's revelation (in Old and New Testament and most significantly Jesus Christ himself) to guide the improvisation. However, in trying to balance the importance these constituents, his incorporation of Gadamer's concept of play ends up giving more authority to the interpreter and the interpretive community in shaping the identity of Christian canonical Scripture: "We are affected by the text; but the text is also affected (ontologically) by us."[106] In other words, as canonical Scripture affects tradition, tradition also affects

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106. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 301. In discussing the relationship between "the structure of the piece of music" or "text" and the interpretive community which do the improvisation, Benson suggests three ontological possibility: (1) within the very structure of the piece there are multiple meanings or profiles, so that the history of performance/interpretive practice is simply the history of *revealing* the possibilities that were always there. Improvisation, then, is *merely* discovery. (2) the "piece itself" or "text itself" is merely a bare schema, with the result that improvisational changes do not affect that piece or text. They are, instead, mere additions. (3) performance practice actually affects the very identity of the piece, not in the weak sense of bringing out possibilities but in the strong sense of actually "creating" them. Benson, for sure, prefers the third possibility. See Benson, "The Improvisation of Hermeneutics," 203-4. Benson himself acknowledges that there is a constraint in improvisation; there are ways in which an improvisation can be deemed "faithful" or "unfaithful" to the text, but he does not give any criteria for judgments and believes that "the constraints on improvisation in interpretation are always dependent upon a given "discourse" or "practice," and cannot be easily codified into something like an "improvisational manual." See p. 105.

Scripture's identity. Benson also believes that the Holy Spirit plays an important role to guide the process of improvisation and guard against misinterpretation, but he does not give us any principle on how the Holy Spirit does that.[107] Benson quotes Vanhoozer who claims that God can do new things with the book of Jonah and other biblical texts by gathering them in a canon,[108] and takes it further: "if God can speak in new ways through canon formation, cannot the Holy Spirit continue to speak in new ways as the Word goes forth throughout the world?"[109] Holy Spirit can say new things through the locutions of Scripture. Indeed, but we must always remember that the Spirit can only do that "on the basis of the concrete textual illocutions—the content!—of Scripture."[110]

While rigid distinction between Scripture and tradition as the primitivists suggest is untenable, collapsing the ontological difference between canonical Scripture and the subsequent improvisatory movements that make church tradition is problematic.[111] If tradition play an important role in shaping the

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107. To be fair, that probably is not Benson's concern in his philosophical hermeneutic project. He once says that his goal is not that of adjudicating between "the conflict of interpretation" (Ricoeur's phrase), but simply to make clear that all interpreters of Scripture are engaged in an improvisational practice. See Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 337.

108. From Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 194.

109. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 303.

110. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 198.

111. Alister McGrath explains three types of attitude towards tradition that were adopted by the three major theological voices in the sixteenth century that can serve as a typology of the relationship between Scripture and tradition: (1) the Council of Trent; dual-source understanding of tradition, Scripture and unwritten tradition were treated as equal authority and source of revelation; (2) the mainline Reformation; single-source understanding of tradition, understood as "traditional method of interpreting Scripture" which is secondary to Scripture in its authority; (3) some representative of the Radical Reformation insisted that there was no

identity of the Scriptural canon, how can the canon itself become the "measuring rod" to judge the faithfulness or the authenticity of a tradition? Is there no difference between infallible Scripture and fallible tradition? Which tradition should shape the canon? Which interpretive community counts? How can we know that a particular tradition is still consistent with the "cantus firmus," how do we differentiate between good and bad tradition? How do Christians know that they are still living the true Gospel and not the other gospel? If the distinction between Scripture and tradition collapses, it seems that evangelicals will have an open-ended and unfinished canon instead of a closed-canon. Vanhoozer differentiates between Performance II and Performance I interpretation of Scripture to explain the Scripture/tradition relationship. In Performance II interpretation, "the church's habitual use/performance of Scripture is seen to be constitutive of the literal sense."[112] What counts is the community's appropriation of the script. It privileges "the aims and interests of the interpreting community over the aims and interests of the playwright"; it is the reader who 'directs' the text."[113] In performance I (endorsed by Vanhoozer), by contrast, "what is authoritative is the divine authorial (canonical) use."[114] Because the canon itself is a performance, improvisation by the interpretative community counts as a respond to continue the performance. Therefore, the norming norm for good improvisation is clearly in

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place for any notion of tradition in Christian theology. See Alister E. McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 145.

112. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 167.
113. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 167.
114. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine,* 167.

"the divine author's, not the interpretative community's, use of Scripture."[115]

Strengths & Weaknesses

Perhaps the most important strength of the improvisation model is the fact that it is scriptural; it has strong biblical foundation. All of the three scholars aware that even though they borrow the model from the world of theatre and music, the model itself is embedded in what Scripture reveals about God's speech-acts and his relationships with human beings and the whole creation. In other words, the improvisation model only confirms and makes explicit what is implicit in the Bible. Looking at improvisation as a species in the genus of performance reminds us that being a Christian is much more than merely agreeing on a set of doctrines, but a matter of performing/enacting the Scripture in community. We have learnt that the improvisation model encourages believers to face the unknown future with virtues of openness, courage, attentiveness, respect and trust. The idea of overacceptance and reincorporation is particularly helpful to keep walking in this pilgrimage of faith and to keep the story going without losing the big picture and the final *telos* of the theodrama. The idea of improvisation also guards us from the danger of revisionism, traditionalism, and primitivism. It reminds us that Christian live is not just about acquiring the right information, but about the formation of the right habits to make the true and timely (wise) judgments "according to the Scripture." Improvisation encourages us not to be pride in our desire to be original, nor to be afraid of "using different concepts to reach the same biblical judgments." Improvisation encourages us to become a serious student of Scripture, because Scripture is our supreme authority and a script

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115. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 184.

that records previous performances that invite us to faithfully respond, participate, and continue.

Improvisation model appreciates church tradition and further encourages ecumenical and catholic dialogue, because it looks at the history of the church as the history of church's improvisation. We learnt from Benson's discussion on the Call/Response structure and the polyphonic (even heterophonic) nature of improvisation that improvisation is never done in isolation by individuals, but always within diverse interpretive communities. We must listen to the previous "calls" made by Christians from previous generations and from different places in order to "respond" fittingly and keep the story going. Improvisation model also encourage appropriate contextualization. Vanhoozer has rightly reminded us about the missional character of Christian improvisation. As we enter new contexts and new circumstances, improvisation model reminds us that it is not enough just to think about canonical fittingness, cultural fittingness is just as significant.

However, I found some questions that need further clarification, with regard to the appropriation of this improvisation from theatrical and musical world. First, from the theatrical analogy. The idea of offer and acceptance (parallel to the idea of Call/Response) is helpful, but the question is: which and whose offer/call should we accept/respond? Which and whose call counts? Should we accept the offer from our situation? Or from God? Or both? Surely as Christians, we want to first and foremost heed to God's call. Vanhoozer seems to anticipate this question when he says that "the theo-drama as the Christian's prime assumption."[116] As a matter of fact, we live in a noisy world with plurality of (and most often dissonant) voices. How do we know that we are

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116. Vanhoozer seems to anticipate this question more than Wells when he says that "the theo-drama as the Christian's prime assumption." See Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 339.

accepting/responding to God's offer/call in this world of multiple offers/calls? Should not Scripture be the norm and authority to guide us in prioritizing which call/offer to respond/accept? Should we not make the illocutions of God in Scripture as the primary offers that demand our acceptance?

This brings me to my second question. The theatrical improvisation model assumes that we must never block an offer. Instead, we must always try to overaccept the offer. We must always say "Yes" (or at least: "Yes, but"), but we should never say "No." The argument is that those who say "Yes" are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say "No" are rewarded by the safety they attain.[117] Is this idea biblical? Those who use theatrical improvisation model in theology must clarify *what does it mean*, *in what level*, and *from whose perspective* should we always say "Yes" and never say "No" to the offer? It might be true that God in Christ was doing overacceptance in his incarnation (as Wells and Vanhoozer suggest), but what about the scene in the Gospel where the disciples say to Jesus, "Everyone is looking for you" and Jesus replies, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." (Mk. 1:38). Can we say that in this passage Jesus is blocking the offer made by the crowd and his disciples? Or can we still say that Jesus is not blocking the offer but overaccepting it (*in what level*, *from whose perspective*)? It is clear that at least in this situation, Jesus is blocking the crowds' offer/call because He knows that He must answer another call.

Second, from the jazz/musical analogy. Benson found an analogy between the origin and the development of jazz and the origin and the development of Scripture. For him, both jazz and Scripture have polyphonic and heterophonic nature in their origin

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117. Both Wells and Vanhoozer quote this from Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1981), 92. See Wells, "Improvisation in the Theatre," 155; Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 339.

and development. The diverse facets both in the Bible itself and in the history of interpretation cannot *simply* be described as polyphonic (the idea of multiple voices), but also heterophonic (the otherness of those voices).[118]

Heterophony emphasizes the idea of "differing voices that do not simply blend or produce a pleasing harmony but remain distinct and sometimes dissonant, sometimes precisely when we would rather they were not."[119] More than that, Benson believes that heterophony is true both descriptively and *prescriptively*.[120] The question for Benson is this: what about the fact that the Bible is not only a human word, but ultimately God's word, the voice of the triune God? Is there any dissonance in God's voice? Is there any heterophony and inharmonic voices within the Trinity? If the Triune God is its ultimate Author, should we not legitimately expect some kind of unity and harmony in the Bible, surely without trying to force any kind of cheap or gross harmonization into it? Should we not even try to find some kind of unity of harmony in interpretation though genuine ecumenical/catholic dialogue? Benson seems to be less optimistic on this possibility.

Appealing to Derrida's concept of *différrance*, Benson "defers" the reality of difference to a messianic time, when "there will be a new harmony of those differences, one in which there is

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118. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 319. Italics in the original.

119. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 318. From the Bible, Benson gives an example of the four Gospels. For him, the four Gospels are not only polyphonic but also heterophonic: "they have somewhat contrasting melodies that cannot simply be harmonized with one another, except by overemphasizing similarities and underemphasizing differences." (see p. 311). From the history of interpretation, he gives an example of Calvinism and Arminianism, the other kind of heteronomy that he thinks will remain and will not disappear (see p. 318).

120. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 318. Italics mine.

true—and not merely contrived—*shalom*."[121] He continues, "Here and now, though, we can barely begin to imagine how that harmony of heavenly *shalom* might sound."[122] Given the fact that we are living in between Act 4 (Pentecost and the church) and Act 5 (eschaton), in the overlapping of two ages, the *"already-not yet,"* should we be more realistically hopeful about finding harmony and unity, despite the heterophonic phenomena? Peter Toon, in his discussion on the development of doctrine, is more optimistic than Benson. He says, "If we have one God, one Faith, and one hope, then we must work towards either an agreement in doctrine or towards an agreement that our different doctrines are not mutually exclusive."[123] Another question to ask is: With that much room for freedom in improvisation, how do we know that the heterophonic voices are still speaking the "same language of the same Gospel" and not falling into heterodoxy? If the improvisation model is to be used effectively, it is imperative that we hold in balance both the diversity and the unity of the Bible and its interpretation. More importantly, the canonical Scripture must be the *norming norm*, the highest standard and the most authoritative source for faithful and creative improvisation.

Conclusion: Ten Principles on Good Improvisation (or: Ten Characteristics of Good Improvisers)

To sum up, I will try to synthesize good principles that can be gained from these three scholars on how to do improvisation in ethics, theology, and hermeneutics. These ten principles are by no means exhaustive, but rather specifically drawn from interpreting,

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121. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 319. Italics in the original.
122. Benson, "Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities," 319. Italics in the original.
123. Peter Toon, *The Development of Doctrine in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 124.

inferring, interacting with (and sometimes improvising on) these scholars. For sure, more research needs to be done in this area, especially on the more practical level (e.g. how does improvisation practically works in the level of exegesis, biblical interpretation, and preaching). The ten principles below will eventually be proven useful to guide this more practical use. To make it more embodied and participatory, the ten principles of improvisation will be stated in the perspective of its agents, as improvisation is indeed performative.

1. Good improvisers understand their work first and foremost as *missional*, the way of participating in and continuing the new covenant drama that has been inaugurated by Christ in his work of personal and cosmic redemption.

2. Good improvisers are committed to discipline themselves in *"triple immersion."* They seriously immerse themselves in and become serious students of the canonical Scripture, the catholic tradition of the church, and their cultural context.

3. Good improvisers use their growing acquaintance in this "triple immersion" to *reincorporate* the right elements of Scripture, tradition and their context to reach fitting and wise hermeneutical, theological and ethical judgments.

4. Good improvisers aware that in a world of multiple (and often dissonant) voices, their highest allegiance is to the triune God. They are first and foremost accountable to respond/accept to *God's call/offer* as communicated in the diverse illocutions of Scripture.

5. Good improvisers understand that although church practices, traditions, and their cultural context are important for the work of improvisation, they only have *ministerial authority*, while the *magisterial authority* belongs to the canonical Scripture.

6. Good improvisers choose the best available concepts and categories from their philosophical and cultural context and

use them as tools to render the same judgments as found in the canonical Scripture. In doing this, they appreciate the valuable guide from *the Rule of Faith* and *the exemplars* of good improvisation from the church tradition.

7. Good improvisers aware of the *"betwenness"* of their place in the theodrama; they understand that they are not playing a single-act drama. They realize that the most important work has been done by Christ in the previous act; they wait expectantly to the consummation of Christ's work in the last act and faithfully engaged in their present roles.

8. Good improvisers understand their work as a *community project.* They resist to work in isolation and regard their work as always being influenced by and influencing other improvisers in the body of Christ from all ages and from all historical/cultural contexts.

9. Good improvers depend on *the Holy Spirit* to keep themselves from the pride of *ad-libbing* and from the cowardice of *preplanning*. Realizing their finiteness and fallenness, they rely on the Holy Spirit to mold both the character of humility and courage that are essential for faithful and creative improvisation.

10. Good improvisers always strive for *unity (not uniformity) and harmony* despite the heterophonic realities in their interpretation, theology, and ethical practices by engaging in authentic dialogue with other Christian voices—ancient and present; local and global.