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See back cover for Table of Contents



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# Kevin Vanhoozer's Theodramatic Improvisation and the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15

Brent Neely

In a well-known article, Andrew Walls asks the reader to imagine an extremely long-lived Martian anthropologist studying the 'earthly' phenomenon of Christianity over centuries and across the globe.<sup>1</sup> Walls's imaginative 'on the ground' descriptions of the extra-terrestrial social scientist's visits indicate a breathtaking extent of liturgical, theological, cultural and linguistic diversity among Christian faith communities, almost to the point of obscuring their shared Christian identity.

Indeed, the cultural, political, economic and even theological gaps among Christian groups around the world are stark—not only over time, but also in various locations in our own time. This variation testifies to the fact that, in terms of its lived expression, the Christian faith has undergone multiple rounds of change, variation and innovation since it emerged in Jerusalem two millennia

ago as a radical movement of Jews committed to Jesus as their risen Messiah. The undeniable diversity in Christian expression raises crucial questions about how to pursue authentic contextualization of the faith once delivered to all.

From its inception, the Gospel has continually traversed cultural and linguistic boundaries. Especially in the modern period, this has resulted in diverse developments across the spectrum of global churches as Christianity has become rooted in an ever-increasing array of local cultures. A diverse ecclesiastical panorama has emerged from the fraught and intricate dance between message and context as the gospel wends its way through history. Missteps are possible, but so too is a beautiful pattern that is both variegated and integrated, dynamic yet faithful to God's story.

Whence comes all this dynamism and creativity? Is there a stable identity? Where is the continuity among the churches? How do this vast newness and change in the Church interrelate with the inalterable truth from which its existence derives? And where might we look for guidance as

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture', in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 3–15.

we seek to achieve faithful contextualization of the message amongst the world's countries and people groups?

## I. Acts 15, the Global Church, and Improvised Drama

One point of entry into these questions appears in Acts 15, which recounts decisions adopted by the so-called Jerusalem Council that unleashed seismic transformation in early Christianity.<sup>2</sup> As we consider those world-forming moves in ancient Judea, we turn to the insights of a contemporary theologian to help us frame and guide our quest.

'Theodrama' is the guiding paradigm that Kevin Vanhoozer applies to biblical interpretation, theological production, and the life and mission of the church. He affirms 'a canonic and hence christological principle, namely, that the Spirit speaking in Scripture about what God was/is doing in the history of Israel and climactically in Jesus Christ is the supreme rule for Christian faith, life, and understanding.'<sup>3</sup> Further, he 'views

the gospel as essentially dramatic, the Bible as a script, doctrine as theatrical direction, and the church as part of the ongoing performance of salvation.'<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I apply elements of Vanhoozer's notion of theodrama to the narrative action of Acts 15, giving special attention to his use of the concept of *improvisation*. In this precise theological sense, improvisation does not mean unbounded innovation. Rather, it represents the creative but faithful contextualization or application of canonical truth to shifting cultural contexts. Vanhoozer explains that such improvisation is fully consonant with a stable orthodox identity.<sup>5</sup>

Vanhoozer uses the classic debate between Athanasius and Arius over the nature of Jesus as an illustration, pointing out that mere repetition of prior verbal formulations guarantees neither theological integrity nor relevance. 'The Arians could affirm Jesus' statement "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30)', Vanhoozer states, 'but it fell to Athanasius to explain what the words meant. *Homoousios* was Athanasius's "improved" response.'<sup>6</sup>

Vanhoozer's understanding of 'theodramatic improvisation' correlates in striking ways with the 'drama' of the Jerusalem Council. Acts 15 has featured frequently in discussions of global theologizing, contextualization, and the translation of the gospel across cultural, religious, or ethnic boundaries.<sup>7</sup> For Richard Longeneck-

<sup>2</sup> I assume the broadly reliable historicity of Luke's work. For a defense of this contested position, see Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), chapters 3–9, including the final section of chapter 6, 'Approaching Acts as a Historical Source'.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "'One Rule to Rule Them All?' Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity', in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (eds.), *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 108. Vanhoozer's full statement on doctrine as 'theodrama' is found in *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster

John Knox Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 109.

<sup>5</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 128.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia A. and David K. Strong, 'The Globalizing Hermeneutic of the Jerusalem Coun-

er, at the Jerusalem Council, 'James, it appears, voiced one of the greatest of all theological judgments, which at this point in God's dealing with humanity was one of the great turning points of redemptive history.'<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding its unique role in the drama of salvation, Acts 15 is an exemplary, even foundational, case of the improvisation and contextualization that has been underway as theology has 'gone global' from the start.

For Vanhoozer, theology is oriented towards 'practical' wisdom (*sapientia* and *phronesis*) in the life of disciples. Given its relationship to lived experience in all its nuance, diversity, and tension, the rationale of the divine drama 'is as imaginative-intuitive as it is analytic-conceptual and ... theology's primary aim is to help disciples discern how best to "stage" the gospel of the kingdom of God in concrete situations'.<sup>9</sup> Scripture provides 'the script' which is to be lived out as the church 'performs' the Gospel on the world stage.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, the narrative action

in Acts 15 is virtually a tailor-made exemplification of dramatic improvisation.<sup>11</sup> 'Improvisation is ... [the term] for the process of judging how to speak and act in new situations in a way that is both canonically and contextually fitting.'<sup>12</sup> For Vanhoozer, 'The best improviser is the one whose speech and action appear neither preplanned nor ad-libbed but rather fitting. Christian theologians improvise whenever their doctrinal directions appear fitting or obvious to one who fears God, to one whose reflex is to follow the Word in the Spirit of freedom.'<sup>13</sup> 'Improvising well requires both training (formation) and discernment (imagination).'<sup>14</sup>

For those committed to the authority of Scripture, the assumed overtones of the term 'improvisation' may well be alarming. But, as Vanhoozer points out, the problem here lies with the popular (mis)understanding of the concept and the failure to realize how improvisation, rightly understood, has been inherent in *all* theology, mission and translation, at least since the closing of the canon.

In the contextual adaptation of im-

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cial', in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (eds.), *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 127–39; Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 202–5. I will not address the complex and contested exegetical issues of the passage in complete detail.

<sup>8</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, 'Acts', in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (eds.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), Kindle Locations 27449–50.

<sup>9</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 109.

<sup>10</sup> See Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 30–33.

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<sup>11</sup> This essay primarily engages with Vanhoozer's 'One Rule', along with *The Drama of Doctrine*. Vanhoozer does not provide a detailed overlay of the improvisation scheme onto Acts 15 in either work. Cf. *Drama of Doctrine*, 339, 440. From a different angle, in *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), Vanhoozer presents the Jerusalem Council as 'a paradigmatic case of what it means to practice *sola scriptura*' (p. 130; cf. 130–32).

<sup>12</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 113; cf. *Drama of Doctrine*, 335–54.

<sup>13</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 114.

<sup>14</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 337.

provisation, there is no question of abandoning truth. But for those who view theology as exclusively propositional and abstract, the intuition, discernment and oblique insight inherent to improvisation may be unsettling. Precisely these elements, however, are central to Luke's story.

In drama theory, improvisation begins with an 'offer', an initiative presented by some character in a shared scene. The offer is built on a preliminary assumption; offers are then either 'accepted' or 'blocked'. 'In accepting an offer, the actor says yes to the basic assumption. A block, by contrast, is "anything that prevents the action from developing".<sup>15</sup> The theodrama of the canon is the Church's operative assumption. Vanhoozer further states:

The most important offers that structure the ensuing play—'Let there be light'; 'Behold the Lamb of God'; 'For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works' (Eph. 2:10)—have already been made. The New Testament is replete with examples of people accepting offers—improvising—in ways that develop the action. The Jerusalem Council, for example, accepted the 'offer' that the covenant of Grace included the Gentiles.<sup>16</sup>

While improvising, good actors fruitfully go beyond merely accepting an offer; they may *overaccept* it. That is, they incorporate offers 'into a

larger story'. They are faithful to the big picture, maintain their own identity, and 'keep in mind the overall coherence of the developing theodrama' even as they respond to 'what is happening immediately around them'.<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes the word [of God in the biblical drama] is accepted, usually it is blocked; the divine improvisation continues regardless. God overaccepts even human blocking by incorporating it into the broader covenantal comedy. Even Israel's unbelief is overaccepted into the story, with the result—spontaneous but not discontinuous—that the Gentiles become part of the action too (Rom 9–11). The greatest divine improvisation is, of course, the incarnation, when the word of the Lord comes in a way that is different yet at the same time continuous with previous words.<sup>18</sup>

Another relevant concept here is 'reincorporation', one of the most important narrative skills in improvisation. Reincorporation involves reintegrating previously revealed material in a scene during its development or towards its closure. Reincorporation is not an exercise in autonomous free association or radical and random redirection; rather, the improviser engaging in this action is thoroughly 'committed to the play, to the other

**15** Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 339. Vanhoozer quotes from Keith Johnstone's work *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1981), 97. On the process described in this paragraph, see *Drama of Doctrine*, 338–39.

**16** Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 339.

**17** Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 340.

**18** Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 341. 1 Sam 8, in which God grants a king to Israel, is another example of overaccepting—an improvised response that goes beyond the narrow confines of the initial offer ('Israel wants a king like the other nations'), incorporating the entire episode into a much greater narrative and purpose (God's designs for a Davidic redeemer).

players', and to the wholeness and unity of the drama.<sup>19</sup> As we will see, offers, acceptances, overaccepting and reincorporating are all prominent in the Jerusalem Council story.

In describing theologians as improvisers, we must stress that they are not freestyle, independent improvisers. Rather, they follow the lead of God the Author, Thespian and Improviser himself; he makes the offer. For Vanhoozer, in the canonical sweep of the salvation story, the lead offer is God's cosmic promise to Abraham (Gen 12; Rom 4:13).<sup>20</sup> 'The history of salvation is largely the history of divine improvisation on this covenantal theme.'<sup>21</sup> In Acts 15, we clearly perceive an initiating offer and an improvised response. In the unprecedented flow of Greek pagans into the Antioch congregation *without becoming Jewish proselytes*, God (and his missionaries) had radically interjected the 'new'; an offer was on the table (cf. Acts 11:19–26; 14:27; 15:3). The apostles and elders struggled, listened and responded; that is, they improvised.<sup>22</sup> Recognizing the Antioch mission to the Gentiles as the 'restoration of David's fallen tent'—now extending its sovereignty over the nations—was a grand move to overaccept and propel God's drama forward (Acts 15:16–18).

## II. Memory, Catholicity and Canon at the Jerusalem Improv

The disciple-theologian-actors are not called to a wilful, autonomous construction, even as they are called to improvise. Whatever the 'new' is in improvisation, it is not a heedless disavowal of what preceded. As Vanhoozer puts it:

Memory is actually more foundational for improvisation than originality. An improviser seeks not to innovate but to respond to the past ... for the future is formed out of the past. ... The difference between acting from a script and improvising is that the improviser is more dependent on what the other actors are saying and doing. This is especially the case when the action carried forward derives from the economy of the Triune God.<sup>23</sup>

This is precisely the story of Acts, a narrative propelled across the Roman world stage with unexpected twists and turns. The apostles display bold obedience, but on many occasions they are simply scrambling to keep up with the Actor's offers. Consider, for example, the apostles' somewhat fuzzy expectations until the Spirit appears at Pentecost; the sometimes negative nudges that the Spirit gives Paul's band in guiding their journey (e.g. Acts 16:6–7); or especially the engagement between Peter and Cornelius.

In Luke's earlier book, the paradoxical victory of the cross had been confirmed as the resurrection shredded the shroud of the old cosmos, ushering in the new creation. And

<sup>19</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 340 (cf. 339–40).

<sup>20</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 347.

<sup>21</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 114.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 339.

<sup>23</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 114.

then, in the immediate sequel, the would-be ambassadors of the new-creation gospel are told to wait (Acts 1:4)! God must move first; his people will improvise in response.

Although improvisation implies the emergence of something new, the *prior* activity of God sets the trajectory, even when that prior action has long been misunderstood. Throughout Acts, the Spirit leads in line with the covenantal promise granted to Abraham in eons past (cf. 3:24–26). Memory is vital in Antioch, in Jerusalem and in the mission to the nations. Thus the debate in Jerusalem invokes the memory of the Spirit's recent actions in Syria and Asia Minor (15:3–4, 12); of Peter's encounter with Cornelius years earlier (15:7–11); and, ultimately, of the divine deposit in the Scriptures and history of Israel (15:13–18).

A theodramatic expression of the Gospel in new scenarios entails surprise, contextual development, or even apophatic mystery. But it certainly does not mean a random abdication of authority to every new agenda or context. Vanhoozer's construal of the theodrama entails the Spirit, through Scripture, leading the assembled community. Therefore, improvisation in the theodramatic mission of the Church must be both canonical and catholic (universal). Perhaps today more than ever, vernacular theologies from across the world must contribute to this process, as catholic community is global community.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 117–18. In personal communication, Vanhoozer advocated for further clarity (here and in theology generally) on the role of catholicity and also for correlating the universal with the local church in concrete rather than abstract ways.

In Syria and Asia Minor, God and the Antiochene community had been improvising on such a scale that an 'ecumenical' conference was necessary. This new expansion of the people of God—an incorporation into Messiah of Gentiles who had not taken on the 'yoke of Torah'—was shifting the ground beneath the feet of a church that understood itself as the renewed Israel of the latter days. God's bold offer led to considerable shaking and to 'no small dissension and debate' (Acts 15:2 NRSV). But a centrifugal fragmentation had to be resisted. Importantly, the shape of the theodrama is unified and catholic, so representatives of the whole spectrum (from those reaching out to Gentiles to the Hebraic old guard) convened at Jerusalem (15:2).

The tenor of theology forged in new contexts is improvisational. For the first-century church of Judea and Syria, the context that could not be ignored was the increasing number of non-Jews entering the fold of Israel's Messiah. The tectonic plates were sliding. Crucial to the deliberations were the remembered contexts of the ministries of Paul, Barnabas and Peter<sup>25</sup> wherein God had instigated new realities in physical, tangible, miraculous ways. But James then turned the

<sup>25</sup> Note Peter's impassioned speech in Acts 15:7–11. In effect he says: 'God gave these outsiders his own Spirit freely and directly. Who are we to quibble?' Indeed, Peter is rather provocative and totalizing as Luke presents him: God makes 'no distinction between us and them'; Jews and Gentiles are saved by Messiah's grace on the same terms; and resisters are 'testing God', and hypocritically at that (as they themselves have been less than comprehensive in bearing the yoke of Torah!)

assembly's focus to the holy writings. Again, the theodrama is *canonical*; it always requires the turn to Scripture. But in light of the new reality, improvisational hermeneutics would also be required.

### III. Improvisational

#### Hermeneutics at the Council

In globalizing theology, as faith crosses boundaries, fresh understandings of the canon emerge. The fact of a diverse world church, gathered around a shared canon, raises the question of interpretation. (For simplicity, I set aside the relatively minor differences between Christian traditions regarding the canon.) What is the form of a canonical, yet dynamic, hermeneutic? How is the word to be understood in unprecedented scenarios? What methods should be employed?

With regard to James's invoking of Scripture in Acts 15:15–18, David and Cynthia Strong point out that his method in appropriating Amos 9 (and other passages) contrasts substantially with the conventional historical-grammatical exegesis taught in American evangelical seminaries. They treat James's more 'rabbinic' technique as an example of a valid, though non-Western, hermeneutic—a hermeneutic still anchored in Scripture.<sup>26</sup>

Strong and Strong raise a valuable point, but there is more to be said. Whatever Hebraic contextual exegesis James may be engaged in (such as stringing together diverse biblical texts based on lexical triggers), beyond his method there is also a

meta-principle, a guardrail of sorts. This guardrail is the canon itself. To be more precise, exegetical method in Acts 15, and throughout the New Testament, is shaped by the drama of revelation contained in the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures and understood to have recently climaxed in the Christ-event.

The apostolic interpretation of the Prophets was certainly improvisational, but it did *not* consist of purely arbitrary lexical games or random method. In this regard, the larger context of Amos 9 may also be relevant to James's expanded interpretive horizon. For example, in Amos 9:7, the prophet's sharp rhetoric shockingly places Israel in the same basket with other nations of the world, near and far.<sup>27</sup> The early believers improvised their Bible reading in line with the arc of salvation-history, in light of the divine drama of the Gospel—the Christ-event that had broken in upon Israel now, at the end of the ages (cf. 1 Cor 10:11).

Given these extraordinary events that had been accomplished in the midst of the first-generation church (cf. Lk 1:1), for James to understand the Gentiles' embrace of the risen Jesus as the 'restoration of David's fallen tent' (Acts 15:16; Amos 9:11–12) was anything but a stretch; indeed, it was virtually inevitable.

The famous story of Akhnai's oven from the Babylonian Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 59b)<sup>28</sup> provides an illustrative

<sup>27</sup> See Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Bletchley, UK and Grand Rapids: Paternoster and Baker Academic, 2003), 67.

<sup>28</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud* (original text and English translation) is available at <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Talmud>.

<sup>26</sup> Strong and Strong, 'Globalizing Hermeneutic', 131–32.



counterpoint to the scriptural hermeneutics of Acts 15. In Luke's account, Scripture is authoritative and context (i.e. the influx of Gentiles) must be evaluated in light of it; nevertheless, the context—the divine action in the world—pushes the believers towards an appropriation of God's word that is both *new and canonically faithful*. Together, by the Spirit, they come to a fresh understanding of God's previously unexpected action in the world and of how that action is consonant with, or even required by, his ancient, revealed truth. In the Talmudic story, on the other hand, not even miracles or heavenly voices can overcome an interpretation backed by traditional consensus; so settled is this point that God is in effect outdone by the rabbis. The interpreters trump the Author.

Of course, Acts and the Talmudic narrative are not comparable genres, and we must allow that the Talmud is speaking 'tongue-in-cheek'. But with regard to the dynamics of canon, community, and hermeneutical authority, the structural contretemps between the two stories is noteworthy.

The Hebrew Scriptures remained the unassailable authority for the Jerusalem messianic community. But that canon was understood as a coherent story line that had reached its climactic, surprising fulfilment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus from Nazareth. The drama that explains the past, situates our present and directs the future is centred on the gospel about Jesus. Recall that reincorporation (or recapitulation) is essential to right improvising.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, 'one might say that the whole

New Testament is an improvisation upon the Old', entailing 'the recapitulation of all that has gone before in Jesus Christ' (cf. Lk 24:27; 2 Cor 1:20).<sup>30</sup>

This sense of improvisation between the testaments is not identical to, but is compatible with, Augustine's famous aphorism about the 'new concealed in the old; the old revealed in the new'.<sup>31</sup> Augustine, writing *Against Adimantus*, says that 'there is such strong prediction and preannouncement of the New Testament [in the Old Testament] that nothing is found in the teaching of the Evangelists and the apostles, however exalted and divine the precepts and promises, that is lacking in those ancient books'.<sup>32</sup>

In *On the Profit of Believing*, Augustine speaks of the underlying congruity between the Old and New Testaments, stating that the apparent disjunction lies only in the obscuring epistemological veil that obfuscates the reading of the Old Testament until that veil is removed in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 3:6–18).<sup>33</sup> In the wake of a dramatic improvisation in the Bible's 'Great Story', one's retrospective gaze may well lead to a sense that a veil has been lifted.<sup>34</sup> At the Jerusalem Coun-

<sup>30</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 341.

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Dr Tite Tiénou for reminding me of this Augustinian notion. The phrase is said to come from *Questions in the Heptateuch* 2.73 (which I have not been able to access).

<sup>32</sup> Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), Kindle Locations 1039–41, citing *Against Adimantus* 3.4.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *On the Profit of Believing/De Utilitate Credendi*, [www.newadvent.org/fathers/1306.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1306.htm) (paragraph 9 on the 'veiling' issue).

<sup>34</sup> Iain Provan sometimes refers to (a sum-

<sup>29</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 339–40, 388–89.

cil, the dynamic and redemptive intervention of Jesus in his world (well beyond Jewish boundaries) drove the disciples back upon Scripture, in dependence on the living Spirit, in such a way that they saw with new eyes. The path forward would be discovered not by syllogistic deduction but by wise discernment as a faithful community improvised within the drama.

#### IV. Canon and Context

Acts 15 exemplifies mission in fresh cultural context and provides a sort of live video clip of *canonical* theodramatic interpretation.

Scripture governs theology not by providing the field from which we harvest abstract universals, but *by embodying truths of transcultural significance in particular contexts*. ... What ought to govern the play of theology in other times and places [is] the cultural-linguistic patterns of Scripture itself, *not* because those ancient cultures are authoritative but because the judgments that come to specific cultural-linguistic expression in them are. ... [The canon authoritatively] constrains but does not exhaustively determine how we participate in the theo-drama today. We are still in the realm of *phronesis*.<sup>35</sup>

Faithful improvisation entails not *contextualism* ('the view that everything we say is determined by and relative to a particular context') but

a *contextualizing* 'that recognizes the cultural clothing of our speech and action but does not necessarily deny their transcontextual significance'.<sup>36</sup> David Bosch critiques a sort of hyper-ideological contextual theology that, in a sense, sets the context *above* the text: 'It isn't the facts of history that reveal where God is at work, but the facts illuminated by the gospel. According to *Gaudium et Spes* 4, the church, in reading the signs of the times, is to interpret them *in the light of the gospel*.' Bosch further asserts, 'We may not, however, without ado convert the context into the text.' For Bosch, the '*theologia localis* should ... challenge and fecundate the *theologia oecumenica*, and the latter, similarly, [should] enrich and broaden the perspective of the former.'<sup>37</sup>

At the Jerusalem Council we see what Vanhoozer calls a critical or disciplined contextualization—that is, a 'genuinely contextual theology [which] is accountable both to the theodrama (and hence to canonical texts) and to the contemporary situation'.<sup>38</sup> Timothy Tennent construes the outcomes of Acts 15 as 'a generous compromise';<sup>39</sup> while I acknowledge his observation, for our purposes the stronger resonance of 'faithful improvisation' is a more fitting term than 'compromise' for the contextual theology that emerged in Jerusalem.

Vanhoozer calls for 'creative fidelity' in theological production, a pro-

mary of) the narrative flow of the canon as 'the Great Story.' See e.g. Provan, *The Reformation*, Kindle Locations 1063-69.

<sup>35</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 348 (emphasis in original).

<sup>36</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 118.

<sup>37</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 422, 491, 420.

<sup>38</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 114.

<sup>39</sup> Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 204.

duction executed in subjection to the canon. This is a fidelity in which the identities of Scripture, of the story, and of the God and people of that story remain stable and continuous. Yet new enactments of theological truth appropriate to a new time and place are fleshed out. Throughout time, the Gospel is transmitted, translated and expressed in changed ways, in changed contexts—all this with faithfulness to the judgements or ‘communicative action’ of the canonical theodrama. In faithful improvisation the *same* gospel, not another gospel, is handed on.<sup>40</sup>

As the message is translated into new contexts, the church and its theology are contextualized or, perhaps more precisely, enculturated. This is not merely an expansion of the church, but the Church ‘being *born anew* in each new context and culture’.<sup>41</sup> Necessarily, productively, and by design, tensions remain throughout the process of mission and enculturation, always and everywhere—even in the Western world. Again, the Spirit forms, challenges and critiques local expressions of the *ekklesia* by means of canon and (catholic) community.

The Church can be conceptualized as a ‘universal hermeneutical community, in which Christians and theologians from different lands check one another’s cultural biases’.<sup>42</sup> The

‘local’ may celebrate its distinctiveness, but not in isolation, for ‘any theology is a discourse about a universal message’.<sup>43</sup> The Gospel is both vitally at home in *and* incisively at odds with *every* people and place. In Andrew Walls’s formulation, the dialectic tension between the ‘indigenizing’ and ‘pilgrim’ principles is constant.<sup>44</sup>

Certainly, theological understanding of Scripture must not and cannot be ‘confined to the past’. Even translation involves interpretation, or perhaps improvisation.<sup>45</sup> Historical-critical sensitivity to the original context of the biblical text is vital, but it does not constitute the whole theological process; if it were, then theology would be reduced to perpetual ‘duplication’.<sup>46</sup> This is not how improvisational drama works. ‘Though the church’s script is sufficient, it is not enough simply to repeat one’s lines when the cultural scene changes.’<sup>47</sup>

But the equal and opposite defect is an interpretation that cuts the interpreter off from the authority of the past and of the text by a totalizing commitment to the contemporary context or regnant ideology. This is,

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1985, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), xxxvi. This and the previous sentence are drawn from Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 450, who quotes Hiebert and Gutiérrez.

<sup>44</sup> Walls, ‘The Gospel as Prisoner’, 7–9.

<sup>45</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 351; cf. 129–33.

<sup>46</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 351, with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff’, in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 7.

<sup>47</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 336.

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<sup>40</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 127–33. Vanhoozer helpfully employs Ricoeur’s distinction between two kinds of ‘sameness’, *idem*-identity (brittle, duplicative) and *ipse*-identity (dynamically faithful) (pp. 127–28).

<sup>41</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 447; cf. 445–50.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Hiebert, ‘The Missiological Implications of an Epistemological Shift’, *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* (May–June),

among other things, a failure to faithfully remember; it is, rather, to engage in 'blocking'.

A move in either direction, then, distorts and misappropriates Scripture by seeking to entrap it within either the ancient or current epoch. The 'canon itself avoids both mistakes. It neither leaves earlier texts in their own epochs nor distorts what they were originally about. On the contrary: later biblical texts reincorporate the earlier material. They translate; they improvise.'<sup>48</sup> They are 'creative'.<sup>49</sup>

The Jerusalem Council faithfully *and also freshly* read God's script and then improvised. James and the Jerusalem band were creative in multiple ways:

- in their catholic incorporation of all the relevant actors—apostles, leaders, advocates and complainants;
- in their reference to recent actions of accepting offers, remembering and reincorporating, such as Peter's experience with Cornelius;
- in their submission to the Spirit, the Director (Acts 15:8, 28); and
- in their reference to the canon of Scripture—remembering, reincorporating and overaccepting in light of the 'Big Play'.

## V. Conclusion

Thanks to developments in the global South, we now realize that *all* theology is essentially mission-

ary theology, arising out of the need to translate and incarnate the gospel in and into particular cultural settings. Just as important is the renewed consciousness that theology is something that is lived. Doctrinal truth must be not only systematized but also *shown*; stated, yes, but also staged and even suffered.<sup>50</sup>

Theology without discipleship is fatally deficient. Christian truth is to be 'performed'; it is dramatic. A critical aspect of the dramatic paradigm of Scripture, with its climax in the story of Jesus, is the virtue of faithful theological improvisation. And, in faithful mimesis, 'the task of systematic theology is to train actors with good improvisatory judgment, actors who know what to say and do to perform and advance the gospel of Jesus Christ in terms of their own cultural contexts.'<sup>51</sup>

The expansion, development, and multi-directional movement of the church in mission engender and require ever-new theologizing. But for this church to remain recognizably the one *ekklesia* of Jesus, the pulsing energy of myriad contextual theologies must be channelled canonically, by the Spirit of Jesus, in a shared universality. The resulting catholicity 'is not a "colorless uniformity" but a coat of many threads and many colors'.<sup>52</sup>

The canonical template of faithful improvisation itself exerts a sort

<sup>48</sup> Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 351.

<sup>49</sup> Each term is a potential pitfall. Vanhoozer points out that this faithful creativity is *not* a creation *ex nihilo* (*Drama of Doctrine*, 351).

<sup>50</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 122–23.

<sup>51</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 121.

<sup>52</sup> Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 118, referring to Shoki Coe, 'Contextualization as the Way toward Reform', in *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes*, edited by J. Elwood (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980), 48–55.

of normative pressure on the church in mission throughout history. Consider, for example, the famous conciliar creeds, promulgated during a time of dramatic expansion of the early church. Vanhoozer terms them 'theodramatic discoveries' worthy of respect.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, mission, and thus translation, contextualization and improvisation continue today in all Christian contexts. As Craig Ott states:

[We may] affirm that theological formulations in the Western tradition are no less true in Africa or Asia than they are in Europe or America. However, they are not necessarily equally relevant, understandable, or adequate in all contexts. Nor are such formulations exhaustive. Here is where theological insights from non-Western perspectives hold so much promise. They open the door not necessarily for *alternative* but rather for fuller theological understanding.<sup>54</sup>

The fateful Jerusalem Council, occurring two decades after the resurrection, grappled with fundamental crises of ecclesiology, theology, ethics and salvation as a radical Jewish renewal movement was confronted with a wave of Gentiles entering the

Messiah's fold. What was God doing? Who are the people of God and how are they constituted? The new covenant represents a theological *tour de force* in which consummate pagans were, by faith, swept into the company of the chosen, alongside believing Hebrews. As Bosch observes, this is the epitome of contextual theology, 'holding together in creative tension *theoria*, *praxis* and *poiesis*—or, if one wishes, faith, hope, and love'; such is 'the missionary nature of the Christian faith, which seeks to combine the three dimensions'.<sup>55</sup>

Andrew Walls speaks of the early church's move towards incorporating Jews and Gentiles into one body as a fleeting but critical watershed for subsequent church history; he then contends that today's globalized church is poised on the cusp of another such defining 'Ephesian moment'.<sup>56</sup> The epochal decisions emerging from the drama of Acts 15 constitute a Spirit-breathed improvisation, the redemptive consequences of which have echoed down the centuries. Their consequences echo even today as the theodrama continues on its globalizing arc.

53 Vanhoozer, 'One Rule', 119.

54 Craig Ott, 'Conclusion: Globalizing Theology', in Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (eds.), *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 315.

55 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 424.

56 Andrew Walls, 'The Ephesian Moment', in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 72–81, available online at [www.calvin.edu/admin/provost/multicultural/documents/ephesian\\_moment.pdf](http://www.calvin.edu/admin/provost/multicultural/documents/ephesian_moment.pdf).