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Improvising

Church

*Scripture as
the Source of
Harmony,
Rhythm,
and Soul*



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Part I

Harmony

MUSICAL MOMENTS SOMETIMES LODGE in our memories, for both listeners and musicians. I will never forget a gig I played in Australia where I was comping (playing behind) a saxophonist. The saxophonist was improvising an abstract melody that didn't fit neatly into any harmonic structure. In the moment, I slammed down a six-note chord using both hands. The chord was constructed of stacked fourths (a fourth interval layered five times over). This chord has an abstract (or ambiguous) harmonic quality that matched the melody of the soloist perfectly. I felt a coherence deep in my gut, as *my* harmony made sense of *his* melody and invited him to say something more. A second after I whacked down the chord, the double bass player, a highly respected musician, yelled, "Yeah!"

Harmony brings out the color and personality of the music; played thoughtfully, it can create tremendous excitement. These first four notes for improvising church have to do with the personality, the characteristic spirit of the community: Scripture, leadership, place, and aesthetic.



The Text *Grants*

THE WORD OF GOD, full of creativity, poetry, and life-as-it-is, shouldn't produce static or predictable churches. Rather, Scripture inspires and even demands improvisation. Of course, there will be a level of predictability in churches. When we worship, the Word and sacraments will take center stage, for example, and we may draw on rich historical traditions. And yet, playing our part in the biblical story is like a jazz performance. Immersed in the biblical tradition, we play fresh improvisations on the tradition that make sense in the context in which God has placed us.

The first, ongoing step is to immerse ourselves in the biblical tradition, getting it into our bones. In this way, Christ-followers are like jazz musicians who immerse themselves in the tradition of jazz. We jazz musicians learn from the masters, those who hold the tradition. We study their playing. When I am listening to jazz, an amazing, improvised line will often catch my ear. I may choose to pause and to learn from this line. I will put the section of music on repeat, studying the line to discover how it works harmonically. Then I practice the line on piano, getting it under my fingers. Next, I practice the line in each of the twelve keys. Finally, I try to improvise in a fresh way, using the rhythmic and melodic “vocabulary” of the line.

Immersion in the biblical tradition takes the same kind of devoted, intelligent, soul work. We get the Bible under our fingers, we become familiar with its characters, structure, intricacies, and paradoxes. We delight, we memorize, we suspend judgment, we rage, maybe we learn the original languages. And we find companions—perhaps new voices or experts who haven't been given their due in the tradition's historical records—to learn

from. When playing jazz, within a few seconds good jazz musicians recognize whether or not the music is emerging from the tradition. For example, when a good musician plays with someone who has not spent time immersed in the jazz tradition, they know almost instantly. It's the same with Scripture.¹

The tradition inspires creativity. As we study Scripture, we recognize the ingenuity of the biblical authors themselves, as they hold out the word of life within their own diverse contexts (as we will see in this book). The Bible inspires in us fresh imagination as we re-express the tradition in our particular place. The rich inventiveness of jazz that requires musicians to step into the unknown, in trusting interdependence with one another, can inspire us to imagine: What fresh and beautiful melodies and rhythms can the biblical tradition birth in us? How can we choreograph the harmony, the rhythm, and the soul of Scripture in our lives to faithfully display the beauty and tenderness of Jesus within our neighborhood? Only with this kind of poetic imagination can we improvise our part in this story as those who are “sent” for witness (Jn 20:21).

Like jazz musicians, Christ-followers improvise out of the biblical tradition together, in conversation with one another, interdependent with one another. Maybe one person in your church begins to develop a motif that seems to be Spirit inspired. This motif may begin to shape the whole performance. In community with one another, we can ensure that we are always playing out of the tradition, inspiring one another to go deeper into the tradition.

Consider what the following qualities have in common: nuance, trust, coherence, conversation, listening, poise, story, subtlety, creativity, generosity, emotion, wariness of sentimentality (but embracing authenticity). These are all qualities of an excellent jazz performance, and they are also qualities of a community that is creatively playing its part in the biblical story. I am convinced that the key to unlocking fresh imagination for the church is not a new strategy but a rich understanding of the biblical story, alongside embracing the invitation to improvise on the tradition. I hope that by reading this book you will discover that there is more than enough imagination,

¹A part of our work is disentangling cultural traditions from biblical traditions, ensuring that we are not mistaking one for the other.

creativity, and tenderness in Scripture to last a lifetime. Our first note for improvising church is Scripture, the text that *grants*.

The Text Grants

It is helpful to acknowledge that many of us (but not all) have a complex relationship with Scripture. We might wonder, *What shall we do with the apparently violent texts? What about the misogynistic texts in Scripture that rightly trouble so many of us?* Indeed, a troubled relationship with Scripture is one aspect of the pervasive doubt that characterizes the church today. Relationship with Scripture is not the only cause of this pervasive doubt. Religious pluralism, violence within Christian history, Christian nationalism, and toxic masculinity all contribute profoundly, among other causes. Yet our relationship with Scripture is almost always a part of the puzzle. How then should we approach the texts in Scripture that may trouble us?

Let me share a story. When I was in my twenties, I was impressed by eighteenth century revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards's approach to theological perplexities. When Edwards found a biblical or theological issue that had him stumped, he wouldn't rest until he had the issue "solved," and he encouraged others to do the same. This approach suited my young, energetic personality, and I adopted it for some years! And yet the longer I live and the longer I journey with the Bible, the more I realize that I need to sit with difficult texts over time, maybe even a lifetime. As a professional exegete, I have chosen to be patient with texts that sit uneasily with me, to hold them curiously over months and years. Sometimes through unexpected avenues I find fresh insight into a text that has stumped me, maybe while I am studying a different text altogether, or maybe as I am listening to a friend from a culture that is closer to the communal context of Syria-Palestine than my own. In some cases I decide to devote significant time to a particularly difficult text.

I am convinced that the key to unlocking fresh imagination for the church is not a new strategy but a rich understanding of the biblical story, alongside embracing the invitation to improvise on the tradition.

The text *grants*: these three words are my adaptation of a beautiful phrase from Rainer Maria Rilke and explain my experience of journeying with a text in trust over time. My experience in these journeys is that, in the end, the text *grants*. By “grants” I mean that texts that seem to be harshly dissonant within the narrative of Scripture may, in time, be seen to make a beautiful and unique contribution to the narrative. Rilke’s original phrase reflects on the fecundity of the earth, which gives life and blesses. “The earth grants,” Rilke says. “The farmer never reaches down to where the seed turns into summer”—the earth does this work: “The earth grants.”²

Even as the earth grants, I find that as I persevere with Scripture, *the text grants*. As the Spirit “reaches down to where” we interpret Scripture and Scripture interprets us, the text gives, blesses, invites, amazes, challenges, dignifies, joins, puzzles, shocks, horrifies, resolves, sings, heals, brings life.

The Unity of the Biblical Story

Each chapter in this book will enrich our understanding of the biblical story, and yet it is helpful now to take a deep dive into the biblical story by addressing four key themes. Doing so will give us the big picture as background for studying individual passages in later chapters. This is a bit like practicing scales before learning to solo. My reason for choosing these four particular themes is that, taken together, they help us to read Scripture as a unified story that finds its fulfillment in Jesus. These four themes help us to comprehend the grand narrative of Scripture, the overarching narrative within which each of the parts make sense. Comprehending Scripture’s unity won’t untangle the knots of every difficult text. But it will assist us, at least, to see their ultimate goal. I find that these four themes emerge as one begins to answer four key questions about Scripture:

1. What is the biblical story? Creation is a unifying element in the biblical story: the world matters to God.
2. What is biblical ethics? A biblical ethic of kinship runs through Scripture.

²Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 107.

3. What is the gospel? The gospel announces Jesus' redeeming lordship over all of the creation, as the "mender of all things."
4. What is witness? Witness—in life, word, and deed—isn't merely one task among many, but the very identity of the church.

Christian leaders can spend their whole lives deepening their answers to these four questions. Yet too often in Protestantism, reductionistic answers to the questions have been assumed, and remained uncritiqued. First, the biblical story has been reduced to God saving individuals from hell—and the world is left behind. Second, ethics has lost sight of biblical kinship. Third, the gospel has been limited to penal substitutionary atonement. Fourth, witness has been narrowed exclusively to evangelism and considered as a task rather than as an identity. Little wonder that leaders are left wondering: What is the church *for*? What is the church supposed to *do*? The biblical story has been abstracted and disconnected from the pressing questions of life, community, and culture. I have landed on these four themes, because together they demonstrate the unity of the biblical story, also providing compelling answers as to the identity and purpose of the church.

As we understand the Bible as a unified story, a new and beautiful invitation for Christian life and witness emerges. We unpack these four key themes in turn now.

The World Matters to God

A key and unifying motif in the grand story of Scripture is the creation. This is so often misunderstood that we will give the creation some attention here as a way of enriching our understanding of the biblical story.

In the first two chapters of Scripture, God creates the world with care and delight. You remember from Genesis 1 that seven times God saw that the creation was "good." The seventh time God saw that the creation was *very* good (Gen 1:31)! It's as if Genesis 1–2 stretches an eye-catching banner over the creation that says, "A first class world!" The other side of the banner reads: "This world matters to God!" And God places humanity in the creation as

divine image bearers, as stewards of God’s good creation—think of images installed in an ancient temple as representatives of the temple’s gods (Gen 2:15).³

The first two chapters of the Bible are mirrored by the last two chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21–22. Here the creation is restored, healed. The new Jerusalem, which is a symbol of God’s renewing rule, comes to earth, healing the creation (Rev 21:2, 10; 22:2). So the first two chapters of the Bible are about the creation of the world, and the last two chapters of the Bible are about the healing of the world. Creation bookends the Bible! This shows us that the biblical story takes the whole of creation within its gaze. And the gospel of Jesus Christ comes in the *middle* of this story. This hints to us that the gospel must be about nothing less than the healing of the creation itself.

In Genesis 3, as a result of human transgression there is no part of the good creation that is not distorted by the curse of evil. And yet, there is virtually no part of the creation that does not also still display something of creation’s original goodness. We might say that as the result of the fall, evil preys parasitically on the good creation, as Al Wolters puts it.⁴

In the middle of the biblical story, Christ’s incarnation and resurrection reveal God’s commitment to the creation. The point of the resurrection is not that my sins are *definitely* forgiven—I grew up thinking this is what the resurrection meant. And the point of the resurrection is not that you and I will be raised, though that’s not wrong. Rather, God raised Jesus from the dead as the first fruit of the whole creation renewed (1 Cor 15:20, 23)!⁵ With Jesus’ resurrection, renewed creation has begun. And *that* should be our call and response on Resurrection Sunday:

Leader: “Christ is risen!”

Congregation: “**Renewed creation has begun!**”

That’s why Easter Sunday is the high point of the Christian calendar. In light of the resurrection we look forward to *this* world being renewed: *these* mountains, *these* rivers, *these* cities. We will live in renewed bodies in *this*

³See further, Carmen Joy Imes, *Being God’s Image: Why Creation Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), 35.

⁴Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 57.

⁵See further, N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 219.

world, renewed. That is why repeatedly Paul says of Christ's return, "When he comes," "when he comes" (see 2 Thess 1:10; cf. 1 Cor 11:26).⁶

The message that this world matters to God can shape our understanding of discipleship, of worship, of work, of witness and of the gospel itself. I will never forget the day I connected this rich theology of creation with jazz piano. *God listens in when I play piano, and delights in it!* I thought. I realized that God values my music not because I am using it in a homily, and not even because music can be a prayer or a conscious act of praise (though this is wonderful). God values my music simply because God values aesthetics and art making! For God created the world with care and delight, and so we know that the beauty we create brings God joy.

A Biblical Ethic of Kinship Runs Through Scripture

We can't understand the unity of Scripture without discerning the ethical impulse that runs through Scripture, the ethical goal of it all. Yet this is no easy task, for the conception of right and wrong in modern Western culture is vastly different from the communal culture of the ancient Mediterranean world. For example, a modern concept such as human rights, as important as it is, is so embedded in Western individualism that it doesn't get to the heart of the ethics of the Old and New Testaments. Have you ever wondered how the ancients conceived of good and evil, of what we owe to one another? And have you ever wondered what is the unifying ethical impulse that unites the sense of right and wrong in Scripture?

The ancients who wrote the Bible experienced their lives and identities communally, in communal societies. The most pressing questions for the people in the world of the Bible were "To whom do I belong?" and "For whom do I have responsibility?" Practically speaking, a crisis of poverty would have been experienced also as a crisis of kinship. Imagine that you fell into deep poverty in ancient Israel. Certainly, you would have been aware of a scarcity of food and a lack of means to plant the next crop. And yet you would have also been acutely aware that your plight was the result of an absence of strong kin ties. For an impoverished person lacked kinsfolk who could offer subsistence.

⁶On the restoration of this world, see Mt 5:5; Rom 8:22; Rev 21.

Think of the gleaning laws in the book of Deuteronomy, for example. The command to leave the gleanings of the field, vineyard, and olives for vulnerable people (Deut 24:19-22) could, in modern contexts, be interpreted as mere charity. However, in the communal context of the Bible, God's command to leave the gleanings signified that God's people were to treat the stranger and the fatherless as kin. In other words, Israel was to extend to vulnerable people the kind of protection and sustenance that befits kinsfolk.

Such kinship responsibility appears at the very start of the story of the Bible, with the sons of Adam and Eve. After Cain kills Abel, he responds to God by asking whether he is his brother's keeper. This prompts God's rebuke: "Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground" (Gen 4:10). Cain has failed in his responsibility toward his kinsfolk, and the very earth cries out in protest. According to Genesis, kinship responsibility isn't limited to brothers from the same immediate family such as Cain and Abel. For Genesis portrays humanity as one giant family, descended from common parents (Gen 10). Humanity's common descent that unifies all people as family is called the "one blood doctrine" in Black theology. The one blood doctrine was a key theological pillar for antislavery activism.⁷

Coming to the New Testament, consider Paul's letter to Philemon, which Paul wrote while in chains in Rome.⁸ Onesimus, Philemon's slave, had escaped and fled from Colossae to Rome. In Rome, Paul introduced Onesimus to Christ. And now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, carrying the letter that we know as Philemon. Paul appeals to Philemon that, far from punishing Onesimus, he should no longer even consider Onesimus a slave, but a brother, "a beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord" (Philem 16).

In the punitive and hierarchical culture of the empire, Paul's request to Philemon insists on a totally different category for human relations, that of family. People, even slaves, are no longer to be viewed in terms of what they deserve or their given lot in life but as a beloved sister or brother in Christ. We will see that Scripture is reshaping God's people as family, a family

⁷Lisa M. Owens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 28.

⁸See also, Mark R. Glanville, "A Biblical Ethic of Kinship for People On the Move," *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 15 (2022): 9-23, at 21.

characterized by tenderness.⁹ Following the example of our God, who has adopted us, we enfold one another as family, offering belonging, solidarity, and protection (Deut 10:15, 18-19). We bring the weakest among us into the center. And biblical kinship extends beyond the church to enfold the most vulnerable in our neighborhoods (Lk 15:1-2).

The Gospel Announces Jesus as Lord, the Mender of All Things

As we come to address the question “What is the gospel?” the word *gospel* itself can be confusing. The word may bring to mind a “gospel presentation,” a ready-at-hand explanation designed to lead people to Christ. But it is clarifying to put these presuppositions aside and instead to see how the word *gospel* is used in the New Testament itself.

Our discussion so far has hinted at the nature of the gospel. Because the biblical story starts and ends with the creation, the gospel, which comes in the middle of the story, must concern the creation. This is a good start. Now let’s see how the word *gospel* is used in the Gospel accounts. The word *gospel* is used three times in Mark 1:1-2, 14-15 (emphasis mine):

The beginning of the good news [gospel] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah . . . [Mark then cites a mosaic of Old Testament texts] Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news [gospel] of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news [gospel].”

Here are five things we learn about the gospel from these verses:

1. The gospel concerns the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (verse 1);
2. The gospel is the fulfillment of world history long anticipated by the prophets. That is to say, the gospel is eschatological (verses 2 and 15);
3. As the long-anticipated fulfillment of the Old Testament story (“the time is fulfilled”), the gospel is redemptive. The gospel redeems

⁹Kinship in the ancient world looked very different from the modern nuclear family, as we shall see in chapters five and six.

everything that the Old Testament concerns itself with, including human community, justice, politics, God's presence with humanity, and so much more (verses 2 and 15);¹⁰

4. In Christ, God's restoring reign is at last present in power (the "kingdom of God," verse 15);
5. The gospel calls for a response, and a faithful remnant is gathered (verse 15).

We might summarize the gospel in this way: now at last, in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God is establishing God's healing reign, for the sake of the whole world and for humanity within it.¹¹

A further lens for understanding what the first Christians meant by the word *gospel* is the imperial context. In 9 BCE the Provincial Assembly of Asia proclaimed Augustus's birth as the beginning of the "gospel" or "good news" and reset the calendar accordingly (cf. Mk 1:1).¹² With the battle of

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Actium in 31 BCE, Caesar Augustus had ended a decade-long civil war. New Testament scholar Richard Horsley writes: "Starting almost immediately, and continuing into subsequent generations, there was an outpouring of gratitude and goodwill toward Augustus himself as well as Rome for bringing the peace for which people had yearned so long."¹³ Augustus was repeatedly heralded as the "Savior of the whole human race."¹⁴

Luke's narrative of the shepherds who visit the newborn Jesus picks up this imperial vocabulary and transforms it (Lk 2:1-21). Luke presents

¹⁰Consider the range of concerns that the Old Testament addresses, ranging from constraining royal power to welcoming refugees (e.g., Deut 15:14-20; 10:18-19).

¹¹The apostle Paul has the same narrative dynamic in mind when he uses the word *gospel* (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 15:1-5; 2 Tim 2:8).

¹²"The birthday of the god [Augustus] has been for the whole world the beginning of good news [gospel, *euangelion*] concerning him." *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae* 2, no. 458 (1905), cited in Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 27.

¹³Horsley, *Liberation of Christmas*, 26.

¹⁴Horsley, *Liberation of Christmas*, 27.

Jesus as the “Savior” who brings “peace,” placing him in direct opposition to Caesar’s rule.¹⁵ Yet Luke does not present Jesus merely as a spiritual ruler who replaces an earthly ruler (Augustus), as if the world doesn’t really matter because we are all going to heaven anyway. Rather, Jesus’ reign challenges Augustus’s barbaric and idolatrous reign in every dimension (Lk 1:46-55): “He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1:53). For Luke, the gospel is God’s establishing a liberating, worldwide kingship in the face of the brutal reign of Caesar.

I sometimes refer to the gospel as an announcement of Jesus as the “mender of all things.”¹⁶ Mending clothes is a craft that requires costly attention to detail. Mending speaks of kinship, of loving repair on behalf of those we love. While Jesus’ kingship and power are certainly prominent in the Gospels, so is his humility (think of the feeding trough in which he was placed at his birth; see also Mt 11:29) and familial welcome.

Improvising Witness is the Very Identity of the Church

Witness is the fourth theme that discloses the unity of the biblical story. Witness is not just one task among the many tasks of the church; witness is the very identity of the church. And our witness is to be improvised, played with creativity and soul, like jazz music.

Human witness to God’s redemption did not begin with the church but with God, who called ancient Israel to be a light to the nations. Israel’s life was supposed to be contrastive and compelling so that other nations would notice and be attracted to the wisdom and justice of Israel’s God. To this end Moses said to Israel:

You must observe [these statutes] diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and

¹⁵Horsley, *Liberation of Christmas*, 33.

¹⁶Tom Wuest, *Mender of All Things*, copyright 2016; used with permission. I have borrowed the phrase “mender of all things” from my favorite bard, Tom Wuest.

ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?
(Deut 4:6-8)

By their beautiful life, ancient Israel was supposed to be magnetic, and the nations would come to Yahweh their God. Yet, tragically, as the Old Testament unfolds, Israel failed to be the contrasting community that God had called them to be.

Coming to the New Testament with Christ's resurrection, witness has a new, Spirit-empowered edge. Acts 1 is a turning point in the history of redemption. As we interpret Acts 1, it is helpful to think of the role of cultural symbols or signs. For example, for Aussies, symbols such as koala bears and Vegemite (a black, almost inedible substance that we spread on bread) contribute to our shared identity as Australians. Similarly in Acts 1, three striking Jewish symbols are telling the disciples that this is the moment when Israel (and all of creation along with it) will be restored. The disciples are gathered in Jerusalem (sign one), there is a resurrection (sign two), and Jesus has promised his Spirit (sign three). All three are signs of the great Day of the Lord the prophets had spoken about. So it makes perfect sense that the disciples would ask the resurrected Jesus: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). This is not a silly question; it is exactly what an observant Jew should have thought. Jesus' answer is a watershed:

"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:7-8)

What is the new insight? Jesus is saying that this is, indeed, the great Day of the Lord predicted by the prophets. And yet, the end has been pushed back for a particular purpose, for a time of witness. The purpose of this time in world history is for God's people to witness to Christ as we await his return. And this witness is for the sake of all peoples to the ends of the earth.

Jesus is not so much giving the church the job of witnessing, as one task among many that the church has to do. Rather, witness is the very reason that the end has been pushed back, the reason why the Spirit has been given. It is our very identity as Christ-followers to be people of

witness.¹⁷ To illustrate, imagine that there is a meeting-room in your church, the place where the leaders of the various ministries in your church meet for important conversations. Each of the ministries in your church is represented by a chair placed around a meeting-room table. There is a chair for children's ministry, a chair for preaching, and so on. The point of Acts 1 is that there isn't a chair for witness. Rather, witness is the table itself. Everything we do and everything we are are meant to serve the purpose of witness.

And what is the nature of witness? The breadth of the gospel, which is as wide as the creation, compels us to witness to Christ in life, word, and deed. We are to *be* the witness, *do* the witness, and *say* the witness, as Darrell Guder put it.¹⁸ The church is a community caught up in God's reconciling purpose for all the creation, a people living by the Spirit as a sign, an instrument, and a foretaste of Christ's restoring reign.¹⁹

And our witness is improvised, performed with soul like a saxophonist's solo. This is implicit in the way the book of Acts ends. In Acts 28, Paul is under house arrest in Rome, proclaiming the kingdom of God at that time. There is a certain finality to the rejection of the gospel by the Jews in Rome. And so Paul declares: "This salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen" (Acts 28:28). Acts doesn't tie a neat bow on the story, it stirs anticipation! Such an open-ended conclusion begs for another twenty-eight chapters—chapters left unwritten, at least on papyrus. The next chapters of Acts are for the *ekklesia* (church) to write, both then and today. And lest you be tempted to write a dull and unremarkable sequel to Acts, recall the adventure of Acts 27 and 28, which include Paul's lethal snake bite, a shipwreck, and a magnificent eucharistic gesture embracing all who are on the boat with Paul. Let's just say that Acts 29 through 56 had better be more than coffee and biscuits (cookies) after the morning service.

¹⁷Michael Goheen makes this point powerfully in *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 128.

¹⁸Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 91.

¹⁹*Sign, instrument, and foretaste* are Lesslie Newbigin's characteristic images of the church, first articulated in Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 166.

Bringing Acts 28:28 together with Acts 1, we realize that the risk-taking creativity that the book's final scene requires is inspired and energized by the Holy Spirit, who opens the book (Acts 1:7-8). The Holy Spirit, God's personal agency in the world, is an improviser of unparalleled genius. Acts 27–28, and indeed the whole book, displays the creative virtuosity of the Spirit, through Christ's followers. It is as if the whole meaning of this time in history is for our jazz ensemble to follow the Spirit's lead, in a solo of shifting tonalities that is so beautiful that to hear it (let alone to "sit in") will leave you changed forever.

Let's sum up. In a ten second version, we can summarize the biblical story like this: This is my Father's world! Broken and corrupted by evil it may be, but it still belongs to God. In Christ, God is healing humanity and the whole world from sin's curse. And God is nourishing a people to live as a tender sign to God's restoring love.

Immersing in the Tradition

I hope that these four themes into Scripture remind you of the harmonic depth of Scripture. Scripture is more like a six-note chord of layered fourths²⁰ than the predictable Alberti-bass pattern that accompanied melodies during the classical period.²¹ The layered fourths voicing creates a rich and open harmonic texture that can inspire soaring improvised lines. The layered fourths that I whammed down behind the saxophonist open up more imagination and space for his solo, not less. So it is with Scripture.

Certainly, holding out the word of life in post-Christian contexts today poses fresh challenges. As we have said, many of our people (and perhaps we ourselves) have complex relationships with Scripture. We wonder: *How can we display the beauty of Christ and the wisdom of Scripture to our people?* Be encouraged that we can, in time, grow an intuitive awareness of the diversity of relationships that our people have with Scripture. And we can learn to hold out the word of life responsively; we can even learn to display the beauty of Scripture in contexts where this seems

²⁰Listen, for example, to pianist McCoy Tyner's chording on John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* (Impulse! Records, 1965), at 1:00, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll3CMgiUPuU.

²¹Listen, for example, to the left-hand piano accompaniment in the opening bars of Mozart's piano Sonata K 545, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUnYGUwatpo.

highly implausible. Perhaps the most alluring aspect of Scripture is its capacity to shape communities of tenderness, especially in its relentless call to biblical kinship, to bringing the weakest among us into the center of the community. This vision is found throughout Scripture and fulfilled in Jesus himself. I hope that the appendix, “Preaching that Nourishes Incarnational Communities,” is helpful to those who preach and teach.

The purpose of this chapter has been to discern the deep harmonic structure within Scripture, which we have likened to a thick, six-note chord of layered fourths that opens space for creativity and creates energy. We have focused on the unity of the biblical story, by unpacking themes of creation, an ethic of kinship, the gospel, and witness. We have taken in the big picture to supply context for the investigation of Scripture that lies before us. Our end goal is to compose and perform new melodies on the tradition, as Christian communities, even as we continually return to Scripture for fresh orientation and inspiration.

In the next chapter we are going to dive into practicalities. The personality of a church will be deeply influenced by its approach to leadership and participation; we will explore skills and biblical resources necessary to nourish leader-full communities.

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