Application as Improvisation
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by Abraham Kuruvilla

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Abstract

Christian ethics is an exercise in applying biblical texts, an activity that is at the core of preaching. This paper proposes that application of Scripture is akin to improvisation, both musical and dramatic: an endeavor characterized by fidelity (sustaining theological identity with, and bearing the authority of, the pericope it is derived from), and by novelty (respecting the specific situation of, and thus being relevant to, a particular audience). It is by the faithful offering of such "improvised" applications, integrally related both to the text and to the circumstances of listeners, that the homiletician enables the people of God to meet the ethical demands of God.

Introduction

Application is "the life and soul of a sermon, whereby these sacred truths [of Scripture] are brought home to a Man's particular conscience and occasions, and the affections ingaged [*sic*] unto any truth or duty."[1] James 1:22–25 emphasizes the importance of application: "prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves"; the one who applies the text is "an effectual doer … blessed in what he does." It is not enough to *know*; one must also *be.* Only in personal appropriation or application does the text accomplish its meaning; therefore, Gadamer could assert that application was an integral part of the hermeneutical process.[2] It is the culmination of the enterprise of preaching, whereby the biblical text is brought to bear upon the lives of the congregation in a manner that seeks to align the community of God to the will of God for the glory of God. What is historical and distant (the text) is, in preaching, made contemporary and near

(praxis). Such application that is promulgated in preaching, if it is to be deemed valid, must carry the authority of the inspired text, as well as be relevant for congregational praxis. Therefore, the core issue for preachers of the Bible has always been the determination of application that is faithful to the textual intention and fitting for the listening audience. Since pericopes are the basic textual elements of the church's weekly rendezvous with the Word of God, and the fundamental units of the canonical text handled in the formal gatherings of the people of God, deriving valid application from pericopes becomes the cardinal task of the homiletician.[3]

Preaching as Theology in Translation

The expositor's arduous struggle to bridge the gap between ancient Scripture and contemporary listeners—what Ricoeur called "distanciation" between the world of inscription and the world of interpretation—has previously been compared to the transaction of translation.[4] It was proposed that *pericopal theology* is the translational bridge between the ancient text and contemporary world. It is by means of this entity that sermons can manifest the authority of their source texts by respecting the constant component thereof; pericopal theology also provides the basis for generating relevant sermonic application for target audiences by being conceptually general enough to encompass their varying circumstances and situations.[5] Thus there is a twofold aspect to homiletical "translation": the exposition of pericopal theology from the text, and the delineation of how the latter may be applied in real life. The first move leads meaning *from* the biblical text (text to theology) with authority, the second directs meaning *to* the situations of listeners (theology to praxis) with relevance.[6] It is this second half of the undertaking that will be the focus of this paper.

Here it is proposed that *improvisation* is a fruitful metaphor to think of this second movement, the intersection of pericopal theology with the faith and practice of God's people—how exactly the theology of the pericope helps shape the lives of hearers of sermons for the glory of God. In so actualizing theology into the discrete

and specific circumstances of believers, the values of the cosmos are gradually subverted, and those of God's world are progressively established in the life of the community. This is part of what it means to acknowledge, "Thy kingdom come."

Preaching as Theology in Improvisation

From the early days of the church, the narrative of Scripture was envisaged as a single, universal, and ongoing story, the continuing relevance of which was to be explicated by preachers to audiences in each generation. Thus the Bible has always been read by the church with an underlying assumption of the immediate contemporaneity of the ancient text to every listener, in every era, in every place. There is, indeed, a philosophical basis for this enduring contamporaneity. The consolidation of heterogeneous writings into the single normative canon of Scripture created a new reading frame for its component texts.[7] The canon, thereby, redeployed these writings as parts of a new literary whole in a fresh hermeneutical context. Such a hermeneutical shift prompted by the canon renders the moral and ethical will of God accessible for future generations, a move that is consummated by the preaching of Scripture. Thus the canon is potentially relevant for every believer, in every generation, everywhere. Chrysostom declared that what was written in the Bible was written "for us" and, therefore, worthy of diligent attention. In like manner, asserting the universality of the canon's relevance and readership, Gregory the Great asked rhetorically: "For what is sacred Scripture but a kind of epistle of Almighty God to His creature?"[8] Of course, the Bible itself consistently affirms the relevance of its message for future generations: Deut 29:14–15; 2 Kgs 22–23; Neh 7:73b–8:18; Ps 78:5–6; Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 9:10; 10:6, 11; 2 Tim 3:16–17; etc.

Improvisation is Contextualization

Application of Scripture was to be the culmination of the move from text to praxis for all God's people in any period of time, anywhere. Therefore, the concern of interpreters, both ancient and modern, has not simply been the reconstruction of the *Sitz im Leben*

of the text, but also the elucidation of its *Sitz in unserem Leben,* its situation in *our* life, in the situation of current readers and hearers of the text.[9] This is the process of deriving valid application.

In the hermeneutical process of translating the text to derive application, the preacher essentially contextualizes the theology of the pericope into the faith and practice of that particular local community of God. Such an application of theology, then, "is less a matter of *in*doctrination than it is of *ex*doctrination: the living out of Christian teaching."[10] It is therefore crucial that the specific application so generated from pericopal theology be valid—both legitimately drawn from the text, and relevantly moved towards the audience. While the preacher is governed by the ancient script of Scripture, this *verbum Dei minister* ("minister of the Word of God") is also beholden to the contemporary community to make this unchangeable and unchanging text relevant for the changeable and changing circumstances of God's people. Here is where the metaphor of *improvisation* comes in handy, for the essence of this activity is the paradoxical alliance of *fidelity* and *novelty.*

Fidelity and Novelty Characterize Improvisation

As the end of the Gospels and the beginning of Acts make clear (Matt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8), God desires to involve his people in his magnificent work, the ongoing drama of creation and redemption. Believers are to undertake their own "improvisations" that demonstrate faithfulness to the past and newness towards the future—not the aping of deeds once done, nor the repetition of words once uttered, but a re-articulation and re-presentation of the ongoing saga with *fidelity* and *novelty*.

Application, while indebted to the text, is thus not an attempt to repeat what is in the text or to regenerate in the present the historical event that stands behind the text. "Rather, creativity must be involved as we seek to mediate, translate, interpret its meaning—the meaning in front of the text—into our own horizon."[11] *Fidelity* to what has gone on before is essential, for the church remains under the authority of the text of Scripture and

seeks to be faithful to it in its application. On the other hand, *novelty* is also called for in the fresh context of current auditors, as the church contextualizes an ancient text to its own modern setting. Fidelity and novelty are at the heart of application; these two elements are also the *sine quibus non* of improvisation. Verbatim and unimaginative imitation of what transpired in the previous acts of the drama is inadequate and inappropriate in the new context of the present troupe of performers; instead, a "novel" reading of the unchangeable text has to occur in a changed context in order to maintain fidelity to that normative divine discourse. This is what it means to improvise (from the Latin, *improvisus*, "unforeseen")—to perform without previous preparation, on the spur of the moment, from whatever materials are readily available. The specific situations of future readers were never foreseen by the ancient writers; these situations call for creativity in those unique moments; and the available material (the text of Scripture) must be used, as well. In short, "[e]thics cannot be simply about rehearsing and repeating the same script and story over and over again, albeit on a fresh stage with new players. … Improvisation means a community formed in the right habits trusting itself to embody its tradition in new and challenging circumstances; and this is exactly what the church is called to do."[12] It is the dual polarity of fidelity and novelty that give this preaching movement the character of improvisation.

Of particular interest is the paradigmatic phenomenon of improvisation in music, especially in jazz. Musicians performing this genre recognize "jazz standards" as providing authoritative instructions for improvising. Such operations are not *totally* spontaneous, for to be the performance of a jazz standard, the improvisation has to be in accord with a given set of guidelines embodied by that standard. Young and Matheson discuss what they call the "canonical model" of such tacit rules that constitute a jazz standard: introduction, head (statement of the melody), improvisations, recapitulation of the head, and ending. According to the model, two jazz performances are discrete instances of the same standard if their heads utilize the same melody and their

improvisations are grounded on the chord patterns of the head (the same "theology"?), while yet being obviously very different from each other. Indeed, many of these performances are based on *The Real Book*, a set of unauthorized, but ubiquitous, volumes, scoring the melody and chord changes of an exhaustive listing of jazz standards. All paginated identically (chapter and verse?) and coming in editions to suit B-flat, E-flat, and C instruments (multiple translations/versions?), these tomes, in a sense, form the "canon" of jazz.[13] The analogies are evident: *fidelity* to the standard (as outlined in the jazz "Bible") and *novelty* in each new specific musical situation characterize the exciting phenomenon that jazz improvisation is. These twin features, fidelity and novelty, anchor the specific performance in the past and simultaneously unfurl its sails towards the future. To bring the analogy back to the homiletical endeavor of the church, "[i]f the Christian story is drama, then ethics, the embodiment of that story, is appropriately regarded as performance."[14] One may thus conceive of preaching as a performance maintaining fidelity with the text (thus having authority), while at the same time providing application congruent with the specific situation of current listeners (thus having relevance).

Variety and Identity in Improvisation

In sum, the translational task of the preacher, like that of the jazz musician or performer, is to delve into the past and suggest in the present how the past may be creatively applied in the future—an act of improvisation. Keith Johnstone's analogy is apt: "The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards."[15] This is one who, with eyes on the past (the canonical Scriptures), must be guided by it. Yet the improviser, it must be remembered, is also headed "forwards," away from the past of the text, translating it into the future of hearers. The situation of the latter must also be an important parameter for the improvising translator. Thus, when the same text is "translated" into different contexts to produce discrete improvisations (applications) on the same theme (theology), the same pericopal theology is being

brought to bear upon those different reading situations in order to generate faithful applications appropriate for each unique context. Such applications, though governed by the same pericopal theology, may—and, indeed, should—look different, for each reader, hearer, congregation, and context is different. However, insofar as these different applications fall within the bounds of the same pericopal theology, they are but variations on a single theme, and therefore all such improvisations remain faithful to the text.

Thus, the validity of the latter half of the translational movement (from theology to praxis) is maintained insofar as the particular application is encompassed within the breadth of the theology of the pericope. In other words, the language of the Bible allows for a whole field of possible future meanings in the generality of pericopal theology such that all applications subsumed by that theology may be considered legitimate extensions of the meaning of that pericope, the continuation of the biblical story into the life of the current body of believers.[16]

This means that fidelity in improvisation involves sustaining a sort of identity between application and the textual sense, a preservation of some kind of correspondence between text and praxis. This congruence is not superimposable identity—slavish imitation, the repetition of the past—but, rather a skilful translation, an improvisation for the future. One is mimicry, the other is musicianship; one is passive, the other demands training and a developed sensibility for what is fitting in which situation, a transaction best directed, in biblical exposition, by those who "by practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Heb 5:14). It requires of the preacher attentiveness to new contexts of interpretation, sensitivity to the unfolding continuities of the work, and responsibility for, and accountability to, the particular community of co-performers, fellow-improvisers, and auditors.[17] However, the creativity of the expositor in generating such applications must be exercised with due respect for the original work, lest "[t]he license to create-to-preserve quickly becomes indistinguishable from the license simply to create."[18] Application,

therefore, is not an act of creation *ex nihilo,* but rather a *re*creation—an "improvisation" on the text in the fresh context of current hearers. Scripture is the plenary source, the authoritative playbook of action, with each pericope contributing specific instructions for the "performance" of the segment of the canonical world it projects. Fitting, valid, and legitimate application is generated from the text by an improvisation characterized by fidelity and novelty. It is in the maintenance of fidelity and novelty that the intermediary entity of pericopal theology plays such a crucial governing role in the preaching transaction.

The entire operation, from text to theology and from theology to praxis is, therefore, the task of the church in every age, and pericopal theology is the authoritative guide for this faithful-yet-new performance of the text in unprecedented situations. It is pericopal theology that ensures the bi-directional congruity in this move towards application—backward congruity to the word of Scripture that maintains the *authority* of the text (fidelity), and forward congruity to the world of the hearer that manifests the *relevance* of the text (novelty). In this latter move, the particular cares of the day are to be diligently considered by the preacher in order that the theology of the pericope may be couched in the concrete. This is the argot of translation—the re-expression of an ancient text in the language and circumstances of contemporary time, without which the antiquarian interest is simply a futile endeavor "to massage the dead."[19] The preacher must therefore grapple with both the canon of God and the concerns of mankind, and employ pericopal theology as a mediator between the two, maintaining the dialectic of improvisation between fidelity and novelty, sameness and change. Not only must the sermon expound the pericopal theology, it must also express applications that are specific and concrete, tailored to the congregation to whom the message is delivered. "[T]o make a general principle worth anything, you must give it a body; you must show in what way and how far it would be applied actually in an actual system."[20] Otherwise the ethical demands of a God who calls his people to be like him in his holiness can never be met.

Improvisation in Practice

Of note is the fact that such an understanding of textual hermeneutics pertains not only to religious literature but to legal literature as well—ancient texts that both homiletician and jurist, respectively, seek to apply to their contemporary eras.

Improvisation in Legal Hermeneutics

It has oft been observed that interpretation of legal texts, such as the *U.S. Constitution,* is akin to translation, "a bringing into the present a text of the past," a straddling of two worlds simultaneously.[21] The continuing life of a binding legal or religious classic depends on an ongoing translation into new circumstances; like the Scriptures, a constitution, too, is "intended to endure for ages to come, and, consequently, to be adapted to the various *crises* of human affairs."[22] The similarities between the hermeneutics of law and Scripture are therefore considerable: the literature of both fields exists to be actualized in specific situations in subsequent time, one to serve the execution of justice through pronouncing verdicts, the other to serve the exercise of faith through preaching sermons. Generating "application" by improvisation is also the task of the judge who moves from the text of law to judicial philosophy and thence to the adjudication of the case currently at the bar. The homiletician, on the other hand, generates application by moving from text of Scripture to pericopal theology before arriving at specific exhortations for the congregation currently in the pews. "This implies that the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly—i.e., according to the claim it makes—must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way."[23] Of particular interest, then, is this congruence between discerning application in legal and scriptural interpretation; a comparison illuminates with greater clarity the importance of this final component of the move from text to praxis in the hermeneutical endeavors of both disciplines.

Legal literature is replete with examples of such a movement from

textual sense to future application. The passage of time introduces new conditions and contingencies, and, therefore, legal (and religious) classics are constructed (and construed) to be perennially relevant. Textual distanciation renders necessary the translational movement of improvisation to generate applications in situations and circumstances unforeseen at the event of original inscription. For instance, the *U.S. Constitution* empowers Congress "[t]o raise and support armies," "[t]o provide and maintain a navy," and "[t]o make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces" (article I, section 8, clauses 12 and 13). As written, this edict is silent about any support for an air force. However, despite the absence of any explicit reference in the *Constitution* to this branch of the armed forces, the U.S. government continues to raise and support, provide and maintain, and govern and regulate an air force. Presumably, the concrete terms "army" and "navy" in that late eighteenth-century document were construed as comprehensive ones signifying the broad categories they attempted to particularize, namely, all manner of national defense undertakings. The "theology" of the declaration was, clearly, to designate *any conceivable military force* as worthy of establishment and maintenance by Congress; such an intention would necessarily include "improvisations" such as an air force or, potentially, even a space force as future applications. A translation that moves in this fashion from textual sense to application via "theology" is essential for the interpretation of any canonical text that is intended to be applied in the future. No such corpus can be expected to bear the burden of explicitly expressing *all* possible future applications.[24] In the Christian canon, it is the theology of the pericope that implicitly bears every legitimate option of improvised application of that particular text, and thus oversees what may be considered valid application of that particular pericope of Scripture. The original words of texts such as the *Constitution* or the Bible establish the direction of meaning of what is written therein, and this trajectory (judicial philosophy for the former; pericopal theology for the latter) functions as the standard by which the validity of all subsequent interpretive endeavors must be gauged.[25] Thus, in biblical hermeneutics, the theology of the

pericope becomes the arbiter of the legitimacy of praxis proclaimed and urged by the preacher.

Improvisation in Biblical Hermeneutics

The terminus of application renders possible the transformation of the lives of God's people according to the will of God. It is therefore critical that this move be performed in a manner that guarantees the validity of application. When applications are specific instances subsumed by the theology of the pericope, such improvisations on the text with fidelity are, for that reason, authoritative. When applications are appropriate for the specific circumstances of the community being preached to, such improvisations bearing novelty and respecting the situations of the auditors are, for that reason, relevant. Application that is both authoritative and relevant is valid.

A brief analysis of 1 Pet 2:17d will suffice to illustrate the scope of "improvisation" in biblical interpretation. This verse enjoins Christians to "honor the king." What exactly is meant by the "king" (*basileus*)? Clearly, its historical context obliges one to fix its referent as the Roman emperor in the mid-first century CE—in particular, the individual Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (37–68 CE; reign: 54–68 CE).[26] How might one apply it today? Even if one concludes that regents other than Nero were "meant," could one conceivably apply this command to "honor the *king*" while subsisting within polities not involving crowned male monarchs? Does one need to honor the queen? What about presidents, prime ministers, headmen, warlords, juntas in dictatorships, primates in theocracies, etc.? In the particular case of 1 Pet 2:17d, the context provides the interpreter with a ready answer.[27]

First Peter 2:13–3:7 is considered a *Haustafel*, a household duty code, a list of the obligations of members of a household, one to another. However, there is not that symmetry as is found in the *Haustafeln* of Eph 5:22–6:9 and Col 3:18–4:1. Only half of each of the pairs is intact here: wives, not husbands (the men do get a mention, but only in a single verse, 1 Pet 3:7); and slaves, not masters; children and parents are not addressed at all. However, in this 1 Peter code, a new

directive, the obligation of Christians to those *outside* the believing community is introduced—to the emperor and those in authority; upon this directive the rest of the duties of the *Haustafel* are built. This responsibility might have been at the root of its very asymmetry, for the list thereby emphasizes its outward gaze: Peter assumes the situation of Christian subjects under pagan rulers, Christian wives living with non-Christian husbands, and Christian slaves serving unbelieving masters. This would also explain the omission of parental and filial responsibilities, for in such relationships there rarely is the imbalance of belief confronting unbelief.[28]

The seeming difficulty of 2:17d is easily solved, seeing that 2:13 plainly exhorts believers to submit themselves to *every* human institution for the Lord's sake, adding, for emphasis, "whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him." Conceivably, Peter would have appended an "etcetera" to his list of two examples of "human institutions."[29] When Peter requires submission "for the Lord's sake" (*dia ton kurion*), he is also anticipating the paradigmatic behavior of Jesus in the face of opposition from the rulers of the realm—the Jewish religious leaders and the Procurator of Judea (2:21–25); thus, implicitly, the list of potential potentates to whom honor is owed has been enlarged. The latent expansion by Peter could be read thus: "If Jesus was submissive to Pilate *et al.,* then so must all of you, to Nero *et al.*"[30] The apostle is "improvising" on an established principle. Such an improvised extrapolation continues in 2:17d: paralleling "honor *all* people" (2:17a), the directive to respect the king makes this ruler "an example of the particular stations and people to be given deference by the Christians."[31] In other words, from the pericope itself, it becomes obvious that the king is but one in a series of civic authorities, all of whom as representatives of the heavenly sovereign are owed honor. The inclusion of every stripe of human government within the semantic field of *basileus,* whether Pharaoh, Tsar, Kaiser, or Shah, is an interpretive act of improvisation on the fundamental essential: "all God-established human authority" constitutes the theology of the text. Every specific ruler ("improvisation") that falls

within the bounds of "all God-established authority" (pericopal theology) is a valid application of that text.

Conclusion

The move from text to application is made possible by the intermediary of pericopal theology; improvising upon this theology, an endeavor undertaken with fidelity and novelty, valid application is generated. Applications subsumed by pericopal theology demonstrate fidelity to the text of Scripture under consideration; the novelty of improvisation is reflected in the relevance of application to the specifics of auditors' contexts. The preacher thus serves as the conscience of application for the community of God, with the dual responsibility to understand what God has said (text), and to generate valid application (praxis) in order that God's people may be aligned to the will of God for the glory of God. The task of the homiletician is therefore one of great moment and consequence for the church. John R. W. Stott charged preachers with this solemn duty:[32]

> Our bridges … must be firmly anchored on both sides of the chasm, by refusing either to compromise the divine content of the message or to ignore the human context in which it has to be spoken. We have to plunge fearlessly into both worlds, ancient and modern, biblical and contemporary, and to listen attentively to both. For only then shall we understand what each is saying, and so discern the Spirit's message to the present generation.

Thus the preacher is the mediator between the text and church (or between script and actors); it is this one's task to interpret the text for the community and to propose how the text may be applied in a faithful manner. Combining canonical script analysis and contextual situation analysis, the sermon bridges text and praxis via pericopal theology. It is the fidelity and novelty with which improvisation is undertaken that renders an application true to the Scriptures and relevant to the congregation. In the faithful performance of such improvised applications, the community of God will have met the

ethical demands of this holy One who, in His Word, has deigned to call humanity to be like Him.

Notes

1. John Wilkins, *Ecclesiastes, or A discourse concerning the Gift of Preaching As it fals under the Rules of Art: Shewing The most proper Rules and Directions, for Method, Invention, Books, Expressions, whereby a Minister may be furnished with such abilities as may make him a Workman that needs not to be ashamed* (3rd ed.; London: Samuel Gellibrand, 1651), 19.

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd rev. ed.; trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; London: Continuum, 2004), 307. So also Paul Ricoeur: "This goal [of appropriation] is attained only insofar as interpretation actualizes the meaning of the text for the present reader" (*Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* [ed. and trans. John B. Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 85, 159).

3. "Pericope," here, demarcates a segment of Scripture, irrespective of genre, that forms the biblical basis of a sermon.

4. See Abraham Kuruvilla, "Preaching as Translation," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* (2009, forthcoming); Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences,* 147.

5. Abraham Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* (LNTS [JSNTS] 393; London: T. & T. Clark [2009]), 157–190, develops in detail the concept of pericopal theology.

6. "The honest rhetorician therefore has two things in mind: a vision of how matters should go ideally and ethically and a consideration of the special circumstances of his auditors. Toward both of these he has a responsibility" (Richard M. Weaver, *Language is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric* [eds. Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks; Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1970], 211).

7. Or, as Wittgenstein might say, a "playground" (*Spielraum*) for those language-games. See Max Black, "Wittgenstein's Language-Games," in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Critical Assessments* (2 vols.; ed. Stuart Shanker; London: Croom Helm, 1986), I: 83 (74–88).

8. Chrysostom, *Homiliæ in Genesim* 2:2; Gregory the Great, *Epistula ad Theodorum medicum.*

9. N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 27–28. Expositional application was always a fixture of synagogue worship. Philo observed that on the Sabbath, a day of learning for all, Scripture is read and "some of those who are very learned explain to them what is of great importance and use, lessons by which the whole of their lives may be improved" (*On the Special Laws* 2.15.62). This Jewish orientation of reading for application was retained in the homiletical practice of the church. Justin Martyr's description of a second-century worship service in Rome noted that, after the reading of the Gospels, "the presider verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things" (*First Apology* 67).

10. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 400.

11. David Tracy, "Creativity in the Interpretation of Religion: The Question of Radical Pluralism," *New Literary History* 15 (1984): 298.

12. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 12.

13. See James O. Young and Carl Matheson, "The Metaphysics of Jazz," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (2000): 125–133. Incidentally, there are recent legal versions of *The Real Book* as well (3 vols.; Milwaukee, Wis.: Hal Leonard, 2006).

14. Wells, *Improvisation,* 59. "I believe Christian communities interpret by acting out, embodying, creating the events called for by Scripture. Our understanding of Scripture comes to fullness within our performance of it" (Shannon Craigo-Snell, "Command Performance: Rethinking Performance Interpretation in the Context of *Divine Discourse*," *Modern Theology* 16 [2000]: 475–494).

15. *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1981), 116.

16. See Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis,* 46–51, for the delineation of the three-fold "meaning" of the text: original textual sense, pericopal theology, and valid application.

17. Titus 2:1 appropriately urges that a church leader is to "speak what is fitting for sound doctrine." In the same vein, Thucydides lauded Themistocles: "[He] was of all men the best able to extemporize the right thing to be done" (*autoschediazein ta deonta*)—improvisation upon principle (*History of the Peloponnesian War,* 1.138.3). For a discussion of the philosophical nature of this "identity" between text and praxis, see Kuruvilla, *Text to Praxis,* 50–51, 176–180.

18. Lawrence Lessig, "Fidelity in Translation," *Texas Law Review* 71 (1992–1993): 1206.

19. Paul L. Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 16.
20. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Use of Law Schools," in *Speeches by Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1934), 34–35; this oration is dated Nov 5, 1886. On the other hand, the tendency to preach exclusively at the level of systematic and biblical theology, at a level of generality removed from the immediacy of both text and listener, creates a situation where the sequential preaching of contiguous pericopes often tend to have similar thrusts, making *lectio continua* on a weekly basis virtually impossible to sustain without repetition of sermonic/applicational goals. For a critique of such a *modus operandi,* see Abraham Kuruvilla, "Book Review: *Preaching Christ through Genesis,* by Sidney Greidanus," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 8 (2008): 137–140.
21. James Boyd White, "Judicial Criticism," in *Interpreting Law and Literature: A Hermeneutic Reader* (eds. Sanford Levinson and Steven Mailloux; Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 403.
22. U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall, *McCulloch* v. *Maryland,* U.S. 17 (4 Wheat.) (1819): 415 (italics original). "In the application of a constitution, therefore, our contemplation cannot be only of what has been but of what may be" (U.S. Supreme Court Justice Joseph McKenna, *Weems* v. *United States,* U.S. 217 [1910]: 373).
23. Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 307–308, 325–326, 328.
24. "A constitution, to contain an accurate detail of all the subdivisions of which its great powers will admit, and of all the means by which they may be carried into execution, would partake of the prolixity of a legal code, and could scarcely be embraced by the human mind" (Marshall, *McCulloch* v. *Maryland,* 407).
25. The interpreter's goal is "never … to copy what is said, but to place himself in the direction of what is said (i.e., in its meaning) in order to carry over what is to be said into the direction of his own saying" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* [trans. and ed. David E. Linge; Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1976], 68).
26. John 19:15; Acts 17:7; and Rev 17:9 (as well as Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.13.6) indicate the Roman emperor as the specific referent of *basileus.*
27. This text was chosen for that specific reason—the ease of a solution. It, therefore, serves well as a concise illustration of the point about improvisation. Needless to say, not all texts can be improvised upon this easily!
28. J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC 49; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1988), 122–123.

29. "Human institution" is the best rendition of the Greek phrase that literally reads "human creation."

30. Jews, for the most part, were respectful to their Roman rulers, even sacrificing and praying for them (see Philo, *Embassy* 23.157; Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.10.4; and *Against Apion* 2.6). Christ, too, adjured his followers to abide by this pattern (Matt 22:21).

31. Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 120.

32. *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 145. "[T]ruth and timeliness together make the full preacher"—fidelity to the text and novelty towards audience (Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching, Delivered before the Divinity School of Yale College in January and February, 1877* [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1877], 220–221).

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