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LIVING IN THE MOMENT:
MISSION AS IMPROVISATION IN SAMUEL WELLS, KEVIN
VANHOOZER, AND HANS URS VON BALTHASAR

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What does it mean to be an actor? Viola Spolin's classic textbook *Improvisation for the Theater* begins by connecting "stage-worthy" acting not to extraordinary talent as one might perhaps expect, but to a kind of carefully developed theatrical intuition—namely, the actor's ability to become present to her surroundings and, without hesitation, act in creative, free response to what she is experiencing. In short, a crucial part of being an actor is the ability to effectively improvise:

The intuitive can only respond in immediacy—right now. It comes bearing its gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us . . . Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves.¹

The concept of improvisation—which theologian-ethicist Samuel Wells succinctly defines as a theatrical "practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear"²—may seem out of place in serious theological discourse. Yet Spolin's brief description of the spontaneous, responsive freedom of theatrical improvisation provides a natural window into what Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar described as the "divine-human drama" of revelation in his five-volume *Theo-Drama*. The evocative language of the "moment when we

1. Spolin, *Improvisation*, 3–4.
2. Wells, *Improvisation*, 11.

are freed to relate and to act” bears a distinct resemblance to Balthasar’s central concept of mission, the fruitful, free taking up of a role, which he sees as the true vocation of all human subjects. The nature of improvisation thus takes us to the heart of a theme central to Balthasar’s theological project: the dynamic relationship between mission and freedom. These dramatic concepts form the basis for Balthasar’s thoroughly trinitarian and robustly christocentric understanding of the nature of individual and ecclesial participation in the theo-drama, making a place for human freedom within divine freedom—a kind of “analogy of freedom” that can be discerned alongside the *analogia entis* and *analogia fidei*.

Recent theodramatic approaches to Christian theology have focused on the radically improvisatory nature of ecclesial mission in the contemporary context. Samuel Wells has suggested that such an understanding of the theo-drama that makes space for spontaneity and “unscripted” performance of the gospel serves as a necessary corrective to Hans Urs von Balthasar’s original model of theodramatic action. However, a careful review of Balthasar’s seminal *Theo-Drama* with Wells’s concerns in mind demonstrates that the Balthasarian understanding of freedom makes abundant space for individual and ecclesial improvisation within his uniquely christocentric concept of mission—a discovery with important implications for situating the church’s improvisatory, missional praxis into a trinitarian framework. In what follows, I will begin by outlining recent contributions by Samuel Wells and Kevin Vanhoozer that aim to understand ecclesial mission through the model of theatrical improvisation. Second, noting Wells’s and Vanhoozer’s concerns with Balthasarian theodramatics, I will seek to articulate Balthasar’s understanding of both individual and ecclesial mission in terms of improvisation, whereby inclusion in Christ opens, not restricts, human freedom to act in the cosmos. In so doing I hope to demonstrate the appropriateness of an “improvisatory” model for conceiving of theodramatic action as well as its relevance to Balthasar’s seminal project.

Improvising Mission: Wells and Vanhoozer

Improvisation has emerged as a theme in post-Balthasarian theodramatics as a way of expressing the radically creative and dialogical aspects of the experience of the church as it seeks to bring its “dramatic” resources to bear on the problems of the age.³ In his comprehensive study *The Drama of Doctrine*, Kevin Vanhoozer characterizes improvisation as a kind of acquired “theological wisdom” that issues in ecclesial performance based on the “canonical” script of the Christian Scriptures. Rather than an unconstrained, off-the-cuff acting, such improvisation is rather an intentional and structured activity that requires both instructive “formation” (by immersion into text and community) as well as constructive “imagination.”⁴ For Vanhoozer, the theodrama is itself to an extent improvisatory and dialogical in the sense that it authentically “reincorporates” human experience into the larger story of salvation.⁵ Others such as Samuel Wells have more consciously attempted to go beyond Balthasar in appropriating dramatic improvisation as a paradigm for theological ethics, characterizing Balthasar’s own model of the theodrama as inadequate to portray the constantly shifting and evolving nature of the church’s experience in the immanent present. Wells instead, following Stanley Hauerwas, draws attention to the ecclesial practices that form and train the ecclesial body to embrace the “gifts” of the present moment (and, again, to reincorporate them into its dramatic action).

To be sure, Wells is generally supportive of Balthasar’s theodramatic vocabulary, particularly his Hegelian elevation of the

3. For a helpful bibliography of current literature in the area of “theatrical theology,” see Vander Lugt, “Church beyond the Fourth Wall.” Following Balthasar I will deal with theatrical improvisation, rather than musical improvisation, as a theological *instrumentarium*. However, there is also much work to be done in bringing insights from musical improvisation to bear on Christian theology. See especially the discussion of jazz improvisation in Benson, *Liturgy as a Way of Life*, as well as Kane, “Negotiating Tension.” A methodologically different approach can be found in Crawford, “Theology as Improvisation.”

4. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 336–37.

5. *Ibid.*, 341.

dramatic as the appropriate middle way between the epic and the lyrical.⁶ This is an issue of critical importance in terms of ecclesial appropriation of the gospel. For the Christian drama is neither a simple memorial of past, objective events (the “epic” tendency), nor is it an entirely imaginative, subjective (i.e., “lyrical”) myth that turns “the story of incarnation, death and resurrection” into “an event in the believer’s heart.”⁷ The dramatic serves as a bridge between past and present, epic and lyrical, personal and public; it emphasizes the living process of performance, whereby the story of salvation-history becomes a public, dynamic enactment of this story in present (and future) contexts.

However, Wells ultimately asserts that Balthasar’s iteration of theo-drama is in a sense “too much about God,” at the expense of humanity’s (particularly the church’s) free role as a central *dramatis persona*.⁸ If God has written and revealed the drama, it seems there is not much left for the church to do in the present. Moreover, according to Wells, Balthasar’s Marian ecclesiology adheres too closely to the language of “perfection and ideal types” rather than placing its emphasis on the concrete, incarnational community of faith acting within and amidst the contingencies of history—which is precisely where Wells locates mission. This, for Wells, leads to a lack of a sense of the immanent present as the place in which the church “strives to embody [the] drama.”⁹ Thus, ultimately, for Wells, “even drama is too static an understanding of theological ethics”¹⁰ in the “moving, changing world” of human culture—he instead, hoping to move past the limitations of Balthasar’s approach, holds up improvisation as a fuller category beyond performance, uniquely able to

6. Wells, “Drama of Liturgy,” 177, notes, “If the epic is the account from ‘outside,’ the self-consciously objective viewpoint, then the lyric is the account from ‘inside,’ the subjective viewpoint. Lyric speaks from the heart. It explores the depth of personal commitment and feeling and the spectrum of human qualities and perceptions involved in the narrative.”

7. Wells, *Improvisation*, 46–49.

8. *Ibid.*, 50.

9. *Ibid.*, 51.

10. *Ibid.*, 12.

describe human experience of genuine freedom and faithful ecclesial mission.

Wells adopts improvisation as a paradigm for ecclesial ethics as it flows naturally from the “inherently dramatic” nature of the “action of God” in human history. More than “repetition” and “interpretation,” but avoiding an unrestricted “creation de novo,” improvisation for Wells describes the nature of “ecclesial ethics,” which must mediate responsibly between the still unfolding divine-human drama and new (primarily cultural-linguistic) contexts.¹¹ (Here we have echoes of George Lindbeck, whose study of the nature and mediation of doctrine provides the impetus for Vanhoozer’s project.)¹² Bruce Benson similarly notes (with respect to music) the way in which improvisation relies on “material that already exists”—in this case, church tradition—“rather than creating *ex nihilo*.”¹³ An ecclesial praxis that takes improvisation as its mode of engagement is not simply making up the story as it goes along, proceeding by means of free association or total spontaneity independent from context or the lessons of the past. Wells instead embeds the practice of ecclesial improvisation within the structure of the drama as a whole: if the Christian story is a theo-drama, then the church finds itself in the “fourth act” of the play. The first three acts have shown in vivid and dramatic scenes the creation of the world by a loving God and the subsequent fall of humanity into sin and death; the beginnings of the history of redemption through the chosen but wayward nation of Israel, and finally, in the “third act,” the narrative twist—the surprising but satisfying introduction of Jesus the Christ, who emerges in his absolute uniqueness as God-man to recapitulate the story of Israel and restore fallen humanity to grace. The *dramatis personae* of the fourth act thus find themselves in the peculiar position of responding to this momentous story of salvation in a way both continuous and discontinuous with what has gone before, improvising based on what has already occurred in the drama.

11. Ibid., 65.

12. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*.

13. Benson, *Liturgy as a Way of Life*, 93.

In the case of the church, the body of Christ, this process of faithful improvisation is first rooted in the preservation through the ages of liturgical and social practices that draw it into conformity with its Head; in short, the development of ecclesial intuition by immersion into tradition. The church thus constantly moves from formation to discernment, from its rich dramatic resources to appropriate and constructive improvisation in the context of the world. Here again the script of the theo-drama is not fixed—it is in the process of being written, in a way that is faithful to the overall shape and narrative trajectory of the drama but without becoming mere repetition. In order to effectively perform this drama, then, the individual players who make up the community of the church are themselves in a constant state of preparation:

Christian ethics and theatrical improvisation are both about years of steeping in a tradition so that the body is so soaked in practices and perceptions that it trusts itself in community to do the obvious thing.¹⁴

Learning to navigate the empty space of the stage with all the spontaneity, confidence, and narrative skill such a practice entails is a process both simple and extraordinarily difficult. Wells characterizes the actual process of being on stage with reference to the technical theatrical terms of improvisation. The nature of improvisation is always to accept the situation that is being offered by the other actors in the scene—in fact, as Wells notes, to “overaccept,” which entails “incorporating offers into a larger story”¹⁵—which allows the drama to move forward rather than grinding to a halt. The accepting of offers and the spontaneous construction of stories on stage leads to a third process of reincorporation, creative dialogical response that integrates the action into a coherent whole. In all of this, it is clear that doing the “obvious” thing in an improvised scene does not mean total originality, but responsive awareness—intuition that is able to inhabit and act within the constantly changing horizon of exper-

14. Ibid., 17.

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

ience precisely because it has been formed in order to act in this way.

For Wells, ecclesial improvisation is similarly not about being original, but about being (in the language of improv) “obvious.” The church, as a communion of saints, has “permission to be obvious”: believers “simply use the resources of the first three acts, and what they anticipate of the final act, and faithfully play with the circumstances in which they find themselves.”¹⁶ Improvisation is also not restricted to “gifted individuals”—bishops, saints, and mystics—but instead comes from a community of ordinary people who have developed a tacit trust in one another and an understanding of their situation.¹⁷ Wells’s goal is the positing of a properly theological, ecclesial ethics rooted in the “traditions and practices of the church” and the “character and acts of God.”¹⁸ Rather than being a universal ethics that tries to find points of correspondence between Christian values and other traditions and communities (as in Lindbeck’s “experiential-expressivist” typology), or a subversive ethics that, while perhaps beginning with Christian particularity, defines itself primarily in opposition to a dominant system, “ecclesial ethics” is ethics for the church—it takes the “practices of the church,” the faithful community, as its norm.¹⁹ For Wells, like Vanhoozer, the church is “steeped” in the narrative of the Scriptures—it takes up the story of Israel in all its dimensions, and through its incorporation into Christ as his body finds its practices taken up into his life. These liturgical, social, and ethical practices by which the church is “formed, extended and restored” give rise to individual “witnesses,” whose transformed lives serve as the “visible face of the church.”²⁰ Importantly for Wells, these witnesses are not heroes—whose exterior qualities are championed by the epic story told about them—but saints, those

16. Wells, *Improvisation*, 67.

17. *Ibid.*, 68.

18. *Ibid.*, 34.

19. *Ibid.*, 37.

20. *Ibid.*, 41.

whose lives are always “at the periphery of a story that is really about God.”²¹

This account of ecclesial improvisation accords a high place to both individual and corporate freedom, and construes mission as a genuine participation in the creative actualization of the theo-drama—the drama itself is “unscripted,” a kind of dynamic, responsive performance that the church “acts” out based on its identity as the body of Christ. Is this dynamic, embodied model of improvisation compatible with Balthasar’s understanding of ecclesial mission? Or does Balthasar’s theo-drama, particularly with the “Marian profile” it accords to the church, fail to account for the “present” reality of ecclesial mission and freedom? In other words, is Balthasar’s theo-drama out of touch with reality?

Balthasarian Improvisation

Despite Wells’s legitimate concerns, a careful review of *Theo-Drama* reveals that Balthasar not only makes a place for human dramatic spontaneity within his understanding of mission but takes great care to ground freedom—including what Wells terms ecclesial improvisation—in a rich christological and trinitarian paradigm. In fact, there is even room within Balthasar’s thought for conceiving, as does Vanhoozer, of the theo-drama itself as a kind of improvisatory movement: a place for human freedom as genuinely involved in the course of history, flowing out of the trinitarian creativity of the “divine improviser.”²² The value of Wells’s appropriation of the concept of improvisation is clear—it captures something of the spontaneous nature of Christian experience, which must constantly assert itself in the moment. Indeed, any theology that employs dramatic categories must make a space for the intuitive, dynamic process by which action plays out on the empty stage, the “moment” of decision and embodiment, and the complexities of “dialogical action.” Wells’s emphasis on ecclesial practices as constitutive of the living body is also to be commended. However, Wells’s evalu-

21. Ibid., 43.

22. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 341.

ation of Balthasar as giving insufficient weight to human freedom in the theo-drama is unfortunate. For not only does Balthasar make freedom a central theme of his dramatics, his christological development of this theme—rather than being a concession to abstract “ideal types”—theologically legitimates human freedom within the absolute freedom of God. The same can also be said of his view of mission. To the criticism that the *Theo-Drama* is “too much about God,” it can be persuasively argued that Balthasar’s setting of human mission within the eternal *missio Dei*—the eternal sending of the Son—in fact supports and nourishes ecclesial mission precisely at its most improvisatory and spontaneous.

It is clear from Balthasar’s work as a whole that he accords a high place to both human and divine freedom in his theology. This is arguably one of the main reasons he adopts the dramatic as a way of expressing not only the action of God in human history but the human response to the divine call; it allows a place for spontaneity and free decision to a greater extent than other theological categories such as proposition and narrative. For while stories are read, drama is performed on the stage—and so it proves to be not just a helpful category for describing the inherently dramatic nature of the biblical narrative in all its heights and depths, but the existential, temporal experience of the Christian actor who seeks, particularly in the context of the church, to live out the theo-drama in a particular historical moment.

An equally important theme of Balthasar’s work is his essentially christocentric concept of mission, which he defines in terms of theodramatic role. In keeping with the Greek term *prosōpon*, which connotes a theatrical mask, each individual person must assume their role or mission in the great divine-human drama, thus fulfilling their great longing to see their life as forming a coherent, meaningful (and thus narratively satisfying) whole.²³ To do so is to become a person (*persona*) in the fullest sense—not simply psychologically, but in terms of

23. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 1:16–17.

“dialogical action”²⁴—taking one’s place in a network of inter-subjective relationships with God, others, and the world. Thus for Balthasar,

behind the problem of the actor there emerges the problem of man himself, the conscious subject in search of a role. And ultimately this role cannot be just *any*, interchangeable role but should be his own, unique, “personal” role.²⁵

True existential self-understanding on the part of the individual human being consists of the dramatic inhabiting of one’s unique, God-given role; mission comes to inform identity at the most basic level.²⁶ Such reception or assumption of one’s mission primarily comes in cultivating a certain dramatic “readiness” or *disponibilité* (a theatrical term Balthasar borrows from Stanislavski, the great teacher of “method” acting) to the Spirit, a total availability or readiness to fulfill the will of the Father, which in turn leads to greater conformity to the “form” of Christ.²⁷ This thoroughly trinitarian shaping for mission involves death—the Pauline passing of an old self, of *personality*—and rebirth as an integrated *person*.²⁸ Yet crucially, even those “outside Christianity” who are willing to “break out” of selfish egoism may be given a “mission” by God; for “every grace implies a

24. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 367.

25. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:532. Note that Balthasar consistently employs the older convention of using masculine pronouns and “man” to refer to human beings in general.

26. Victoria Harrison aptly describes the taking up of a mission in Balthasar’s thought in terms of the actualization of an archetypal divine Idea: the individual must “actualize their Idea by living in accordance with their mission, or, in other words, their unique personal calling” (Harrison, “Von Balthasar’s Phenomenology of Human Holiness,” 425).

27. Vander Lugt succinctly defines this theatrical term as “a multi-dimensional receptivity and availability oriented toward the director, playwright, script or story, company or troupe, performance traditions, audience, theatre space, and self” (Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 36).

28. Harrison, “Von Balthasar’s Phenomenology of Human Holiness,” 427–28.

mission,” and there is grace to be found outside of the church.²⁹ Each human being plays a role in the drama of salvation.

One might subsequently be tempted to characterize mission as the opposite of freedom—taking on a determinate role with fixed contours rather than living in freedom, the subsuming of personal free will in the adoption of God’s will (cf. Luke 22:42). Indeed, as Balthasar is well aware, there are some inherent “subtle problems”³⁰ in conceiving of Christian revelation as akin to a stage-play. Perhaps the most pressing of these is the lack of flexibility the model of a divinely given “script” for humanity—and in particular, the church—to follow may perhaps imply. This is one of the implicit reasons Wells presses for improvisation rather than script-based performance as the normative paradigm for theological ethics. One might be tempted to lose sight of human freedom in the knowledge that the narrative has already been written by God—all that seemingly remains for the actors to do is to act out predetermined roles within a story with a determinate (eschatological) end.

A second “subtle problem” may come in misunderstanding the nature of existential *disponibilité*. For Balthasar, the divine call is of utmost importance, demanding total, and in a sense passive, surrender. Such a willingness to be disposed of according to the will of God can be seen as an outgrowth of the “Ignatian seed of indifference”—it entails a willingness to be sent wherever God desires, without preference, counter-argument, or hesitation.³¹ Balthasar himself vividly described his own call to ministry in such terms; sitting beneath a tree, he suddenly perceived an inner voice that assured him he had “nothing to choose, you have been called . . . You have no plans to make, you are just a little stone in a mosaic which has long been ready.”³² This is the Ignatian call to mission, a call that in its particularity also serves to incorporate the subject into the universal church, the body of Christ. Such language as is

29. Ibid., 527.

30. Ibid., 532.

31. Quoted in Olsen, “Remaining in Christ,” 55.

32. Ibid.

displayed in Balthasar's own call seems to imply the erasure of human free will by total availability, or at least an overcoming of human freedom by divine initiative. Yet readiness (which Balthasar also describes using Eckhart's term *Gelassenheit*)—the willingness to be formed and sent by God—does not simply mean inactivity, an abdication of freedom. Rather, for Balthasar, the feminine, ultimately Marian, response of the believer—the all-embracing “yes” or *fiat* to God's will—is itself a profound demonstration of freedom as well as fecundity.³³ For Balthasar, the freedom of the Mother of God is the archetype of the freedom the believer receives in the grace of mission, for she “made herself available” to the divine economy—her seemingly passive response is also in an important sense a dramatic (i.e., active) act of obedience.³⁴

Freedom in Christ

Thus, paradoxically, Balthasar finds human freedom brought into its fullness at the very point of submission to the will of the Father in the acceptance of a mission. Importantly, this takes on a christological dimension. As individuals are incorporated into Christ (*en Christōi*) through the Spirit, there is opened up the possibility of an “interplay” between the human subject and the Triune God, a genuine “dramatic dialogue” where lived experience, particularly in relation to the concrete specificity of the church, exists in creative counterpoint with the divine call. Thus inclusion in Christ *enables*, rather than hinders, a kind of theodramatic improvisation—the moment of readiness and response

33. Ibid., 56–57. “We will regard it as our greatest *freedom* to do, not our own will, but the will of the beloved.”

34. Ibid., 58. A discussion of the contestable complementarian underpinnings of this aspect of Balthasar's theology is outside of the range of this study; it will suffice to note, along with Gonzalez, that “while his model of gender complementarity hampers Balthasar's anthropology in the eyes of feminists, his emphasis on relationality as the center of what it means to be human resonates with the work of contemporary feminist theologians” (Gonzalez, “Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology,” 575).

is precisely the moment of action and total *disponibilité*, where one is genuinely freed to play one's role.

The mystery of the authentic human freedom that comes through incorporation into Christ is further developed by Balthasar within the context of the Trinity. For Balthasar, only a truly trinitarian theology is able to mediate between the transcendent and the historical, avoiding the extremes of a remote God who cannot interact with the world and a purely immanent, "mythical" deity enmeshed in finitude and process. God is not just another actor, yet neither is he absent from the world-stage. The doctrine of the Incarnation rests on the paradox of a God who is "truly able to enter the world drama" yet also "acts in utter freedom."³⁵ God the Father conceived of as "Author" already implies that he is deeply involved with the drama, while remaining transcendentally above and beyond it ("he is prior to the play and above it").³⁶ However, there is also an important sense for Balthasar in which God, rather than simply being a "Spectator" looking at the play from the balcony, is also the "central actor" in the theo-drama. The mystery of the Trinity—Son and Spirit both as "fully God" in the course of their economic activities—means that it is truly God, not just a shadow of the divine, who freely "acts" on the world stage. It is precisely this theological freedom that forms an analogy to human agency.

Moreover, and again without falling into the language of mythological struggle—the position he ascribes to the early Moltmann—Balthasar sees the drama of history as encompassed within a drama in the Trinity itself. The earthly, historical dimensions of the theo-drama are not the full story—rather, there is an eternal drama within which human experience, including the story of the church, is dramatically unfolded. This is true even to the extent that Christ's death and descent into hell—a key moment in the divine-human drama—corresponds analogically to a kind of relational distancing even within the immanent Trinity. Such language pushes our conception of eternal trinitarian relations to the limit, and indeed some have questioned

35. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:529.

36. *Ibid.*, 532.

whether this theological formulation subverts, rather than undergirds, a healthy model of human relationality and action.³⁷ However, even in this moment of crisis and “inversion,” the bonds of the Trinity are not broken. For Balthasar, the dramatic event of the cross (and by extension Christ’s descent to the dead) is an “extreme form” of the dynamic, eternal fellowship of the Trinity.³⁸

Balthasar’s paradigm of mission is subsequently not restricted to the obedient response of faithful individuals, but is rooted in his understanding of the unfolding of the immanent Trinity in the economic sphere. The Father freely sends the Son, not as an afterthought, but as a natural continuation of an eternal, kenotic movement of *missio* or *processio*—an intra-Trinitarian initiative that overflows into the world without becoming mythologically bound to the contours of human history.³⁹ In this eternal *missio Dei* the Son “spontaneously . . . declared his readiness” for mission “before the foundation of the world,”⁴⁰ which is to say he has always-already been “sent”; his filial relationship with the Father is precisely that of the “one-who-is-sent” perfectly revealing “him-who-sends,” on earth and in heaven.⁴¹ The experiential ramification of this is that in both eternity and within the great “trinitarian inversion” that occurs in the Incarnation, the Son knows himself to be “identical with his mission.”⁴² Christ, as the perfect actor, plays his role without hesitation. In a sense, his theatrical intuition is perfect—conscious of his identity, and aware of his context, he acts in spontaneity in each moment of his life, fulfilling the will of the one who sent him and fleshing out the theo-drama in human history.

37. The most sustained critique of Balthasar’s theology of Holy Saturday is Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*. For an insightful yet probing critique that characterizes Balthasar’s model of intra-Trinitarian kenosis as fundamentally “masochistic,” see Tonstad, “Sexual Difference.”

38. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:451.

39. The reference here is again to Balthasar’s critique of the early Moltmann. See O’Hanlon, *Immutability of God*, 66.

40. *Ibid.*, 516.

41. *Ibid.*, 518–19.

42. *Ibid.*, 522–23.

This is the reason for Balthasar's intense interest in the "consciousness of Christ" throughout *Theo-Drama* and his *Theology of History*—to understand Christ's own experience of mission or role is to be able to glimpse his "spontaneous, filial obedience" that provides the model for all subsequent human missions, dramatic roles that enable the fulfillment of true personhood. All missions are in an important sense "cut from" Christ's original mission, representing in part what his *missio* is in fullness.⁴³

Jesus Christ is *the* Person, in an absolute sense, because in him self-consciousness (of the conscious subject) coincides with the mission he has received from God, a mission that, because of this identity, cannot but be universal, embracing all other possible and partial missions.⁴⁴

How does the incarnate Christ experience his mission? In keeping with Balthasar's own anti-docetic view of Christ as experiencing human nature from within, he brings us to the threshold of Christ's own consciousness in an effort to better grasp the mysterious inner contours of Christ's theodramatic role. Christ's earthly existence is characterized by "uninterrupted reception"⁴⁵ of the will of the Father, mediated through the Spirit, which is the pattern for our own, feminine mission of responsive obedience. A crucial element here is his experience of time—surely an important dimension of existence in the theatre of the world. Christ "receives" time from God as pure gift, not anticipating or grasping knowledge of what is to come in the drama but allowing events to play out in the fullness of time. At the wedding in Cana (John 2), he tells his mother that his "hour is not yet come"; like an actor, he waits for the right time to disclose his identity and play his unique part in the drama. Even when he could (in a sense) act to disrupt the narrative and reveal himself to be God in the flesh, he consistently, willfully stays in his role as the one who came "not to be served, but to serve"

43. *Ibid.*, 527.

44. *Ibid.*, 509.

45. Balthasar, *Theology of History*, 26.

(Mark 10:45). This applies even to the “hour” of his Passion—Christ waits for just the right moment, never (in a certain sense) stepping out of character but instead yielding himself to the authorities, playing the part set before him (the Servant) in perfect obedience, even to death on the cross (Philippians 2).

Such an assuming of role might again imply a kind of determinism—a “fixed script” to which Christ is bound. Yet critically, Balthasar rejects any model of the theo-drama that sees performance as mere slavery to the script.⁴⁶ For Balthasar, Christ is the central actor in the theo-drama, and yet he does not play his role within a rigidly scripted play that already pre-exists in its totality. Rather, the drama is “conceived, produced and acted all in one.” Each scene of Christ’s life is received in its originality in moment-by-moment inspiration—this is precisely part of his experience of time as a gift from the Father, and so also of his unique existence as he-who-is-sent.⁴⁷ Here it becomes clear how the Holy Spirit is the director of this essentially unscripted drama—“prompting” Christ at every turn, guiding him in his obedient actions.⁴⁸ Although the word “improvisation” never occurs in the five volumes of *Theo-Drama*, it does seem uniquely appropriate here—Christ spontaneously does the will of his Father, embodying his role in each moment of his earthly life. Again, one might say he is the ultimate actor, with a keen intuition for both the movement of the dramatic narrative—the story in which he finds himself—and his concrete situation, always in relation to the will of the Father. Balthasar describes Christ’s moment-by-moment reliance on the Spirit as the very model of Stanislavskian *disponibilité*—a readiness that allows him to “carry out his mission” in total dependence upon the will of the Father, “which is set before him anew at every moment.”⁴⁹

Christ’s “point of identity” is “his mission from God (*missio*),” which, for Balthasar, is identical with his Personhood within the eternal relations of the Trinity (*processio*). His en-

46. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:532.

47. Balthasar, *Theology of History*, 33.

48. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:533–34.

49. *Ibid.*, 533.

trance into human history means that the “world drama” is itself meaningful, a true drama that is truly indicative of a drama within the Trinity rather than an empty charade. It thus also, then, enables his “fellow actors”—human beings—“the opportunity to embrace, not simply a psychological or sociological role, but the unique mission that God has prepared for them in Christ.”⁵⁰ His mission—which we have seen is itself an improvised role—enables all others. Critically, however, these roles are equally not simply “vertically” given from above, which would imply a loss of freedom and spontaneity; rather, “the man Jesus” is the one who is able to “open up” the prospect of true freedom for humanity. This is a mystery, communicated especially through Christ’s eucharistic self-giving—the Word becoming flesh allows flesh to be “given a participation in the dimensions of the Word,” enabling “a shared humanity that is both human and divine” precisely in its experience of authentic freedom.⁵¹

The Empty Stage

Balthasar is aware that his formulation of true freedom as occurring only *en Christōi* may initially appear to pose a “problem lying right across the threshold of a theodramatic theory.”⁵²

In the previous volume, we spoke of the interplay of absolute and created freedom, which guaranteed openness to every possible course of action: Is this now to be disappointingly restricted by the prior fact that everything that happens can only take place “in Christ Jesus”?⁵³

But Christ is not just an actor, but is the “one who creates a stage,” namely an empty stage on which the drama of the church can play out.⁵⁴ This “transcendental inauguration of the dramatic acting area”⁵⁵ is constituted in part by the cross itself, where the initial freedom given to mankind in creation, a freedom limited

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid., 39.

52. Ibid., 18.

53. Ibid., 17.

54. Ibid., 41.

55. Ibid., 47.

by death, is replaced by absolute freedom. Human freedom conceived of in alienation from God Balthasar compares to a fish that dramatically twitches when put on dry land—it displays the appearance of freedom, but ultimately is a futile activity—mere sound and fury.⁵⁶ Constrained by the absolute limit of death, cut off from eternity, unredeemed humanity plays out its drama on a tiny stage. The gospel, however, enlarges the space in which the drama takes place:

[Man] can choose the freedom of being his own origin, in which case he must pay the price of never being able to find any sufficient reason or satisfying goal for this self-manufactured freedom but must content himself with the exercise of his autonomy; or he can choose the freedom of continually acknowledging his indebtedness, in ever new ways, to absolute freedom.⁵⁷

The divine “overcoming and revaluation of man’s dying,” which Christ accomplishes not only on the cross but in his “being with the dead”⁵⁸ on Holy Saturday, makes possible a genuine “interplay between God and man.”⁵⁹ Rather than a small, “self-manufactured freedom,” Christ offers to humankind the possibility of genuine freedom—of meaningful “improvisation” rather than spasmodic, meaningless contingency.

The cross is of course also tied to the resurrection, and this is precisely where Balthasar locates mission: “*En Christōi*, in the acting area Christ opens up as the fruit of his Resurrection, each individual is given a personal commission; he is entrusted both with something unique to do and with the freedom to do it.”⁶⁰ Mission, conceived of in terms of the freedom to play one’s unique role, is what constitutes the individual as a *person*—one finds one’s identity precisely by playing a part in the great “divine-human drama.” Just as “the great artist is the instrument

56. Ibid., 20.

57. Ibid., 36.

58. Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 148–50.

59. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:50. He continues that man [*sic*] is no longer “doomed to play an endless succession of futile games with himself within his own finitude.”

60. Ibid., 51.

of his art,”⁶¹ and the great actor becomes so immersed in her role as to become indistinguishable from an assumed character, so the Christian becomes the instrument of a mission, in some cases becoming (like Christ) so identified with this unique task that no separation may be made between mission and identity. In this way Balthasar is able to characterize the “grace of personal mission”⁶² as part of not only a subsequent process of sanctification (as one might attribute to certain strands of Protestantism) but as part of the initial gift of salvation given to the individual; one does not receive grace according to merit but is rather graciously and gratuitously saved to serve.⁶³ If we are to liken the experience of the individual Christian to that of Christ, it seems legitimate to then characterize the freedom that comes in assuming one’s role to be improvisatory in nature. Human beings, set free in Christ (“it is for freedom that Christ has set us free,” Gal 5:1) grow in awareness of their own mission, a process of identity-formation that enables them to spontaneously act in the world. The moment of inclusion in Christ, the great improviser, is the moment in which subjects are “freed to relate and act”; in moment-by-moment reliance upon the Spirit’s prompting, individuals are able to inhabit their roles with confidence to accept the gifts of the present.

One might say that Balthasar’s understanding of personhood in terms of role allows one to see divine election as akin to a casting call. Vanhoozer argues that such a paradigm perhaps de-emphasizes the way in which we choose the role we play in the theo-drama and rather draws attention to the way in which we are cast in a particular role.⁶⁴ Does this reintroduce the problem

61. Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 71.

62. *Ibid.*, 72.

63. Balthasar, in an interesting gloss on Protestant views of justification, points out how the sinful beggar is not made beautiful simply by having come into contact with the condescending king—by forensically donning beautiful garments that mask his true condition. Rather, the inner, “underlying poverty of his nature and origin” is removed and replaced with a unique, graced task, a dramatic role to play that simultaneously ennobles, enlivens, and sanctifies. See *ibid.*, 74.

64. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 367.

of a fixed script to which the individual must adhere? How does divine sovereignty coexist with human freedom? As we have seen, Balthasar's solution to this problem is to situate—and so legitimate—authentic human freedom in relation to divine freedom, *within* the total freedom of Christ, the central actor in the theo-drama. The inclusion of humanity in Christ—and the gracious freedom he brings that allows human beings to be able to relate to God freely—is what enables the assuming of a role or mission to be a truly free expression of creaturely potential. However, it is critical to remember that Balthasar does not (mythologically) put human freedom on an equal plane with God's ultimate freedom:

Mission, then, requires man's "yes"—an act not less important than the act by which God calls his chosen one And yet the two words—God's word and man's word—are not to be regarded as equal. On the contrary, man's word is but the acceptance of God's call and mission—his simple cooperation in the eternal "yes" of God.⁶⁵

For Balthasar, this understanding of God's absolute freedom in turn yields the (Ignatian) sense in which election makes sense—for the accepting of a theodramatic role entails "the sacrifice of [one's] personal freedom *insofar as it is regarded or exists as an entity distinct from the divine will*" and becomes alive, through mission, to "sharing the absolute freedom that is in God."⁶⁶ Does this mean then a "renunciation" or "extinction" of one's own will, subsumed as it seems to be in the "decrees of God"?⁶⁷ No—one is still enabled to make the free choice, in every moment, to follow, or in the language of improvisation, to accept the offer of grace. Subsequently, "nothing makes the human individual more autonomous than the divine mission that he accepts in free obedience and with full responsibility."⁶⁸

Balthasar's understanding of individual mission flows directly into his concept of the mission of the church. The individual is

65. Balthasar, *Christian State of Life*, 400.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid., 401.

68. Ibid.

“constituted as a Christian individual through being chosen, called and sent forth, in and through Christ,”⁶⁹ a process that, as we have seen, is grounded in both Christ’s own improvised role in the drama and the eternal *missio Dei* that reveals the trinitarian roots of the earthly aspect of the theo-drama. This anchoring of individual mission in the *missio* of the Son gives us a new perspective on not just the nature of individual freedom, but, as shall be demonstrated, on the nature of the church, and accordingly opens up the possibility of ecclesial improvisation.

Ecclesial Improvisation

For Balthasar, the uniqueness of each individual role, from that of the ordinary Christian all the way to the privileged faith-experience of the saints, flows out of God’s unique authorial Idea for each individual life. Though corporately the church is Christ’s “community of love”—a fellowship that embodies the *koinonia* of the Trinity—she is also made up of obedient individuals.⁷⁰ When individuals are seen as tributaries that feed into the central river of the church, ecclesiology becomes precisely the coalescing of individual life-missions into the overarching mission of the church, itself compelled by a responsive, dramatic living or acting out of a divine Idea. The grace of mission—the call to a unique vocation given to the individual, a kind of instrumental election—is thus precisely what connects the performance of the individual to the mission of the church as a whole. The mission of the individual becomes “de-privatized”—shared or universalized for the benefit of the whole *ecclesia*—and revealed to be “a portion of the Church’s mission.”⁷¹ This is thus no solitary drama; on the empty stage of the world, the church acts as a company or troupe of players and brings to life the theo-drama, performing the script even as it is written. This group performance is directed by the Holy Spirit, who

69. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:447–48.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid., 527.

brings the Author's text into the actuality of the performance, in response to the manifold, fortuitous needs of the moment and the changing potential of the troupe of actors . . . The director must sensitively listen for the text's spirit and infuse it, in its integrity, into the troupe's multifarious organism.⁷²

One may thus, responding to Wells's concerns, legitimately consider the church as itself a full-fledged *dramatis persona* in the Theo-Drama, collectively responding to the divine call and actualizing through its diverse members its appointed mission. Though the individual players will constantly be changing over the course of its history, the church is an "organism" that in its own assumption of a dramatic role demonstrates a freedom *en Christōi*, a grounding of ecclesial freedom in the absolute freedom of God. For Balthasar, the readiness of the church to respond to the divine call is a dimension of its "Marian profile": like the Mother of God, the church awaits the Word spoken in silence, yielding itself unreservedly to God's will. Thus though the formula "*in Christ Jesus* gives us, a priori, the greatest opportunity and the widest possible framework for the interplay of both forms of freedom,"⁷³ in terms of the church, freedom comes in both christological and mariological forms.

The fact that human freedom is expanded and confirmed by Christ does not simply mean that now "the being and actions of all men" are divinely sanctioned.⁷⁴ True freedom comes in Christ, and the church is his body. On the other hand, however, Balthasar, while not presuming to speak for the billions of human beings on earth, does suggest (in opposition to Karl Rahner's hypothesis of the "anonymous Christian") that "man's actual experience of freedom" (not just Enlightenment autonomy) may lead towards "genuine religious awareness" on the part of individuals.⁷⁵ Here again, even outside the church, the pattern is the same—"every human being who is awakened to

72. Ibid., 533.

73. Ibid., 17.

74. Ibid., 457.

75. Ibid.

freedom owes his existence ultimately to an ultimate freedom,”⁷⁶ which in the end is the absolute freedom of God. This freedom enables “room” for intersubjectivity in human relations, an echo of trinitarian communion; and finally, even for those outside of the church “the gift implies a task.” Anyone who comes into contact with grace may experience the sense of “having been awakened to free subjectivity” and so also “entrusted with a mission”; as with those within the church, this is a dramatic role that when taken up allows one to truly become a Person.⁷⁷ This provocative aspect of Balthasar’s understanding of ecclesial mission is an area deserving of further study.

Conclusion: Improvising within the Theo-Drama

We have seen how Balthasar’s exposition of human freedom grounds individual mission and freedom in the mission and freedom of Christ. Christ opens up the empty stage on which the drama of redemption plays out:

Initially, the inclusion of dramatic characters in Christ means no more than this: in Christ, God opens up that personal sphere of freedom within which the particular (individual or collective) characters are given their ultimate human face, their mission or “role”; it is left up to them to play their part well or ill.⁷⁸

This initial development of freedom finds an even fuller expression, however, when seen against the backdrop of the Trinity. Christian existence as individual persons finds its ground in the interpersonal relationships that occur in the community of the church. This interpersonal dimension in turn finds itself enabled by the “trinitarian” fellowship (*ekklesia*) of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Here is where Balthasar’s Marian ecclesiology is not just an abstract ideal but has important implications for the present experience of the church in mission. For Balthasar, Christ is in

76. Ibid., 458.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid., 38.

the uniqueness of his form “*the* individual among men; he is utterly lonely.”⁷⁹ This loneliness “remains true” even in terms of the church’s twofold relationship to Christ—as his body and bride. Yet even this loneliness communicates to the church something of his eternal *missio*; provocatively, Balthasar suggests that “the trinitarian fellowship enjoyed by Jesus (which he lives out in extreme form in the loneliness of the Cross) is the point of origin of the fellowship of the Church.”⁸⁰ Even in the absolute forsakenness of the cross and tomb, Christ yields “fruitfulness” that is appropriated by the church;⁸¹ even his “final, precipitous plunge into the abyss” of death is not the dissolution of the Trinity, but the fullest expression of both the missionary role and existential freedom he enjoys as the eternal Son.⁸²

Such an unfolding of mission in terms of trinitarian fellowship may once again seem to imply a lack of individual freedom *within* the church. The church originates, however, not just from the wounded side of the dying Christ but in Mary. Balthasar is clear that the church does not undergo kenosis in the precise, theological way proper to Christ. However, we may speak of an ecclesial kenosis “in the broad sense” (he prefers the term *offering*), which is conformed to the Marian pattern as an obedient, feminine “letting oneself be available” to be led in the “direction” (note again the dramatic terminology) chosen by God.⁸³ In this Marian pattern, individuals themselves may represent the church in the world—precisely as “witnesses” (as in Wells)—“Witness, *martyrion*, is always the individual’s response to Christ, but it is always made in the name of the Church and concretely represents her.”⁸⁴ Ecclesial mission and individual mission exist in a kind of dynamic interplay, yet another polarity for which the term “improvisation” seems appropriate. Balthasar

79. Ibid., 448.

80. Ibid., 451.

81. Ibid., 450.

82. Ibid., 75–76.

83. See Balthasar, “Kenosis of the Church?”

84. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:453.

gives the examples of Mother Teresa and Maximilian Kolbe as twentieth-century saints who acted “*in persona ecclesiae*,” demonstrating through their supreme “clarity of word and action” even in the face of suffering and death the Marian face of the church. They, as in Wells’s understanding, exemplify the intuitive practice of improvisation, the “spontaneity” by which we are “re-formed into ourselves” (Spolin)—without a fixed script to guide them, they act in the moment “without fear.”

Kevin Vanhoozer has pointed out the ways in which “improvising well requires both training (formation) and discernment (imagination).”⁸⁵ Developing these virtues in the ecclesial community works to enable true spontaneity—not “off the cuff” extemporizing but allowing tradition to speak dialogically and creatively to new situations. In a Balthasarian turn of phrase, Vanhoozer notes that “Spontaneity . . . describes the state of an actor’s readiness: one’s preparedness to fit in and contribute to whatever starts to happen.”⁸⁶ Such readiness—which, in Balthasar’s thought, is always a Marian readiness to respond to the Word—includes memory. Memory, in Wells’s terms, translates to an awareness of the previous three acts of the play, a consciousness of tradition and history; for Balthasar, ecclesial memory is the memory of Mary herself, who “treasured” the truths of her Son and “pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Conceived of as a “narrative skill,” the development of ecclesial memory in turn enables “reincorporation,” which, far from being simple repetition, is “remembering and recapitulating past elements in the narrative in order to make of the scene a whole and unified action.”⁸⁷ Wells rightly emphasizes, in his disavowal of the “fixed script,” the fact that “Christians do not have ‘parts’ in the drama, with ‘lines’ pre-prepared and learned by heart.”⁸⁸ New contexts demand new patterns of engagement. However, this is not (for Wells or Balthasar) to discount what has gone before in the theo-drama. The successive acts of a drama cannot

85. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 337.

86. *Ibid.*, 338.

87. *Ibid.*, 340.

88. Wells, *Improvisation*, 60.

simply repeat each other; yet at the same time they must sustain the “constancy” of both the narrative and the “development of character,” displaying a kind of continuity even in their newness.⁸⁹

Memory is much more significant than originality. The improviser does not set out to create the future, but responds to the past, re-incorporating it to form a story.⁹⁰

The Christian community uses what it has been offered in order to perform a new “story consonant with the one given story.”⁹¹ Here, according to Wells, is where “the script does not provide all the answers,”⁹² and where Balthasar’s strong emphasis on “freedom” bears its fruit in the immanent present of ecclesial mission.

Is Balthasar’s understanding of mission sufficient to account for not just the “dramatic” content of Christian revelation but, in Vanhoozer’s terminology, “the twin notions of doctrine as dramatic direction and the Christian life as performance interpretation”⁹³ as they exist in the complexities of the postmodern present? As the language of improvisation, freedom, and *disponibilité* reminds us, the theatre is a space in which characters respond not only to the overarching narrative in which they find themselves but to each other and to their constantly shifting situation—it is a place of spontaneity and immediacy, where the actors play their unique roles in the moment, bringing the script to life through their performance and in an important sense maintaining the dynamism of the drama as it unfolds in time and space. I contend that Balthasar’s christological, trinitarian understanding of mission enables a robust understanding of both individual and ecclesial freedom, one that is hospitable to Wells’s language of improvisation—an unscripted (though still worded) drama in which the *dramatis personae* can proceed without fear, in the confidence of inclusion in Christ and the

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid., 147.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid., 62.

93. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 30.

improvised drama of his life, death, and resurrection. In appropriating the language of the theatre as a theological *instrumentarium*, Balthasar thus truly finds “a genre that does justice . . . to the interaction between the finite freedom of humanity and the infinite freedom of God.”⁹⁴ For to be an actor—to play a role—is to freely but faithfully interpret the words of the drama, creating a kind of improvisatory interplay between idea and realization; to give the “Author’s word”—or in this case, the Word made flesh—a “real presence in the form of action.”⁹⁵

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94. Wells, *Improvisation*, 46.

95. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 3:532.

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