

**John Dickson:** right. Woo. All right, mate. That's awesome. Well done. Thanks. Thanks for joining us.

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## **John Dickson (Studio)**

I'm chatting with Mark Glanville, an Aussie living in Vancouver. By day, he's a Bible scholar at Regent College. By night, he's a jazz muso and a good one!

Between researching, teaching, rehearsing, performing, and being a family man, Mark found time to write *Improvising Church: Scripture as the source of Harmony, Rhythm, and Soul*.

It's about Christianity in a post-Christian culture, and it draws on the lessons of music in general, and jazz in particular, to probe how Christians and doubters alike can make sense of God, Christ, and the church.

Mark is sitting at his piano, his happy place, for the entire unscripted interview.

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**John Dickson:** So, so, I mean, this is a good place to, uh, pick up straight away. Let's talk about jazz. Okay. Cause the, the joke, the joke among musicians, usually lower level musicians like me, is that if you hit a wrong, if you hit a wrong note in a performance, you just, you just go, oh yeah, that was some jazz, you know, anything goes, anything goes.

But there's more to jazz than that.

**Mark Glanville:** Right, yeah, yeah. That's good, that's great. Yeah, I heard a joke the other day, John. Um, uh, if you have, Through playing three, a rock musician plays three chords to an audience of 3, 000, a

jazz musician plays 3, 000 chords to an audience of three. That's totally right. Yeah, but that's a good place to start.

Jazz is rooted in tradition, and that's what a lot of people maybe don't realise, that jazz musicians are playing out of the tradition, and we spend literally thousands of hours, maybe 5, 000 hours, Rooting ourselves in the tradition, learning to sing its harmonies, to tap its rhythms, and each time we come to play, we're being creative, we're playing out of that tradition creatively, but yet it's deeply rooted in a tradition.

And the reason why my book is called Improvising Church is because as Christians doing church, we're rooted in that, tradition of scripture, a tradition that In my view, a bit like jazz, it demands improvisation.

**John Dickson:** Yeah. I mean, that's the thing that people often don't know about jazz. Um, is that it is super highly technical and grounded in the highest level of musical knowledge, and it's precisely that rigour that gives you the freedom, right? It's not a contradiction of the rigour.

**Mark Glanville:** It gives it the depth, you know, it gives it that depth. The jazz musician knows straight away if what's being played is from the tradition. And if someone hasn't learnt the tradition but we're on the bandstand together, it drives us nuts if they're not immersed in it. And that tradition, you know, at the heart of it, As you probably know, is the blues.

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## **John Dickson (Studio)**

The blues started in the 19th century on North American plantations.

It was born from the work songs of slaves. It was a counter-intuitive mix of African work songs, field hollers, and even hymns, creating its unique sound with what they called "blue" notes—those out-of-key notes that give the blues its emotional depth.

The Blues likely started around the Mississippi Delta and then travelled upriver to the cities. As it spread, it evolved and laid the groundwork for modern styles like R&B ( rhythm and blues - think Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey) and also rock 'n roll.

But here's my point: Jazz also sprang from the blues. Jazz emerged in early 20th century New Orleans. It blended Afro-Blues rhythms with European instruments and harmony but it ditched the classical rigidity and championed improvisation and personal expression.

The history of Jazz is directly linked to the history of black America.

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**Mark Glanville:** It's that black American music of the blues that's, that's birthed in the horrific reality of, of slavery in North America. But that, that genius, that resilience. I mean, just to illustrate, if I may, you know, the, the blues, you know, and jazz is always connected to the blues or the rhythm. The harmony is always coming out of that. And that's the tradition that we learn, but it takes

**John Dickson:** I've got a question though, that arises directly from that because people will think of church, all those God botherers getting together as, um, more like classical music, you know, strict, highly organized, hierarchical. Uh, some might even say it's not even classical music It's more like scales - In what sense do you think, do you think church for the Christian world could and should be a little more like jazz

**Mark Glanville:** It's because of the nature of scripture itself, John, and there's lots of lenses we could go to, but the lens for me as an Old Testament scholar is that the biblical authors themselves were incredible improvisers, incredibly creative. So, for example, going to the Old Testament, because that's my area of expertise, think of the Old Testament metaphor of a covenant, which no one would disagree is a central metaphor in the Old Testament.

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## **John Dickson (Studio)**

A covenant is just a binding agreement between parties, with various obligations to each other.

It's sort of a contract: you could find yourself in a financial covenant, a marriage covenant, or even a military covenant.

In the Ancient Near East, powerful nations would enter into covenants with less powerful nations: we'll keep you safe if you give us lots of tribute!! That sort of thing.

Covenants could be brutal, but Mark points out that the Old Testament uses 'covenant' language and gives it a twist. Yes, God's covenant with Israel wasn't really an agreement between equals, but the striking thing is the way God continues to pursue his covenant people despite their constant breaking of the covenant details. That is basically the whole story of the OT. God intends to keep his side of the bargain - to bless the world through the Israelites – even though his people fall short of the covenant stipulations.

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**Mark Glanville:** The first time the master scribe in ancient Israel suggested that, they must have thought he was batty. They must have thought he was nuts. But here it is, this central Old Testament metaphor, you know, so creative. So creative. And in a similar way, you know, with the Bible in our hands, for our context today and the diverse context, I'm in the West, I'm in Canada, I'm an Aussie and a Canadian, we're improvising church in the sense that with the Bible in our hand, we're playing our part in the biblical story with creativity in ways that are meaningful today in the name of Jesus.

**John Dickson:** Um, you also think, uh, just by the by that, that churches should be more open. Um, this is a giant question I know, but where did the church go wrong on the arts?

**Mark Glanville:** Man, I'm not sure, you know. Like, it's easy to be simplistic, you know, you say the rationalism of the Enlightenment or something like that. I'm not sure what went wrong. I mean, there's maybe, you know, it's the iconoclasm, the suspicious, the suspicion of visual images back in the Reformation.

People often cite that and maybe that's a part of it. But I think that the creativity of the Bible itself, you know, the, the tremendous creativity of the Bible itself, it shows me that we need to not just know God with our minds, and we need to hold on to that, but we need to know God with that, with artistic intuition.

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### **John Dickson (studio)**

Hey, this is a good time to tell you to go check out our episode 'The Artist', with Makoto Fujimura and Russ Ramsey (Episode 70 to be exact).

Beauty is a key theme of that episode, and it's one of my favourites. I think that's the one where I shed a tear in the recording studio - I probably just got something in my eye!

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**John Dickson:** So beauty is a, is a theme you, you, you strike on the church should be, um, Should be aiming for this. And, you know, at its heart embodies this, you've got this sort of tripartite approach. You've got stuff that comes from harmony, stuff that's to do with rhythm, stuff to do with soul, right? That's how you think of a good song, right?

So under harmony, you talk about beauty. I, so, so that's a, you know, that's, it's a great, it's a great thing. Um, I was almost going to put you on the spot and say, give me a definition of beauty.

**Mark Glanville:** Yeah, well, I think beauty, man, I mean, gosh. I mean, I think what I'm shooting for is, is, is an artistic intuition. You know, it's, it's knowing God with an artistic intuition and doing things with care. You know, instead of, uh, doing things like, uh, you know, like, uh, just slapping something together in the kitchen, doing something with care and full heartedness, attention to grace, attention to what inspires.

That artistic intuition that, uh, that every human being knows, that curiosity that we all have, but when we come to the church we can easily, easily kind of put it aside because we're in old ruts. But with the survival itself that inspires, I think, this improvisation, I think that beauty is one of the most important things for the church in post christian societies, that we seek beauty, that we lift up our artists, that we lift up, but we become artistic, all of us, in the way we do many things in our life together.

And with the Bible in our hands, we need to bring that artistic intuition as a way of knowing into our shared life together. Yeah, into every aspect of our shared life. You know, so just illustrating the piano, you know, like, you know, I could throw some musical theory and spatter it around the living room where I'm sitting here and play in F major, say.

You know. You know, and you and I know both. We know that that's an F major chord and there's not a lot of complexity there. But let's just stay with that level of complexity. Just an F major chord for all those musicians who are listening in. And let's make it beautiful. Let's play the same theory, but make it beautiful, you know. You know, and beauty is a glimpse of God, John, you know, beauty is a glimpse of God. How can we show the beauty of Jesus, the tenderness of Jesus in our neighbourhoods, by attending to aesthetics?

**John Dickson:** Yeah. Um, under the theme of rhythm, you've got a whole bunch of notes that you hit, um, in, in, in the book, but one of them

is healing. Uh, I mean, it's healing kinship and something else, but I just want to focus on the kind of mending thing, right? Because, um, I want to ask, in what ways do you think the church is a place of mending? Because a lot of people think of it as a place of harm.

**Mark Glanville:** uh, yeah, the church has done harm and, and that'll come up later. But you know, If we've, we've, when we encounter Jesus, we encounter Jesus love, don't we? And we encounter Jesus love, not in the abstract, but as the creator of all things. And as the one who is. Who has secured a future for us with garden and for the creation itself, including our bodies, you know, and so as the church best witness to that, Jesus, to, to the creator, to the recreator, to the, to the one who redeems even our bodies. We're bearing witness to a healer, you know. In my book I speak about this remarkable text in Exodus 15, that just struck me once when I was reading through the book of Exodus, that they're at the waters of Marah, at the bitter waters, just fresh out of Egypt, they're so thirsty and, but the water's bitter and then, uh, the water becomes sweet, miraculously, and Yahweh says, I the Lord am your healer.

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## **READING - Exodus 15: 22-27**

*Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. (That is why the place is called Marah.[f]) So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?"*

*Then Moses cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became fit to drink.*

*There the LORD issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test. He said, "If you listen carefully to the LORD your God and*

*do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you.”*

*Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.*

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**Mark Glanville:** And, uh, you know, it's actually a pretty rare metaphor in the Old Testament that God is our healer. But here it is, all that God is, all that God calls us to in Christ, the scriptures that are shaping us are shaping us to be a community of healing.

**John Dickson:** Yeah, and that's a huge idea in the New Testament, right? Um, I mean, obviously Jesus wandering around healing, but, but that's, that's more than just miraculous healing. You know, those, those healings in the Gospels are clearly, um, previews of the kingdom. It's little microcosms of, you know, all things being made well, uh, as a picture of the, of the final, final kingdom. It's amending. healing in that broader sense is right at the heart of it, isn't it?

**Mark Glanville:** Absolutely, and so when I think of recontextualizing church in the post-Christian West, it's hard to find words and phrases to drive at, uh, I think what the Bible calls us to, but maybe the closest phrase I can come for myself is a community of people who are receiving and extending the healing of Jesus in a particular neighbourhood.

**John Dickson:** Can I put you on the spot and give us a musical rendition of this mending idea? Because, I mean, it's so core to music, isn't it? Um, except for maybe sort of postmodern music that, that sort of glories in not resolving. But if you got, give us something that, that really speaks to tension coming to resolution.

**Mark Glanville:** It's great. From one musician to another. I mean, and just to say, you know, when music speaks of that anger. You know, like

so much of jazz has in its story or resolution, there's healing in expressing our anger isn't there? Sometimes there's healing in, yeah, that's it. Leaving questions unanswered. No, thanks. I'd love to. Here we go.

**John Dickson:** I'm so pleased you got to that final chord. Ah, I can breathe.

**Mark Glanville:** Awesome. Yeah, man. Oh, man.

**John Dickson:** Hey, under soul, you talk about conversations. Okay. And this also takes us to jazz music and it's something that's quite, uh, Um, not quite unique, but it's, but it is distinctive of jazz music that it is. When you're watching it live, it is a conversation. It is musos talking to each other in a way, you know, like when I, when I played in a sort of pop rock band, we had fun on stage, but there was not much conversation in the music going on. It was like, we all knew where we were going and we were all playing it. But, but jazz musos .... They don't, they don't know what's coming in the next 30 seconds.

It depends on what the other guy says. So tell us about this musically first, and then why this is a good metaphor for what the church should be doing.

**Mark Glanville:** yeah, no, that's exactly right. We're responding to one another and creating something in the moment. So rooted in the tradition, paralleling, being rooted in the tradition of scripture, here we are on the bandstand. I'm doing a gig tonight, John, called The Seven Last Words of Christ. I mean, I'll just tell you real quick, uh, I'm obviously a Christ follower, the composer's a Christ follower, and his singing, then two professional musicians here in Vancouver, two of the best jazz musicians in Vancouver, playing with us, and they're not Christ followers, but they're going to be caught up in in the joy of this, and so we're playing this jazz suite, and even though it's composed, and we know what the song is, the framework is, the chords, uh, there's some lyrics, each time someone comes to solo but in every moment, even as we play

the groove, we're responding to one another, we're seeing, well, what is inspired in the moment.

It's very exciting and it's just fun to see the grin on the other musicians, all the focus on the other musicians as they just listen so hard, you know, and

**John Dickson:** And it's actually gorgeous to watch. Like if you go to a really high level jazz concert and you know, they're doing that, it is just beautiful. a delight,

**Mark Glanville:** That's great, I love that. Yeah, my wife says that too. Yeah, my wife, Erin, says the same thing. She says, I love seeing you guys listen to one another. And we do, man. We listen so deeply. We're listening. And when we're listening, that's when we're in the moment. That's when we're at our best, you know. So, actually, what I do literally sometimes, John, is, because I have to listen to myself as well, sometimes I literally physically seat myself back from the piano half a foot, just as a way of embodying that listening to the whole.

So they can see what impact am I having on the whole and what are other people doing that I need to respond to. It's a weird thing that I do physically, you know. But it does, it does remind me of the church

God's word addresses all of us, and I think it's in post Christian society that it's important. You know, while we're used to maybe more of a monologue in the way we do church, listening

**John Dickson:** Well, that's what I was thinking. Some people listening to us will be going, man, church ain't a conversation. It's, it's, it's those guys just proclaim, you know, they've got the truth and I'm meant to listen.

**Mark Glanville:** Ha ha, right. I mean, I am, man, I am endlessly fascinated by Ephesians 4 when Paul says, Speak in the truth in love. There's a conversation going on there and it's a call to unity. what I find fascinating about this is that Paul, the apostle in Ephesians 4, has very strong opinions himself.

You know, with Jew / Gentile things on the table, a whole lot's on the table that Paul really cares about, and yet this call to unity, this call to a conversation where we speak the truth, yes, but in love. And Paul just has that emotional flexibility, that kind of Emotional span to have a conversation and to call the Ephesians to have a conversation speaking the truth in love.

I'm fascinated by that because Paul isn't short of opinions and that yet somehow in this unity the church can be together and talking.

**John Dickson:** It is, it goes back to that first point we touched on about jazz. I mean, there is a musical theory. There is a high-level doctrine that is embodied in jazz

**Mark Glanville:** It's a tradition.

**John Dickson:** it's actually, it's, it's precisely the tradition as you say, or you could even say the science of music that, that is known and respected, but it's also the very thing you're interacting with, um, and developing a conversation from.

**Mark Glanville:** So true man.

**John Dickson:** So the church can be, can be dogmatic. In the sense that it's, it represents its tradition, but it also has to do jazz. Doesn't it? As it interacts with people's doubts and questions.

**Mark Glanville:** That's right. And you know, I mean just to illustrate, you know, tonight we're playing this gig, you know, and you know I mean, he's just to illustrate, right? So, uh, remember that jazz standard, jazz standard for us, someday my prince will come from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs? That beautiful Disney cartoon? Every jazz musician knows that. And you know, so the bass player, the bass player might start to play in two all of a sudden. Let's say, so that he might do something, it's actually in three, you know. One, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three. So he might start, or she might start to play in two. And then that might affect the whole thing.

And the drummer might do this percussive thing. You know, on the snare, you know, And we might all do that.

You know, I try and be a drummer, As a pianist, you know, and that's the same with church, you know, and I think it's actually, the challenge is an emotional one. It's hard, I think, for us all to have a conversation. I'm a pastor, I've been a pastor for well over a decade, and I can fear that people will say something that's not according to Scripture.

That could be my fear about having a conversation as a church. Other people might fear that someone might say something that triggers someone or that really upsets someone. I don't know. There's fears in the room. And it's that emotional work of what John Keats has called negative capability. Just that ability to sit with someone and to hear them say something that, that is quite different from what I think and who I am. And to have that capacity to let the other person be different from me. Negative capability. And I think John, artists tend to have a lot of negative capabilities. Can we be artists in our conversations? Can we have that, that emotional spam?

**John Dickson:** We're out of time, but can you give us a piece to take us out?

**Mark Glanville:** Yeah, absolutely.

**John Dickson:** Jazz is all about grace. That's amazing. Grace. Thank you so much.