

Theological Education and the Church: The School of Theodrama

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Part One:

What the church is: the company of the gospel

Drama is a matter of actors saying/doing something on stage. Actions communicate, yet often it is dialogue that carries the action.

A. How we actually live our faith

1. The situation in North America

Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion* : "Evangelical churches lack doctrine because they want to attract new members. Mainline churches lack doctrine because they want to hold on to those declining numbers of members they have".

2. The global situation: same text/gospel, different context/stage

3. The drama of doctrine in the contemporary situation

The Drama of Doctrine sets forth new metaphors for theology (dramaturgy), Scripture (the script), theological understanding (performance), the church (the company), and the pastor (director).

B. Theodrama: God's speech and action

The substance of the gospel, the essence of Christianity, is theodramatic: a matter of God's speech and God's action.

1. Theodrama is evangelical

Theology done in accord with the *euangelion* highlights two divine initiatives that together make up God's good news about God.

2. Theodrama is eucatastrophic

God has done something extraordinarily good - a *eucatastrophe*.

3. Theodrama involves entrances and exoduses

The Incarnation is the climax of a pattern of divine entrances. The cross of Christ is the great exodus event of the NT. And the resurrection makes possible a new entrance: that of the Holy Spirit: "it is to your advantage that I go away [exit, die], for if I do not go away the Counsellor will not come to you" (Jn 16:7).

4. From *promissio* to *missio*

"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, . . . and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:2-3). God makes good on his

promissio thanks to the *missio* of Son and Spirit. The gospel is a mission statement and a statement of the divine “missions”.

5. The drama is the divine *dramatis personae*

6. A covenantal comedy

C. The script

1. Inspiration

The Spirit “prompts” human writers to speak in their own words the Word of God.

2. Canon

The canon is the source and norm, the raconteur and provocateur, of the church’s corporate identity and witness.

3. *Sola scriptura*

Sola scriptura is the Spirit-enabled practice of participating in the “canonical practices” that comprise Scripture.

D. Doctrine as direction

Doctrine as direction tells us what has already been done (by God), thus implying what remains to be done (by us).

1. Knowing God as participatory theatre

Doctrine provides program notes for identifying the *dramatis personae* and for understanding the basic theodramatic plot.

2. The dramatic definition

Doctrine is direction for the fitting participation of individuals and communities in the drama of redemption.

3. The director

The director is perhaps best viewed as the midwife of a text’s performance, the mediator between the word written and the word enacted with and before others.

a. The Holy Spirit

The director’s primary task is to preserve the communicative import of the author’s drama. “He will guide [direct] you into all truth” (Jn 16:13).

b. The pastor

While the providence of God oversees the global production, it is the pastor who bears the primary responsibility for overseeing local performances.

E. Implications for theological education: understanding the theodrama

1. Transcending the theory/practice dichotomy
Doctrine serves the purpose of fostering truthful ways of living.

2. The way of wisdom
We demonstrate understanding of our script, and of what God was doing in Jesus Christ, by our “works” - our speech and action. The canon as a *sapiential criterion*, a means of making judgments about how to speak and act in ways that best conform to Jesus Christ, the wisdom of God.

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Part Two:

What the church should be/do: a parabolic performance of the kingdom of God

A. Learning our roles: from Stanislavski to sanctification

The theologically correct term for the role or part we play is “calling” or “vocation”.

1. Identity theatrics and the problem of hypocrisy: between casting calls and role-playing
Two possible objections: first, that doctrine gives direction for merely play-acting roles; second, that personal identity is a matter of playing arbitrary roles that we choose and construct - that it is “roles” all the way down.
 - a. Role-playing: the problem of hypocrisy
A hypocrite is one who pretends to be something he is not. *Doctrine tells us not how to pretend to be something that we are not, but rather who we really are: creatures made new in Christ.*
 - b. Person or *persona*: the self in theodramatic perspective
Personal identity is not something that we construct; election is our “casting call”. *Personhood and identity thus refer not to social roles but to theological vocations.*
2. The “Method”
 - a. Hypocrisy as mechanical acting
“Never allow yourself externally to portray anything that you have no inwardly experienced and which is not even interesting to you” (*An Actor Prepares*, 31).
 - b. The "magic if"
“If you speak any lines, or do anything, mechanically, without fully realizing who you are, where you came from, why, what you want, where you are going, and what you will do when you get there, you will be acting without imagination” (*An Actor Prepares*, p. 77).
 - c. Through-lines and super-objectives
Everything an actor says and does on stage must have a reason, an aim, an objective. *The ultimate goal of the actor, however, is not simply to play a role but to project the main idea of the play.* The ultimate point of a performance is to communicate what he called the play’s main idea or “super-objective”.
 - d. From character to spiritual formation
Doctrine helps disciples both to fit into their parts and to become fit: able to play their parts well.
3. Doctrine as habit of the theodramatic imagination
The imagination is the ability to grasp things together, to see connections that are not apparent to the senses. The eschatological imagination is the ability to see what is not (yet) there, the ability to see creation as it is being transformed and brought into

conformity with Christ. Doctrine trains and disciplines our imaginations so that we develop a theodramatic habit, the habit of viewing everyday life *sub specie theodramatis*.

4. The disciple's vocation: being real
 - a. Growing into the role: identity as task
 - b. Witnessing to Christ: vocation as identity
The Spirit's role is to personalize and contextualize Jesus' life in us (e.g., the part in us) so that it fits appropriately into new cultural situations.
- B. "Doing" church: an ensemble amateur theatre of reconciliation**
"The *Pulpit* gives the *Rule*, the *Stage* the *Example*" (anon. 17th century)
The church is the performance of the gospel word in the power of the gospel Spirit. Doctrine renders the truth of Jesus Christ not by mere theoretical correspondence but by theodramatic correspondence.
1. "An exhibit to the world": towards what kind of theatre?
Peter's Brook's *The Empty Space*.
 - a. The Deadly Theatre
This is the theatre of repetition, the theatre of set scenes, cliché, and stock effects.
 - b. The Holy Theatre
Theatre originated in rituals "that made the invisible incarnate" (45). Today "we do not know how to celebrate, because we do not know what to celebrate" (47).
 - c. The Living Theatre
Brook likens performance to self-sacrifice, since the actor gives his all to his role.
 - d. The Celebratory Theatre: Word and sacrament
The church's role in the drama of redemption is *to present the body of Christ*.
We celebrate the *presence of Christ* in our midst.
 2. Performing the Scriptures: the costumed interpreter
"Clothe yourselves with the (righteousness of) the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14).
Faith seeks textual understanding, yet the understanding of faith is displayed in the performance. The key to effective interactive theatre is the costumed interpreter. We have put on Christ: this is the role we are interpreting. Lesslie Newbigin likens the church to a "hermeneutic of the Gospel": in its corporate witness we come to understand the love of God, the peace of Christ, the fellowship of the Spirit. This is the "playerhood" of all believers.
 3. The church as theatre of martyrdom
Paul in 1 Cor 4:9 says that he and the apostles have been "exhibited" by God as "a spectacle [*theatron*] to the world". Luther believed that the genuine church is recognized by seven marks, the seventh being martyrdom: suffering witness.
 4. The church as theatre of reconciliation
The church proclaims what God has done in Christ and practices what it preaches. The church strives to model social and ethnic and racial reconciliation in order to correspond to the contours of the new creation. Forgiving others should become a

theodramatic habit - one of those propensities to see, think, and judge in particular imaginative ways - that defines the Christian player in the theatre of the gospel.

5. A plea for amateur theology: acting in parables

a. For the love of it

An amateur is a person who does something *for the love of it*. Ultimately, the church speaks and acts as amateur players *for love of the love of God*. Love is the super-objective of the theodrama, the through-line of divine action, and the key to our improvisations on our authoritative script.

b. Rehearsing the kingdom

Jesus spoke in parables. More to the dramatic point: Jesus *was* a parable. In the same way, the church, as living theatre, becomes an enacted parable of God. Only the church can rehearse the kingdom of God. Indeed, the church's mission is "to represent the reign of God" (George Hunsberger, "The Newbigin Gauntlet", in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, p. 15). The special vocation of the people of the gospel is to live in such a way that shows they are in touch with reality, with that eschatological fullness of the real in Christ.

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Part Three: Discipleship as theological dramaturgy and improvisation

A. Practicing discipleship: performing the doctrine of atonement

1. From doctrine to identity: atonement and union with Christ

a. The theodramatic climax: a wondrous improvisatory exchange

i. The form of the exchange: improvisatory

ii. The outcome of the exchange: edification and life

b. Our theodramatic identity: “in Christ”

To affirm the doctrine of atonement is to have acquired a particular habit of the theodramatic imagination, namely, that of thinking, imagining, even *feeling* that we have died and been raised with Christ. Specifically, what needs to be imagined (because it cannot be empirically observed) is God’s acceptance of us and our subsequent union to Christ. *Christian identity is theodramatic: who we are is ultimately defined in terms of Jesus’ person and work.*

2. The theatre of the cross

a. Revolutionary theatre (Brecht)

The purpose of Brecht’s theatre is to make the familiar strange: “to make the spectator assume an enquiring, critical attitude towards events”. The effect of such alienation (the “A-effect”) is to enable spectators to achieve a critical distance from their social and political conditioning, to perceive the truth of their situation, and hence to act on it. The church is never more Brechtian than when it proclaims and performs the cross, when it speaks the truth in love and acts the love in truth. The church is nothing less than a permanent revolution in the midst of the world.

b. Reconciliatory theatre

The church demonstrates her understanding of atonement by breaking down the dividing walls of racial and ethnic hostility. To perform the doctrine of atonement is to participate rightly in the peace made by Jesus Christ, and this means engaging in everyday practices that exhibit and foster social, racial, and ethnic reconciliation, especially in the church. To follow the direction of the doctrine of atonement and form multiethnic congregations may seem like folly to a pragmatically-inclined world, yet it is just such communities of holy folly that constitute the hope of the world.

B. Discipleship as a kind of improvisation

Gary Izzo writes that interactive theatre is the art of play. Play is (1) intensely absorbing (2) conducive to the formation of social groupings (3) an end in itself. Play takes place in a *temenos* - a “sacred space” in which the rules of the game obtain - and within this experience of play the “players develop a bond, a shared sense of ‘being apart’ together”. The church, I submit, is such a *temenos*, the play of the company of saints who are “set apart” together for the very purpose of continuing the drama of redemption.

Interactive theatre, unlike stage performances, is largely a matter of “ensemble improvisation”. An ensemble, says Izzo, “is a group that shares three things mutually and in abundance: trust, play, and joy”. What the church as the company of the gospel enjoys together is essentially imaginative play - the realization of a new, eschatological world in the midst of the old.

1. Phronesis: practical wisdom

Phronesis discerns “what is here and now to be done.” Specifically, phronesis apprehends what shape the good assumes in this particular situation. Phronesis just is the canonically nurtured ability to say and do the “fit in Christ” in relatively singular contexts in ways appropriate to their relative singularity.

2. Improvisation

Doctrines help us to improvise judgments about what new things to say and do that are nevertheless consistent with our canonical script. Improvising well requires both training (formation) and discernment (imagination).

a. Spontaneity

Training for improvisation usually takes the form of games and exercises that develop both perception and imagination.

- i. Good improvisers are trained to avoid two common pitfalls. The first obstacle to spontaneity is “pre-planning” - the temptation to think out a course of action before saying or doing anything. One could probably write the history of Christian missions in terms of wanting to maintain control or “script-write”.
- ii. A second obstacle to spontaneity, at the opposite extreme, is the temptation to ad-lib or to be original. Improvisation is not to be confused with ad-libbing : “ad-lib is individual cleverness, not evolved dialogue”. Ad-libbing is the theatrical equivalent of heresy, where one person stubbornly insists on going his own way instead of playing the game.
- iii. The true improviser is the one whose actions appear neither pre-scripted nor cleverly novel, but fitting, even obvious. Christian theologians improvise whenever their doctrinal directions appear obvious to one who fears God, to one whose reflex (instinct) is the “law” of the Spirit of freedom. Sapiential spontaneity is simultaneously "scripted" and "spirited".

b. Accepting and blocking “offers”

Improvisation begins with an assumption about the game being played. The technical term used in improvising to describe this process of adding action to

assumption is "offering". Anything someone does is an offer. Statements, gestures, actions - all are invitations to respond by extending the action and keeping the play going. Offers can either be "accepted" or "blocked." To accept an offer is to respond in such a way that maintains and develops the initial premise.

c. Narrative skills

Memory is more important for improvisation than originality. The improviser is one who seeks not to create novelty but to respond to the past (e.g., to various "offers"). The improviser is "like a man walking backwards" who sees only where he has been, not where he is going. "Improvisers must keep the full picture in memory in order to move the scene forward effectively . . . An improviser's powers of observation and memorization are keys to retaining this ever-growing assembly of ideas".

d. Reincorporation

"Reincorporation is the repetition of a previously revealed bit of information or situation within a scene. It is a powerful tool for giving form to developing scenes, and it can provide closure". Improvisers must be "finely aware and richly responsive" to everything that has been going on up until the present moment.