

Faith Speaking Understanding
Performing the Drama of Doctrine

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Introduction: “In Accordance with the Scriptures”

Local Church as “Living Bible”

Christian doctrine is what the church believes, teaches, and confesses as it prays and suffers, serves and obeys, celebrates and awaits the coming of the kingdom of God.

—Jaroslav Pelikan

PLAYBILL: LOCAL CHURCH MAKES “LIVING BIBLE”

This is a book about learning doctrine for the sake of acting *out* what is *in* Christ: call it the *drama of discipleship*. Nothing in the world is more important than this project: living to God with one another in Christlike ways “in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3). This is the way the people of God come to know and express their love for God: by conforming their lives—hearts, souls, minds, and strength (Mark 12:30)—to his will, on earth as it is in heaven. Doctrine gives direction for bearing faithful witness, for *speaking* understanding. Moreover, if action “speaks” louder than words, then faith speaking understanding involves both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication: words and deeds.

Scripture gives authoritative witness to the identity and significance of Jesus Christ. Disciples thus speak understanding when they talk and walk “in accordance with the Scriptures.” Living in accordance with the Scriptures—being *biblical*—is thus the disciple’s prime directive. To be a follower of Christ is to be a follower of Scripture, in all three senses of “follow”: (1) to understand the meaning of what Christ says in Scripture, (2) to respond to his instructions with obedience, and (3) to go after Christ or along “the way” of Christ.

Being biblical is thus a matter not only of theory but also of practice. It is one thing to have a view of biblical authority, quite another to grasp God's word and formulate its truth systematically, and still another not only to state the truth but also to do or *embody* it. Too often, doing theology according to the Scriptures does not include this latter sense. The present proposal works with a robust sense of being biblical that includes all three dimensions: holding a high view of Scripture, using Scripture as a source and norm of Christian doctrine, and embodying Scripture in forms of everyday life. Doing theology "in accordance with the Scriptures" is ultimately a matter of being transformed by the Spirit in order to conform one's heart, mind, and soul to the Bible such that being biblical is indeed a matter of the strength of one's very *being*.

It has been said that church history is essentially the history of biblical interpretation.¹ This is obviously true on one level inasmuch as many important turning points in church history involved conflicting interpretations over particular biblical texts (e.g., the Arian controversy featured disagreement over the meaning of the Son's being "the firstborn of all creation" [Col. 1:15]). It is also true on another level insofar as the story of the church is essentially the story of its attempts to interpret Scripture "bodily," that is, through the shape of its life together. The church is biblical, therefore, when it seeks to embody the words in the power of the Spirit and so become a living commentary. The church is thus not only the "people of the book" but also "the (lived) interpretation of the book."

Followers of Christ seek to be biblical in response to Jesus' prayer: "Thy will be done." God's will is expressed in God's word, and no part of Scripture more resembles a script to be performed than the Law. Yet biblical wisdom too functions like a script to the extent that it asks to be embodied in the life of the people of God. Indeed, there is something intrinsically representational, and thus dramatic, about doing God's will "on earth *as* it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). The *as* provides a warrant for thinking about the church's embodied interpretation as a performance that seeks to represent on earth the rule of God as it is in God's own realm. How, then, should the people of God perform "in accordance with the Scriptures"?

In 1985 First Presbyterian Church in Libertyville, Illinois, performed the Scriptures, in public, for the first time. They continued to do so over a span of evenings, once a year for several years. The "Living Bible" became an annual event eagerly anticipated by the whole community. The basic idea was simple: spectators could walk around the church building and see a series of thirteen tableaux, staged for three blocks around the parish hall, representing key moments in the biblical story, including Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, Noah's ark (with goats, horses, etc.), the nativity, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. The production involved more than 600 actors and 200 volunteers working behind the scenes: there was a director for each scene, set decorators, actors, stagehands,

1. Gerhard Ebeling, "Church History Is the History of the Exposition of Scripture," in *The Word of God and Tradition: Historical Studies Interpreting the Divisions of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 11–32.

prop makers, painters, costume makers, people to work with sound and light, and so forth.

Performances of the Living Bible ran continuously for two hours on each of the three nights, with shifts of actors taking turns. The actors did not have lines, but they played their parts in silent pantomime to musical accompaniment and prerecorded biblical passages. The centerpiece was the scene depicting the Last Supper, modeled after Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting. Great care was taken to ensure that the hairstyles, tableware, and food corresponded to da Vinci’s canvas: “Everything will be true, right down to the round loaves of bread on the table. The painting was meant to capture the moment after Christ told his disciples, ‘One among you will betray me.’ Our actors will personify as exactly as possible their expressions of disbelief.”² The thirteen actors in the scene would be moving about and gesticulating and then suddenly freeze, creating a nearly exact replica of the disciples’ postures and expressions in da Vinci’s painting. It was a very effective moment, often taking the spectators’ breath away.³

The Living Bible was an effective means of evangelism, of showing the way in which the basic story line of the Bible converges on the event of Jesus Christ. In this sense it was a success. Nevertheless, the present book takes the model of performing the Scriptures in another direction. I am more concerned with the latter half of the Great Commission: with making disciples not in the sense of converting them to Christ but rather in the sense of cultivating in them the mind of Christ, “teaching them to observe” the supreme authority of Christ in every situation (Matt. 28:20 KJV). The church is to be a Living Bible, yes, but not by staging literal repetitions (copies) of biblical scenes. This is one kind of faithfulness, to be sure, that of photographic reduplication. The long-term challenge for disciples, however, is to represent the gospel not by seeking literally to duplicate past scenes but rather by continuing to follow Jesus into the present in ways that are both faithful and (necessarily) creative. It is ultimately the difference between repristination (“dead” theater) and fitting participation (i.e., theater that is vital and vibrant).

Being biblical is a Spirit-enabled way of being that is both generated and governed by God’s word. It is a matter of coming to know God through his word and of loving God by doing his word. Theology exists for the sake of God’s word, ministering understanding, and this for the purpose of growing disciples. Theology is a response to Paul’s injunction: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16). The rest of this book attempts to make good on this claim. Part 1 shows why the theatrical model offers important resources for conceiving the challenge of being biblical. Part 2 examines a number of doctrines and shows how they help prepare disciples to play their part in the living Bible, or better, the living body of Jesus Christ.

2. H. Lee Murphy, “Cast of Hundreds Celebrates Bible in Church’s Tableaux,” reporting an interview with Rev. James Glenn, *Chicago Tribune*, September 18, 1987, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-09-18/entertainment/8703100871_1_scenes-painting-la-grande-jatte.

3. First Presbyterian relaunched the Living Bible program in September 2012.

PROGRAM NOTES: WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

Faith Speaking Understanding uses a theatrical model to discuss the various ways in which doctrine shapes Christian understanding and forms disciples. Theology serves faith's vocation of speaking and showing understanding, of bringing biblical Christianity to life. The present book seeks to advance this all-important project for the sake of the church's well-being. This is a daunting task that involves several interconnected matters. The present book therefore has nine interrelated themes, each of which serves its principal thesis.

It Is about Being Biblical

The church is "a people of the book" in a dynamic way, bringing it to life by entering into the drama of the Christ that the Scriptures attest "in many and various ways" (Heb. 1:1). Here we may recall what Hans-Georg Gadamer says about interpretation as entering into the "play" of the text, which "always involves something like performing a drama, for the player who takes the play seriously interprets it from within, by belonging to and playing a part in it."⁴

Being biblical means attending to the whole as well as the parts and to the relationship between them. Let us call the kind of scholarly analysis that focuses on particular passages *biblical reasoning in its workday mode*. It is familiar to theologians who view their task as studying the data of Scripture to see what the whole Bible (by which they mean the collation of the parts) has to say about a particular topic. Yet synthesis—keeping the big picture in mind—is just as important and requires imagination: the ability to incorporate the individual parts of Scripture into unifying patterns. Imagination is *biblical reasoning in its Sunday best*, lost in wonder at the creativity of the Creator. Being biblical is a vital means of transformation by the renewing of our minds.

It Is about Theology

Theology is a science in that it pertains to knowing God, but "science" may not be the best label for describing this knowledge or why doctrine matters to disciples. In the secular realm, *science* means the mastery of some domain, summarized in a system of knowledge. To know something scientifically is to be able to control it, use it to our advantage. One does not "master" the project of living blessedly with others before God.

Theology admits of many definitions, but in this context it primarily concerns the process of seeking, finding, and then demonstrating wisdom. We will only be able to rehabilitate doctrine if we are able to view doctrine itself as a helpful bridge that spans the debilitating divide between theory and practice. Theology

4. Joel Weinsheimer, "Hermeneutics," in *Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 126. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 147–48.

helps disciples to display the *lived* knowledge of the gospel: the mind of Christ embodied and embedded in particular situations. Theology is the art and science of enacting the mind of Christ everywhere, at all times, and to everyone.

It Is about Church Doctrine

We may need to change our picture of doctrine if we are to see it as playing a necessary role in growing disciples.⁵ Doctrine refers to the deposit of authorized teaching entrusted to the church’ care (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14), yet it is more than a body of knowledge. It is instruction whose aim is to form, inform, and transform disciples into doers who can speak, act, and think the way Christ did. Doctrine serves as a finishing school for disciples by helping them to view their lives as Christ did his, as caught up in the great drama of redemption.⁶ Doctrine, then, is not simply an inert body of knowledge; rather, it intends an active bodily doing. Church without doctrine to direct it is dazed and confused; yet doctrine without the church to embody it is arid and empty.

It Is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ

The gospel is the good news that Jesus has blazed the way to eternal life with God, making good on God’s covenant promise to forgive old sins (Isa. 53:5), give new hearts (Ezek. 36:26; Jer. 31:33), and renew creation (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). The gospel is the joyful proclamation that God has done something to good effect. *God has done something*: the drama of redemption reaches its climax when the Son pours out his life on the cross (Acts 2:23) and when the Father raises him from the dead (2:24) and when the Son again pours out his Spirit (2:33). *To good effect*: those who put their faith in the risen Christ are saved from their sins and have a share, through his Spirit, in his life and sonship (2:38).

It Is about Life

Too many people, even those in the church, dismiss doctrine as dry and dusty, unrelated to the rough and tumble of real life, and perhaps even a little bit unspiritual to the extent that it encourages division in the church, as if logic cannot but assault faith (as if “Blessed are those who believe without thinking!”). Sadly, there is more than a little truth to these caricatures. The fault lies not with doctrine itself, however, but with a misunderstanding of its nature and purpose. A false picture of doctrine as lifeless has held sections of the church captive for too long.

5. Matthew Myer Boulton’s *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011) makes a similar claim.

6. To be sure, transformation requires more than studying doctrine. Saints are not always good students (and vice versa). At the same time, doctrine is one of the ways in which the Holy Spirit ministers the word of God.

What does the church have to say and do that no other institution can? Nature and society alike abhor a vacuum, and there are many ideologies and agendas waiting to rush in and fill the hearts and minds of the uncommitted. Doctrine orients the church's life by teaching it how to live and what to live for. Indeed, doctrine orients the church to the abundant and eternal life found only in Jesus Christ. For life is more than a matter of biology, more than sheer physical existence: it is a matter of being in fellowship with the triune God. Doctrine forms disciples when it helps the church to act out its new life in Christ. Far from being removed from real life, then, we see that doctrine concerns energies and events that are as real and powerful as anything known in physics or chemistry, energies and events that can turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

It Is about the Reign of God

What turned the Thessalonian Jews' world upside down had to do with the apostles' proclamation: "there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7 RSV). The lordship of Christ continues to be disruptive, breaking ideological strangleholds, subverting corrupt loyalties, and exposing idolatry well beyond Thessalonica. The kingdom of God is the breaking in of God's reign to defeat the powers of darkness and disorder. Liberating the oppressed is God's signature mark: Christ's setting the captives free is the highpoint of the dramatic conflict between Satan and the Son of God on a stage that includes both heaven and earth.⁷

It Is about the Church

The church is the place where Christ rules by his word, which dwells in disciples' hearts. The kingdom of God is the domain of Christ's word, that bounded area where Christ's word rules and is joyfully accepted. The church is thus a royal theater: a lived exhibit of the word of truth, grace, and love. In particular, the church is that peculiar place where men and women freely and joyfully do the will of God on earth as it is in heaven.

"I believe in . . . the holy catholic church." This is a bold, often counterintuitive confession of faith, especially in an age where the flaws of various church leaders are all too apparent and where so many people express disappointment in their actual experience of church. Yet bold faith in the reality of church is just as important now as it has always been. The church is the visible presence of the invisible, the tangible experience of the kingdom of God on earth: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth" (Matt. 6:10). We cannot help but believe in church: it is the firstfruits of the Father's answer to the Lord's own prayer and petition.

7. Timothy Gombis describes Jesus' victory over the powers and principalities as having cosmic scope (*The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010], 24).

Of course, it is not enough merely to believe that the church exists. One must also belong to it, be an active member. What is the nature of this activity? Doctrine aids disciples in discerning what they must say and do in order to be church. In later chapters I will expand upon the claim, as bold as it is relevant, that the people who make up church are the place where the reign of God becomes most visible. The local church is a parable of the kingdom when it acts out the new creation in Christ amid the old here and now. As we shall see, the church is not an empty space (Peter Brook’s metaphor for the theater) but a *peopled place* where God exhibits his gospel. What fills the empty space is the body of Jesus Christ.

It Is about Public Theology

Public theology is the church’s demonstration of life in Christ—to the glory of God and for the sake of the world. When the people of God display a flourishing life in obedience to Christ in the power of the Spirit, they both glorify God and demonstrate the power and wisdom of the gospel to the world. This penultimate theme encompasses the prior seven claims of “what this book is about.”

It is commonplace to think of religion as a quintessentially “private” affair and of Christianity as about one’s own personal relationship to Jesus. However, to think that what God has done in Christ is simply to make it possible for individuals to go to heaven is severely to truncate and even distort the gospel. The good news is not only that individual souls can go to heaven but especially that God has established a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Exod. 19:6; Rev. 1:6), and that he has established social peace in reconciling Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14). There is therefore a public aspect to the gospel: on the cross of Christ, God displayed his wrath against sin *and* “disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15 RSV mg.). In the words of the King James Bible, God “made a shew of them openly.”

There is therefore a public dimension to the gospel. The relatively new discipline of “public theology” studies ways in which Christian faith should impact public life. The assumption is that the gospel has a significant bearing on all people, not Christians only. Much of what the church says and does takes the form of public witness.

Theology is public in another sense as well. To learn Christian doctrine only from textbooks rather than from participating in the communion of saints is like reading Shakespeare but never encountering a live performance: it may be informative, but it is rarely transformative. Disciples best learn how to *practice* doctrinal truth through *paideia*, an apprentice-based pedagogy that involves following the examples of (i.e., imitating) others who are further along.

Theology is public, finally, inasmuch as it seeks both to demonstrate and participate in the expansion of God’s reign in the world. How should it accomplish this vital task? What criteria can we use to determine what demonstrations of the

kingdom ought to look like? Can we hope that even successful demonstrations will change the world? These are challenging questions, but the short answer is that doctrine is an essential aid to such demonstrations, to such corporate discipleship.

Can the church's demonstration of the gospel change the world? If so, does this have more to do with changing human hearts or social structures, ideas or institutions? In his work *To Change the World*, James Davison Hunter has argued that what changes the world are not simply great men with great ideas but rather ideas embedded in culture-producing institutions. For better or for ill, the church in North America no longer figures on that list. Not to worry. According to Hunter, the church should be less concerned with seizing social power than with being *faithfully present*: "The vocation of the church is to bear witness to and to be the embodiment of the coming Kingdom of God."⁸

The key term here is *witness*. If the very *existence* of the church, as the "body" of Christ, represents a standing witness to the truth of the gospel, how much more does its *activity* (i.e., its bodily *movement*) do so? It is important to speak the truth, to be sure. Yet to demonstrate the truth of the gospel, the church must both speak and show its understanding. Culture-producing power is "the capacity to define what is real."⁹ The church does this by enacting God's word in particular times and places, for it is God's word that defines what is ultimately real.

To witness to God's word is thus not simply to repeat it but also to embrace it as one's framework for seeing and interpreting the reality of God, oneself, others, and the world. All that disciples say and do should therefore bear witness to renewed minds and transformed hearts: "Changing our world depends on changing our hearts: how we *perceive, name, and act* in the world."¹⁰ The drama of doctrine is never more on display than in disciples' lives as they seek to communicate "the life that is God's life in and for the world,"¹¹ thus giving evidence of changed minds and hearts.

This is how doctrine directs the church to turn the world upside down: by urging Christians to *do* what they *know*, displaying in the lives of disciples and in local churches the wisdom of Jesus Christ.¹² The church is (or ought to be) a public display of the good news, the supreme good that is found only in union with Jesus Christ. This has been the charge to the church since the beginning: to live out the way, truth, and life of Jesus Christ. The result is a "politics" of the gospel whereby the church engages in public practices for the public good, practices that also characterize the distinctive use of power in the coming reign of

8. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 95.

9. *Ibid.*, 178.

10. Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others through the Eyes of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 23.

11. *Ibid.*, 27.

12. For an extended argument to this effect, see C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Greco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. chap. 4.

God—such as gathering together, confessing Jesus, peacemaking, truth-telling, and doing justice.

It Is about Reality

There are plenty of doctrines in the world and plenty of disciples for various causes. What makes Christian doctrine unique, however, is its single-minded and single-hearted focus on knowing God and oneself in Jesus Christ and in directing disciples to demonstrate their understanding of this ultimate reality.

Christian doctrine grows disciples by teaching them to perceive, name, and act in ways that demonstrate the reality of the gospel, speaking and showing *what is* “in Christ.” This is also the public, and Pauline, face of the church’s mission: “to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints, . . . Christ in you” (Col. 1:25–27). The church is the public revelation of the mystery of salvation. Doctrine exists to aid the church and disciples, not to withdraw from the world into their own enclave but rather to *get real*. Public theology in the sense I am using the term is all about getting real: displaying the real *in Christ*.

PLOT: A BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Faith Speaking Understanding has a two-part structure. Part 1, “Before the Curtain Rises,” sets out the contours of the theatrical model for thinking about doctrine and theology as well as my reasons for choosing it.

I begin by expounding the book’s title. By speaking understanding, faith begins to *do* the word. Speak-acting is the language of the theater. It also corresponds to the Bible’s injunction to be a doer as well as hearer of the word. The obedience of faith and faith’s demonstration of understanding involve speech and action alike. I then develop the theatrical analogy further, defining key terms and drawing a number of important conceptual distinctions, especially between Scripture and “script.” I also explain my subtitle and distinguish between three different but related senses of “drama of doctrine.” Next, I consider whether “theatrical” theology is intended only as a metaphor or as an analogical model for the nature of theology and its subject matter. I consider (and rebut) two objections to the theatrical model, an exercise that makes several important advances beyond my argument in *The Drama of Doctrine* (chap. 1 below).

The next chapter confronts a potentially fatal stumbling block to the theatrical model: perhaps it encourages us to think of the church either as thespians performing for a world from which they are separated or, equally disastrous, as a gathering of passive spectators. In response, I suggest that we view the church as an interactive theater in which there is no “fourth wall” separating actors from audience. As to the problem of encouraging passive spectators, I use 2 John as a template in which to show how doctrine urges disciples to abide not only in

truth but also in love, and this means active engagement. The audience itself is thus the staging area for the action and the site of the drama, for the urgent issue—the matter on which the whole play (life itself) turns—is whether disciples take the doctrine of Jesus Christ to heart. The church is the proper domain of doctrine, for it is in the church that the truth of doctrine is learned and demonstrated (chap. 2). This brings part 1, my case for thinking about theology in theatrical terms, to a close.

Part 2 is a constructive proposal for how doctrine functions in the church to make disciples. Every doctrine contributes in one way or another to the church's overall understanding of *what is in Christ* and *what is happening in Christ*. It is the burden of part 2 to draw on doctrine both to understand the church's task—right participation in the drama of the Christ—and to equip disciples to demonstrate that understanding in forms of wise, loving practice.

Part 2 begins where we are, with the church on the twenty-first-century stage, and examines the present crisis of authenticity: Whose words and acts count, and why? What does the church have to offer to the world? In response, I offer the bold claim that the church offers speech and action that accord with the created order (i.e., reality) and thus give true testimony to the meaning of life (chap. 3). Doctrine helps us to view God as God presents himself and the world as God views it. The doctrine of human being and sin helps to clarify the precise nature of the dramatic conflict: the clash of finite and infinite freedoms, human faithlessness and divine faithfulness. Fallen creation is the backdrop for the divine playwright's entrance onto the stage of history in order to execute his dramatic plan of salvation (chap. 4).

To this point the focus has been on how doctrine defines disciples, their nature and purpose. The rest of part 2 deals with how disciples do or perform doctrine. I begin by considering what is perhaps the most obvious objection of all to the theatrical model—that it encourages playacting or hypocrisy—and argue in response that Christian doctrine rather shows us who we truly are in Christ (chap. 5). As I have already argued, Christian faith is not a private affair for individuals but a community-building project. Accordingly, the next two chapters turn their attention to ecclesiology. The role of doctrine in the church is to assist pastors and other church leaders to mount local productions that serve as living parables of the kingdom of God. The church is a place where disciples of Jesus gather to learn his teaching and to practice what they learn, not least by acting out their union with Christ, especially in baptism and the Lord's Supper, two central scenes that rehearse the high point of the drama of redemption (chap. 6). The ministry of word and sacrament not only edifies church members but also prepares them to bear witness to Christ's reign to the wider world, especially by performing spontaneous words of truth and works of love wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name (chap. 7).

A brief word about the structure of part 2 is in order. In grammar, we say that a verb is in the *indicative* mood when it expresses simple statements of fact (e.g., “she took of its fruit and ate”; “Jesus wept”). Verbs in the indicative

mood *indicate*: they show something; they are symptoms of something. We get the English term from the Latin *indicare* (to point), from which the term *index* finger also derives. In addition to *show* or *state*, the verb *indicate* can also mean *suggest a course of action*, especially in a medical context (e.g., “the presence of symptom *x* indicates treatment *y*”).

Each chapter in part 2 sets forth one or more doctrines that indicate some aspect of *what is in Christ*. Following the example of the apostle Paul, each of these indicatives is followed, under the rubric of “recapitulation,” by an imperative that makes explicit what is already implicit in the particular aspect of *what is in Christ* under consideration. The imperative is simply a statement of what kind of behavior should follow in order to be indicative of *what is in Christ*. These six imperatives give *direction for the church’s self-presentation in everyday life, direction for keeping in step with the truth of the gospel* (Gal. 2:14). They also serve to restate the basic argument in more traditional (i.e., nontheatrical) terms.

Part 2 concludes by considering the ongoing dramatic conflict in light of the drama’s climax (victory in Christ) and urges disciples to abide in doctrine in order joyfully to endure until the end (chap. 8). The book concludes with a plea for grateful realism, two exhortations that should govern demonstrations of faith’s understanding always, everywhere, and by all, and with a reminder that the process of making disciples involves awakening sleepers to the new creational kingdom inaugurated in Christ. For readers who require further convincing of the merits of a dramatic approach to doctrine, I include an appendix that examines both historical and contemporary objections to drawing theological water from a theatrical well.

PART 1
BEFORE THE
CURTAIN RISES
ON THEOLOGY AND THEATER

Chapter 1

Doing the Word “on Earth as It Is in Heaven”

Introducing the Theater of the Gospel

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

—1 John 3:18 NIV

The New Testament is not a text to be analyzed so much as a set of scripts for forming a company of performers, a movement that will be Christianity.
—Terrence Tilley, *The Disciples’ Jesus: Christology as Reconciling Practice*

Anselm famously defined theology in his *Proslogion* (1077–78) as “faith seeking understanding.” Why, a thousand years later, do I make so bold as to suggest a change? And in what sense is “faith speaking understanding” a kind of performance?

FAITH SPEAKING UNDERSTANDING: THE CHALLENGE

Speaking is a form of acting, and action is a kind of speaking (“actions speak louder than words”). Actors give speeches, yet action is the language of the theater. Action, in word and deed, is also the primary means by which the church demonstrates its understanding of the world as the theater of God’s glory and of itself as the theater of the gospel.

Disciples do not need to speak Greek to live according to the Scriptures, but they do need to speak *Christian*. However, according to Marcus Borg, a historian of Jesus, this is easier said than done. In his hard-hitting book *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power*, Borg points out a disconnect between the original (i.e., biblical) meaning of many Christian

terms and the way Christians use them today.¹ North Americans think they know how to speak Christian, but what they say is actually a gross distortion. Either people do not know Christian words at all, or they have heard them but do not know what they mean, or they think they know what they mean when in fact they mean something completely different.

Borg is not referring to non-Christians only but also to churchgoing Christians unaware of how far the meanings of Christian terms have drifted from their historical biblical roots. The crisis in Christian language (why Johnny can't speak Christian) is also a crisis in the church insofar as language is the stuff of worship, preaching, teaching, and so forth and thus the means by which we "do" church. Accordingly, Borg has written his book as a kind of "Christian primer," a remedial wordbook for people who want to speak authentic Christian—not a lexicon for understanding the Christian "Greats," but at least a graded reader.

How did it happen? How could North American Christians forget basic biblical vocabulary? Borg has two explanations. The first is modernity's "literalization" of language, perhaps under the pressure of science. The second is the captivity of biblical language by a heaven-and-hell framework that (mis)understands the gospel as the message that we can "go to heaven" because Jesus paid the price for our sins. It turns out that "speaking Christian" is a matter not of knowing Greek or memorizing Scripture but rather of using certain biblical ideas as a lens through which to view God, world, and self.

I am as interested as Borg in disciples speaking genuine Christian, because faith attains understanding largely by means of biblical paradigms ("By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God" [Heb. 11:3]). I agree with Borg that our understanding must be disciplined by Scripture's way of speaking, and that one key Christian term—*believing*—means considerably more than affirming certain statements to be true.²

"How to understand Christian language is the central conflict in Christianity today."³ If theology trains disciples to speak "proper" (i.e., biblical) Christian, then Borg's claim that "speaking Christian" is in a state of crisis means that theology, too, is in a state of crisis. This is particularly so as concerns theology's presence (unremarkable) and influence (minimal) in the church. The real issue, as Borg rightly observes, concerns what Christianity is about. Is the gospel about the afterlife and what we must believe to get to heaven? Or is it about God's passion for the loving transformation of this present life on earth?⁴ According to Borg, we must choose between two competing visions, the water of contemporary literalism and the wine of biblical symbolism: "What separates them is how the shared

1. Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—and How They Can Be Restored* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

2. Borg reports that, before the sixteenth century, the English verb *believe* always had a person rather than a thing as its direct object and was synonymous with *belove* (*ibid.*, 119).

3. *Ibid.*, 231.

4. This simplistic (either-or) distinction may reflect on Borg's own inability to "speak Christian theology."

language is understood.”⁵ Indeed! Followers of Jesus should therefore want, above all things, to speak with “a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ” (cf. Philem. 6). Borg’s own speech, no more than a sound bite really, is ultimately too abbreviated to be helpful: “The Christian message reduced to its essentials is: love God (as known in Jesus) and change the world.”⁶ Yes—but how?

Speaking Christian is a matter of faith speaking understanding, of theology *articulated*. Each element in this definition is important. *Faith*: what Christians speak is what they have received through faith in the apostolic word of the gospel. As Calvin notes in his *Institutes*, what determines faith as Christian is the word that forms and informs it: “For by his Word, God rendered faith unambiguous forever, a faith that should be superior to all opinion,” and to make it permanent, God recorded his oracles on public tablets.⁷ *Speaking*: theology arises when the church realizes “that it must give an account to God for the way in which it speaks.”⁸ *Understanding*: everything Christians say gives evidence of their understanding of God’s prior word and act, especially as this concerns the history of Jesus and the meaning of the gospel. What is Christianity all about, what did Jesus’ death accomplish, and what precisely is the gospel?

“Faith speaking understanding” presupposes knowledge of the grammar of faith: doctrine. Learning the language (and grammar) of faith is both means and end of Christian discipleship. Augustine seemed to think so too, if the opening paragraph of his work *On Christian Doctrine* is any indication: “There are two things on which all interpretation of Scripture depends: the process of discovering what we need to learn, and the process of presenting what we have learnt.”⁹ Theology speeds disciples on their way to right seeking and wise speaking: to discovering, with the ultimate aim of presenting, understanding.

What is it to speak, and present, understanding? I agree with George Steiner: to understand something is to be able to translate it.¹⁰ To “speak understanding” is to express the meaning of the gospel in some language; to present understanding is to translate the meaning of the gospel into various forms of language, logic, and life. Christian theology is the task of translating—discovering and presenting—the meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ for us today. The special vocation of the church is to seek, speak, and show nothing less, and nothing else, than Jesus Christ, and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

5. *Ibid.*, 253.

6. *Ibid.*, 238.

7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.6.2, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). (Hereafter cited as *Inst.*)

8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 3. Under “speaking,” Barth includes all that the church says and does in its specific action as a fellowship: “proclamation by preaching and the administration of the sacraments, worship, . . . internal and external mission including works of love amongst the sick, the weak, and those in jeopardy” (I/1:3).

9. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 9.

10. See George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 47.

THE WITNESS AS DOER OF THE WORD: JAMES'S MIRROR AND JESUS' HOUSE

It is but a small step from the idea of “presenting” faith’s understanding to “performing” it. Or is it? Some readers may rightly worry that to speak of faith and theology in terms of performance is to encourage an activist view (as if Christianity were about works righteousness) or, what is worse, a display of one’s supposed skill in righteous living, a sure path to prideful ruin. Those (like me) who speak about “performing” doctrine would do well to keep Jesus’ words in mind: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:1). Performing with the wrong motivation is an ongoing danger.

There are, however, other motives for performing faith. Indeed, we have only to look to Jesus’ own example. Jesus does (i.e., performs) God’s will, embodying the reign of God through his willingness to give himself up for the world. There is nothing we can do to add to the finished work and definitive performance of Christ; however, it does not follow that there is nothing for Christians to do. On the contrary, Christ calls his disciples to participate in his work by bearing witness to its achievement and to do so in word and deed. If actions speak louder than words, it is because they lend the weight of behavior (real assent) to belief (nominal assent).

Nominal Christianity falls short of true witness and discipleship. The way witnesses live clarifies the meaning of their words and may even count as an argument for the truth of what they say. The disciples’ “performance” of faith must be motivated first and foremost by the love of God. This is the one thing above every other that disciples must perform, as Kierkegaard makes clear in his *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, one of his “edifying discourses.” How, asks Kierkegaard, should the ideal reader respond to his challenge to will one thing only (i.e., the good—God)? “To listen in order to act, this is the highest thing of all.”¹¹ He goes on to compare worship to a theater and himself to a prompter who reminds those on stage of their lines. What the actor says matters because “each word becomes true when embodied in him, true through him.”¹² People of faith who would speak understanding cannot therefore be content with speaking only.

For whom do witnesses perform their understanding of the gospel? Clearly, disciples ought to enact their faith out in the open in order to communicate their understanding of God and the gospel to others: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). At the same time, everything that disciples do is potentially a way of worshiping and glorifying God, the audience of one to whom our lived confession of faith is ultimately directed. On this, the apostle Paul and

11. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* (New York: HarperOne, 1956), 179.

12. *Ibid.*, 180.

Kierkegaard agree: “We speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts” (1 Thess. 2:4). Kierkegaard compares God to a critical theatergoer “who looks on to see how the lines are spoken.”¹³ The salient point is that those who receive instruction are not passive listeners but active actors, responsible for *acting out* what they have heard and received. The witness presents faith’s understanding by translating it into action.

Witnesses must therefore not only speak but also *do* “Christian.” This is the moral of the famous mirror image of the apostle James: “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like” (Jas. 1:22–24). By contrast, those who look into the mirror of the word of God—the Two-Testament story of God bringing captives out of bondage—see themselves as they truly are: people who have been brought into the kingdom of light by him who is light. The challenge, then, is to live out, to perform, our Spirit-given freedom: to be not “hearers who forget” but “doers who act” (Jas. 1:25). Doctrine is thus something *dramatic*: something to be not only heard and believed but also demonstrated, done, and *acted out*. The path of becoming Christlike is not passive. Grace is opposed not to effort but to the idea of earning.¹⁴ The key to nurturing disciples is well-directed action.

Jesus himself expects his disciples to perform his doctrine. Toward the end of his teaching on the law in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus employs the metaphor of house building to make a point similar to James’s mirror: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock” (Matt. 7:24; cf. Ezek. 33:30–33). And again, like James, Jesus contrasts the way of wisdom and true discipleship with an abbreviated hearing that stops short of performance: “And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matt. 7:26). Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly calculates the cost of genuine discipleship: “*Only [one] who believes is obedient, and only [one] who is obedient believes.*”¹⁵

What is ultimately at stake in the idea of performing is the very nature of Christian faith: does belief that fails to issue in behavior count as genuine witness (and understanding) or not? There is something inherently “performatory” about the logic of first-person confessional utterances (“I believe”; “We believe”). Such statements are not merely descriptive, informing others of the contents of one’s consciousness, but also *dispositional*, indicating the posture of one’s being and behavior toward the content of one’s belief. If we believe what we say, we ought to be prepared to stand by it and act appropriately. Believing “is *action-oriented*,

13. Ibid., 181.

14. So Dallas Willard, “Live Life to the Full,” *Christian Herald*, April 14, 2001, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=5>.

15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller et al. (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 63.

situation-related, and embedded in the *particularities and contingencies* of everyday living.”¹⁶ The local church is the community that seeks both to *understand* and *stand by* Christian beliefs. The local church is any place in which the gospel of Jesus Christ gets performed, acted out by disciples who translate it into forms of life, worship, and works of love.

The gospel—the good news of the Father’s gracious self-communication in Jesus Christ through the Spirit—is essentially a matter of what God has done for the salvation of the world. At the heart of biblical Christianity is a series of divine acts that together constitute the drama of redemption. The present book sets forth a vision of the church as the theater of the gospel (a community gathered to act out its faith) and theology as a species of what we could call *theodramatics*: the attempt to discover and present—to seek, speak, and show—the church’s understanding of what God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus Christ. Theodramatics is faith’s attempt to speak understanding by discovering, and then participating in, what the triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit—is doing in and through Christ for the salvation of the world.

A disciple is one who seeks to speak, act, and live in ways that *bear witness to the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus Christ*. If the disciple is a truth-bearer that presents faith’s understanding, then the theologian is best viewed as a minister of understanding; for getting understanding is prerequisite to presenting it. What is *understanding*? It is not simply head knowledge; it is more than theoretical. Church towers are not made of ivory. To understand one’s faith is to know how to get on with it: how to practice it and what to *do* with it. Hence the purpose of this book is to give direction to disciples for understanding the drama of redemption. Therefrom arises my thesis: the recovery of doctrine is essential to the task of discipleship, demonstrating understanding of God’s word by doing it. Doctrine is less theoretical than it is theatrical, a matter of *doing*—speaking and showing—what we have heard and understood.

“THEATER” OF THE GOSPEL: DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

At this point readers may want to know why I feel the need to make a difficult subject, Christian doctrine, even harder by pairing it with something as esoteric, distant, and inappropriate as drama. Fair question. I have four principal reasons. First and most fundamental: the subject matter of the Bible, God’s redemptive words and deeds in the history of Israel that culminates in Jesus Christ, is inherently *theodramatic*, a matter of what God (*theos*) has said and done (*draō*) in history. At the heart of Christianity is not merely an *idea* of God but rather God’s self-communicating *words* and *acts*. The gospel is not a

16. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 21.

universal truth but an announcement of God’s saving work in Christ. Second, the language of the theater, and theater studies in general, provides additional images and concepts by which to bridge the theory/practice dichotomy mentioned above. The theatrical model encourages us to relate the lived *form* of our discipleship to the *content* of our doctrines. Third, following from the preceding: the aim of Christian theology is not merely to add to our stockpile of theoretical knowledge but to cultivate disciples who can display the mind of Christ in every situation. Knowledge is static, but wisdom—lived knowledge—is dynamic and hence dramatic. Finally, the notion that the Christian life is a drama in which I have a role to play, with other believers, gives renewed urgency to everyday discipleship. In an age of apathy, the drama of doctrine reminds us that we are here to participate in God’s mission to a wanting world. The opportunity to make a difference in the world by performing the drama of doctrine ought to be enough to get even jaded churchgoers out of bed on Monday morning.

Doctrine is instruction about God and direction for playing one’s role in the same drama of salvation that lies at the heart of the Scriptures. Doing theology according to the Scriptures means displaying our understanding of what God is doing in the world and of our place in it. It’s all about doing the will of King Jesus amid the kingdoms of this world. If *dramatics* is the study or practice of acting in plays, then *theodramatics* is the study or practice of acting in God’s royal theater.

I have no interest in making theater studies the queen of the sciences. On the contrary, my appeal to the language of drama and the theater, like my appeal to philosophical concepts, is strictly ministerial. This means that whatever authority or usefulness the theatrical paradigm may have derives from its ability to minister—communicate, teach, apply—the truth and power of Scripture and its theological subject matter, nothing else. I would never go so far as to say that it is *necessary* to employ the theatrical mode, though I do believe that sometimes it may be *expedient* to do so. The theory-practice dichotomy that still bedevils many a theological curriculum serves neither seminary nor church. There is a debilitating dichotomy between what Christians believe (doctrine) and how they live their lives (discipleship). It is not always apparent, for example, what practical bearing doctrines such as the Trinity or even the atonement have on the rough and tumble of daily life. Thus what better antidote than to present doctrine as *theatrical direction for understanding discipleship*—instruction in wise living, teaching how believers are able not only to know but also to love God, do the truth, and be the church?

To repeat: it is not the primary aim of the present work to offer an apology for doing theatrical theology. The main burden of the book concerns the role of doctrine in the life of the church. It is not about using the theatrical model magisterially, as if it had some kind of authority of its own, but rather of using it ministerially, as something that serves the edifying end of making disciples. Personally, I have found the model to be a powerful resource for

envisioning how to move from Scripture to theology, how to participate fittingly in the drama of redemption. Thinking of theology in theatrical terms helps me better understand William Ames's aforementioned definition of theology as the project of *living to God*. So, while each chapter wears theatrical garb, the substance of the proposal does not depend on the validity of the theatrical model. Still, a few words of clarification would not be amiss (one way to minister understanding is to avoid misunderstanding). What follows is an attempt to draw a few conceptual distinctions that will help head off at the pass a number of possible confusions (we consider objections to the theatrical model in the appendix).

It is rare to find analytic philosophers mucking about in theatrical metaphors or theater directors overly concerned with logical inference and conceptual precision. Yet there is something to be said for combining the analytic rigor of the one with the imaginative breadth of the other. How, then, ought an analytically inclined theologian distinguish drama from theater, written plays from performance, or for that matter, scripts from Scripture?

Here is a provisional definition: a "drama" delivers a unified sequence of action that a "script" preserves or prescribes in writing, which human enactors bodily represent and enact by a "performance" in a "theater" (*theatron* = a place for seeing).¹⁷ Although the etymology of drama (*draō* = to act, do, take action) suggests a meaning close to "performance" (i.e., doing), it is more common to associate drama with a type of literature designed for stage representation and performance with the "live" enactment of the written drama. Drama is thus the text of a play; theater is its actual production in some place (not necessarily an indoor three-walled space with an audience); a performance-interpretation is that which brings the text, a mere skeleton, to onstage flesh-and-blood life. Theater is therefore the verbalization and visualization—the lived *exhibit*—of drama.

There is thus an organic connection between drama and theater similar to that of musical score and performance. Though not all theorists would agree, I think it unnecessarily reductionist to identify drama with the play script. It can be a verb as well: to "dramatize" is to bring to embodied life a script, scenario, or idea as a theatrical performance. Unlike narrative texts that represent a sequence of action in the third person ("he said, she did"), the words that comprise drama are spoken in the first and second person. While dramas can accommodate third-person narration and first-person monologue, they are essentially dialogical in form (i.e., one person presenting oneself to others).

Theater is not a static thing but a happening, a happening that involves more than physical events. The medium of theater is not physical but personal: human action and interaction. Theater happens whenever one or more persons present

17. See also Richard Schechner, "Drama, Script, Theater, and Performance," in *Essays on Performance Theory, 1970–1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977), 36–61.

themselves to others in space and time.¹⁸ *At the heart of both drama and theater, then, is communicative action in word and deed.*¹⁹

What happens in theaters is often a matter of life and death. Consider, for example, theaters of war or surgical theaters. Interestingly, the apostle Paul compares his apostolic ministry to a theatrical spectacle: “For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle [*theatron*] to the world, to angels and to mortals” (1 Cor. 4:9). God puts the apostles on display, and the apostles participate in the play by administering Christ in their speaking, acting, and suffering. Not only that: Paul urges his readers “be imitators of me” (1 Cor. 4:16), thus bequeathing his vocation of being a theater of the gospel to the church today.

There is more. While the church is the theater of the gospel, creation is, in Calvin’s words, the theater of God’s glory. As creatures in God’s world, humans are spectators of God’s works.²⁰ We have a front-row seat in what Calvin calls “this magnificent theater of heaven and earth,” yet even so we fail to know God.²¹ In order to see the spectacle of God’s works in creation, we need the Scriptures, which bring focus as the “spectacles of faith.”²² Calvin has in mind the metaphor of eyeglasses. It is only with the aid of Scripture that we can “read” the book of nature correctly. Yet Scripture recounts a whole series of supernatural spectacles, God’s mighty acts, by which God reveals *who* he is (e.g., the only true God) by *what* he does (e.g., making and keeping his promises). God thus exhibits not only the apostles but also himself in the great theater of the world.

In summary: drama is a shaped sequence of action, especially dialogical action, with a beginning, middle, and end. Performance is the realization or actualization of drama. Theater is the space-time performance by which persons present themselves—their being—to others: “Activity is the basic medium of theater. It is the only channel through which presentational ideas can be projected.”²³ Speaking is the preeminent human communicative activity. The theater is thus the space-time of dialogical action.

At this point it is tempting to identify Scripture with the dramatic script.²⁴ This is partially true but not wholly correct. A script contains plot development, dialogue (i.e., the words that the characters are to say), and stage direction (i.e., indications of what the characters should do). It is true that dramatic scripts exist to be performed, just as texts exist to be read and interpreted. Yet one

18. I owe this definition, and my analysis of the relationship of drama to theater in general, to Bernard Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 10.

19. Silence and suffering also have their place in drama.

20. Calvin, *Inst.* 1.6.2.

21. *Ibid.*, 2.6.1.

22. *Ibid.*, 1.6.1.

23. Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama*, 13.

24. I may have succumbed to this temptation in *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). Accordingly, in chap. 3 of the present work, I associate Scripture less with a script than with the lights that illumine the stage and allow us to see what is going on.

should not too hastily identify Scripture with a play script.²⁵ It is true that Jesus' words must be not only heard but also obeyed; yet not all of Scripture is law. To be sure, some parts of Scripture call for direct repetition (e.g., the Lord's Prayer). Other portions of Scripture prescribe principles of behavior (e.g., the Ten Commandments), suggest templates for behavior (e.g., Jesus' cross), or inform us of what has already happened and is never again to be repeated (e.g., the flood). Still others *ought not* to be repeated (e.g., Israel's conquest of Canaan; Judas's betrayal of Jesus). How then does Holy Scripture stand in relation to the drama of redemption and the church as the theater of the gospel?

Scripture alone is the normative specification of what God has done in Israel and in Jesus Christ to redeem sinners and renew creation. The prophets and apostles who authored it are less scribes who script lines for the church than transcribers who have produced an authoritative record of God's work, an inspired transcript: "*It is the transcript of the love of God in the loving and gracious quest for wandering man. . . . Scripture is the transcript of Jesus Christ.*"²⁶ In an important sense, the Bible is *not* a script in the sense of a detailed blueprint for action (or the future); this was the moral of our remarks concerning the live performance of biblical scenes known as the "Living Bible." In a looser sense, however, Scripture remains the church's script, a divinely commissioned and authorized written witness to the ongoing drama of redemption, for which doctrine gives direction to disciples for understanding and participation. Scripture not only transcribes but also prescribes, authorizing spiritual medicine (e.g., the fear of the Lord; faith) that, if taken as directed, leads to beneficial and healthy results: wisdom, *salus* (welfare).

Scripture itself is part of the dramatic action. This is most obvious in New Testament passages where the interpretation of the Old Testament is at issue (and where is it not?). In such cases, the drama is the activity of biblical interpretation: What are the apostolic authors *doing* with the Law and the Prophets? How are they reading the Psalms and the Wisdom literature in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ? What generates the drama is the word of the Lord coming to people (e.g., prophets; kings). The history of Israel, for example, often depended on how its kings responded to the word of the Lord. The same is true of the history of the church. In short: the Bible not only reports the word of God but is itself a form of the divine address. There is theodrama wherever there is divine address awaiting human response. What the church ultimately has to perform is not a holy script but rather the theodrama that Scripture describes, transcribes, and prescribes. This is the sense in which the believing community is to be biblical, the sense in which the church best constitutes a living Bible.

25. Thanks to Wes Vander Lugt for help with this insight.

26. Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God: An Essay on the Contemporary Problem of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), 186.

THEATER AS HANDMAID TO THEOLOGY: METAPHOR OR MODEL?

Paul uses a racing metaphor to describe the Christian life (1 Cor. 9:24), but he is no more suggesting that disciples go to the track than I am urging them to sign up for acting classes. What, then, is the purpose of the theatrical language? It is all about vision-casting: helping disciples to see how doctrines do not merely state the truth but also encourage one to live and lean into it, to *do* the truth (John 3:21; 1 John 1:6).

Theatrical theology concerns faith speaking and showing understanding. It is all about the church’s attempt to explain, and then act out, the meaning and significance of the theodrama of which Scripture is the authorized account: script, transcript, prescript. Theatrical theology serves the project of *gospel exhibition*: the living out of Christian faith in the theater of the world. Like all comparisons, however, this one too can be pushed too far. Before going further, then, it will be helpful to examine the appropriateness of the theatrical model, both in respect to doctrine and that which doctrine is about: redemption. In what sense are theology and the gospel itself dramatic?

“Drama” of Doctrine

The principal drama of which Scripture serves as transcript, script, and prescript concerns the mighty acts in word and deed of the triune God: theodrama. What, then, does it mean to perform the drama *of doctrine*? To answer this we must first define *doctrine*.

Doctrine (Lat. *doctrina*; Gk. *didaskalia*) means “teaching, instruction.” It is what the church believes (on the basis of the Bible) and teaches, both explicitly in its creeds and confessions and implicitly in its way of life. It is no coincidence that Paul’s Pastoral epistles (1–2 Timothy, Titus) are replete with references to doctrine, for doctrine at its best exercises a pastoral function: correcting error, deepening understanding, fostering wisdom, funding endurance, encouraging godliness. Doctrine is necessary, in part, because there is false teaching and evildoing. So doctrine combats false teaching, the “doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1 RSV). It does so by preserving teaching that accords with the apostolic preaching of the gospel and with biblical revelation more generally. In the Pastoral Epistles, the “sure word” of the gospel is the touchstone for “sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9 RSV).

What is the nature of “sound doctrine,” a phrase Paul uses five times (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1)? That doctrine is “sound” (Gk. *hygiainō*, lit., “hygienic”) suggests that its teaching is more than technically true. On several occasions Paul introduces his teaching with a variation on the following formula: “the saying is sure [i.e., trustworthy] and worthy of full acceptance” (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8). These trustworthy sayings are more than propositional statements to be gathered into a system of truths, more

than a collection of authoritative statements by Chairman Paul. They are rather statements of *understanding* that indicate a grasp of the meaning and significance of what God has done in Christ. Accordingly, they are statements that call for personal (and practical) appropriation, not mere theoretical acknowledgment. They are statements that call for their hearers to exercise trust and to respond not only with one's mind but also with one's whole being: heart, soul, and strength. Doctrine explicitly tells us *what is* and *how things are*; it also implicitly asks us to trust that *this is how things are* to the point of staking one's life on it.

Doctrine is a special kind of teaching that instructs the head, orients the heart, and guides the hand. It tells us what we should believe (*credenda*), what we may hope (*sperenda*), and what we should do (*agenda*). As such, it provides direction for faith, hope, and love alike. Sound doctrine is biblically grounded direction that both corresponds to the gospel and also engenders godliness, combining the privilege of knowing God with the responsibility of living righteously out of love for God. As such, "godliness" is a sign of authentic Christian faith. It is the lived knowledge of God, the truth of the gospel bearing the fruit of godliness. Sound doctrine is teaching that is good for us, direction that makes for sound living and human flourishing.

How does doctrine perform such marvelous feats? By providing summary statements of the story line of the Bible and insights into its key players and events. Doctrine thus provides us with a dramatic framework for viewing God and his relationship to the world in a new, true light. If the Scriptures are the Christian's spectacles of faith, doctrine is the disciple's spectacles of understanding. Doctrine helps us understand both what God is doing in the world in and through Christ and what we are to do in response. Specific doctrines, like Christology and Pneumatology, help us understand the principal *dramatis personae* (as does the doctrine of the Trinity); other doctrines, like the doctrine of original sin or the doctrine of the atonement, help us to understand the action (what kind of story are we part of?). Eschatology teaches about the ending of the story and thus of how to live toward it.

Christian doctrine thus provides a very particular kind of teaching: *direction*, both dramatic and theatrical. More pointedly: doctrine gives us direction for articulating and appropriating our understanding of biblical Christianity. Doctrines give us, first, direction for understanding the theodrama, the great drama of redemption that begins with Israel's exodus and reaches its climax with Jesus' *exodos* from Jerusalem (i.e., his "departure" or death on a cross [Luke 9:31]). Various doctrines also yield particular vantage points from which to understand the meaning of the whole theodrama. What we are to believe, hope, and do is related to a prior question: Of what story (drama) do I find myself a part? Sound doctrine ultimately orients disciples to the true story of the world. Put differently, sound doctrine ministers reality, a created and redeemed order to which wisdom willingly conforms, for there is no other order.

In sum: we come to understand the drama of redemption that lies at the heart of Scripture and our role in it through doctrinal direction. Doctrine first

gives disciples direction for *understanding* the drama, the identity of God, the chief protagonist, and the meaning of what God has done (call this theoretical understanding). Then, in a second move, doctrine gives disciples directions for *demonstrating* their understanding by speaking and acting in ways that display their grasp of the action and their willingness to participate in it (call this theatrical understanding).

Now that we have explained *doctrine*, we are in a better position to see what I mean by the *drama* of doctrine. It will help to keep in mind the following three senses:

1. The drama *behind* the doctrine. This refers to what God has already said and done in the histories of Israel and Jesus Christ. The Bible is the transcript of the divine-human interaction that forms the heart of the drama, and that allows us to see the Old and New Testaments as progressive stages in a single unified plot. In this case the “drama” refers to the sequence of historical actions recorded by Scripture (a covenantal history) that has already been accomplished and of which Scripture is a part (as covenant document).

2. The drama *of* doctrine. This refers to the church’s attempt to understand the drama behind the doctrine, especially the meaning and significance of what God was doing in Jesus Christ. There is drama in the development of doctrine not least because, as we have seen, false teaching is an ever-present danger and because from the beginning darkness has struggled to overcome light (Gen. 1:2; Isa. 60:2; John 1:5). Scripture here functions as source and norm, providing both the basic narrative on which theology reflects and seminal statements of its meaning and significance.

3. The drama *in front of* the doctrine. This refers to the present scene in which the church finds itself and to the very real demand on disciples to participate fittingly in the ongoing triune action, thus demonstrating their understanding of senses 1 and 2 (above). Here Scripture functions as prompt and prescript, encouraging the people of God to display the meaning and truth of the gospel by living in wise ways that exhibit the mind of Christ in bodily (i.e., corporate) form.

Doctrine is dramatic, then, because it concerns the church’s efforts to perform it, to speak and show its understanding of what God is doing in Christ to renew creation. Disciples are not onlookers who keep a safe distance but witnesses who stake their lives on the good news that the triune God is actively at work in all situations to rescue and redeem. What the church needs now are not passive spectators but active participants, actors who can follow doctrinal directions.

“Drama” of Redemption

Many writers refer to the “drama” of redemption. Is it only a figure of speech? As mentioned previously, the essence of drama is persons presenting themselves to one another, largely through language, but also through deeds. This is precisely what God does in making himself known to Adam, Abraham, Moses, and

others. Divine address and human response comprise the two-beat rhythm of the history that forms the backbone of biblical narrative. The medium of theater, like theology, is interpersonal interaction. And if having a plot that unifies this interpersonal interaction is a necessary and sufficient condition of drama, then the history that Scripture recounts is indeed dramatic.

Erving Goffman uses the theater as a framework for conducting sociological research. The way persons present themselves to others in everyday life is similar to the way an actor renders a character to an audience. Goffman's particular interest involves the ways individuals try to control the impressions that others form of them. They do so through their self-presentations (i.e., performances), "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants."²⁷ As we shall see in later chapters, this theatrical framework opens up new possibilities for thinking about hypocrisy. The salient point, however, is that the theater is, for Goffman, a conceptual scheme that allows him further to explore the human condition.²⁸

The apostle Paul was adept at using metaphors to communicate the saving significance of Jesus' death, employing imagery drawn from the battlefield (victory), temple (sacrifice), commerce (redemption of slaves), and lawcourt (justification). We have also observed his appeal to imagery drawn from the theater ("We have become a spectacle [*theatron*]" [1 Cor. 4:9]) as well as Calvin's description of creation as the "theater" of God's glory (see above). The question is whether theater is one of the "metaphors we live by" and, if so, whether it has the potential and staying power to become a comprehensive model.²⁹ Models are extended metaphors that view one reality (e.g., God) in terms of another (e.g., theater director).

Theater serves as an appropriate model for the relationship of Christian doctrine to discipleship because (1) theology's subject matter is intrinsically dramatic, a series of actions united by a plot (i.e., the theatrical model is conducive to understanding and ordering Scripture); (2) the drama of God's self-communication structures theological understanding (i.e., the theatrical model is conducive to systematizing belief and ordering doctrine); and (3) the drama of redemption orients and prompts human action (i.e., the theatrical model is conducive to illumining life and ordering love). Human existence with others before God is theatrical and indeed a model that Christians can live by, thus generating promising possibilities for both thought and action. For the theatrical model is both explanatory and exploratory: it helps us grasp what God has done, and it helps us navigate our way forward. Understanding God as Rock, for example, is helpful as far as it goes, but it goes only so far toward

27. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 15.

28. Victor Turner makes a similar proposal for anthropology, defining human beings as *homo performans* and using the theatrical model to make sense of cultural rituals. See his *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); idem, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987).

29. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

explaining and exploring the ways of God. In contrast, the theatrical model encourages us to think of the triune God as simultaneously playwright, actor, and director of the drama of human history. As we shall see, this is a more fecund and generative model for thinking about both God and the Christian life than “rock” and “walk” respectively.

To conceive of the gospel as dramatic and theology as theatrical is to embrace a meaningful, imaginative vision for thinking about reality and about discipleship. And just in time, too. For the prevailing naturalistic world picture by which many people live today leaves little scope for meaningful human action or meaning. According to some neo-Darwinian evolutionary models, human action is best explained (or is it explained away?) by reference to the unifying story of genetic engineering. History is less the story of self-presentation than self-propagation. Nature is the theater not of God’s glory but of the violent struggle of DNA to survive and thrive from one generation to the next. If this is the ultimate framework by which to understand our existence, then we of all species are “most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19).

I agree with Dorothy Sayers: “The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama.”³⁰ At the heart of the drama, the crucial point on which the whole plot pivots, is the question “What think ye of Christ?” (Matt. 22:42 KJV). In claiming that the dogma *is* the drama, Sayers has in mind the story line of Jesus summarized in the Apostles’ Creed: “conceived . . . born . . . suffered . . . was crucified, died, buried . . . rose again . . . ascended . . . will come again.” It is hard to believe, Sayers playfully suggests, “that anything so interesting, so exciting, and so dramatic can be the orthodox Creed of the Church.”³¹ The drama of doctrine, summarized by creedal Christianity, is a model not only for viewing but also for participating in reality. It is precisely this invitation to orient oneself in the world as an actor in the divine drama of redemption that makes theatrical theology superior to narrative theology. Disciples are not mere storytellers but *story-dwellers*.

That disciples are story-dwellers is another way of claiming the superiority of theatrical over narrative theology. Before going any further, however, we must consider two potential objections to the very enterprise of theatrical theology.

Objection 1. “Dramas are representational, but ‘theodrama’ does not represent anything.” Speaking well of God is the theologian’s first, and most important, task. To go wrong in one’s doctrine of God is to go wrong everywhere, for theology concerns the relationship of just this God to just this world. That is why the present objection, which concerns not misrepresentation but the impossibility of representation, kept me up half the night (Michael Pakaluk, you owe me three hours’ sleep). Here is the problem in a nutshell: drama is about the representation or imitation of something “more real” (i.e., the real story) than the actors and actions themselves. Children can play at representing

30. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), 3.

31. *Ibid.*, 20.

their parents, just as the Greeks played at representing the actions (antics!) of their gods on stage. Pakaluk asks: “But if God is the actor, whom is He going to represent? Who or what is the greater Reality which his actions might imitate and strive to be like?”³² Surely the Creator God is not merely *pretending* to be a heavenly Father! Pakaluk is happy enough to speak of God as acting, but not of God as an actor. He asks, What in the world is the biblical theodrama representing?

Answer: Nothing in the world, but rather something in eternity. *God’s mighty acts in history “represent” the perfections of God’s eternal nature and the outworking of God’s eternal decree.* Revelation (i.e., God’s self-presentation in historical word and deed) is essentially representational. The historical missions of Son (e.g., incarnation) and Spirit represent eternal processions (e.g., begetting). What God does in time represents the way God is in eternity. God is on earth as he is in heaven!

The technical term for God’s self-presentation, his presence and activity in history, is “economy” (*oikonomia*). The economic Trinity (i.e., the way God is “for us” in time) represents in history the light, life, and love that characterize the “essential” or “immanent” Trinity (i.e., the way God is “in himself” in eternity).³³ Recall the opening verses of Hebrews: in the past God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has presented himself to us by his Son, who is “the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Heb. 1:3). What God does in time as Father, Son, and Spirit represents what and who God eternally is. God the triune actor is acting in history (the economic Trinity), representing God the triune Author (the immanent Trinity).³⁴

In sum: the dramatic story of which the church is called to be a part represents the outworking of a divine decree or plot conceived “before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20). The people of God too participate in the historical representation or unfolding of God’s eternal plan. Doctrine guides disciples not to playact but to get real. While the finite may not be able to *contain* the infinite (*finitum non capax infiniti*), it may be able dramatically to *represent* it.³⁵ Indeed, human beings are created in the image of God and charged with the task of glorifying him. The Son glorifies the Father by dramatically finishing the work he was given to do (John 17:1–4). Disciples imitate the Son, who is the definitive image of God and dramatic representation of God’s being (Heb. 1:3) when they too glorify God in their bodies by performing works of grateful obedience (1 Cor. 6:20).

32. Michael Pakaluk, “The Play’s Not the Thing,” *Edification: The Transdisciplinary Journal of Christian Psychology* 4 (2010): 29.

33. I shall return to this theme in chap. 4 below.

34. See Fred Sanders, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner’s Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (New York and Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005); and my *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 70–72 and chap. 5.

35. The context of Calvin’s *finitum* formula was the debate with Lutherans over the ubiquity of Christ’s flesh in the Lord’s Supper.

Objection 2. “The theatrical model is merely window dressing, does no real work, and ultimately only gets in the way of the task of systematic theology.” Where the first objector accuses the theatrical model of getting in the way of Scripture, this second objection charges it with hindering the handmaiden’s proper work. According to its critics, the theatrical model plays, at best, a merely cosmetic rather than substantive role, putting rouge on the queen’s cheeks, perhaps a curl in her hair—all in all, a trifling service with which theologians can easily dispense.

On the contrary: The theatrical model provides us with a fresh way of integrating knowing, doing, and being. It charts a middle way between theology as an inductive science that arranges biblical “facts” into a system of theoretical knowledge on the one hand and a moralistic science that arranges biblical commands into a practical system of right and wrong. The apostle Paul was neither academic theologian nor ethicist; instead, he was a pastor *and* theologian who speaks about the “is” and the “ought” in Christ at one and the same time: “Paul’s ethical vision is shaped by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the sending of the Spirit.”³⁶ Paul’s goal is to instruct his readers by inducting them into the story of Jesus Christ. Paul urges us to conform our thoughts and lives to the contours of the theodrama, in particular to the death and resurrection reality that we find at its climax. The theatrical model is doing real work to the extent that it facilitates and extends Paul’s integrative and edifying vision. The theatrical model is doing real systematic work when it helps to unify Scripture and vivify disciples.

Is it truly “systematic”? We need to define our terms. A “system” of theology must ultimately give “an orderly account” concerning the things of which Scripture informs us (Luke 1:3–4). Theology need not rely on some philosophical method in order to be systematic; there are other ways to pursue coherence and consistency. The idea that the world is the theater of God’s action and that a single dramatic plot links the two Testaments is one way of arranging the various elements in the Bible into a meaningful whole. Furthermore, *theodramatic* coherence and consistency accord with the subject matter of theology itself. A theodramatic systematics includes a concern for *logical* coherence and consistency but cannot be reduced to it, for its primary concern, the pastoral, is aimed at helping disciples better understand the theodramatic plot: how God’s plan conceived before the foundation of the world is now being worked out through the Word made flesh.³⁷ And, as I have been arguing, to understand this drama requires one not only to look at it from a critical distance but also to participate in it, to begin to live out its truth, to live *into* its truth. *Theatrical theology is essentially a matter of wisdom (i.e., lived theodramatic knowledge).*

36. Timothy Gombis, *Paul: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T& T Clark International, 2010), 62.

37. See the discussion in Gale Heide, *Timeless Truths in the Hands of History: A Short History of System in Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), esp. 6.

Theology is systematic when it shows how the various doctrines relate to one another and how God relates to everything else.³⁸ The dramatic model is one such systematic attempt to show just that and to do it in such a way as to cultivate theoretical and practical understanding. In ministering understanding, the theatrical model avoids the modernist extreme of valuing thought over action as well as the narrativist tendency to make action more important than thought.³⁹ The only truly effective response to this dichotomy is to show how the theatrical model actually ministers understanding (i.e., reflective practice), how it actually helps disciples grasp the orders of creation and redemption “in Christ,” and how the church fits in.

It is perhaps fitting that its critics decry the theatrical model for its relative “weakness.” Theater studies are, no doubt, “weak” and “foolish” in comparison to more prestigious academic disciplines like physics and philosophy. Could this be another chapter in the history of God’s using weak and foolish things to demonstrate the peculiar wisdom of the cross?

What counts at the end of the debate, of course, is not the theatrical model itself but rather the understanding of reality, “being in Christ,” that it ministers and administers. The substance of my argument—that doctrine fosters understanding, helping disciples to speak and show their faith in meaningful forms—does not depend upon the theatrical analogy. Nor should one think that the dramatic model focuses only on *doing* the good or merely encourages disciples to be activists. While it is true that the gospel demands a response (the obedience of faith), the drama of doctrine involves more (but not less) than working for the social implications of the gospel. It requires professing its truth, doing right, and acquiring right desires. The theatrical model, rightly handled, encourages disciples to participate in or enact the truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus Christ.

38. See A. N. Williams, *The Architecture of Theology: Structure, System, and Ratio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

39. For more on the contrast between modern and narrative theology, see Gale Heide, *System and Story: Narrative Critique and Construction in Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009).