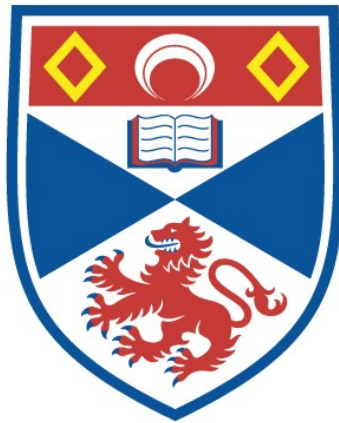


**AVAILABLE ACTORS, APPROPRIATE ACTION:
THEODRAMATIC FORMATION AND PERFORMANCE**

Wesley Vander Lugt

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews**



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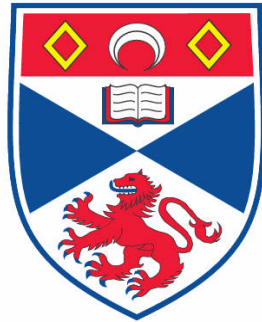
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AVAILABLE ACTORS, APPROPRIATE ACTION: THEODRAMATIC FORMATION AND PERFORMANCE

A THESIS SUBMITTED BY

WESLEY VANDER LUGT



IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

PHD

AT THE

UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS

ST MARY'S COLLEGE

INSTITUTE FOR THEOLOGY, IMAGINATION, AND THE ARTS



ST ANDREWS
SCOTLAND
2013

To Stephanie Vander Lugt,

My peerless partner in this gritty and graced performance

❧DECLARATIONS❧

1. Candidate's declaration:

I, Wesley Vander Lugt, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 88,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September, 2009 and as a candidate for the degree of PhD in Theology, Imagination, and the Arts in May, 2010; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2009 and 2013.

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❧ ABSTRACT ❧

Situated within the theatrical turn in Christian theology, this project explores theatre as a model for theological ethics, looking particularly at the dynamic interplay between formation as disponibility (availability) and performance as fittingness (appropriateness). A primary goal is to demonstrate how disponible formation and fitting performance are multi-dimensional realities oriented simultaneously toward the triune God (as playwright-producer-protagonist), Scripture (as transcript and prescript), the church (as characters in company), tradition (as performance paradigms), unbelievers (as audience), and local context (as theatrical environment and place). As a result, this theodramatic approach seeks to integrate theology and ethics, describing and resourcing everyday Christian practice with reflection on the theodrama. In addition, focusing on the dynamic interplay between formation and performance represents an attempt to unify agent-oriented with action-oriented theological ethics within a holistic, theodramatic framework. Finally, through attentive interaction with theatrical theory and practice, this project contributes to a fruitful and growing dialogue between Christian theology and the arts, particularly how theatre provides imaginative, heuristic models for theological ethics pursued within the liberating constraints of confessional Christianity.

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My wife Stephanie is my greatest advocate and closest friend, and she deserves more acknowledgements than I can possibly express. Without her by my side, far less would have been possible.

Soli Deo Gloria.

❧ ABBREVIATIONS ❧

- ANF* Alexander Roberts, ed., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994)
- NPNF1* Phillip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 14 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989).
- NPNF2* Phillip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, 14 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994).
- CD* Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translated by G. W. Bromiley et al., edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 13 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-69).
- GL* Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, translated by Erasmo Leiva-Herikakis, et al., 7 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982-89).
- TD* Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, translated by Graham Harrison, 5 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-98).
- TL* Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, translated by Adrian Walker, 3 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001-05).
- ET* Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, translated by A. V. Littledale, et al., 4 vols. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989-95).



PREFACE TO A THEATRICAL THEOLOGY

If theology, therefore, is full of dramatic tension, both in form and content, it is appropriate to turn our attention to this aspect and establish a kind of system of dramatic categories.

∞ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*¹

We need to conceive of revelation not as a drama that plays out in front of us, but the drama that is our drama.

∞ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*²

1.1 THE THEATRICAL TURN IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Two opposing currents run deeply in the Christian tradition: the antitheatrical prejudice and the intrinsic theatricality of faith. The former appeared as footnotes to Plato, whether as ontological objection to imitative representation or ethical disapproval of arousing the passions.³ Equally dismissive was the Puritan and later fundamentalist perspective that theatre is an epicenter of evil, existing merely for base entertainment.⁴ Although many Christians today endorse neither Platonic nor Puritan prejudices against theatre, the lingering effects still permeate everyday parlance. Petty conflicts are *dramas* to be endured or to avoid. Causing a public ruckus is *making a scene*. Authenticity is the opposite of *play-acting*. And more specific to Christian practice, living by grace is placed in opposition to relying on personal *performance*.

Alongside outright denunciation or subliminal suspicions of theatre, however, Christian theologians have long recognized the theatricality of divine revelation and human response. For example, James K. A. Smith observes that underneath Augustine's critique of theatre exist enduring affirmations regarding the goodness of creation, fleshly incarnation, and embodied resurrection, all supporting a theatrical aesthetic.⁵ As a result of these affirmations,

¹ Balthasar, *TD I*, 128.

² Barth, *CD I/2*, 498.

³ Jonas Barish traces the antitheatrical prejudice in Western culture as a whole and emphasizes its Platonic foundation in *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). The Platonic influence is evident in the diatribes of Augustine and Tertullian against theatre, skillfully addressed by Ivan Khovacs in "Divine Reckoning in Profane Spaces: Towards a Theological Dramaturgy for Theatre" (PhD dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2007).

⁴ Some prominent examples include the William Prynne's *Histriomastix* (1632) and later J. M. Buckley's *Christians and the Theatre* (1875).

⁵ James K. A. Smith, "Staging the Incarnation: Revisioning Augustine's Critique of Theatre," *Literature and Theology* 15, no. 2 (June 1, 2001): 123–139.

theologians as diverse as Clement of Alexandria, John Calvin, and Pedro Calderón de la Barca have employed theatrical metaphors and models to describe God's world and work. In addition, liturgical dramas and medieval mystery plays sustained theatre within the Christian tradition and provided a precedent for positive theatrical expression.⁶ Although the relationship between Christianity and theatre remains strained in some circles, the involvement of Christians in religious and mainstream theatre is flourishing and considered a godly vocation.⁷

Another indication that the antitheatrical prejudice is crumbling among Christians is the greater number of Christian scholars pursuing interdisciplinary dialogue between theatre and systematic theology, biblical studies, ethics, worship and other areas of Christian thought and practice. In fact, a cursory glance over the landscape of Christian theology will reveal a "theatrical turn" throughout the last several decades. What accounts for this theatrical turn? What motivations and methodologies are guiding Christian theologians and ethicists in their dialogue with theatre? Although there are a myriad of motivations, the rest of this section will outline nine movements that have influenced the theatrical turn, highlighting the foremost scholars advancing interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and theatre.

1.1.1 *From Theatrical Social Science to Theatrical Theology*

The theatrical turn in Christian theology is intertwined with the more general theatrical turn in the social sciences. Psychology was the first discipline to draw deeply from theatre, with Jacob Moreno in the 1920s pioneering a new method he later called psychodrama. As an original approach to group therapy, psychodrama valued the power of spontaneous encounter and experimented with role-play and improvisation.⁸ Later developments, such as dramatherapy and sociodrama, blurred the lines between psychology and theatre by seeking

⁶ Two helpful books exploring the relationship between the church and theatre from the early church to medieval church include Christine Schnusenberg, *The Relationship between the Church and the Theatre: Exemplified by Selected Writings of the Church Fathers and by Liturgical Texts until Amalarius of Metz, 775-852 A. D.* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988); Donnalee Dox, *The Idea of the Theater in Latin Christian Thought: Augustine to the Fourteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

⁷ Todd Johnson and Dale Savidge, *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 40–50.

⁸ See Adam Blatner, *Foundations of Psychodrama: History, Theory, and Practice*, 4th ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2000).

self-transformation through performance.⁹ Since performances of the self always occur on a social stage, a similar dialogue with theatre emerged within sociology, with G. H. Mead's sociological dramaturgy interpreting individuals as playing roles according to social scripts.¹⁰ Perhaps the most influential figure in popularizing sociological dramaturgy and role theory, however, is Erving Goffman, who explored the dynamics of everyday interactions and how people negotiate believable performances of social roles.¹¹ With the advent of postmodernism, sociologists such as T. R. Young have expanded on interpersonal dramaturgy popularized by Goffman to address macrosocial and political dramaturgy.¹² Within these large-scale performances, verbal communication is clearly a critical component alongside nonverbal communication. As such, J. L. Austin and John Searle investigated the nature of linguistic "performatives,"¹³ or things people do with words, with subsequent sociolinguists examining the influence of social and cultural norms on verbal performances.¹⁴

Finally, drawing on the vast dialogue sustained between theatre and psychology, sociology, philosophy, and linguistics, anthropologist Victor Turner identified humans as *homo performans*, employing theatrical models to explain human and cultural rituals.¹⁵ At the same time, Richard Schechner elaborated multiple points of contact between theatre and anthropology, merging these interests by creating the first ever department of performance studies at New York University. Schechner maintains that whereas not everything in life is performance, almost everything can be studied as performance.¹⁶ With every discipline and

⁹ For an excellent introduction to dramatherapy, see Phil Jones, *Drama as Therapy: Theatre as Living* (London: Routledge, 1996). A prime example of sociodrama is Playback Theatre, developed by Jonathan Fox and Joe Salas. Fox describes his methods in *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in Nonscripted Theatre* (New Paltz: Tusitala, 2003).

¹⁰ George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, ed. Charles William Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934).

¹¹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1959). Cf. Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (New York: Penguin, 1963), especially Chapter 6.

¹² Quite harshly, in fact, Young argues that Goffman's model suffers from "theoretical entropy, empirical inaccuracy, and political sterility." T. R. Young, *The Drama of Social Life: Essays in Post-Modern Social Psychology* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1990), 69.

¹³ J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1969).

¹⁴ For example, see Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1984). This theatrical model has been adopted by several feminists and other post-structuralist pundits seeking to highlight marginalized linguistic performances, such as Judith P. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁵ Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987).

¹⁶ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, revised and expanded ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 38. Schechner's early work includes *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of

sphere of life now open to investigation *as* performance, it was inevitable that this theatrical turn would extend to theology. In fact, through the work of Schechner and others, a major barrier to interdisciplinary dialogue with theatre had been overcome, namely, dismantling the association between theatre and showy hypocrisy, focusing instead on theatre's authentic creativity.¹⁷ Similarly, theologians are interacting with theatre in more constructive and less disparaging ways, forging new insights and dissolving longstanding suspicions of theatre. In doing so, the social sciences are critical dialogue partners for wrestling with the drama of existence and forging productive interdisciplinary methodologies for interacting with theatre. As theologians draw insights from the social sciences and the world of theatre, however, John Milbank warns that theology must be governed by God's revelation rather than secular norms.¹⁸ This caveat motivates a primary aim of this project: clarifying how theology can dialogue with theatre without losing its grounding in divine revelation.

1.1.2 *From Human Drama to Divine Drama*

Theologians readily affirm, along with social scientists, that human existence is dramatic. Hans Urs von Balthasar observes that we are inherently familiar with drama “from the complications, tensions, catastrophes, and reconciliations which characterize our lives as individuals and in interaction with others.”¹⁹ Like drama, our lives have a beginning, middle and an end, a plot riddled with conflict in which we play many roles. If Christian theology merely reflected on the shape of human existence—a theology from below—this would be reason enough to employ a theatrical model. But theology also begins from above, reflecting on and responding to God's revelation. God does not reveal himself in logical formulas or

Pennsylvania Press, 1985); *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁷ Reflecting on the theatrical turn in anthropology, Clifford Geertz wrote twenty years ago that a theatrical model is “coming to be applied extensively and systematically, rather than being deployed piecemeal fashion—a few allusions here, a few tropes there. And second, it is coming to be applied less in the depreciatory “mere show,” masks and mummery mode that has tended to characterize its general use, and more in a constructorial, genuinely dramaturgical one—making, not faking, as the anthropologist Victor Turner has put it.” *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (London: Fontana, 1993), 26–27.

¹⁸ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 234. Indeed, danger lurks for theology in either repelling or collapsing into the social sciences, as argued by Richard Roberts in “Theology and the Social Sciences,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David Ford and Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 370–88.

¹⁹ Balthasar, *TD I*, 17.

secret knowledge; God reveals himself by saying and doing things on the world stage. The whole purpose of Balthasar's five-volume *Theo-Drama* is to explore the drama of God's infinite being and redemptive action that frames every finite drama.²⁰ The *theodrama*, therefore, is the drama of God's communicative action in dynamic interaction with his creation. Several theologians have adopted Balthasar's theodramatic approach, such as Kevin Vanhoozer, who affirms that both "the content and the process of divine revelation" are dramatic, a covenantal comedy of the triune God who speaks and acts for the sake of our salvation.²¹

Vanhoozer observes that theology as human projection (ala Feuerbach) "eliminates the *theo* from theodrama" and theology as existential expression (ala Bultmann) "drains the *drama* out of theodrama." By contrast, beginning with God's dramatic revelation keeps both together.²² If revelation is dramatic, then theology should follow suit.²³ Rather than choosing between text-centered or history-centered theologies, Michael Horton maintains that dramatic theology draws from the entire scope of God's textual and historical performance.²⁴ Consequently, the theatrical turn in theology recognizes the primacy of a revelatory, divine drama that precedes, enlivens, and interfaces with the drama of human existence in real time and space. This is seen most clearly in the drama of Jesus' incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, which Max Harris explains is theatrical in the best sense: the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, engaging all our senses and drawing us into the drama.²⁵ In the theodrama, God's incarnation is the preeminent performance. Chapter 3 addresses in more detail how the performance of the triune God, and more particularly the performance of the Protagonist Son, informs human formation and performance.

²⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, 5 vols. (Einseideln: Freiburg, 1973-1983); *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, 5 vols., trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998). Hereafter cited as *TD* I-V.

²¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 38.

²² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 476.

²³ Balthasar, *TD* I, 127.

²⁴ Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 10, cf. 171. In *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Zondervan, 2011), Horton argues that doctrine, discipleship, and doxology are intrinsically connected and arise out of the biblical drama (see especially 13-32).

²⁵ Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1-2.

1.1.3 *From Monologue to Dialogue*

In the beginning of his *Theo-Drama*, Balthasar articulates several trends in modern theology that provide rationale for a theodramatic approach, including the move toward recognizing genuine dialogue between God and humanity.²⁶ Influenced by biblical theology and philosophical personalism, this trend recognizes that at the heart of the biblical drama are dialogical covenants God initiates with his creation and chosen people. While God's covenant-making performances never make him dependent on his creatures, they do entail a real, relational drama between God's infinite freedom and sovereignty and the finite freedom and responsibility of his covenant partners.²⁷ Barth articulates a similar dynamic between divine and human freedom, asserting that revelation is not "a drama that plays out in front of us, but the drama that is our drama."²⁸ Like every theatrical production, therefore, the theodrama contains a mysterious coincidence of freedom and dependence.²⁹ A crucial distinction exists, however, between God's infinite, perfect performance and humanity's finite, imperfect performance.³⁰

Raymund Schwager carried on Balthasar's concern for theodramatic dialogue, arguing that dramatic theology supersedes narrative theology because of its ability to "integrate a genuine line of reasoning" while giving adequate attention to the covenantal, conflictual action of the salvation drama.³¹ His work has inspired a continuing tradition of "Innsbruckian dramatic theology," characterized by conflict orientation (*Konfliktorientierung*) and an emphasis on God as doer (*Gott als Handelnder*), as an alternative to liberal theology.³²

More recently, Kevin Vanhoozer has similarly defended God's dialogical authorship of and covenantal involvement in the theodrama. He suggests that when theologians resist metaphysical speculation and attend to the dramatic form of God's revelation in Scripture, we notice that God is the sovereign author, but humanity enjoys the "dignity of

²⁶ Balthasar, *TD I*, 34-37.

²⁷ Balthasar, *TD II*, 71-73.

²⁸ Barth, *CD I/2*, 498. Consequently, the drama of Jesus Christ "is not a drama which is played out a remote distance," making humans "interested or disinterested spectator[s]." *CD III/1*, 387.

²⁹ Balthasar, *TD I*, 268.

³⁰ See Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 273.

³¹ Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation: Toward a Biblical Doctrine of Redemption* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 12. Translated from the original *Jesus im Heilsdrama: Entwurf einer biblischen Erlösungslehre* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag, 1990). Cf. *Banished from Eden: Original Sin and Evolutionary Theory in the Drama of Salvation* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2006).

³² Sandler Willibald, "Was Ist Dramatische Theologie?," in *Religion - Literatur - Künste. Aspekte Eines Vergleichs*, ed. Peter Tschuggnall (Anif/Salzburg: Müller-Speiser, 1998).

communicative interaction” with God.³³ For Vanhoozer, God does not author the theodrama through coercive monologues, as some have interpreted classical theism. Rather, dialogue is the means by which God authors the theodrama and interacts with human actors, who are free on the basis of their response-ability and answerability.³⁴ The dialogue is genuine and communicative, yet God is still in ultimate control.³⁵ Is Vanhoozer’s “dialogical determinism” a plausible proposal for triune authorship, and how does God’s action as playwright relate to his action as protagonist and producer of the theodrama? Adequately addressing these questions requires further exploration of a trinitarian theodramatics, which is the focus of Chapter 3.

1.1.4 *From Narrative Understanding to Dramatic Performance*

Theatrical theology shares affinity with narrative theology, but one important difference is the greater fluidity between perception and performance within a theatrical model. Whereas narrative theologians often refer to understanding that arises from indwelling, telling, and living the Christian story, a dramatic model contains more capacity to encapsulate this movement. As Gerald Loughlin observes, “When a person enters the scriptural story he or she does so by entering the Church’s performance of that story: he or she is baptized into a biblical and ecclesial drama. It is not so much being written into a book as taking part in a play.”³⁶ In addition, while a narrative framework emphasizes understanding a story from the past, a theodramatic framework highlights our present participation in a drama extending from the past into the future. Samuel Wells warns that narrative theology is easily tempted by Gnostic tendencies, with correct understanding easily ossifying into “secret knowledge,” while a dramatic approach accentuates “a dynamic, spiraling process of constant repetition, reinterpretation, transfer, and restoration of meaning.”³⁷ If narrative tends to fixate on understanding what has happened, then drama orients us toward participating in what is

³³ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 45.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 331–34. Vanhoozer enters into conversation with Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Mikhail Bakhtin in outlining a dialogical theodramatics. Daniel Treier also engages in a similar conversation, and concludes that “drama is a fitting way...to plot the relationships of divine and human action in their necessarily diverse ways.” *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 93–94.

³⁵ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 384.

³⁶ Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20. For an earlier intimation of this idea, see Gordon MacAfee Brown, “My Story and ‘The Story’,” *Theology Today* 32, no. 2 (1975): 6.

³⁷ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 45–46.

happening.³⁸ Of course, as Wells points out, this is a false dichotomy, for the Holy Spirit unites the story of past redemption to the drama of the church's performance.³⁹ As Richard Heyduck explains, drama actually includes narrative; it is a broader, more fruitful category because it orients theology toward faithful performance in the present.⁴⁰ If we view Scripture merely as telling a story or narrative, warns Francesca Murphy, there is danger of slipping toward a-historicism and static reception of the text, but within a dramatic paradigm, the actor-interpreters enter into dynamic interaction with the biblical script.⁴¹ Consequently, while the theatrical turn in theology values the centrality of story, it pushes narrative theology to its logical conclusion, namely, that the intelligibility and credibility of the biblical story arises out of faithful performance.⁴²

1.1.5 *From Biblical Application to Interpretive Improvisation*

In many traditional models, biblical interpretation is an intellectual exercise to determine textual meaning, distilling theological and ethical principles and then applying these principles to contemporary scholarship and practice. Nicholas Lash, however, challenged this position by viewing biblical interpretation through the lens of theatrical performance, arguing that the everyday performance of the church *is* biblical interpretation.⁴³ Within this model, Scripture functions like a script that the church interprets through patterns of words and deeds on the world stage. Frances Young, although interacting more with music than theatre, also describes biblical interpretation as the “art of performance” requiring imaginative and improvisational skill.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Tom Wright expands Lash's proposal by describing

³⁸ A dramatic model, therefore, resists closure, which is why David Ford suggests that “the image of an ongoing drama has some advantage over that of a narrative, and the concept of theodrama...has rich potential.” *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 82.

³⁹ Samuel Wells, *Transforming Fate Into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2004), 98.

⁴⁰ Richard Heyduck, *The Recovery of Doctrine in the Contemporary Church: An Essay in Philosophical Ecclesiology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2002), 39.

⁴¹ Francesca Aran Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation: Paradise Lost and Regained in Biblical Narrative* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), xv.

⁴² George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 131.

⁴³ Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 42.

⁴⁴ Frances M. Young, *Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1990). Rowan Williams develops a similar position regarding a “dramatic mode of reading” in “The Literal Sense of Scripture,” *Modern Theology* 7, no. 2 (1991): 121–134.

Scripture as four Acts of a five-Act play, leaving the church responsible to improvise the fifth and final Act in a way consistent both with previous Acts and the prophesied end of the play.⁴⁵ Consequently, Wright envisions the Christian life as a process of improvising with an unfinished script, thus showing concern for the primacy and authority of the biblical script while leaving room for contextual improvisation pursued with “innovation and consistency.”⁴⁶ Other biblical theologians, like Walter Brueggemann, also view Scripture as a script, but disagree to what extent Scripture presents a unified drama.⁴⁷

Despite these disagreements, many scholars prefer to work within a theatrical model, replacing the one-dimensional movement from biblical interpretation to application with a dynamic process of interpretive improvisation, including “re-enactment, retelling, rehearsing, redescribing [and] reperformance” in new contexts.⁴⁸ Vanhoozer contrasts this “drama-of-redemption” approach to other popular methods for going “beyond the Bible” to theology and ethics, proposing that contemporary interpreters improvise with the biblical script in order to achieve theodramatic wisdom.⁴⁹ The purpose of Chapter 4 is to consider carefully this proposal and to ask, among other things, whether construing Scripture as script is the most accurate metaphor to describe the nature and function of Scripture in the theodrama. In addition to impacting biblical theology and interpretation, the theatrical turn has also made inroads into biblical exegesis, whether in the form of dramatic hermeneutics⁵⁰ or biblical performance criticism.⁵¹ While significant in their own right, these areas of inquiry

Stephen Barton traces the development of these themes as it relates to New Testament studies in “New Testament Interpretation as Performance,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52, no. 2 (1999): 179–208.

⁴⁵ N. T. Wright, “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?,” *Vox Evangelica*, no. 21 (1991): 7–32; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 140–43; N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 121–27.

⁴⁶ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 140.

⁴⁷ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts Under Negotiation* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 70.

⁴⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Ichabod Toward Home: The Journey of Gods Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 120.

⁴⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Drama-of-Redemption Model,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 151–99.

⁵⁰ Dramatic hermeneutics is a methodology of discerning dramatic elements within biblical texts. Some examples include James L. Blevins, *Revelation as Drama* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984); A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987); Paul R. House, *Zephaniah: A Prophetic Drama* (Almond, 1988); Walter David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1990); Jo-Ann A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004).

⁵¹ Biblical performance criticism studies the nature of oral performance traditions and their impact on textual transmission and biblical interpretation. For an excellent introduction and

are outside the bounds of the current project; the investigation of biblical theodramatics in Chapter 4 largely focuses on a theatrical model for biblical theology and interpretation and its impact on theodramatic formation and performance.

1.1.6 *From Individuals to Community*

If Scripture is something like a script that guides improvised performances, and those improvisations are both the result of and means for interpreting Scripture, then it is also true that this is a communal process. Biblical interpretation, like the task of theology and the mission of faithful performance, is the task of a whole company of actors. Even though postmodern theory has accentuated the social context of reflection and action, some models of doing theology still assume scholarship is accomplished in isolated, ivory towers. Compounding this problem is a view of theology as merely a process of reading and writing texts; this view is much more inclined toward individuality and subjectivity, whereas “drama captures both individual and public aspects of theological discovery and its subject matter.”⁵² Nicholas Lash explains that when biblical interpretation and theology are linked with embodied performance, it is “no more possible for an isolated individual to perform these texts than it is for him to perform a Beethoven quartet or a Shakespeare tragedy.”⁵³ Whether we are referring to theology written in a study, preached from a pulpit, or enacted in everyday habits, it is always performed in the context of a larger company, both past and present, in which everyone has different roles, gifts, and responsibilities.⁵⁴

Not only does a theatrical model highlight the communal and relational nature of biblical and theological performance, but it also enables us to re-imagine, as Johnson and Savidge do, the nature of human identity as individuals-in-community, as image bearers of a relational God.⁵⁵ The communal and relational context of theodramatic performance extends beyond the company of actors to include the audience: those outside the company who are not committed to participating in the theodrama as presented in Scripture. Many interested in

treatment of recent works, see David Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part I,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36, no. 3 (2006): 1–16; David Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part II,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36, no. 4 (November 1, 2006): 164–184.

⁵² Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 10.

⁵³ Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, 43.

⁵⁴ Shannon Craigo-Snell makes a similar observation in “Command Performance: Rethinking Performance Interpretation in the Context of Divine Discourse,” *Modern Theology* 16, no. 4 (2000): 479.

⁵⁵ Johnson and Savidge, *Performing the Sacred*, 61–65.

the theatrical turn have acknowledged this point, but few have investigated in detail how audiences actually impact theodramatic formation and performance.⁵⁶ As a result, this project seeks to explore the theodrama as performed by individuals and their companies (ecclesial theodramatics: Chapter 5) in the presence of an audience (missional theodramatics: Chapter 7).

1.1.7 *From Epic and Lyric to Dramatic*

The irreducibly relational and communal nature of theodramatic participation highlights just one reason why there is, according to Balthasar, “no external standpoint” from which to describe and evaluate the theodrama. Using categories borrowed from Hegel, Balthasar shows how “drama” embraces both the “epic” and “lyric” modes of Christian faith and theology.⁵⁷ Whereas an epic stance clamors for objectivity and seeks to understand reality according to systems and structures, a lyric stance revels in subjectivity and the intensity of personal experience. Between these two extremes lies the dramatic mode, modeled by the New Testament authors, for whom as witnesses of the drama of Jesus Christ, “the only chance of being objective is by being profoundly involved in the event they are describing.”⁵⁸ Ben Quash, an avid interpreter of Balthasar, describes the potential for the dramatic mode to heal the rift between “the brutally given, and the brutally, banally free.”⁵⁹ In other words, a dramatic perspective gets neither hopelessly mired in subjective experience nor abstractly removed in objective reflection. It allows people, in short, to be “living witnesses to wisdom.”⁶⁰ David Ford is another proponent for a dramatic framework that sustains both epic perspective and lyric intensity, because it maintains “a sense of plot and purpose without suppressing individuality, diversity, and the complexity of levels, perspectives, motivations, and ideas” that combine critical and creative wisdom.⁶¹

⁵⁶ For example, see Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35–36; Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation*, xv; Rosemary Haughton, *The Drama of Salvation* (London: SPCK, 1975), Chapter 4.

⁵⁷ Balthasar, *TD I*, 54f.

⁵⁸ Balthasar, *TD II*, 57. For an excellent summary of this theme in Balthasar, see Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs Von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 60.

⁵⁹ Ben Quash, “‘Between the Brutely Given, and the Brutally, Banally Free’: Von Balthasar’s Theology of Drama in Dialogue with Hegel,” *Modern Theology* 13, no. 3 (1997): 293–318.

⁶⁰ Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 50.

⁶¹ David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 26.

Ford observes to his chagrin that most classical Christian theology tends toward the epic mode.⁶² In fact, Quash accuses Balthasar himself of epic tendencies despite his desire to move toward the dramatic. In general, he claims that Balthasar's emphases, style and tone tend to erode "time, particularity, irreducible personhood and finite knowledge" despite his theodramatic vision.⁶³ A truly dramatic approach will embrace the indeterminacy, provisionality, particularity, and contextuality of theology and practice, operating "*within* the drama, *before* the end of the play."⁶⁴ Nicholas Healy is another theologian who investigates the implications of this approach, tracing the contours of a theodramatic, practical-prophetic ecclesiology in contrast to blueprint or epic ecclesiology prone to abstraction, rationalism, normativity, and excessively systematic coherence.⁶⁵ Since theology reflects on and occurs in the midst of historical, temporal, and cultural contingencies, a theodramatic approach does not rush toward closure and attends carefully to changing contexts. Although each chapter below deals with different elements of context, Chapter 8 in particular attends to the contextual dimension of the theodrama as it relates to creation and culture, two arenas in which neither epic nor lyric approaches are ultimately satisfactory.

1.1.8 *From Theory to Practice and Back Again*

Another angle from which to consider the relationship between the objective and subjective elements in the theodrama is the relationship between theory and practice, or between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Since theological reflection takes place while participating in the theodrama, Balthasar correctly asserts: "in the real Christian life, dramatically lived out, there is no moment of pure orthodoxy distinct from and prior to orthopraxy."⁶⁶ Not only is "right practice" the goal of "right belief," but faithful practice is also the necessary condition for faithful understanding. In the theodrama, nothing is outside the drama, so participants do not have the luxury of learning about the play before performance. We learn *about* the play by performing *in* the play.⁶⁷ Does this mean, however,

⁶² Ibid., 28.

⁶³ Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 197.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁶⁵ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁶⁶ Balthasar, *TD I*, 68-69.

⁶⁷ As Ben Quash observes, the theodrama is not a play we learn "before we get involved in the action—like learning a theory, or reading the instruction book for our new microwave oven before

that within the theatrical turn in theology, practices have priority over theory? Does the theatrical turn in theology follow the cultural-linguistic turn by privileging the practices and grammar of particular communities?⁶⁸ While some proponents of the theatrical turn may lean in this direction, those who follow in the tradition of Balthasar privilege the “preeminent divine activity in the drama of Jesus Christ.”⁶⁹ Vanhoozer places himself firmly within this camp, rooting both orthodoxy and orthopraxy in the communicative action of the triune God. What both theology and ethics have in common, therefore, is their reliance on the performance of God in history and Scripture.⁷⁰

Theology seeks to understand the divine drama and ethics seeks to embody that understanding in fitting performances. All of this happens, of course, in the midst of performing in the theodrama, and so the relationship between theology and ethics is complex and intermingled. Theology belongs at the heart of ethics and ethics belongs at the heart of theology, because both involve faith seeking performative understanding.⁷¹ As Barth maintained: “Dogmatics is ethics and ethics is dogmatics.”⁷² Overall, the theatrical turn is not interested in practice over theory or ethics over theology, but in the dynamic interplay between these two disciplines. One way to describe this approach, therefore, is to follow the theatrical turn toward a renewed vision of theological ethics, a vision for faith seeking performative understanding.

1.1.9 *From Scientific to Aesthetic*

Another reason theology and ethics are inseparably linked is their mutual connection with aesthetics. According to Balthasar, both theology and ethics arise out of an encounter with the beauty of God’s revelation in the performance of Christ. Perceiving this beauty occurs in the midst of our own participation in the drama and calls for the holistic response of performative understanding. “For God’s revelation is not an object to be looked at: it is his action in and upon the world, and the world can only respond, and hence “understand”,

using it. We learn it *in action*, as we go along.” “The Play Beyond the Play,” in *Sounding the Depths*, ed. Jeremy Begbie (London: SCM Press, 2002), 98.

⁶⁸ As articulated by George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine*.

⁶⁹ Balthasar, *TD I*, 69.

⁷⁰ This is based on a similar observation in Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 311.

⁷¹ Duncan Forrester appropriately relates theology and ethics in a spiral of reciprocity and ongoing dialogue in *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2000), 27.

⁷² Barth, *CD I/2*, 793.

through action on *its* part.”⁷³ As such, theology and ethics are not dry, scientific disciplines reflecting on brute facts and organizing propositions into tidy systems. Rather, theology and ethics are expressions of wonder, explorations of desire, and responses to the “weight of glory” experienced while participating in the theodrama and encountering Christ.⁷⁴ Truth, goodness, and beauty are neither abstract transcendentals nor principles discovered through disengaged rationality, but “theatricals” revealed through God’s true, good, and beautiful performances and encountered through participatory imaginations.⁷⁵ According to Vanhoozer, imagination is the ability to see, feel, think and act in ways appropriate to the truth, goodness, and beauty of God and his theodrama.⁷⁶ Theodramatic imagination focuses on what *has* happened, *is* happening, and *will* happen in this drama according to God’s promises.⁷⁷

Within the theatrical turn, therefore, theology and ethics are imaginative habits that have more in common with the art of understanding and performing in a play than with conducting a scientific experiment. Theology is not a mere index of truths, but the imaginative art of understanding the theodrama for the purpose of wise performance. Similarly, ethics is not a mere index of duties, but the imaginative art of performing in ways that match the pattern of God’s own performance.⁷⁸ Entering into dialogue with theatre as a performing art orients theology toward artful reflection and ethics toward artful action. It also emphasizes the “artisanal” nature of these disciplines, which Lisa Hess describes as “embodied, exploratory, communal, risky, cross-categorical, and deeply contemplative.”⁷⁹ Consequently, while this project is not an exercise in theological aesthetics, there is an overall

⁷³ Balthasar, *TD I*, 15.

⁷⁴ C. S. Lewis observes that we do not merely want to see this glory, but to “pass into it receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.” *The Weight of Glory* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 42.

⁷⁵ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 277.

⁷⁶ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 377.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 416. Another excellent work that connects performance in the theodrama with eschatological imagination is Trevor A. Hart, “The Sense of an Ending: Finitude and the Authentic Performance of Life,” in *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, ed. Trevor Hart and Steven Guthrie (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 183–86. Cf. Wells, *Improvisation*, 76–77.

⁷⁸ In this sense, ethics is first a way of seeing (the form of Christ’s performance) before it is a way of doing or performing (improvising on the form of Christ’s life). See David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 339–343; Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 46.

⁷⁹ Lisa M. Hess, *Artisanal Theology: Intentional Formation in Radically Covenantal Companionship* (Eugene: Cascade, 2009), 75.

sensitivity to the aesthetic dimension of theological ethics and a commitment to prevent beauty from becoming “the poor stepsister of truth and goodness.”⁸⁰

1.2 TERMINOLOGY FOR THE THEATRICAL TURN

Theologians who promote the theatrical turn draw on a myriad of theatrical terms and concepts, but often in an inconsistent and uncritical manner, which creates barriers for effective interdisciplinary dialogue. Even before Balthasar coined the word “theo-drama” with the publication of *Theodramatik* (1973-83) and its English translation (1988-98), drama was often the word of choice for theologians and ethicists, but is this the best choice? What is the difference between drama and theatre, and how do these terms relate to other key terms such as script, performance, and improvisation? Based on these distinctions, what is the best use of these terms within the theatrical turn in theology?

1.2.1 *Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance*

If we define drama and theatre strictly according to etymology, drama (from the Greek *dromenon*) is “a thing done” and theatre (from the Greek *theatron*) is either “a place for seeing” or the “spectacle” that is seen. In reality, both drama and theatre are fluid concepts, and have developed beyond their original etymology so that drama is a text-centered concept and theatre is a performance-centered concept. In other words, drama typically refers to a genre of literature that provides a script for public performance, whereas theatre typically refers to the actual public performance or production. Drama is the written play whereas theatre is the play in performance. Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis make a similar distinction with a helpful phrase: “the written drama scripts the theatrical event.”⁸¹

In traditional theatre, drama is often synonymous with the script, with both referring to a written text intended for theatrical performance.⁸² In more experimental forms of theatre and

⁸⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Praising in Song: Beauty and the Arts,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 114.

⁸¹ Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis, *Drama/Theatre/Performance* (Milton Park/New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

⁸² For example, Johnson and Savidge equate the two by stating that “a drama is a script that is incomplete until performed in a theatrical production.” *Performing the Sacred*, 12.

within the field of performance studies, however, script tends to take on a broader meaning.⁸³ Richard Schechner, for example, traces the relationship between drama, script, theatre, and performance in terms of four concentric circles.⁸⁴ The smallest, core circle is drama, which is the textual map created by the author(s). The next circle is the script: a pattern of doing or a code of events based on the drama. Theatre constitutes the next circle, referring to the manifestation of the drama and/or script in real time and space. Finally, the largest circle is performance, which encompasses the whole event, including the interaction between actors and audience.⁸⁵ Schechner summarizes: “The drama is the domain of the author, the composer, scenarist, shaman; the script is the domain of the teacher, guru, master; the theater is the domain of the performers; the performance is the domain of the audience.”⁸⁶ One benefit of Schechner’s model is that it applies to a wide range of performance scenarios, including traditional, improvisational, or experimental theatre. In traditional theatre, for example, all four elements are present, but in improvisational theatre, there is no drama and often only a partially formed script based on rehearsal and practiced techniques. Schechner also helps us realize the fluidity of these elements, how “they enclose one another, overlap, interpenetrate, simultaneously and redundantly arousing and using every channel of community.”⁸⁷

Distinguishing drama from theatre is particularly important given the rise of avant-garde or *postdramatic theatre*. Hans-Thies Lehmann describes the “trade secrets of dramatic theatre” as imitation, comprehensible plot, formation of social bonds, primacy of the text, and forming the illusion of world representation.⁸⁸ Consequently, postdramatic theatre is concerned to de-dramatize these elements, purging performance in an effort to get *beyond* drama.⁸⁹ Is the theatrical turn in Christian theology also trying to get beyond drama, or is the purpose to re-dramatize theology, as Vanhoozer has proposed?⁹⁰ In order to address this question, it is

⁸³ Performance studies is a diverse discipline studying human action and ritual. For an excellent introduction, see Tracy C. Davis, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). Cf. Marvin A. Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁸⁴ See figure 3.1 in Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 71.

⁸⁵ See also *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸⁸ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jurs-Munby (Milton Park/New York: Routledge, 2006), 21–22.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹⁰ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 87.

necessary to indicate how the terms drama, script, theatre, and performance may be used correctly and consistently within Christian theology.

First, if drama is a textual map for performance, then drama refers to both Scripture and other written works—including creeds, confessions, and theological and ethical treatises—that guide contemporary performance. An important difference, of course, is that both Scripture and theological works record and reflect on what *has* happened, whether God’s performance or the performance of his creatures, before calling for further performance. Consequently, despite the popularity of the metaphor, it is not entirely appropriate to call Scripture a script, an issue addressed in more detail in Chapter 4. Second, if scripts are understood as patterns of doing, then scripts are the lived, practiced, and embodied Christian traditions that persist through time and from place to place, despite local variation. The drama and script together, therefore, provide the life-plot and patterns for human action. Third, as the manifestation of the drama and/or script, theatre is what happens when people participate in the plot or enact patterns of action at particular times and places as informed by Scripture and tradition. Fourth, while performance is very similar to theatre, it can be used in the broadest possible sense to refer to any action or deed within the theatre of existence, no matter how scripted or unscripted. Both theatre and performance, therefore, are oriented toward action. Unfortunately, as indicated at the beginning of this chapter, both theatre and performance sometimes carry negative connotations, both in Christian communities and in broader society. For instance, *theatrical* might be used to describe something or someone that is pretentious, showy, or over-the-top, and *performance* is often associated with hypocrisy, insincerity, or the prideful attempt to achieve salvation by works. In this project, however, *theatre* refers to quotidian action rather than showiness, and *performance* simply means participation in the theodrama as enabled by the triune God. Faking a Christian role remains a temptation for participants in the theodrama, but Chapter 5 will explore how theodramatic performance can display Christ-like, eschatological authenticity.

1.2.2 *Improvisation*

Improvisation is another theatrical concept that suffers from widespread misunderstanding and derision. When referring to a particular form of theatre, improvisation is “unscripted acting in which the performers collectively make up the story of situation as they go, or collectively try to carry out a specified difficult performance in the presence of the

audience.”⁹¹ This kind of improvisational theatre often assumes a comedic form popularized as “improv” by TV shows such as *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* More fundamentally, however, improvisation is a skill used in every form of theatre, since to improvise is to “produce or make (something) from whatever is available.”⁹² Improvisation is fundamental to all theatrical performance, for even in scripted performance repeated nightly, each moment is unique and involves unpredictable interactions and circumstances.⁹³ Whether utilized in rehearsal, scripted theatre, or specifically in improv shows, improvisation is the skill of creating a meaningful performance out of what is at hand.

Just because improvisation is spontaneous, however, does not mean it can be accomplished without preparation or discipline. The best improvisers are the most disciplined, those who have learned the skills to respond most effectively to whatever is happening in the present moment. In fact, according to Richard Schechner, improvisation is the very crux of theatre as the creative conjunction between spontaneity and discipline.⁹⁴ Improvisation is not, contrary to common opinion, just showing up and fabricating things out of nothing.⁹⁵ Correcting these misconceptions allows us to see more clearly how Christian practice is intrinsically improvisational. As Bruce Ellis Benson remarks, “In the beginning, there was improvisation,” and improvisation continues to constitute the nature of existence as “a mixture of both structure and contingency, of regularity and unpredictability, of constraint and possibility.”⁹⁶ More specifically, human participation in the theodrama is improvisational, because although human are actors, “they do not yet know their lines, or how the play ends.”⁹⁷ In addition, this participation is improvisational because we are always

⁹¹ Dennis Kennedy, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 288.

⁹² “improvise *v.* (2)” in *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 12th ed., Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹³ This is a central thesis of Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1990). Cf. Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor*, trans. Andrei Malaev-Babel, revised ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 36.

⁹⁴ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 54. Schechner is drawing this insight from Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen Drama, 1975).

⁹⁵ Bruce Ellis Benson, “Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities: Jazz, Interpretation, Heterophony, and the Ekklesia,” in *Resonant Witness: Conversations Between Music and Theology*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 300. Benson concludes that improvisation is something “between *imitatio* and *inventio*.”

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM, 1985), 309.

adapting to changing circumstances and responding to particular conditions.⁹⁸ Learning to live well, Stanley Hauerwas remarks, is “to make the unexpected our greatest resource” through creative improvisation.⁹⁹ Ethical improvisation bears “testimony to God’s creativity and abundance” as he directs us toward creative and fitting participation in the theodrama.¹⁰⁰

Samuel Wells fruitfully explores Christian ethics as improvisation and corrects misconceptions that could act as barriers for viewing improvisation as an effective model.¹⁰¹ First, Wells explains—relying on insights from director Keith Johnstone—that improvisation is more a matter of doing what comes naturally than being original. Improvisers who try to be original are not only prideful, but are working too hard.¹⁰² Trying to be original often leads to either paralysis or forced results, whereas just doing the obvious based on what came before and conditions in the present situation produces fitting action. For improvisers in theatre and the theodrama alike, this involves knowing the story in which we are participating, developing an awareness of the current situation, and having the confidence to do what fits. Second, improvisation is not about being extremely witty and standing out with individual talent, but contributing to a group on the basis of trust and respect. Heroism is discouraged, and skillful improvisers are those who recognize their roles and play them faithfully in conjunction with others. Consequently, to emphasize improvisation in Christian ethics is to privilege relationships and community rather than elite individualism. Improvisation is for ordinary people, for it constitutes a core component of everyday life. Everyone *can* improvise, because everyone *does* improvise.¹⁰³ Third, Wells laments that improvisation is often linked with a view of the unconscious as corrupt and potentially demonic. While recognizing that the unconscious is affected by sin, Wells asserts that it has been neglected in accounts of the moral life, especially as a gift that God can heal and restore. Finally, Wells acknowledges that improvisation is often associated with triviality and self-indulgence, although this is misleading

⁹⁸ This is true of all human practice, which Pierre Bourdieu calls “the art of necessary improvisation” in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 8. On the improvisational nature of Christian practices, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 230.

⁹⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 106.

¹⁰⁰ David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 144.

¹⁰¹ Wells, *Improvisation*, 66–70.

¹⁰² Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979); *Impro for Storytellers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

¹⁰³ Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for Theater*, 3rd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 3.

stereotype. Improvisation often does involve laughter, but it involves every other human emotion as well. Similarly, the improvised Christian life requires every human emotion, including playful humor, especially because “the joke is God’s and the laughter is divine.”¹⁰⁴

1.2.3 *Theodramatic or Theatrical?*

Given the clarifications above, is it still legitimate to describe the present project as a study in *theodramatics*? Even though the introduction is framed in terms of the *theatrical* turn in theology, *theodramatic* remains the most popular term among contemporary scholars, especially given the formative influence of Balthasar’s *Theo-Drama*. In keeping with the distinctions above, however, *theatrical* theology emphasizes the practical goal of theology as faith seeking *performative* understanding. *Dramatic* theology highlights rootedness in the drama of Scripture that presents the covenantal dialogue between God and humanity. Dramatic theology is still concerned with performance, but consistency with these terms means the primary focus remains the text, drama, or script providing the plot and patterns for performance. Some advocates of the theatrical turn in theology may desire to distance themselves from the theodrama, together with the primacy of Scripture and its coherent and comprehensive meta-drama. The aim of this project, however, seeks to fuse *theodramatic* concerns with a *theatrical* approach. Embracing the theatrical turn in theology does not entail neglecting the drama of Scripture; on the contrary, it makes the most of biblical interpretation and theology by connecting them to faithful performance in everyday life. As such, this project acknowledges the possibility and necessity of dramatic theology while giving full attention to the theatricality and performativity of the Christian life. Continuing to refer to the *theodrama* forges continuity with others who have used and continue to use this term since Balthasar; juxtaposing it with the language of theatricality and improvisation keeps in play the priority of liveness and embodied performance. If the danger of dramatic theology is epic objectivity, then the danger of theatrical theology is lyric subjectivity, and both are necessary for a fully theatrical theodramatics.

¹⁰⁴ Wells, *Improvisation*, 69. Several connections exist, therefore, between ethics as improvisation and a theology of play. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play* (London: Harper & Row, 1972); Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997).

1.3 METHODOLOGY FOR THE THEATRICAL TURN

Having clarified terminology, it remains to outline a suitable method for interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and theatre. Lamentably, in many interdisciplinary efforts within the theatrical turn, this important step is overlooked or approached in an *ad hoc* manner. This is partly evident in the language utilized to describe the relationship between theatre and theology. Balthasar, for example, calls theatre a metaphor, model, and analogy for Christian theology.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Vanhoozer claims that his theodramatic approach follows a theatrical model,¹⁰⁶ dramatic paradigm,¹⁰⁷ theatrical analogy,¹⁰⁸ and theatrical metaphor.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, Wells describes improvisation as an appropriate analogy,¹¹⁰ mode,¹¹¹ and model¹¹² for exploring Christian ethics. And when summarizing the performative turn in New Testament studies, Stephen Barton refers to performance as a model, metaphor, analogy, and paradigm for biblical interpretation.¹¹³ Whereas different terms may be appropriate in different contexts, it seems that scholars have a difficult time describing how theatre functions as an interdisciplinary dialogue partner for theology. As it turns out, how one describes this relationship impacts how the dialogue proceeds, so it will be helpful to explore various options before tracing out an appropriate methodology.

1.3.1 *Theatre as Metaphor*

In simple terms, a metaphor is speaking of one thing as something else.¹¹⁴ More technically, Janet Soskice defines a metaphor as “a figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.”¹¹⁵ Metaphors are essential to

¹⁰⁵ This is true from the very beginning pages of Balthasar’s work; see, for example, *TD I*, 9-23.

¹⁰⁶ Vanhoozer, “The Drama-of-Redemption Model,” 155, 159, 174.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁰⁹ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, xii.

¹¹⁰ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 152.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹² Samuel Wells, “Improvisation in Theatre as a Model for Christian Ethics,” in Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie, eds., *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 147–166.

¹¹³ Barton, “New Testament Interpretation as Performance.”

¹¹⁴ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 15.

¹¹⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 15.

the way we understand the world; in fact, we live by them.¹¹⁶ The life of faith also rests on metaphors, for God has chosen to accommodate and reveal himself through metaphors, enabling us to grasp his purposes and our relationship with him. God is my shepherd, Jesus is our redemption, the Church is the Bride of Christ, the Kingdom of God is a mustard seed—all of these metaphors give Christian faith meaning and shape. As such, metaphors are not mere ornamental additions to the language of faith, but vehicles for creating meaning.¹¹⁷ Consequently, we can employ theatrical language as metaphors for God's being and action as well as Christian existence: creation is the theatre of God's glory; the Church is the company of the gospel; Christian living is improvisation, and so forth. The world of theatre provides compelling metaphors to explain and explore reality from a Christian perspective.

1.3.2 *Theatre as Analogy*

What is the difference between theatrical metaphors and theatrical analogies? This depends, of course, on how one defines analogy, whether as a particular linguistic device or a general comparison between one thing and another. Linguistically, an analogy arises when a relationship between two things is compared to the relationship between two other things (e.g. director is to actors as Holy Spirit is to Christians). More generally, however, an analogy is any comparison between two similar things, which often have greater similarity than two things linked metaphorically.¹¹⁸ For example, we can say “God is beautiful” by analogy given the fitting similarity between “God” and our concept of “beauty,” whereas “God is a playwright” surprises us in the juxtaposition of two different terms and thus functions as a metaphor.¹¹⁹

Whether theatrical language functions metaphorically or analogically in relation to theology, therefore, depends on the degree of similarity between their conceptual fields. To

¹¹⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Lakoff and Johnson also posit that metaphors are a way of thinking before they are a way of speaking. Nevertheless, given that thoughts become language in order to communicate meaning, we will focus on metaphors as figures of speech.

¹¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

¹¹⁸ Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 66.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* Most theologians acknowledge, therefore, that all God-talk is analogical, whereas an ongoing debate persists regarding if all God-talk is metaphorical. Discussions regarding the analogical nature of God-talk are footnotes on the theology of Thomas Aquinas, who proposed analogical language as a middle way between equivocal (metaphorical) and univocal (literal) language. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 13, 5.

the extent that human life is actually a matter of improvisation, it is accurate to draw an analogy between improvisation and Christian practice. But whereas theatrical improvisation is quite different than the improvisation we experience in everyday life, it is also accurate to use improvisation as a metaphor for Christian practice. In other words, whether we speak of an analogical or metaphorical relationship between theatre and theology depends on whether we are emphasizing the similarity of difference between these disciplines, and both may be appropriate. In general, this project continues to refer to theatrical metaphors, in part because metaphor is a less ambiguous concept, and also because the world of theatre, although a representation of reality, is quite different from everyday life.

1.3.3 *Theatre as Model*

Models differ from both metaphors and analogies because they are states of affairs rather than linguistic devices. Janet Soskice suggests that a model is not simply *speaking* of or describing one thing as something else (metaphor), but *viewing* one thing as something else.¹²⁰ She sets her perspective in contrast to those who view models simply as extended or systematic metaphors, such as Max Black and Ian Barbour, who assert that models only differ from metaphors in that they are theoretical and systematically sustained.¹²¹ Sallie McFague and Avery Dulles also describe models as extended metaphors, explaining that in a theological context, models are employed to organize belief and practice, connecting a coherent view of reality to everyday actions.¹²² John Goldingay, like Soskice, is careful to distinguish between metaphors and models by identifying the constructive nature of the latter as “an image or construct that helps us grasp aspects of these realities by providing us with something we can understand that has points of comparison with the object we wish to understand, thus helping us get our mind round its nature.”¹²³

While it is necessary to distinguish between linguistic metaphors and conceptual models as Soskice and Goldingay advise, it is still true that a model exists in metaphorical relationship to the reality being modeled. What is more, talking or writing about a model (e.g. improvisation

¹²⁰ Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 101.

¹²¹ Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 236; Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 43.

¹²² McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 23, 125; Avery Robert Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1976), 21.

¹²³ John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 7.

as a model for Christian practice) requires the use of metaphors (e.g. Christian practice is improvisation), so it is indeed advantageous to view models as metaphorical constructs.¹²⁴ The benefit of utilizing models in theology, John Franke observes, is that they “provide images and symbols that enable us to conceive of the richness and complexity of the divine life and action of God in the world without claim that they are absolutely literal or precise.”¹²⁵ Theatre provides such a model for Christianity, and we will consider more specifically how this model functions after clarifying whether or not theatre also functions as a paradigm.

1.3.4 *Theatre as Paradigm*

At a certain point, it is possible for a model to morph into a paradigm if it gains enough clout. In other words, a paradigm is a dominant model, and as such, it determines the range of all possible models.¹²⁶ Paradigms, according to McFague, are founded on root-metaphors; consequently, a paradigm shift in theology arises from a root-metaphor replacement.¹²⁷ Similarly, Thomas Kuhn, in his groundbreaking work on scientific paradigms, posited that a paradigm consists of a dominant model or exemplar shared by the scientific community.¹²⁸ When a scientific community observes sufficient anomalies in the existing paradigm, a paradigm shift and scientific revolution begins. Similar shifts and revolutions occurred throughout church history, such as during the Reformation, when communities discovered anomalies and inconsistencies with the current theological paradigm. Whereas theatre certainly functions as a model for some scholars advancing the theatrical turn in theology, it is not a paradigm because it is not a dominant model shared by global church.

1.3.5 *Theatre as a Model for Christian Theology and Practice: Characteristics and Clarifications*

Based on these distinctions, it is appropriate to view theatrical theory and practice as a model for Christian theology and practice, a model that contains many metaphors. Like scientific models, Soskice suggests that theological models seek to present an accurate vision

¹²⁴ For example, Soskice explains that the concept of fatherhood is a model for God, but that we use it to speak metaphorically. *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 55.

¹²⁵ John Franke, *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 120.

¹²⁶ Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 124.

¹²⁷ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 110.

¹²⁸ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 186.

of reality.¹²⁹ Whereas both scientific and theological models utilize symbolic representation, draw on the imagination, and seek a comprehensive ordering of experience, models within theology call for more personal involvement, since they are rooted to our deepest and most cherished beliefs and experiences.¹³⁰ Before discussing the particular advantages and disadvantages of a theatrical model, therefore, it is important to note how models function within Christian thought and practice more generally. First, models are both explanatory and exploratory, assisting us in interpreting our experience in light of divine revelation and expanding our knowledge beyond familiar horizons.¹³¹ For example, the model of God as a playwright seeks to explain his being and action in the world and to explore new possibilities of thought and action arising from this model. Consequently, models are meant to synthesize what we already know and to generate new, faithful theological insights and ethical practices. As Aidan Nichols explains, models provide vividness and immediacy to a theory while pushing beyond familiar conceptual boundaries.¹³² Second, all models bear a genuine yet incomplete correspondence to reality. This critical realist perspective avoids the Scylla of literalism and the Charybdis of fictionalism, highlighting the central role of the imagination.¹³³ To model the Holy Spirit after a theatre director, for example, means charting a creative vision about the Holy Spirit's real work in directing the free actions of humanity, but we cannot confuse the model with the modeled.¹³⁴ Third, models are inherently inadequate, and multiple models are needed for faithful theology and practice. Models are inherently inadequate for theology because certain aspects of the subject matter—God and his interaction with humanity—are inexhaustibly mysterious. Consequently, McFague is correct to acknowledge the impossibility of “super-models,” advocating a myriad of models to grasp the reality of God's being and action.¹³⁵ Fourth and finally, models are life-enriching as much as they are knowledge-building. A good model does not merely provide truthful theological knowledge, but also engenders faithful and fitting ways of living in correspondence with the reality being modeled.

¹²⁹ Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 116–117.

¹³⁰ Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 69.

¹³¹ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 22–23; Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 68.

¹³² Aidan Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Image in Christian Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), 154.

¹³³ Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 37; McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 133.

¹³⁴ Goldingay, *Models for Scripture*, 11.

¹³⁵ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 129. Cf. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 23–29; Goldingay, *Models for Scripture*, 16.

Based on these characteristics, a model used in the context of Christian theology and practice can be defined as *a state of affairs with metaphorical potential to explain reality in relation to divine revelation, expand theological knowledge and exert practical influence*. In addition to these criteria, McFague asserts that models should bear fittingness to the reality being modeled, complement other models, and cope with anomalies.¹³⁶ Dulles provides a more comprehensive list of criteria: basis in Scripture, basis in Christian tradition, capacity to give Christians a sense of their corporate identity and mission, fostering virtues and values admired by Christians, correspondence with Christian religious experience, theological fruitfulness, and practical fruitfulness in the lives of believers.¹³⁷

Whether or not a theatrical model can achieve all these goals is a basic question that will be explored in the chapters that follow. In the meantime, a few clarifications are necessary to show how theatre will function as a model in this project. First, theatrical theory and practices, rather than dramatic texts, will serve as the model for Christian theology and practice. While many fruitful studies have been done using drama as a model to explore biblical texts,¹³⁸ the main focus of this project is the theatrical turn in theology, and so theatrical performers and their performances (which contain elements of drama) will serve as the model. Several capable interpreters of Balthasar have deduced that whereas his theodramatic approach is a stunning development in Christian theology, he emphasized the dramatic to the expense of the theatrical.¹³⁹ Quash even concludes that if Balthasar's approach is followed without modification, it would actually "disable a theodramatics" by diminishing the significance of time, neglecting resistant material and performative particulars, subjugating subjects to structures, and presuming a God's-eye view.¹⁴⁰ By focusing on theatrical theory and practice rather than drama, therefore, this project seeks to build from and correct Balthasar's legacy, as Wells urges, by "genuinely embracing time as a friend, and therefore reinstating the practices of the church and the significance of the present."¹⁴¹

Second, this study does not concentrate on one particular form of theatre (scripted theatre, experimental theatre, improvisational theatre, etc.) one particular style of character

¹³⁶ McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, 137–141. Cf. Goldingay, *Models for Scripture*, 16.

¹³⁷ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 180–181.

¹³⁸ See footnote 50 above.

¹³⁹ See Ivan Khovacs's critique in "A Cautionary Note on the Use of Theatre in Theology," in *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, ed. Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 33–50.

¹⁴⁰ Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 196–97.

¹⁴¹ Wells, *Improvisation*, 51.

formation (role distance or role identification) or the work of one particular theatre director (Brecht, Stanislavski, Brook, etc.); rather, it draws from a variety of theatrical traditions and practices. The advantage of this approach is to ensure that theology is enriched by a greater number of theatrical models and perspectives, rather than limiting the dialogue to particular forms or styles.¹⁴² While it may be appropriate at times to identify one-to-one equivalents between the life of faith and theatre (e.g. church as company), there are other times when these correspondences are less adequate (e.g. Scripture as script).¹⁴³ The disadvantage, however, is that we will not be able to delineate in detail particular areas of theatrical theory and practice. An effort will be made, however, to draw on the most relevant and respected studies and to exhibit genuine interaction with these sources.

While dialoguing with theatre as a model, caution must be exercised not to gather tidbits selectively from theatre in order to make a theological point. The best interdisciplinary method will seek first to understand a theatrical theory or practice on its own terms, and only then to utilize this theory or practice as a model. Balthasar offers good advice in this regard: “It seems to me, that instead of suddenly rushing into the construction of such a [dramatic] theology, one should first elaborate a ‘dramatic instrumentation’ of the literary and lived theatre, and thus of life itself, in order to prepare images and concepts with which one can then work (with an adequate transposition).”¹⁴⁴ If by “transposition,” however, Balthasar means what he stated earlier as a “thorough modification” of insights from a theatrical model, then this methodology is less helpful.¹⁴⁵ What is more fruitful, and yet much more difficult, is being truly open to discovering heuristic insights within theatre, rather than simply finding rationale for pre-established beliefs and practices or trying to make theology more interesting.¹⁴⁶ In asking what the West End and Broadway have to say to Jerusalem, we will

¹⁴² This is one of Josh Edelman’s main critiques of Vanhoozer’s *Drama of Doctrine*, which he claims draws from limited theatrical models, and thus stands on “relatively unsure cultural ground.” “Can an Act Be True? The Possibility for the Dramatic Metaphor for Theology Within a Post-Stanislavskian Theatre,” in *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, ed. Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 53.

¹⁴³ As such, Johnson and Savidge espouse that fixed “dynamic equivalents” can be dangerous, and at other times it is important simply to state the incongruence between the model and modeled and let the equivalence stand. *Performing the Sacred*, 59.

¹⁴⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 98.

¹⁴⁵ Balthasar, *TD I*, 11.

¹⁴⁶ This constitutes another element of Edelman’s critique of *Drama of Doctrine* and what he views as a misuse of both Peter Brook and Constantin Stanislavski. Khovacs, too, accuses Balthasar of “exploiting drama to enrich the language of theology,” and he faults Vanhoozer for limiting the potential of a theatrical model by interpreting it through the lens of speech-act theory. See Khovacs, “A Cautionary Note,” 33, 42–43.

only discover the answer by really living in all cities, rather than merely making occasional visits, and staying long enough to understand the language and the culture.¹⁴⁷

Fourth, this project is limited to the extent that it will explore Christian theology and practice through the lens of theatre rather than vice versa. Both conversations are crucial, but the parameters of this study are such that it must focus on one part of the conversation, while applauding other scholars who are completing the dialogue.¹⁴⁸ Besides interacting with theatrical theory and practice, therefore, the other main conversations partners will be those theologians and ethicists who have utilized theatrical metaphors and models in a constructive manner.¹⁴⁹ Selecting sources in this manner has the fortuitous result of creating dialogue across theological disciplines and between voices that may not normally be juxtaposed. The theatrical turn links the systematic theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Michael Horton, and Kevin Vanhoozer, the ethics of Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, and the biblical theology of Walter Brueggemann and Tom Wright, to name just a few. As such, one goal of this project is to show how a theatrical model for Christian theology and practice is uniquely poised for theological ethics and ethical theology, connecting two disciplines that should never be separate.

A sixth and final clarification is that while this study recognizes the exceptional promise of a theatrical model, it is not without potential pitfalls, nor is it the only promising model. While appreciating many features of the theatrical model, for example, Anthony Thiselton warns that it can, like any model, be overplayed and hold us captive.¹⁵⁰ Although a theatrical model is “wonderfully insightful and instructive,” observe Hauerwas and Fodor, “the Christian faith is far too rich and complex to be captured by a single analogy.”¹⁵¹ While it is healthy to resist the allure of super-models that exclude other models, could it be true that the theatrical model is comprehensive enough to include all other models? One reason why this

¹⁴⁷ Vanhoozer asks this question in *Drama of Doctrine* (79), and in another essay makes a similar observation regarding philosophy and theology, identifying himself as a “nomad” existing on the borderlands between these disciplines. “Once More into the Borderlands: The Way of Wisdom in Philosophy and Theology After the ‘Turn to Drama,’” in *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology: Reason, Meaning, and Experience*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Martin Warner (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 53.

¹⁴⁸ Johnson and Savidge, *Performing the Sacred*; Khovacs, “Divine Reckoning in Profane Spaces.”

¹⁴⁹ Some scholars continue to be attracted by a theatrical model, but struggle with its association with “showiness” or “play-acting.” See Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 60, n28.

¹⁵⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 77–78.

¹⁵¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (London: SPCK, 2004), 106.

may be true is because as an art form, theatre is a cooked version of raw life,¹⁵² so while the drama of redemption resembles theatre, it is also true that theatre resembles the drama of redemption. Consequently, Rosemary Haughton is bold enough to conclude that the drama of salvation “is not a mere metaphor; it is about as accurate a description as it is possible to give of the way in which the real availability of salvation is made known, and its character explained to human minds.”¹⁵³ If Haughton is correct, then the theatrical turn in theology is not a superfluous effort to make theology more interesting, but an attempt to rediscover the heart of living Christianity.

1.4 LIVING THEATRE AND LIVING CHRISTIANITY

In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook appeals for a living theatre as opposed to a deadly one. Deadly theatre determines all stage directions, leaving no room for improvisation and creativity.¹⁵⁴ It is theatre reduced to imitative and conventional action.¹⁵⁵ Theatre becomes deadly when approached “from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done.”¹⁵⁶ Not only that, but deadly theatre persists when people think theatre should not adapt to the changing culture.¹⁵⁷ At the heart of deadly theatre lies deadly acting, but also deadly writing, deadly directing, and deadly criticism.¹⁵⁸ A living theatre, by contrast, will be holy and rough, powerful enough to grasp a vision of the invisible through the visible, and sufficiently earthy and immediate to connect with real life.

Likewise, this project promotes a living Christianity, an expression of faith that is simultaneously rough and holy.¹⁵⁹ It is a call to resist deadly Christianity with its uncreative imitation, sentimental spirituality, unsatisfying clichés, and naïve resolution. A theatrical theology linked to faithful modes of formation and fitting expressions of improvisational practice provides a fuller, livelier way of life made possible by a living King who died and rose again and who embodied, as Max Harris observes, both the rough and holy.¹⁶⁰ Not only that,

¹⁵² Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 30.

¹⁵³ Haughton, *The Drama of Salvation*, 46.

¹⁵⁴ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 15.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

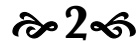
¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 32f.

¹⁵⁹ See Shannon Craigo-Snell and Shawntea Monroe, *Living Christianity: A Pastoral Theology for Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2009).

¹⁶⁰ Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, chapter 6.

but a living, theatrical Christianity rests on the assumption that “in the midst of human mismanagement, self-righteousness, decadence and disease, grace somehow shines and partially transforms both the world and our perception of it.”¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 101.



PRACTICING THEODRAMATICS: FORMATION AND PERFORMANCE

Disponibilité sums up in a single term the condition improvisers aspire to...It's a kind of total awareness, a sense of being at one with the context: script, if such there be, actors, audience, theatre space, oneself and one's body.

~Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*¹

Fitting action, the one that fits into a total interaction as response and as anticipation of further response, is alone conducive to the good and alone is right.

~H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*²

2.1 THEATRICAL FORMATION AND PERFORMANCE

For any actor or company of actors, formation and performance are two essential elements comprising life in the theatre. Theatrical formation refers to the preparation, development and growth of actors toward excellence and a readiness for particular roles and performances. Theatrical performance simply refers to what happens on stage before an audience. What constitutes the theatrical process, therefore, is the unending and mutually dependent movement from formation to performance and from performance to formation. On the one hand, formation without performance is pointless, because performance is the very reason why actors are concerned with formation. Performance is the *raison d'être* of formation, and a theatre of unending rehearsal destroys the purpose of theatre. On the other hand, performance without formation is futile, because formation enables actors to prepare for a performance that will interest the audience.³ The pivotal role of formation may be more obvious with scripted drama, including a readiness to play certain roles and deliver scripted lines, but formation is also crucial for improvisers who are trained with a whole variety of skills and habits. Frost and Yarrow describe at length the meaning and method of

¹ Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 152.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 64.

³ The only possible exceptions are *happenings*, which often focus on the pure performativity of an event. Formation is still often necessary for happenings, however, even if the actor is not preparing for a particular role or learning a script. For as Peter Brook concludes, "Without preparation the event would be weak, messy, and meaningless." *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration, 1946-87* (London: Methuen Drama, 1989), 8.

improvisational formation, which includes activities such as relaxation, games, movement exercises, space familiarization, concentration and attention, and practice following directions and offers.⁴ Furthermore, formation for improvisational theatre involves learning to work with others by developing trust, respect, interactive skill, and an ability to incorporate their actions and offers.⁵

Even though formation is crucial for performance, it has obvious limits. Whether performing from a script or improvising a scene, it is impossible for actors to prepare fully for any performance; actors never surpass the need for continual formation of theatrical skills, habits, and attitudes. Furthermore, given the unpredictability of the environment, varying audience reactions, and the actor's physical and emotional condition, each moment in performance is unique and unrepeatable. Even the most comprehensive and rigorous training cannot prepare actors for every eventuality of performance. When actors attempt to prepare in this way, says Brook, theatre becomes deadly.⁶ These limitations are especially prominent in improvisation, where unpredictable elements are intensified and performances are under-determined.

Given the limitations of formation, most theatre companies realize that one of the best ways to train is by performing. During performance, actors become aware of weaknesses and strengths and develop a greater sense for the necessity and urgency of formation. Only delusional actors would assert complete readiness for performance, realizing that performances must go on despite inadequacies and the usual fears, forgetfulness, and fatigue. The inevitable shortfalls of formation, therefore, require actors to dispel fears of failure. In fact, directors of improvisational theatre emphasize failure as the goal of performance, because failure is the result of risk, creativity, and genuine effort.⁷ For example, Keith Johnstone recommends that when an actor performs timidly, the director should ask: "Why aren't you screwing up?"⁸ The only way to improve is to perform, and to perform is to fail. These failures then motivate further formation, which is tested by subsequent performances. In sum, the entire theatrical process is a dynamic interplay between formation and performance existing in an unending spiral of reciprocity: formation fuels performance and performance informs formation.

⁴ Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 97–104.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 105–111.

⁶ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 126.; Cf. Brook, *The Shifting Point*, 8.

⁷ Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 2.

⁸ Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers: Theatresports and the Art of Making Things Happen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 63.

2.2 THEODRAMATIC FORMATION AND PERFORMANCE

As in theatre, life in the theodrama involves the dynamic interplay between formation and performance. Theodramatic formation is the preparation, development and growth of individuals and the church toward Christ-likeness, along with the readiness for particular roles and performances in the theodrama.⁹ This formation is a process of being *transformed* and *conformed* into the image or form of Christ by the Spirit (1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29) together with the active “putting on” of Christ-like character and the gifts of the Spirit (Rom 13:12-14; Gal 3:27; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:10-12).¹⁰ In the theodrama, of course, performance encompasses all of life; actors are always on stage and “in character,” and as such, there is no distinction between off-stage identity and on-stage roles. Theodramatic performance, therefore, constitutes the entire lives of individuals and the church on the world stage. The purpose of theodramatic formation is faithful performance, and performance is the means and context for formation.

Rather than maintaining this interdependence and complexity, however, many approaches to theological ethics focus on either the formation of performers or the quandaries of performance. A performance-oriented approach primarily addresses problems, decisions, issues, and cases arising in performance and judges them according to principles and/or concrete situations.¹¹ For example, this approach might explore if abortion is right or wrong in principle, and whether there are particular exceptions to a general rule. The formation-oriented approach, however, investigates the character, virtue, habits, and attitudes of the performer. For instance, it takes a step back from quandaries to ask what kinds of people would consider performing an abortion in the first place. While each approach has its strengths, each also has a tendency toward imbalance by either overlooking formation in favor of performance or vice versa. The weaknesses of this false dichotomy are obvious, but does a theodramatic perspective do any better in maintaining the dynamic interplay between formation and performance, between actor and action?

⁹ While theodramatic formation shares much with “spiritual formation,” it highlights the dynamic interplay with performance and the readiness for roles and performances in the theodrama.

¹⁰ The themes of imitating Christ, Christ-likeness, and putting on Christ will be explored in greater detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

¹¹ This approach includes both casuistry—reasoning from principles to particular cases—and situation ethics, which emphasizes the uniqueness of each case. Each borrows in different ways from the deontological and consequentialist traditions.

Balthasar addresses this issue by emphasizing the inseparable relationship between contemplation and action. For Balthasar, contemplating the beautiful enables actors to perform the good, and performing the good leads actors into formative encounter with the beautiful. Contemplation naturally gives rise to action, for in contemplating the beautiful action of God in Christ, “we suddenly realize that we have been made to take our part in the action as a whole and that we are therefore participants in this action.”¹² In general, Balthasar presents a movement from contemplation to action, but also emphasizes their dynamic interplay: “Action is the fruit of contemplation, though contemplation can and must continue throughout the action and fertilize it.”¹³ Thus, Balthasar creates an inseparable link between theological aesthetics and theological dramatics: “There can be no question of simply perceiving, contemplating, or registering what is shown; whoever is moved in faith must go out on the stage (θεατριζω: Heb 10.33, cf. 1 Cor 4:9), in sight of a world which at first imagines it can afford to be nothing more than a spectator itself.”¹⁴ While appreciating this relationship between contemplation and action, it would be misguided to limit theodramatic formation to contemplative perception of the beautiful. Formation includes a vision of the beautiful, but also involves formation of attitudes, desires, virtues, knowledge, skills, habits, and more. What is needed, therefore, is a more holistic understanding of formation while maintaining the dynamic interplay with performance, which is what both Hauerwas and Wells seek to accomplish.

Like Balthasar, Hauerwas observes how aesthetic vision impacts virtuous character, which in turn engenders faithful action; he also reverses the order, showing how action forms vision and character.¹⁵ Therefore, the Christian life is a matter of “learning to live as you are and be as you live.”¹⁶ Hauerwas adamantly resists any approach to ethics that focuses merely on quandaries, decisions, or situations, since “the kind of ‘situations’ we confront and how we understand them are a function of the kind of people we are.”¹⁷ Moreover, the kind of people we are depends on the drama in which we are situated and how this drama shapes our

¹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God*, trans. John Halliburton (London: SPCK, 1975), 53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 52–53.

¹⁴ Balthasar, *GL II*, 52.

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 138–39. Cf. Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*.

¹⁶ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 150.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

imagination and habits.¹⁸ Similarly, Wells identifies imagination and habits as crucial components of theodramatic formation. According to Wells, the ability to improvise skillfully in the theodrama is dependent on the readiness of the performer, which means that ethics is more about rehearsal and formation than action and performance. He identifies worship as the theodramatic equivalent of theatrical rehearsal, both being the time and place during which performers build habits and cultivate imagination.¹⁹

Although Wells accurately represents the formative power of worship, one weakness of comparing worship to rehearsal is that Sunday worship is itself a part of theodramatic performance. Worship does not form actors *outside* of or *preceding* performance, but is part of the performance with powerful potential to shape our vision and virtue. In addition, James K. A. Smith convincingly argues that Christian worship as the liturgy of the church exists alongside other “cultural liturgies” such as shopping or watching television, which compete in forming our hearts, minds, and wills.²⁰ The question is not *if* these liturgies are formative, but which “liturgical performances” *are* in reality the most formative in our lives, and also which ones *ought* to be. Indeed, each decision we make, like the decision to watch a football game instead of participating in corporate worship, is by default a decision to be formed by a particular liturgy. And the more we perform a liturgy—whether worshipping, shopping, or frequenting social media sites—the more these liturgies will shape our identity as actors and the quality of our performances. In other words, every decision is an instance of formation, and how we are formed inevitably influences our decisions. Consequently, rather than prioritizing actor formation over appropriate action, it is more accurate to recognize how formation and performance are dynamically interwoven.²¹ Quandaries form character just as character helps us deal with quandaries, or even determines which quandaries we will face. Despite this dynamism, it is still important to distinguish between these two aspects of theodramatic participation, and to explore each one in greater detail.

¹⁸ Hauerwas develops the theatrical model together with James Fodor in chapter 3 of *Performing the Faith*.

¹⁹ Wells, *Improvisation*, chapter 5.

²⁰ This is a central thesis in James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

²¹ Wells articulates the priority of actor formation, but exploring how action informs the agent might augment his argument. “It is the actor who matters, more than the action: ethics is about forming the life of the agent more than it is about judging the appropriateness of the action.” Wells, *Improvisation*, 81.

2.3 THEATRICAL FORMATION AND DISPONIBILITY

Having established that formation is an essential element in the theatrical process, and highlighting its dynamic interplay with performance, it remains to explore various perspectives on what constitutes theatrical formation. Constantin Stanislavski, often considered the father of modern acting, devoted his directing career to preparing actors for performance through character formation.²² In his system, the goal is for actors to play their parts as if they were real, with intense attention to one's inner life and tapping into emotional memory. For Stanislavski, therefore, proper formation involves acting, thinking and feeling as the character would act, think and feel. Despite the wide-ranging influence of Stanislavski's system, many have challenged his perspective on inward and emotional formation. For instance, Bertolt Brecht insisted that actors should not prepare by emotionally identifying with their roles, but by mastering the external elements—the *gestus*—necessary to play their parts skillfully.²³ Brecht believed that when actors maintain emotional distance from their roles and focus on the externals, it enables spectators to experience the *Verfremdung* or “A-effect” and fully encounter the theatrical illusion, which enables authentic transformation.²⁴

Consequently, Stanislavski and Brecht represent two opposite poles of theatrical formation: internal, emotional formation and external, gesticular formation. This is not to say that these two approaches are completely at odds. In fact, Brecht listed nine things that can be learned from Stanislavski,²⁵ and others have subsequently observed that their perspectives are commensurable and not contradictory.²⁶ For example, both Stanislavski and Brecht give a pivotal role to imagination in grasping the overall story, tying together diverse elements of the play, and enabling each action to fit whatever else is happening on stage.²⁷ In this sense, whether actor formation is primarily about developing internal or external habits, it always involves developing a readiness to contribute appropriately to one's role or place in the story. In other words, both Stanislavskian and Brechtian approaches are commensurable with

²² Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Bles, 1937); Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, revised. (London: Methuen Drama, 2008).

²³ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), 198.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 192–93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 236–37.

²⁶ Eric Bentley, “Are Stanislavsky and Brecht Commensurable?,” in *Brecht Sourcebook*, ed. Carol Martin and Henry Bial (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 37–42. I explore the relationship between Stanislavskian role identification and Brechtian role distance at greater length in Chapter 5.

²⁷ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 71, cf. 271. Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 200.

developing a receptive disposition, whether receptive to a role, fellow actors, the director, the script, the audience, or the overall mission of the play.

In scripted theatre, it may be possible to overlook this core element of formation, since it is technically possible for an actor to memorize and perform a part without being receptive, although it would result in a poor performance.²⁸ In improvisational theatre, however, the need for a receptive disposition is much more obvious, since the constantly developing and unpredictable nature of improv requires actors who are continually responsive to everything around them.²⁹ Jacques Lecoq uses the word *disponibilité* to describe this the state of readiness that enables improvisers to have “receptiveness to everything around us.”³⁰ It is a state of “discovery, of openness, of freedom to receive,” that allows the improviser to be on the stage with a “freshness of beginnings.”³¹

Taking their cue from Lecoq, Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow identify *disponibilité* as a state of being “open to what is happening” (*disponible à l'événement*), a concept they admit is quite difficult to translate into English. They try anyway: “Availability – openness – readiness – acceptance: the precondition of creativity. It implies not resisting but flowing *with* the world and the self.”³² As the core of creative formation, *disponibilité* implies both a readiness to accept what is happening and also an openness to respond and keep the action going. Jerzy Grotowski refers to a similar disposition in his poor theatre method, which “demands a mobilization of all the physical and spiritual forces of an actor who is in a state of idle readiness, a passive availability, which makes possible an active acting score.”³³ Consequently, *disponibilité* implies both passive receiving and active giving.³⁴ Frost and Yarrow summarize the meaning and significance of this concept for improvisation:

Disponibilité sums up in a single term the condition improvisers aspire to. It offers a way of describing an almost intangible and nearly undefinable state of being: having at (or in) one's fingertips, and any other part of the body, the capacity to do and say what is appropriate, and to

²⁸ Robert Barton, a director of scripted theatre, describes actor preparation as developing a state of “alert responsiveness” or “relaxed readiness.” Robert Barton, *Acting: Onstage and Off* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1989), 24–25.

²⁹ In *Acts of Service*, Jonathan Fox articulates this aspect of formation in terms of service or commitment.

³⁰ Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body (le Corps Poétique): Teaching Creative Theatre*, trans. David Bradby (Methuen Drama, 2009), 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

³² Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 151–52.

³³ Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 37.

³⁴ Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 154–55.

have the confidence to make the choice. It's a kind of total awareness, a sense of being at one with the context: script, if such there be, actors, audience, theatre space, oneself and one's body.³⁵

This definition contains several crucial observations regarding *disponibilité* as the core of theatrical formation. First, *disponibilité* is not just an actor's general receptiveness or availability, but is oriented in particular directions: toward the script or story, actors, audience, theatre space, and oneself. In addition to these elements, it is appropriate to include *disponibilité* toward the director, the playwright (in scripted theatre), and to performance traditions. Putting these together, theatrical *disponibilité* is a multi-dimensional receptivity and availability oriented toward the director, playwright, script or story, company or troupe, performance traditions, audience, theatre space, and oneself. Second, although actors can develop the habit of *disponibilité* during rehearsals, it is a habit that must continue to develop throughout performance by means of constant attentiveness and awareness, which solidifies the dynamic interplay between formation and performance. Third, *disponibilité* is a broad enough concept to describe the process of formation in both scripted and improvisational theatre, while at the same time unifying traditions of inward and outward formation, since *disponibilité* is an intellectual, emotional, relational, embodied, and therefore holistic habit.

In transitioning to consider the relevance of theatrical *disponibilité* for theodramatic formation, the French *disponibilité* will be discontinued in favor of the English *disponibility*—a recognized transliteration meaning “the condition of being at one's disposal”—as well as the adjectival (*disponible*) and verbal (*dispone*) forms.³⁶ Part of the reason for this choice is that some theologians featured below already utilize *disponibility* in the English, and despite its relative obscurity, it may prove a fruitful term to promote in theological and ethical discussions. In addition, *disponibility* is preferable over *disposability* because of the latter's unfortunate connotation with being disposed *of*, rather than being disposed *to* someone or something. *Disponibility* carries the positive sense of being disposed toward the other, and therefore pertinent synonyms include availability, receptivity, or openness. With these terminological clarifications in mind, we turn to consider the role of *disponibility* in theodramatic formation.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

³⁶ “*disponibility*, n.” OED Online. September 2011. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/55096?redirectedFrom=disponibility> (accessed September 22, 2011).

2.4 FORMATION: THEODRAMATIC DISPONIBILITY

If disponibility characterizes a well-formed, seasoned actor, to what extent does this concept illumine theodramatic formation? To answer this question, this section explores perspectives on disponibility from several modern theologians, assessing their use of the term in relation to formation. Next, it highlights both the continuities and discontinuities between theatrical and theodramatic disponibility. And finally, it is crucial to investigate the means for developing disponibility in the theodrama.

2.4.1 *Disponibility in Modern Theology*

Given his interest in theatre, it should come as no surprise that Hans Urs von Balthasar utilizes the concept of disponibility most extensively, alongside a constellation of related terms such as availability, readiness, openness, and indifference. In connection with theatre, Balthasar uses disponibility to describe Stanislavski's ideal actor, one who is completely available to perform a particular role. In other words, disponibility is a condition "enabling the actor convincingly to embody the (poetic) reality of the role, to 'substantiate' its 'truth.'" Without developing disponibility, actors abandon their mission and are simply left with "the stage cliché," doomed to inauthentic performance.³⁷

Balthasar links disponibility to the Ignatian tradition of *indiferencia*, which also stands in continuity with the notion of *apatheia* espoused by several church fathers and *gelassenheit* common among Rhineland mystics.³⁸ Unlike the passive connotations of these other concepts, however, Balthasar contends that indifference is an attitude of receptivity that goes "beyond passivity and activity," and can be paradoxically called an "active indifference."³⁹ Like the disponibility of a seasoned actor, indifference is not just passively letting things happen, but an openness to respond actively to one's role and to God. Thus, indifference is "readiness for anything God may ask,"⁴⁰ or "a readiness to step into whatever role in the play

³⁷ Balthasar, *TD II*, 288; Cf. *TD III*, 532-33; Aidan Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide Through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 31.

³⁸ Balthasar, *GL V*, 102. Balthasar also acknowledge his debt to his contemporary Adrienne von Speyr, who articulates this concept in *Bereitschaft: Dimension Christlichen Gehorsams* (Berlin: Johannes Verlag, 1974). André Nathanaël translated this work into French as *Disponibilité: Dimensions de L'obéissance Chrétienne* (Lessius, 1997).

³⁹ Balthasar, *GL V*, 112-13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

God has in mind.”⁴¹ Balthasar explains how this concept stands in close proximity to Luther’s notion of “pure faith,” which implies a radical openness to God’s infinite goodness.⁴² As such, David Schindler concludes that Balthasar uses indifference to denote the fundamental attitude of Christian existence: “complete disponibility to God’s will.”⁴³

The perfect example of disponibility is Jesus’ readiness to do the will of the Father. Balthasar links this observation with Stanislavski’s role-oriented disponibility, and explains how Jesus’ disponibility to his role and mission given by the Father provides the model for disponibility to our role and mission in Christ.⁴⁴ To be disponible, therefore, is to be in a state of complete receptivity to the will of God the Father as embodied by the Lord Jesus, not a “quietistic passivity, but a *pure availability*, one that is so *open* that it responds to even the most unexpected nod of the Head.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, Balthasar locates a prime example of disponibility in Mary the mother of Jesus, who displays an “active-passive readiness to receive the whole Word.”⁴⁶ Indeed, it is Mary’s “disponibility of her attitude of faith” that makes her the “ideal (moral) and real (physical) womb of the church.”⁴⁷

Ben Quash questions, however, if Balthasar’s delineation of indifference or disponibility actually avoids the danger of passivity, and if it diminishes the role of human actors in the theodrama. Rather than freeing the acting subject, Quash criticizes the concept of disponibility for freezing the subject “by a suppression of the things that make human individuals into active, responsible, joyful players in the drama of God and in the arena of the Church.”⁴⁸ For example, would not disponibility have required Job to face his tragic situation with unqualified acceptance rather than actively questioning God’s purposes? Quash maintains that disponibility occupies the opposite extreme of prideful self-assertion, leaving

⁴¹ Balthasar, *TD* II, 59.

⁴² Balthasar, *ET* III, 348.

⁴³ David L. Schindler, *Love Alone Is Credible: Hans Urs Von Balthasar As Interpreter of the Catholic Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 247.

⁴⁴ Balthasar, *TD* III, 533.

⁴⁵ Balthasar, *ET* IV, 304 [emphasis added].

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Balthasar, *ET* II, 166. Likewise, Ben Quash describes Balthasar’s concept of disponibility as “ready to serve the Lord as his handmaid” as exemplified in the disponibility and readiness of Mary. “The Theo-Drama,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs Von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 149. On this basis, Corrine Crammer asks if disponibility is somehow intrinsically related to femininity, or if it transcends the sexes. “One Sex or Two: Balthasar’s Theology of the Sexes,” in *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁸ Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 134. Those things include “energetically committed creativity, imagination, [and] poesis.” *Ibid.*, 132.

the subject limp in the hands of a sovereign God.⁴⁹ Quash faults Balthasar for de-dramatizing the theodrama, and contrasts this to Barth's more existentially dynamic position. Although both Balthasar and Barth embrace an Augustinian view of freedom, "Barth wants in the creature the *obedient* embrace of *freedom*...von Balthasar...wants the *free* embrace of *obedience*."⁵⁰

While Quash's criticism is understandable, especially since Balthasar's vision of disponibility is not always clear and spread across multiple works, we must present Balthasar's view fairly by affirming that a person with complete disponibility never ceases "to be a spontaneous and free human subject."⁵¹ Disponibility does not prohibit action or freeze the subject, for as Balthasar explains, "Receptive and open readiness for God is the ground of all action."⁵² We may conclude, therefore, that disponibility functions for Balthasar as the root of faithful performance in the theodrama, the very attitude or state of being that enables active involvement. David Schindler rightly equates Balthasar's theodramatic ethics with the process of cultivating disponibility. He explains that disponibility, this "letting love have its way," takes many different forms because it "is particularized in as many missions as there are persons chosen by Christ to take part in his universal mission."⁵³ In short, disponibility is the essence of theodramatic formation, empowering actors to perform their mission and embody their roles. As such, Balthasar observes: "Radical disponibility is what is decisive. It is not part of the door but the whole door (one's entire existence) that turns on a single hinge."⁵⁴

Whereas Balthasar identifies Jesus and Mary as the supreme models of disponibility, Khaled Anatolios ascribes divine disponibility primarily to the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵ According to Anatolios, disponibility is God's intra-trinitarian availability in the Person of the Holy Spirit, manifested in the Trinity's outward disponibility to the world.⁵⁶ With insights gleaned from philosopher Gabriel Marcel, who articulated disponibility as the essence of human intersubjectivity, Anatolios delineates several ways in which God is both inwardly and outwardly disponible. For instance, the Spirit is disponible to our prayers, enables our prayers, and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 151. Cf. Francesca Aran Murphy, *Christ, the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 158.

⁵⁰ Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 158.

⁵¹ Balthasar, *GL V*, 106.

⁵² Balthasar, *ET IV*, 307.

⁵³ David L. Schindler, *Hans Urs Von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 244–45.

⁵⁴ Balthasar, *ET IV*, 165.

⁵⁵ Khaled Anatolios, "Divine Disponibilité: The Hypostatic Ethos of the Holy Spirit," *Pro Ecclesia* 12, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 287–308.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 288.

“animates our boldness” to respond to God’s action.⁵⁷ “As such, the Spirit is the one who transforms every *datum* of creaturely reality into the *donum* of divine-human encounter.”⁵⁸ Moreover, since the Spirit is the essence of God’s disponibility as available love, the human ability to love and perform the good is a gift of the Spirit, who indwells us and renders us disponible to God and others.⁵⁹

In addition to Balthasar’s christological and mariological disponibility and Anatolios’s pneumatological disponibility, Wells articulates an ethical disponibility more in keeping with the practices of theatrical improvisation. He proposes that *disponibilité*, which he gleans from Jacques Lecoq, constitutes the heart of Christian formation: a “state of readiness” and “relaxed awareness” formed by participating in the life and worship of the church.⁶⁰ He writes: “The practices and disciplines of Christian discipleship aim to give the Christian this same state of relaxed awareness, so that they have the freedom—indeed, the skill—to “be obvious” in what might otherwise seem an anxious crisis.”⁶¹ Christians with disponibility, therefore, possess the strength of character, imaginative vision, and practical skills that prepare them to improvise their roles in the theodrama. Although Wells demonstrates a fruitful exchange between theatrical disponibility and Christian ethics, this concept does not permeate the rest of the book. If we pursue the model further, is it possible that theatrical disponibility has even more potential for illuminating the nature of theodramatic formation?

One possibility for exploring this potential is to recognize the multi-dimensional nature of theatrical and theodramatic disponibility. As observed above, theatrical disponibility is multi-dimensional receptivity oriented simultaneously toward the director, playwright, script or story, company or troupe, performance traditions, audience, theatre space, and oneself. Transposed into theodramatic terms, we might delineate theodramatic disponibility as a multi-dimensional receptivity oriented simultaneously toward the triune God (as playwright Father, protagonist Son, and producer Spirit), Scripture (as script or story), the church (as company or troupe), oneself (as actor with roles) tradition (as performance traditions), unbelievers (as audience), and local context (as theatre environment and place). In making these comparisons between theatrical model and theodramatic reality, the theodramatic elements neither correspond exactly nor are limited to their theatrical models. For example,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 301-302.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 303.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 307.

⁶⁰ Wells, *Improvisation*, 80.

⁶¹ Ibid., 81. Wells borrows the idea of “being obvious” from Johnstone, *Impro.*

even though it may be fruitful to speak of God as playwright, producer, and protagonist in the theodrama, he also acts as audience.⁶² Despite the inevitable differences between the theatrical model and theodramatic reality, there is still enormous potential in pursuing the model to its full extent, exploring how theodramatic formation is a matter of developing disponibility, not merely in its *christological* (Balthasar), *pneumatological* (Anatolios) and *ethical* (Wells) dimensions, but as *trinitarian, biblical, ecclesial, traditional, missional, and contextual* disponibility.

In the context of everyday participation in the theodrama, these multiple dimensions of disponibility intermingle and overlap to a significant degree. For example, one might develop disponibility to the triune God simultaneously and by means of developing disponibility to Scripture, although it is profitable to explore these dimensions separately. Therefore, even though each dimension will be addressed separately in the chapters that follow, disponibility is a complex whole, and it is still legitimate to discuss disponibility in general as the ideal condition for actors in the theodrama. Besides its multi-dimensional nature, understanding theodramatic formation as disponibility lends other critical insights.

To begin, it brings unique focus and a measure of clarity to discussions regarding “dispositions” in character or virtue ethics, helping to discern the nature of dispositions and how they relate. For example, William Spohn recognizes that dispositions are “habitual character dynamics that become motivations for specific actions” and “connote a readiness to act in certain ways,” but he fails to articulate specifically how Christians should be disposed.⁶³ Dispositions do create a readiness to act and equip us to perform in the theodrama, but to what or to whom should Christians be disposed? As we have already seen, actors in the theodrama have the potential to be disposed in multiple directions, and thereby develop trinitarian, biblical, ecclesial, traditional, missional, and contextual dispositions. Theodramatic disponibility, therefore, is the comprehensive availability of an actor in the theodrama whose character is formed by these various dispositions, and consequently is ready to participate faithfully in the theodrama.

Moreover, disponibility is an ideal concept for keeping formation and performance in dynamic interplay. Disponibility is a condition that creates a readiness to perform, but it is also a condition that matures throughout and as a result of performance. Thus, disponibility shapes and is shaped by performance. Furthermore, understanding theodramatic formation

⁶² These metaphors will be explored in Chapter 3.

⁶³ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 121.

as disponibility helps us reframe the whole discussion in terms of discovery and dynamic, relational development without ignoring all boundaries and constraints. Equipped with theodramatic disponibility, Christians are prepared to approach each situation in “a state of discovery” and a “freshness of beginnings,” developing a readiness to act in ways that are fitting to the liberating constraints of the entire context.⁶⁴

2.4.2 *Beyond Improvisational Disponibility*

Even though theatrical disponibility provides valuable insights for understanding theodramatic formation, the concept—especially as described by Lecoq, Frost and Yarrow in connection with improvisation—also has several limitations. First, according to these scholars, disponibility is a state of neutrality prior to all action.⁶⁵ While disponibility prevents prideful self-assertion, it is important to acknowledge that any action, including all action in the theodrama, arises from subjects wholly embedded in contexts and with commitments that make us biased beings. Theodramatic formation, therefore, does not seek neutrality, but recognizes that actors are already invested and perpetually participating in the theodrama. Balthasar points out the obvious: since every person has a role in the theodrama, we must exclude any possibility of neutrality.⁶⁶ Hauerwas similarly concludes: “Under the guise of neutrality the moral is reduced to matters of choice.”⁶⁷

Second, if disponibility develops from a neutral standpoint, then it precedes formation of characters for particular roles. If, like Balthasar, we understand disponibility in a Stanislavkian sense, however, then disponibility is by its very nature commitment and receptivity to a particular role. Likewise, Christians improvise on the world stage as characters united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, not as generic beings. As those who have been regenerated and are being renewed by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5), Christians are able, as Paul remarks earlier, “to be ready to do whatever is good, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men” (Titus 3:1-2).⁶⁸ Not only that, but each person in the

⁶⁴ Using the phrases of Jacques Lecoq in *The Moving Body*, 38.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 38; Frost and Yarrow even flirt with translating this word as “neutrality,” but decide that “in English this has unfortunate connotations of asensuality and of being disengaged.” *Improvisation in Drama*, 152-53.

⁶⁶ Balthasar, *TD I*, 309.

⁶⁷ Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 31.

⁶⁸ My translation of *πάν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν ἐτοιμὸς εἶναι*. The entry for *ἐτοιμος* and related terms in Kittel’s theological dictionary explains that these words connote a multi-dimensional

theodrama, Christian or non-Christian, develops and prepares for performance as a person created in the image of God and within the constraints of creaturely existence. All of these factors determine that theodramatic disponibility is a condition of particular characters with a mission to perform.

Third, according to Lecoq, disponibility not only precedes character formation, but has no “history, past, context, or passions.”⁶⁹ But if disponibility is a condition of characters, then we must admit that all characters are located in temporal situations connected to the past. Even most improv directors recognize that improvisers need to tap into their past to craft fitting performances. That being said, the future remains replete with possibility, for as Keith Johnstone observes, “The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future.”⁷⁰ Is the same true for theodramatic formation and performance? On the one hand, participation in the theodrama is rooted in history, and actors in the theodrama are responsible to cultivate disponibility to the historical theodrama as revealed in Scripture. Paul wrote to Timothy that Scripture is useful for many things, primarily so that “the man of God may be competent and *made ready for every good work*” (2 Tim 3:17).⁷¹ By attending to Scripture, Christians can be like people “walking backward,” capable of reincorporating the biblical plot. But on the other hand, theodramatic disponibility also includes availability toward the future as biblically and prophetically imagined. As Trevor Hart affirms: “While we may not have access to a script, we need, and are offered, some imaginative vision of an end, a closure, a *telos* to our living which bestows meaning and worth upon it, and which grants a sense of direction.”⁷² Proper theodramatic disponibility is attuned and responsive to the past and the future as revealed in Scripture: the “already” *and* the “not yet.” One of the major differences between theodramatic and improvisational disponibility, therefore, is the role Scripture plays as theodramatic transcript and prescript.⁷³

Fourth, because Christians develop disponibility as characters in the theodrama, the process of formation is riddled with conflict. This clashes with Lecoq’s view that improvisational disponibility is “a state of receptiveness to everything around us, with no

readiness that “gives the Christian life a distinctive dynamic character.” Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 706.

⁶⁹ Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, 38.

⁷⁰ Johnstone, *Impro*, 116.

⁷¹ My translation of *πρὸς πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθὸν ἐξηρτισμένως*.

⁷² Trevor Hart, “The Sense of an Ending: Finitude and the Authentic Performance of Life,” in Hart and Guthrie, *Faithful Performances*, 176.

⁷³ This idea will be unpacked in Chapter 4.

inner conflict.”⁷⁴ Theodramatic formation takes place in the midst of a cosmic and spiritual battle, a conflict between the old and new self. As the Apostle Paul admits, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom 7:15).⁷⁵ Disponibility involves “the desire to do what is right,” but is constantly confronted with the inability to carry it out (Rom 7:18b). In the midst of this conflict, Christians take great comfort and courage in the Spirit as director, who not only sets us free from sin and death, but also empowers us to live in newness of life (Rom 8:1-4).

Lastly, it is common to view disponibility, especially in improvisational theatre, as a state of *unconstrained* availability to pursue any possibility. Indeed, if the improviser in a state of disponibility is a neutral being or blank slate, as Lecoq maintains, then the possibilities for action are endless. But if improvisation within the theodrama is historically situated, character-bound, conflict-ridden, and Spirit-enabled, then it must be understood as an availability to act within particular constraints. As Jeremy Begbie rightly observes regarding musical improvisation: “Improvisation provides a powerful enactment of the truth that our freedom is enabled to flourish only by engaging with and negotiating constraints.”⁷⁶ Besides what Begbie calls the “continuous constraints” of living in time and a physical universe,⁷⁷ theodramatic disponibility is constrained by the various directions in which the improviser is disponible: the triune God, Scripture, the church, tradition, unbelievers, and local context. Formation and performance are oriented toward each of these dimensions, and we are paradoxically bound yet free to improvise within them.⁷⁸ As such, they are “liberating constraints” within which we begin to conceive of improvisational possibilities.⁷⁹ Disponibility, as Begbie describes it, “demands of the participants a peculiar kind of alertness

⁷⁴ Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, 36.

⁷⁵ Dunn describes this as essentially an eschatological conflict, with the believer experiencing the not-yet fulfilled potentials of Spirit-filled life. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 389–90.

⁷⁶ Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 199.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁷⁸ Ethical discernment, as Brueggemann observes, is “the delicate recognition that reality is an intricate network of limits and possibilities.” *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 465.

⁷⁹ Gary Peters, drawing on the work of Isaiah Berlin, calls this constrained freedom a *negative freedom*, which includes “a collective language of care and enabling, of dialogue and participation, a pure aesthetically cleansed language of communal love.” *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2009), 29.

to these constraints.”⁸⁰ It is “for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1), freedom within the loving constraints of God’s gracious gifts.⁸¹

Based on this critical engagement, it is possible to observe how theatrical disponibility—whether for scripted or improvisational theatre—provides heuristic insights for theodramatic formation as multi-dimensional disponibility that readies actors for theodramatic performance.⁸² Several areas have been highlighted, however, in which theodramatic disponibility differs from its theatrical model and needs to maintain more secure theological footing. Given these considerations, theodramatic disponibility may be defined as *receptivity or availability to the triune God, Scripture, the church, tradition, unbelievers, and local contexts that produces readiness for theodramatic performance*. Disponibility is inherently biased, arising out of passionate action and involvement in theodrama. It is what David Ford articulates as the heart of the good life: an “active passivity” and “letting ourselves be embraced” in a web of relationality.⁸³ Christians develop theodramatic disponibility as characters in the theodrama, embroiled in the battle against sin and the particularities of finite existence.⁸⁴ Sin is but one constraint among many within which theodramatic formation and performance unfold, but the Spirit enables Christians to embrace and navigate these constraints with improvisational freedom.

2.4.3 *Developing Disponibility*

According to Frost and Yarrow, developing disponibility involves a “total awareness” to everything, because without this awareness, actors are unable to be receptive and adapt to each situation.⁸⁵ Likewise, from a more philosophical perspective, Gary Peters locates the core of improvisation in “an awareness of relationalities.”⁸⁶ Similarly, Wells identifies “relaxed awareness” with disponibility in Christian ethics, which enables “trust and respect

⁸⁰ Ibid., 200.

⁸¹ As such, this is both a freedom *from* slavery to sin (5:2-12) and a freedom *for* Spirit-filled living (5:13-26). Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 261.

⁸² Although space prohibits exploring this connection at length, disponibility shares many similarities to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* as the disposition that produces the regulated improvisation of practices. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72, 78.

⁸³ David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 63.

⁸⁴ For an excellent exploration of these issues, see Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller, eds., *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011).

⁸⁵ Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 152.

⁸⁶ Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, 29.

for oneself and other actors...alertness and attention...fitness and engagement.”⁸⁷ Rather than defining disponibility as relaxed awareness, however, it is more accurate to recognize awareness as an intellectual habit that aids the development of disponibility. Without building awareness, an actor will never be disponible or receptive, and therefore will not have a readiness to perform.

To explain this concept of awareness, it is helpful to draw on Michael Polanyi’s distinction between focal and tacit awareness. Focal awareness is the attention we give to a particular object, like the text on this page. Tacit awareness is our knowledge of other subsidiary objects and our entire surroundings, like the room in which you are reading this text.⁸⁸ In addition, Polanyi explains how we interiorize focal awareness of individual objects in order to build tacit awareness of a coherent whole. We maintain our tacit awareness even when we are no longer giving focal awareness to the original object. For instance, a reader will continue to be aware of this text even after he pauses or finishes reading and moves on to do something else.⁸⁹ Interestingly, Polanyi describes the relationship between focal and tacit awareness by employing a theatrical metaphor. Actors experience stage fright when their focal awareness of particulars on stage overwhelms or obliterates their tacit awareness of the play and its plot. In other words, when actors focus on their specific lines or actions to the neglect of everything around them and a sense for the whole context of the play, they will paralyze their performance.⁹⁰ Actors need both focused attention and comprehensive awareness. Based on this observation, developing disponibility, whether in the theatre or the theodrama, involves developing *awareness* of every dimension and *attentiveness* to particular elements. Awareness without attentiveness is like seeing the forest but missing the trees, whereas attentiveness without awareness notices the trees but misses the forest.

Developing theatrical disponibility, therefore, is a matter of cultivating attentiveness and awareness. Stanislavski observes how concentrated attention to something or someone already implies receptivity and a readiness to respond. In fact, he notes that the more attention we give to something or someone, the more we desire or are inclined to do something with or for that object or person.⁹¹ As such, attentiveness aids disponibility, since included within the attentive gaze is receptivity and a readiness to respond, inspiring creative

⁸⁷ Wells, *Improvisation*, 80.

⁸⁸ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1958), 55.

⁸⁹ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (London: Routledge, 1967), 18.

⁹⁰ Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 56.

⁹¹ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 76.

performances. John Reed Hodgson and Ernest Richard highlight this connection: “If we are open and receptive, we can make discoveries both about ourselves and others from these moments. If we are less receptive, the tendency will be to reproduce what we consider to be socially acceptable responses which become standardized and stereotyped.”⁹² Developing disponibility through focused attention and comprehensive awareness, therefore, leads to imaginative performances rather than resorting to stereotypical action.

Attentiveness and awareness are equally important in developing theodramatic disponibility. Martha Nussbaum maintains that every good action depends on being “finely aware and richly responsible,” and in order to be ready to perform the good, each person needs “the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient feature’s of one’s particular situation.”⁹³ Furthermore, Nussbaum explains how improvisational action requires even more attentiveness than acting with a script, since it involves being “actively aware and responsive at every moment.”⁹⁴ The improviser who is responsively attentive and aware is a disponible actor and ready to perform in the most fitting ways. Consequently, the improviser “must at every moment—far more than one who goes by an external script—be responsively alive and committed to the other actors, to the evolving narrative, to the laws and constraints of the genre and its history.”⁹⁵ Therefore, the person who is able to develop disponibility through attentiveness and awareness will have “an ability to miss less, to be responsible to more.”⁹⁶

Vanhoozer relies on Nussbaum to conclude that Christians will be ready to improvise in the theodrama when they are “finely aware and richly responsible.” An improviser in the theodrama is “ready both because of her prior training and because she is alert and attentive to her environment.”⁹⁷ For Vanhoozer, attentiveness and awareness are “ingredients of the virtue of perception” that prepares us to act in fitting and wise ways in diverse situations.⁹⁸ More specifically, Vanhoozer speaks of being “attuned and attentive both to the canon and to the contemporary context.”⁹⁹ Therefore, theodramatic performance involves spontaneity resulting from “years of disciplined preparation.” This process of formation brings an actor

⁹² John Reed Hodgson and Ernest Richards, *Improvisation* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1974), 1.

⁹³ Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁹⁷ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 338.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 334.

into a state of disponibility, which is “one’s preparedness to fit in and contribute to whatever starts to happen.”¹⁰⁰

In similar fashion, Hauerwas argues that before we can do the good we must see the good, which involves attentiveness to and awareness of reality in an “effort to overcome illusion.”¹⁰¹ As such, “the moral life is more a matter of attention than it is of will.”¹⁰² The best kind of improvisation in the Christian life arises from “a kind of attentiveness, attunement, and alertness traditionally associated with contemplative prayer.”¹⁰³ Christians need to be attentive to the story in which they are performing, for “without the requisite alertness and respectful, disciplined attention to the creative rhythm of things, the performance falls flat.”¹⁰⁴ Hauerwas also notes that faithful improvisation “demands a certain attention and receptivity, an alertness on our part to the movement of God’s grace in every move.”¹⁰⁵ This attentiveness and awareness forms characters with readiness to enact fitting improvisation.

Even though they do not use the term *disponibility*, Nussbaum, Vanhoozer and Hauerwas all acknowledge the importance of attention and awareness in ethical formation. They do not always state clearly, however, the object of this attention and awareness. Vanhoozer states that attention should be directed toward canonical text and contemporary context, Nussbaum advocates attention to and awareness of the dramatic situation and evolving narrative, and Hauerwas speaks in general terms of attentiveness to the movement of God’s grace in the world. At this juncture, the multi-dimensional nature of theatrical and theodramatic disponibility provides much-needed clarity. According to this model, actors in the theodrama *develop disponibility through attentiveness to and awareness of the triune God, Scripture, the church, tradition, unbelievers, and local contexts*. The following chapters will explore each of these dimensions in turn, creating a vision for theodramatic formation as multi-dimensional disponibility.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 43.

¹⁰² Ibid., 41.

¹⁰³ Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 81.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 103-04.

2.5 PERFORMANCE: THEODRAMATIC FITTINGNESS

By discussing theodramatic formation in terms of disponibility, we are already in the realm of performance, since even formation takes place on the theodramatic stage. Despite this dynamic interplay, it is still helpful to consider how performance of action corresponds with formation of actors. Given the multi-dimensional nature of formation articulated above, this section investigates how the notion of *fittingness* navigates the complexities of theodramatic performance in relation to each dimension. Since fittingness is a term utilized in both aesthetic and ethical theory, this section begins with a brief examination of the use of fittingness in both disciplines and finishes by showing how theodramatic fittingness combines both by seeking beautiful performances of the good.

2.5.1 *Aesthetic Fittingness*

In aesthetic theory, one use of fittingness is in judging the overall harmony of an artwork based on the appropriateness of individual parts to the whole. For example, a painting displays fittingness if its individual brush strokes contribute appropriately to the painting as a whole. A building is aesthetically fitting if the style of its windows matches the overall architectural design. Critics explain the fittingness of any artwork in various ways based on the relation of parts to the whole and often will judge an artwork's success according to the extent of its fittingness.¹⁰⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff calls the artist "a worker in fittingness," which means at the least that artists seek to create works that have fittingness of individual parts to the whole.¹⁰⁷

This notion of fittingness also applies to the "fit" between different elements within an artwork, such as the fit between musical and nonmusical elements in operatic drama. For example, Jerrold Levinson demonstrates both descriptive and dramatic fittingness within Strauss's *Salome*. On the one hand, Strauss creates descriptive fittingness by matching Herod's expression "there is a chill wind blowing" with "eerie glissandos," or setting John's prophetic announcements to "flat-tone, relentless" music. On the other hand, Strauss obtains dramatic fittingness by setting theological disputations to a "spirited fugato" or creating strained vocal

¹⁰⁶ "In art as in life, fittingness is at the heart of aesthetic success." Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 126.

¹⁰⁷ Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 119.

lines for Narraboth, a particularly anxious character.¹⁰⁸ According to Levinson, Strauss's genius is not merely the descriptive and dramatic fittingness between musical and nonmusical elements, but that he is able to maintain the fittingness of musical coherence and completion.¹⁰⁹ In similar fashion, Bertholt Brecht asserts that an effective drama is one that displays fittingness between all the incidents that happen on stage and the overall story being performed.¹¹⁰

In addition to fittingness as coherence of parts to wholes and between different elements within the work of art, fittingness also applies to appropriateness of certain qualities to other qualities, whether within or beyond the artwork itself. Wolterstorff explains this concept by observing how fittingness is a feature of all reality, since most people would recognize the fit between lightness, smallness, ice cream, Mozart's music and Matisse's paintings or between heaviness, largeness, warm pea soup, Beethoven's music, and Rembrandt's paintings. In addition, Wolterstorff claims that most people associate Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with purple and burgundy rather than yellow and green.¹¹¹ Wolterstorff calls this kind of fittingness "cross-modal similarity," because although colors are a completely different "modality" than music or drama, we can still identify the colors that "fit" different kinds of musical or dramatic performances. Works of art also express fittingness on a more profound level, whether in relation to states of consciousness, human experience and actions, or the holy.¹¹² The artist as a "worker in fittingness," therefore, creates art displaying fittingness within the work of art as well as fittingness between that artwork and a whole world of meaning and associations.¹¹³

Based on this understanding, to what extent are actors "workers in fittingness?" For one, actors seek to maintain the fittingness of their own character and actions to the story developing on stage. A skillful actor is able to make every word and action fit at a particular moment, based on everything that happened previously and everything happening in the present. Actors are "workers in fittingness," therefore, by virtue of acting in appropriate ways to specific situations and within the play as a whole. In this sense, skillful theatrical performance maintains a good fit with every dimension of the theatrical event, including the

¹⁰⁸ Jerrold Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 57–58.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹⁰ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 200.

¹¹¹ Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 97.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 114–17.

¹¹³ Similarly, Hans Rookmaaker identifies "appropriateness" as the ultimate norm for good art, which he explains as a synonym for "good taste." *Art Needs No Justification* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2010), 45–53.

director, playwright, script or story, company or troupe, performance traditions, audience, and theatrical environment. Furthermore, an actor is a worker in fittingness by discerning the physical and verbal expressions that fit whatever emotion or idea she is trying to communicate. For instance, if an actor wants to express something funny and desires the audience to laugh, she needs to discern what kind of expression is fitting with hilarity, which may vary according to the situation. Of course, this notion would get more difficult if an actor is assigned to express authentic dependence on God. What would or should this look like? What kind of action is fitting in this kind of situation? These questions are a natural segue into the use of fittingness within the realm of ethics.

2.5.2 *Ethical Fittingness*

Fittingness has a long history in ethical reflection, with scholars tracing the concept back to Homer, while recognizing Cicero as the foremost proponent of the concept in the ancient world.¹¹⁴ Cicero equated moral goodness with fittingness (*decorum*), explaining that good conduct is that which is most fitting to our roles or characters allotted by nature.¹¹⁵ While a similar theme can be found in the early church fathers, medieval theologians utilized fittingness to describe the beauty of a well-proportioned act. For example, Duns Scotus argued that an act is good to the extent that it is proportioned beautifully to every relevant condition.¹¹⁶ In other words, acting morally is an artistic act of relating all the elements of a situation in a beautiful manner.¹¹⁷ While Catholic moral theology continued to maintain an emphasis on situational fittingness, it also became a major theme within twentieth-century situation ethics. C. D. Broad, for instance, argues that an action is right given its harmony within an overall situation. “When I speak of anything as “right”, I am always thinking of it as

¹¹⁴ Max Pohlenz offers an exhaustive treatment of fittingness (*πρεπον*) in the Greek world, beginning with Homer and extending through the first century BC. Max Polenz, “To Prepon: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Griechischen Geistes,” in *Nachrichten von der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, vol. Philologisch-Historische Klasse (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1933), 55–92.

¹¹⁵ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Cicero on Moral Obligation*, trans. John Higginbotham (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 72, 78–79.

¹¹⁶ This should be distinguished from proportionalism as it developed in twentieth-century Catholic moral theology, which involves judging right action according to the proportion of good and harm involved. See T. E. O’Connell, “Proportionality, Principle Of,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

¹¹⁷ For a good introduction to this theme in Scotus, see Mary Beth Ingham, *The Philosophical Vision of John Duns Scotus: An Introduction* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 175–76.

a factor in a wider total situation, and that I mean that it is “appropriately” or “fittingly” related to the rest of this situation.”¹¹⁸ Likewise, W. D. Ross claims that just as a key is “right” for a particular lock, an action can be right or fitting for a particular situation.¹¹⁹ Moral fittingness involves the “greatest amount of suitability possible in the circumstances.”¹²⁰ Ross explains, however, that moral fittingness is actually more aesthetic (a piano being in tune with an orchestra) than it is utilitarian (finding the right key for the lock). As such, “There seems to be something not altogether different in the way in which one part of a beautiful whole calls for the other parts.”¹²¹ By defining fittingness as the suitability of a particular action within a beautiful whole, Ross’s expression of moral fittingness matches the first aspect of aesthetic fittingness articulated above: the harmony of parts to the unified whole.¹²²

H. Richard Niebuhr develops a similar understanding of ethical fittingness, but within an overall framework of moral “response-ability.” Responsibility begins by cultivating situational awareness and interpreting our awareness of the situation in order to understand it correctly.¹²³ Thus, Ogletree observes that Niebuhr locates the foundation of moral obligation in interpretive attentiveness.¹²⁴ Not unlike the notion of disponibility articulated above, Niebuhr believes that readiness to act with fittingness arises from attentiveness to and awareness of what is happening. Not only that, but fitting action also depends on the ability to anticipate reactions and subsequent responses.¹²⁵ Only after developing situational awareness and anticipation, Niebuhr claims, are we prepared for fitting action in the context of human relationships. Thus: “Fitting action, the one that fits into a total interaction as response and as anticipation of further response, is alone conducive to the good and alone is right.”¹²⁶

¹¹⁸ C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1930), 164.

¹¹⁹ W. D. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics*, Gifford Lectures 1935-36 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 51.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹²² Since ethical fittingness shares so much with aesthetic fittingness, it follows that the arts—and theatre in particular—can help us cultivate ethical fittingness. Cf. William C. Spohn, “The Formative Power of Story and the Grace of Indirection,” in *Seeking Goodness and Beauty: The Use of the Arts in Theological Ethics*, ed. Patricia Lamoureux and Kevin O’Neil (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 28–29.

¹²³ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 61–63.

¹²⁴ Thomas W. Ogletree, “The Activity of Interpreting in Moral Judgment,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 3.

¹²⁵ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 64.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 61. Douglas Browning, writing around the time of Niebuhr’s death, articulates a similar understanding of ethical fittingness: “The right action is really the fitting action, given the entire situation, which includes one’s factual beliefs and moral standards, as well as the external factors of context and consequence.” “The Moral Act,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 12, no. 47 (April 1962): 98.

Niebuhr refers to the early church as an example of a community first discerning what is happening and then formulating a fitting response. These actions were the product of a social self in solidarity with others and situated in time.¹²⁷ Niebuhr summarizes his proposal in both relational and aesthetic terms:

Our responsive actions have the character of fittingness or unfittingness. We seek to make them fit into a process of interaction. The questions we raise about them are not only those of their rightness or wrongness, their goodness or badness, but of their fitness or unfittingness in the total movement, the whole conversation. We seek to have them fit into the whole as a sentence fits into a paragraph of a book, a note into a chord in a movement in a symphony, as the act of eating a common meal fits into the lifelong companionship of a family, as the decision of a statesman fits into the ongoing movement of his nation's life with other nations, or as the discovery of a scientific verifact [sic] fits into the history of science. But whether they fit into the actual process, that is another story.¹²⁸

Fitting action, according to Niebuhr, includes the appropriateness of particular responses to the overall interactions and conversation in which these responses are located, much like the response of trumpets within the overall performance of a symphony. Consequently, it is not just the situation that is determinative of fitting action, but the overall story or myth in which that situation is located. As such, Christianity “calls into question our concept of what is fitting—that is, of what really fits in—by questioning our picture of the context into which we now fit our actions.”¹²⁹ In other words, fitting action requires both situational wisdom and narrative imagination. Furthermore, fitting action is oriented to the fitting action of the triune God, particularly toward Jesus who is “the responsible man who in all his responses to altercations did what fitted into divine action.”¹³⁰ Indeed, Jesus makes fitting performance possible, and the Spirit guides and directs. As such, James Gustafson rightly observes that fitting action is not merely the result of human discernment, but “refers to what God is enabling and requiring, not just what seems pleasing to men.”¹³¹ Similarly, John Howard Yoder criticizes a Stoic view of fittingness that many Christian ethicists have adopted, where fittingness refers to what is most adequate, relevant, or effective without any reference to the

¹²⁷ As a result, Linda Holler observes that Niebuhr's notion of fitting action implies relatedness and the coherence of an entire system of relationality. “In Search of a Whole-System Ethic,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1984): 221.

¹²⁸ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 97.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹³¹ James M. Gustafson, “Moral Discernment in the Christian Life,” in *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics*, ed. Gene H. Outka and Paul Ramsey (London: SCM, 1968), 35.

particularity of Jesus.¹³² True fittingness is that which is appropriate to the law of God as fulfilled by Jesus; fittingness is christological rather than merely situational.¹³³

2.5.3 *Theodramatic fittingness*

What do these explorations of aesthetic and ethical fittingness contribute to an understanding of theodramatic performance? Before suggesting a way forward, it is crucial first to consider Vanhoozer's use of fittingness in *The Drama of Doctrine*. On the one hand, Vanhoozer employs language similar to H. Richard Niebuhr by referring to fitting participation and responses within the theodrama. Although there is more than one way to participate with fittingness in the theodrama, some ways "make for a better fit given the (created and recreated) nature of things."¹³⁴ On the other hand, Vanhoozer differs from Niebuhr in articulating two primary dimensions of theodramatic fittingness: Scripture and situations. First, "By showing us what is fitting, Scripture becomes the means of our becoming fit."¹³⁵ The Spirit shapes "our sensibility as to what is evangelically fitting" through our reading of Scripture. Second, fitting participation in the theodrama requires fittingness to changing situations. As the scenes change, our fitting action needs to adapt, and doctrine helps us to maintain "dramatic consistency."¹³⁶ Like Niebuhr, Vanhoozer also recognizes that fitting action should anticipate the future as eschatologically imagined.¹³⁷

Vanhoozer maintains that fittingness integrates the ethical and the aesthetic.¹³⁸ Borrowing language from Wolterstorff and others, Vanhoozer asserts that fittingness gauges the harmony between parts and the whole.¹³⁹ More specifically, "the form in which other parts of the theo-drama are ultimately to fit, in short, is the history of Jesus Christ, a history that represents the whole and complete divine action from creation to consummation: *the Christo-*

¹³² John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 8–9.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 176. Yoder also explains how fittingness is never merely focused on one's individual role (as in Stoicism) but judged in terms of relationships within the body of Christ (ecclesial fittingness) and the church's mission (missional fittingness).

¹³⁴ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 108.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹³⁷ Kevin Vanhoozer, "Praising in Song: Beauty in the Arts," in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 117.

¹³⁸ The concept of fittingness, in other words, is one way of unpacking Moltmann's statement that "morality and aesthetics are one." *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1992), 261.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

drama."¹⁴⁰ Therefore, "Christian wisdom is largely a matter of rethinking theology, ethics, and worship alike in terms of Christo-dramatic fittingness."¹⁴¹ Since Scripture reveals the Christo-drama, particular performances should display fittingness to the canonical text. "As the only authoritative account of the Christo-drama, the canon thus becomes what we might term the church's Rule of Fit."¹⁴² But given changing circumstances and contexts, particular performances should also seek fittingness to contemporary context. Here, Vanhoozer draws on Wolterstorff's notion of fittingness as cross-modal similarity to describe the process of "transposing biblical modes of speech and action into their contemporary counterparts."¹⁴³ By improvising fitting theodramatic performances, Christians are going beyond literal repetition to a metaphorical and imaginative transposition of the canonical script into new situations. Consequently, "Patterns of speech, thought, and action will be fitting insofar as they discover and display a real similarity to the Christo-drama in spite of the culturally dissimilar."¹⁴⁴ In sum, Vanhoozer believes that theodramatic fittingness is canonical and contextual, which is ultimately ruled by Christological fittingness.¹⁴⁵

Vanhoozer brings appropriate theological perspective to bear on the situational complexity of fitting action. Like Broad, Ross, and Niebuhr, Vanhoozer agrees that fitting action constitutes particular responses to particular situations. Another similarity between Vanhoozer and Niebuhr is their recognition that fitting action arises out of accurate attention to and awareness of the situation, and thus fittingness is grounded in disponibility to the context, including the entire narrative or drama in which we are situated. But whereas Niebuhr only vaguely refers to the narrative that determines our understanding of and fitting response to particular situations, Vanhoozer specifically and carefully identifies Scripture as the source of our vision and the standard for fitting performances. In other words, the strength of Vanhoozer's proposal is that he orients both disponibility and fittingness toward Scripture *and* situations and shows how they relate, making biblical fittingness the norm for situational or contextual fittingness.¹⁴⁶ Despite this clarity, Vanhoozer's proposal still seems to

¹⁴⁰ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 257.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁴⁵ More recently, Vanhoozer has affirmed the Trinitarian nature of theodramatic fittingness: "Participation in God is ultimately a matter of "fitting" into forms of triune communicative activity." *Remythologizing Theology*, 272.

¹⁴⁶ Russell Connors Jr. also captures this dynamic, but uses music instead of theatre as his guiding model in "Music and Morality: 'Performance' and the Normative Claim of Scores and Texts," in

overlook the complexity of fitting action as it relates to every dimension of performance. Rather than a two-dimensional model of fittingness, therefore, a multi-dimensional model, as already articulated in relation to disponibility, does greater justice the complex art of theodramatic performance. While faithful performance certainly involves biblical and contextual fittingness, it also contains trinitarian, ecclesial, traditional, and missional dimensions. Just as actors in the theatre pursue well-crafted performances that fit with the script or developing story, the director's guidance, other actors, performance traditions, the audience, and context, so also actors in the theodrama seek a similar form of performative wisdom.

While multi-dimensional fittingness follows from a theatrical model, it also has biblical precedent. We observe this, for example, when the Apostle Paul helps Christians in Corinth wrestle with the issue of head coverings in worship (1 Cor 11:1-16). Toward the end of this section in his letter, Paul makes it clear that wearing head coverings is a matter of fittingness: “*Judge for yourselves: is it fitting for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?*” (v. 13).¹⁴⁷ Up to this point in his argument, Paul had already indicated several strategies for discerning the fittingness of this action, which will be delineated while relating them to overall themes in the Pauline corpus.¹⁴⁸

First, Paul urges *christological fittingness*, not only as a result of mystical union with Christ as the head (κεφαλη) of the body, just as man is the head of woman (1 Cor 11:3), but also in the form of practical imitation (1 Cor 11:1). Christological fittingness is a dominant theme in all of Paul's letters, like in Ephesians 5, where actions fitting for saints (Eph 5:3: καθὼς πρέπει αἰίοις)—as opposed to sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, etc.—are founded on Christ's giving himself as an offering and sacrifice (Eph 5:2). Paul makes a similar injunction in Colossians 3:18 for wives to submit to husbands “as is fitting in the Lord.”¹⁴⁹ Acting in

Seeking Goodness and Beauty: The Use of the Arts in Theological Ethics, ed. Patricia Lamoureux and Kevin O'Neil (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), see especially 161.

¹⁴⁷ My translation: Ἐν ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς κρίνατε πρέπον ἐστὶν γυναῖκα ἀκατακάλυπτον τῷ θεῷ προσεύχεσθαι. Most versions translate πρέπον as “is it proper...?” (e.g. NIV and ESV), although BDAG suggests “to be fitting/to be suitable” (861).

¹⁴⁸ Thiselton suggests that Paul appeals to fittingness in verse 13 in reference “to the variety of arguments and principles which apply to this situation,” many of which Paul has already explained in 11:1-12. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 843.

¹⁴⁹ Here, Paul uses the word ἀνήκω, which is similar to πρέπω and focuses on what is appropriate (BDAG, 78-79). Paul also puts ἀνήκω in parallel to πρέπω in Ephesians 5:3-4, showing their conceptual congruency. Several commentators on Ephesians note that πρέπον is a term gleaned from Stoicism, although Paul uses it in a different manner, as we observe already in this notion of Christological fittingness. Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T&T

christologically fitting ways, therefore, means performing in ways that follow the pattern of Christ's own performance.

Second, Paul appeals to *traditional fittingness* by encouraging the Corinthians to maintain the traditions Paul had received and delivered (1 Cor 11:2). By encouraging traditional fittingness, Paul is not referring to mere human tradition (Col 2:8), but to the way, truth, and life of Jesus as expressed in both orthodoxy (2 Thess 2:15) and orthopraxy (2 Thess 3:6-15). Traditional fittingness is thus an extension of christological fittingness, since Paul only urges imitation of traditions in so far as they faithfully represent and recapitulate Christ.

Third, Paul defends the *biblical fittingness* of head coverings from the perspective of the biblical story and the creation order, with head coverings displaying a fitting reincorporation of this story (1 Cor 11:8-12). Although Paul's use of Scripture has often perplexed interpreters, there is no doubt that fittingness to particular passages and the plot of Scripture takes priority in Pauline ethics. A similar dynamic is at work in Titus 2, where Paul instructs Titus to teach and practice what is fitting to healthy doctrine (Titus 2:1), which seeks to understand the biblical drama culminating in person and work of Jesus who has the power to redeem and purify (Tit 2:12-14).

Fourth, Paul considers *contextual fittingness* in connection with the propriety of women covering their heads, shaving them, or leaving them uncovered (1 Cor 10:6).¹⁵⁰ This corresponds with Paul's previously stated concern to be all things to all men, whether Jews or Gentiles (1 Cor 9:19-23). Consequently, included in this cultural fittingness are hints of a *missional fittingness* oriented toward the reception of unbelievers. In addition, some commentators have noted that when Paul argues that head coverings are fitting to "the way things are" (1 Cor 11:14: ἡ φύσις), he is not drawing on the Stoic idea of fittingness to nature, but fittingness to the conventions of his particular culture. Thus, this kind of fittingness can be subsumed under the dimension of contextual fittingness.¹⁵¹ Paul certainly

Clark, 1998), 477; Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 360, n. 4.

¹⁵⁰ Some commentators focus on the Roman custom for women to cover their heads during prayers and sacrifices (e.g. Witherington), and others focus on the similar Jewish custom (e.g. Conzelmann). It is most likely that Paul had both practices mind in order to discern cultural fittingness (e.g. Thiselton). Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 823-25. Cf. Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 233; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 185.

¹⁵¹ John Calvin, Wolfgang Schrage and Anthony Thiselton have argued that by "natural," Paul was referring to "how things are" in the "context for which he was writing" (Cf. Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 844).

does ground his argument in the created order (vv. 7-9), but his observations regarding length of hair and his appeal for women to wear head coverings are ways for this created order to be respected with fittingness to first-century Corinthian culture.

Finally, Paul acknowledges an *ecclesial fittingness* to the practices and performances of other Christian individuals and communities (1 Cor 11:16). To promote ecclesial fittingness, Paul feels strong enough, as in the case of Onesimus (Philem 1:8-9), to use authoritative commands (*ἐπιτάσσειν*), but prefers to make appeals (*παρακαλεω*) for performing fitting action on the basis of love.

From this brief overview, we can observe that a Pauline perspective on fittingness matches the multi-dimensional nature of theodramatic performance. The only dimension of theodramatic fittingness Paul does not mention in 1 Corinthians 11 is a fuller *trinitarian fittingness*, although elsewhere Paul puts great emphasis on living in a manner fitting to the Spirit (Gal 5:16-26) and to the Father from whom we receive blessing (Eph 1:3) and on whom we are constantly dependent (1 Cor 8:6). Since the Father and Spirit are one with the Son, performance that is fitting toward the Father and Spirit is also fitting to the Son, although it is possible to address each in turn, which is the goal of the following chapter. If christological fittingness is expanded to include trinitarian fittingness, therefore, Paul's perspective provides ample reason to articulate the goal of theodramatic performance as words, thoughts, and action that are fitting to the triune God, Scripture, the church, tradition, unbelievers, and local context.

The fittingness Paul encourages in 1 Corinthians, consequently, is the wisdom of Christ rather than the wisdom of the world. God has “made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1 Cor 1:20) by suffering in the place of sinners on the cross. On the cross, the most foolish action becomes the most fitting action, and reveals Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24). God reveals his wisdom not through abstract aphorisms, but in the particular person and performance of Jesus of Nazareth in which there is “nothing disembodied, nothing abstract, nothing impersonal.”¹⁵² If Christians have received the mind of Christ and his Spirit of wisdom (1 Cor 2:14-16), then wisdom will similarly resist “the gray fog of abstraction” that “absorbs the sharp particularities of the recognizable face and the familiar street.”¹⁵³ Rather,

¹⁵² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1. Cf. Stephen C. Barton, “Gospel Wisdom,” in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church, and the Contemporary World*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 109.

¹⁵³ Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 1.

wisdom is fitting action in the concrete. This notion of wisdom as concrete fittingness has much in common with Aristotle's articulation of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, as a matter of acting "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way."¹⁵⁴ As such, answering a fool according to his folly may be fitting in some situations, but not in others (Prov 26:4-5). Fitting action is not just doing the right thing, but doing the right thing artfully and beautifully: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Prov 25:11). A word spoken may be true, but it may not be fitting because it is not "timely."¹⁵⁵ Theodramatic fittingness, therefore, is wise action in ever-changing situations, which muddles any attempt to memorize a moral script and perform it on cue; fittingness is an improvisational art.¹⁵⁶ While fittingness is always oriented toward artful performance in concrete situations, however, it also places these situations within the context of the entire theodrama and the action of the triune God, whether transcribed in Scripture or transmitted by Christian tradition. In this way, "fittingness always assumes that some order has been set down around us," and thus situational fittingness always takes into consideration this entire order.¹⁵⁷ When fittingness is oriented to every dimension of the theodrama, the result is wisdom that provides, according to Daniel Hardy, "a configuration for the multidimensionality of the world and God, and how they are and should be related."¹⁵⁸

One way to grasp the multi-dimensional nature of theodramatic fittingness is in connection with Wolterstorff's notion of cross-modal similarity. In the case of theodramatic performance, "modes" are the various dimensions of performance, whether trinitarian, biblical, ecclesial, etc. An action is most fitting, therefore, when it displays appropriateness to every mode or dimension. For example, solemn worship may fit biblically, ecclesially, traditionally, but it may not fit contextually or missionally, for instance, in an African worship service. In this case, solemn worship does not have high cross-modal similarity with an African context. Vanhoozer surmises that cross-modal similarity reveals the need for

¹⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b21-22. Cf. *Ibid.*, 1109a27-29. Vanhoozer also connects the themes of Aristotelian *phronesis* with theodramatic fittingness in *Drama of Doctrine*, 324–32.

¹⁵⁵ Barth, *CD III/4*, 584.

¹⁵⁶ A secular counterpart is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "necessary improvisation" in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 8.

¹⁵⁷ Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 95.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel W. Hardy, "The Grace of God and Earthly Wisdom," in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church, and the Contemporary World*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 231.

contextualization, or what he prefers to call “transposition” of the biblical world into contemporary scenes, although as already mentioned, it is slightly more complex than that.¹⁵⁹ Shannon Welch captures the beauty and complexity of fitting performance: “To work for a fitting response, but not a final or definitive response, is to respond with beauty and evocative creativity to the ambiguity and domination of life...It is not triumphalistic, but evocative, for it embodies an intelligent, vital engagement with the complexities of life.”¹⁶⁰ In reality, discerning the fittingness of particular performances in the theodrama resembles the art and complexity of theatrical performance, in which each dimension blends and influences the others. But does each dimension have equal importance, as in Schechner’s performance theory, or do some take priority over others?¹⁶¹ If they are equal, what happens if tradition contradicts Scripture, or the contextual dimension obscures the missional dimension? These and other questions related to the relationship between the various dimensions will be taken up in subsequent chapters. At this point, it suffices to observe that no dimension can be ignored and a dynamic interplay exists between each dimension as actors in the theodrama seek to perform with wisdom, beauty, and fittingness.

2.6 FORMATION, PERFORMANCE AND THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

Having discussed formation as disponibility separately from performance as fittingness, it is crucial to emphasize once again the dynamic interplay between formation and performance. Enacting fitting performances forms disponible actors, and fittingness requires virtuous disponibility.¹⁶² And not only that, but both disponibility and fittingness have trinitarian, biblical, ecclesial, traditional, missional, and contextual dimensions. Another way to trace the connection between disponible actors and fitting actions is by relating them to what are traditionally called the theological virtues: faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:13).

At first glance, disponibility seems to be most similar to faith as receptivity and availability toward someone or something. In fact, Karl Barth describes faith as “receptivity in relation to its object,”¹⁶³ a kind of relational trust which he distinguishes from Schleiermacher’s

¹⁵⁹ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 260–61.

¹⁶⁰ Shannon D. Welch, “‘Lush Life’: Foucault’s Analytics of Power and a Jazz Aesthetic,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Malden/Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 100.

¹⁶¹ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 62.

¹⁶² Wolterstorff highlights the former in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 165.

¹⁶³ Barth, *CD IV/1*, 635.

“dependence” since it arises out of God’s prior receptivity and grace toward us.¹⁶⁴ To be disponible, therefore, is to be someone who trusts, and in the theodrama, this trust is directed ultimately toward the one who is trustworthy: the triune God. But while trust is a present reality, it is also oriented toward the future, where trust merges with hope. The person who really trusts someone also possesses hope in their continued trustworthiness, with confidence that promises will be fulfilled. Hope is another way of describing disponibility oriented toward the future, particularly the eschatological future promised and already experienced in Christ and revealed in Scripture, thus making us “available for everything.”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, disponibility is also linked with love, since love includes a disposition to enjoy someone or something for what it is, rather than seeking to do something with it. Disponibility could be substituted for how Oliver O’Donovan describes love: “an attitudinal disposition that gives rise to various action without being wholly accounted for by any of them.”¹⁶⁶ In sum, disponibility is the confluence of faith, hope, and love, described by Balthasar as “letting go of everything that is one’s own as a bold entrusting of oneself to God.”¹⁶⁷

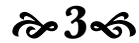
If disponible formation is a way of being trusting, hopeful, and loving, then fitting performance is the enactment of trust, hope, and love in particular situations and toward particular people. It is not enough to trust, hope, and love in general, but to do so in a way that displays trinitarian, biblical, ecclesial, traditional, missional, and contextual fittingness. A key question in the chapters that follow is how each of these dimensions relate, both in developing disponibility and in performing with fittingness. Are all of these dimensions equal, or there some dimensions—like trinitarian disponibility and fittingness—that provide the norm for all the others? While answers to this question and others like it will be taken up in due course, there is one conclusion worth stating at this juncture. Theodramatic formation involves becoming people who are faith-full, hopeful, and loving; theodramatic performance is the enactment of faith, hope, and love. This entire process, moreover, is dependent on the God who makes us disponible and empowers our fitting performances. God is the faithful one, the hoped-for one, and the loving one, and theodramatic formation and performance find their true meaning in communion with him.

¹⁶⁴ Barth, *CD* II/1, 129.

¹⁶⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 44.

¹⁶⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 16.

¹⁶⁷ Balthasar, *GL* V, 72. Cf. Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 44–45.



PLAYWRIGHTS, PROTAGONISTS, PRODUCERS, AND TRINITARIAN THEODRAMATICS

Divine authorship is shorthand for the Father authoring creation and redemption in Christ through the Spirit.

☞ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*¹

“The Actor in the ‘family’ of the Trinity is God the Son: the Playwright Father’s Word in historical flesh.”

☞ Francesca Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation*²

To think of God in terms of a theatre director...gives God a supremely active and creative role...but it does not destroy the autonomy of the creature. It is creative without being manipulative.”

☞ Timothy Gorringe, *God’s Theatre*³

3.1 THE THEODRAMA AS TRIUNE MISSION

If theatre is a drama enacted between people on stage, then *theodrama* involves the interaction between *God* and others on the world stage. More specifically, Ben Quash identifies the theodrama as “human action (people), temporal events (time) and their specific contexts (place) *in relation to God’s purpose*.”⁴ Or according to Kevin Vanhoozer, the theodrama is “the configured space and time of God’s dialogical interaction with human actors and respondents.”⁵ In short, what makes this drama *theodramatic* is the primacy of God’s agency and action. As Balthasar articulated: “It is God who acts, on man, for man and then together with man; the involvement of man in the divine action is part of God’s *action*, not a precondition of it.”⁶ Consequently, dispositive formation and fitting performance in the theodrama depends on right knowledge of and response to the God who acts for and together with humanity. In pursuing such knowledge and response, several questions arise at the outset. What is God’s relationship to the theodrama? Is the theodrama simply “organized by

¹ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 305.

² Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation*, 338.

³ Timothy Gorringe, *God’s Theatre: A Theology of Providence* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 82.

⁴ Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 3–4.

⁵ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 274.

⁶ Balthasar, *TD I*, 18.

God and produced for him and in his presence,” or “can God appear in the play?”⁷ If God enters immanently into the play, then how does he remain transcendent?

Regardless how one begins to answer these questions, each port of entry inevitably leads to the mystery of God’s triune being and action. In fact, even though Balthasar recognizes the inadequacy of trinitarian analogies borrowed from culture,⁸ a central thesis of his *Theo-Drama* is that the author-actor-director triad of dramatic creativity provides an apt analogy for God’s triune being and action.⁹ In fact, Balthasar insists that the author-actor-director triad provides a “perfect metaphor for the economic Trinity in the theo-drama.”¹⁰ Perhaps *perfect* is too strong a word, for Balthasar quickly points out how the metaphor is modified in a theodramatic context. David Cunningham adds a few words of caution, noting the danger in viewing God as three separate people or simply the same person who acts in three different roles.¹¹ Like Balthasar, Cunningham believes “the point of the analogy is not to provide one-to-one resemblance with the triune God, but to give us a sense of why the divine missions are integrally related to the internal self-differentiation in God.”¹²

Consequently, this chapter progresses on the premise that key theatrical roles provide an analogical and by no means perfect model for God’s triune being and action in the theodrama. Rather than the author-actor-director triad first suggested by Balthasar, however, the terms employed in this chapter are playwright, protagonist and producer. In addition to forming a memorable alliteration, these words more accurately reflect specific theatrical roles, although their theodramatic referents (playwright: Father; protagonist: Son; producer: Spirit) remain the same as Balthasar’s.¹³ In exploring separately each of these theatrical roles in relation to God’s triune identity and action, it is crucial to remember that the action of the triune God is indivisible (*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*), and therefore any role or action ascribed to one Person is also performed by the other Persons. For example, the protagonist-Son was involved in the original creation of the theodrama and continues to be involved in its

⁷ Balthasar, *TD III*, 506.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 508.

⁹ Balthasar, *TD I*, 268-305.

¹⁰ Balthasar, *TD III*, 532.

¹¹ This danger motivated the Cappadocian fathers to describe the three Persons of the Trinity in terms of *hypostasis* rather than *prosopon*, the latter derived from the masks worn in theatre so that one actor could play different characters.

¹² David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden/Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 79. Like Balthasar, Cunningham continues to describe the divine missions as *authoring* the play, *performing* the play, and *directing* the play.

¹³ In each section below, I will explain in more detail the reasons for using these specific titles, including the use of “producer” rather than “director.”

production. Nevertheless, we may follow the lead of Scripture and Christian tradition in ascribing different aspects of God's action in the theodrama primarily to particular Persons, which at least enables us to obtain a limited grasp of the infinite triune mystery revealed in Scripture. Indeed, as I embark on this brief investigation of God's triune identity and action, I feel similar to J. I. Packer who once confessed: "As clowns yearn to play Hamlet, so I have wanted to write a treatise on God."¹⁴ Just as Packer admitted that *Knowing God* was not that book, so I know the present attempt will fall significantly short.

Knowledge of the triune God is possible because God himself entered the theodrama as a human protagonist: Jesus of Nazareth. The Father's purpose as playwright was carried out by Jesus the Son as protagonist, providing the pattern for the overall production of the play by the Spirit as producer. In other words, the mission of the Father is known through the mission of the Son and continued by the mission of the Spirit.¹⁵ In carrying out this mission, observes Balthasar, the Son looks to the Father's will which is presented at every moment by the Spirit's prompting.¹⁶ Much more remains to be said about the relationship between playwright-Father, protagonist-Son, and producer-Spirit, but a central truth is that God's triune scripting, acting, and producing the theodrama are inherently missional and constituted by perfect disponibility and fittingness. Reflecting on Balthasar's trinitarian theology, Francesca Murphy remarks that God's own missional disponibility is revealed through "the Father's openness or passivity to receiving his character from the Son, the Son's willingness to be Son, and the Spirit's openness to being the 'giving of the Gift.'¹⁷ Consequently, this perfect disponibility fuels the fitting performance of God's mission to restore his creation into perfect communion with himself.

To be formed and to perform in the theodrama is to reflect and participate in God's communion by growing in disponibility and fittingness to the triune God. Even more profoundly, it is a matter of participating in the disponibility and fitting performance of God

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 5.

¹⁵ Framing this discussion in terms of the mission of God, or *missio Dei*, draws on a phrase originally attributed to Karl Hartenstein in response to Karl Barth, popularized in the 1952 meeting of the International Missionary Conferences, and later developed by theologians and missiologists such as David Bosch, Leslie Newbigin, and Christopher Wright.

¹⁶ Balthasar, *TD III*, 533.

¹⁷ Francesca Aran Murphy, "Hans Urs Von Balthasar: Beauty as a Gateway to Love," in *Theological Aesthetics After Von Balthasar*, ed. Oleg V. Bychkov and James Fodor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 17. Cf. Balthasar, *TD III*, 226-28.

the playwright, protagonist, and producer.¹⁸ As such, the following sections explore these theatrical models in relation to each divine Person in whom theodramatic formation and performance finds their existence and goal.

3.2 THE PLAYWRIGHT AND PLAYING IT RIGHTLY

3.2.1 *Sovereign Playwrights and Free Actors*

With the rise of “director’s theatre” in the 1960s, a common mantra of theatre companies became “the best playwright is a dead one.”¹⁹ A dead playwright implies freedom to direct a play and to embody a role apart from the constraining intentions of an obsessive author. As a backlash to jettisoning the playwright and his script, however, other movements arose calling for faithfulness to the playwright’s intentions and to the original script, a debate that persists in many theatre communities and journals today. Christians often fight a similar battle, some viewing God as a playwright with limited control of his creation and others viewing God as a playwright who has a complete plan for every word and action on the world stage. The latter view—God as sovereign playwright—is most commonly associated within classical theism and Reformed theology.²⁰ The former view—God as co-playwright with humanity—is usually identified with relational, open, or process theism.²¹ Is it possible, however, to affirm God’s role as sovereign playwright while maintaining creaturely freedom to improvise?²² Is this kind of model conceivable in theatre, let alone in the theodrama?

The models available in theatre tend to fall on either side of the divide between an authoritarian playwright and improvisational freedom. In traditional theatre, the playwright has pride of place, despite strident and sustained reactions against authorial intent, for without the playwright’s original act of creation there would be no play. In reflecting on the

¹⁸ For more on the notion of participating in God’s performance, see David A. Scott, “Speaking to Form: Trinitarian-Performative Scripture Reading,” *Anglican Theological Review* 77, no. 2 (Spr 1995): 142.

¹⁹ This movement paralleled the rise of reader response theory and what Roland Barthes declared “the death of the author” in literary studies.

²⁰ The classical and Reformed view includes the view that God is the producer who carries out his own intentions as playwright.

²¹ Kevin Vanhoozer labels this view the “new kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology” and focuses on the work of Philip Clayton. *Remythologizing Theology*, 139f.

²² This is similar to Vanhoozer’s goal in *Remythologizing Theology*, in which he hopes to sketch a variation on classical theism, “incorporating the best of the new relational model while simultaneously avoiding its defects.” *Ibid.*, 177.

relationship between the playwright and the play, William Gibson concludes that the work of the playwright is primary: “where nothing was, he ordains the world.”²³ The playwright intends for the script to be realized in performance, but “it is the solitary act of the playwright that is originating, that necessarily comes first.”²⁴ Despite the enduring appeal of a dead or absent playwright to some, the reality is that most traditional theatre performances progress more or less according to the script and in correspondence with the playwright’s intentions, with some level of directorial adaptation and the actors’ improvisation.²⁵ When improvisation does occur, however, it is often in response to erroneous deviations from the script, unforeseen set malfunctions, or audience reactions. In pure improvisational theatre, however, there is neither a playwright nor a written drama. No one determines the action on stage except the ensemble involved in creating the story, sometimes a creative director, and often the audience giving suggestions. Recognizing the improvisational element theodramatic performance, therefore, seems to preclude drawing on the playwright as a model for God’s being and action in the theodrama.

3.2.2 *God the Father as Playwright*

The particular model utilized in this project includes both scripted and improvisational theatre. As such, God is not like a playwright who produces a script to be performed word for word by a company of actors. Rather, he has a plan for the whole play, partly hidden and partly revealed, which is accomplished by inspiring the actors to write a transcript of improvised performances that in turn serves as a prescript for further performance, a unique body of writing Christians call Scripture. This model will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, but first the benefits of viewing God the Father as playwright must be considered.

To begin, if God the Father is a playwright, then he assumes a position of creative primacy over the theodrama. Even though playwrights often work in dynamic interplay with the director and performers, Balthasar does not hesitate to assert “the ontological primacy of

²³ William Gibson, *The Seesaw Log: A Chronicle of the Stage Production, with the Text, of Two for the Seesaw* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1984), 113.

²⁴ Sidney Berger, *Playwright Versus Director: Authorial Intentions and Performance Interpretations* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 148.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41. In America, for example, the rights of playwrights and dramatists are protected by organizations such as the Dramatists Guild of America: Dramatists of America, “Bill of Rights”, n.d., www.dramatistsguild.com/files/DGBillofRights.pdf.

the author” both in theatre and the theodrama.²⁶ The divine playwright also maintains creative primacy by possessing an overall purpose for the theodrama that shapes particular events, interactions, and their effects. “The author, with his shaping role, stands at the beginning of the whole production triad and ensures that it has an effect, beyond itself, on the audience.”²⁷ If God is playwright, then his will, plan and purpose for the theodrama precedes its actualization on the world stage. This position stands in contrast to open theism, which places humanity in co-authorship with God, thereby making God dependent on relational interaction and unable to determine the outcome of the theodrama.²⁸ Vanhoozer explains that according to open theists, “human characters become co-creators and co-authors of an indeterminate wiki-world.”²⁹ Human participants have a genuine role to play in the theodrama, but God still maintains his sovereignty.³⁰

Second, this model makes it possible to conceive how God communicates truthfully but not comprehensively his plan and purpose for the theodrama in Scripture. It would be naïve to assume that any script or even the playwright’s collected works communicate everything there is to know about the playwright, or that the intended meaning of a script is immediately clear and intuitive. As literary works, scripts are liable to multifarious interpretations and performances. Likewise, by communicating through Scripture, God does not reveal everything about himself, the meaning of the theodrama, or how the theodrama should be performed. As a diverse collection of literature written by a variety of authors in different cultures, Scripture paints an allusive and partial picture of God’s intentions as playwright, leaving many questions unanswered.³¹ This has less to do with God’s inability to communicate comprehensively and more with the freedom and responsibility he grants to human actors in conjunction with the ongoing work of the Spirit. Even though Scripture may

²⁶ Balthasar, *TD I*, 270.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

²⁸ A representative example is the work of Clark Pinnock and others gathered in Richard Rice, John Sanders, and Clark H. Pinnock, eds., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

²⁹ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 312.

³⁰ It is also important to view God’s providence and natural causation not as alternatives, but as simultaneous realities, as C. S. Lewis does in comparison with the simultaneity of Shakespeare’s plan and the natural-dramatic logic of events. See *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Centenary Press, 1947), 213–14.

³¹ Utilizing this metaphor for apologetic purposes, Tim Keller comments: “If there is a God, he wouldn’t be another object in the universe that we could put in a lab and analyzed with empirical methods. He would relate to us the way a playwright relates to the character in his play. We (characters) might be able to know quite a bit about the playwright, but only to the degree that the author choose to put information about himself in the play.” *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 119.

not communicate comprehensively, positing God as playwright gives confidence regarding the overall unity of his communicative action, both in history and in his canonical performance.³² God's identity as sovereign playwright establishes theodramatic unity, ultimately preserved by his involvement in the drama as protagonist and producer. Balthasar affirms that amidst the disparate and diverse elements of revelation, a fundamental unity will emerge because God authors *and* guides the action.³³

Another result of viewing God the Father as playwright is that a playwright's work is inherently dialogical, enlisting the involvement of other agents—producer, set designers, technicians, director, actors, and others—in preparing and performing the play. The playwright may have creative primacy, but unless the playwright autonomously acts and directs his own play, other contributions are required.³⁴ Moreover, according to the model articulated above, the divine playwright does not generally write specific lines for human actors to deliver, but leaves room for them to improvise within the theodrama. Even if God as playwright has a specific idea for how each role should be performed, this idea is, as Vanhoozer has argued, “dialogically consummated” through interaction with the characters.³⁵ Drawing on Bakhtin's reading of Dostoyevsky, Vanhoozer contrasts a monological model of authorship in which characters are voiceless puppets under the despotic control of the author with a dialogical model of authorship in which characters are dialogical agents with the freedom of “answerability.” For example, God's plan as playwright was to establish his covenant through Abraham, but this plan progressed on the basis of Abraham's free response to God's authorial plan and directorial interjection. “Had it not been for the drama of this dialogical interaction, Abraham would not have emerged as a true hero of the faith.”³⁶ Like Abraham, Christians improvising in the theodrama today are not coerced to follow some predetermined fate, but invited to respond to the playwright's work and word in “a series of situations in which dialogues takes place through which a character is consummated.”³⁷ God's role as playwright is not to manipulate, but as Gilbert Meilander

³² Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 272.

³³ Balthasar, *TD II*, 78.

³⁴ See Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 171.

³⁵ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 329f. Colin Gunton makes the same point that God is a playwright who writes a story “to allow the characters to develop according to its and their intrinsic logic,” but he does not develop this model like Vanhoozer does. Colin Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, 1st ed. (Malden/Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 64, cf. 6–7.

³⁶ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 334.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 336. Vanhoozer describes God's authorial agency as one of interjection rather than intervention or influence (*Ibid.*, 316).

maintains, “to incorporate all his characters’ choices in the plot of the story that ends in accord with his design.”³⁸

Although the role of a theatrical playwright illumines the reality of God the Father as playwright, the model inevitably breaks down, and there are significant divergences. One prominent dissimilarity is that before creating a literary work to guide performance, God creates the stage on which the performance occurs. God created the heavens and the earth, and thereby established an enduring distinction between himself as Creator and all of creation. Balthasar identifies the distance between the Creator and creation as “the presupposition of all theodramatic action,” for without this distinction, there is no dialogue and hence no drama.³⁹ God not only creates the theodramatic stage, he is the source for all the conditions that make the theodrama possible.

God’s “authorship” begins with creation, but it does not end there. Vanhoozer suggests that triune authorship contains three dimensions: cosmic, covenantal, and canonical.⁴⁰ Another divergence from the theatrical model, therefore, is that after his original work of creation and before co-authoring the canon, God continues to “create” by initiating covenantal relationships with his creation. Francesca Murphy explains this phenomenon in connection with dramatic authorship: “When we say that God the Father ‘writes’, the word is used in an analogous sense: we mean that the drama is gestated in him, and is brought about by his hand. The story would not be a drama if it were first and foremost a *book*. The Father writes in the language of actions.”⁴¹ The playwright Father is author of the entire theodrama, which includes communicative actions throughout history as well as the communicative speech-act of Scripture.

A third divergence between a theatrical and divine playwright is that the playwright Father also exists and acts as protagonist Son and producer Spirit. Although it is not uncommon for a theatrical playwright to be involved at various points in the play’s production, God is playwright, protagonist and producer as one Being in three Persons. God’s identity and action as playwright is inseparable from his identity and action as protagonist and producer, since “the Father ‘authors’ in Christ through the Spirit.”⁴² When

³⁸ Gilbert Meilaender, “Divine Grace and Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77.

³⁹ Balthasar, *TD II*, 178.

⁴⁰ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 488.

⁴¹ Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation*, 337.

⁴² Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 26.

God's authorship is broadened to encompass its cosmic, covenantal, and canonical dimensions, it is easier to grasp how "divine authorship is shorthand for the Father authoring creation and redemption in Christ through the Spirit."⁴³ In fact, it is through the performance of the Son and production of the Spirit that we know and relate to the Father as playwright.

3.2.3 *Disponibility and Fittingness to the Playwright-Father*

Developing disponibility to God the Father as playwright, therefore, involves cultivating attentiveness to him as the one in whom the whole theodrama originates. This disponibility involves the awareness that we are not the authors of our own existence and that there would be no theodrama without God's creative authorship. It involves trusting that God has a plan for the theodrama and that God intends to work out this plan through human participation and improvisation, even if this plan is ultimately incomprehensible. Although this improvisation involves each actor's "particular flair and interpretation," it is done with an abiding trust in God as the one who knows how the plot should and will progress.⁴⁴

Many Christians have supposed that fittingness to God as playwright entails discovering and playing social roles designed by God for particular individuals. For example, Clement of Alexandria equated wisdom with playing "the role God has given him in the drama of life."⁴⁵ Balthasar notes, however, that this perspective more closely resembles a Stoic rather than Christian attitude toward human freedom in the theodrama.⁴⁶ The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, for instance, advised: "Your business is to act the character that is given you and act it well; the choice of the cast is Another's."⁴⁷ A resurgence of Stoic thought occurred in the sixteenth century, as illustrated in the work of Pedro Calderón de la Barca, who expresses that roles are simply handed out by the Director (God), and human characters have to bend their wills to take them.⁴⁸ Fittingness, according to Calderón, is playing the role God has

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 305.

⁴⁴ Meilaender, "Divine Grace and Ethics," 87.

⁴⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VII.11.65, quoted in Balthasar, *TD I*, 156.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 498-99.

⁴⁷ Epictetus, *The Discourses and Manual, Together with Fragments of His Writings*, trans. P. E. Matheson, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916), 219.

⁴⁸ Pedro Calderon de la Barca, *The Great Stage of the World: An Allegorical Auto Sacramental*, trans. George W. Brandt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976).

given—whether poor, rich, peasant, or King—for God will reward human characters based on how well they have played the part.⁴⁹

One entailment of this view, however, is a deterministic outlook on God as playwright. G. K. Chesterton presents this scenario in his play *The Surprise*, in which the Author in Act 1 creates a play without a villain, but with characters who are puppets in the playwright's hands. "They are intelligent, complex, combative, brilliant, bursting with life and yet they are not alive."⁵⁰ In the second Act, however, the characters come alive, but everything goes wrong. The Author finally interjects to end the play: "And in the devil's name, what do you think you are doing with my play? Drop it! Stop! I am coming down."⁵¹ In this scenario, the characters had the freedom to act, but failed to perform with fittingness because they had no direction. In my view, the best way forward is neither a fittingness to pre-determined roles nor jettisoning authorial fittingness in light of an absent playwright, but fittingness to God as a playwright who continues to be involved in the play in order to provide a paradigm and direction for free and fitting performance. In their free participation, humans may make a "great mess" of the playwright's play, but God as playwright entered the theodrama as protagonist in order to deal with that problem.⁵²

3.3. THE PROTAGONIST AND IMPROVISATIONAL IMITATION

3.3.1 *Protagonists and Master Improvisers*

God is the playwright who is free to act in his own play. It is not without theatrical precedent for playwrights to act in their own plays, including Shakespeare, who some surmise wrote particular parts for himself.⁵³ In addition, within improvisational theatre, some directors have been known to join the actors on stage to act out various scenarios. Likewise, in the theodrama, "The divine playwright has the freedom to write himself into the drama of

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, lines 425-35.

⁵⁰ G. K. Chesterton, "The Surprise," in *Plays; Chesterton on Shaw*, vol. 11, *Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 340: act 2, scene 3.

⁵² G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 118.

⁵³ Martin Mueller, "Hamlet and the World of Ancient Tragedy," *Arion* 5, no. 1 (Spring - Summer 1997): 35-36. Likewise, Judd Hubert examines the phenomenon of the playwright as protagonist in the plays of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin in "Molière: The Playwright as Protagonist," *Theatre Journal* 34, no. 3 (October 1982): 361-371.

human history.”⁵⁴ God the Son enters the play as Jesus of Nazareth, thus incarnating the Trinity’s involvement in the theodrama while not becoming trapped in it.⁵⁵ In one sense, God the Father as playwright remains “outside” of the theodrama while God the Son enters the theodrama as protagonist, the one around whom the whole plot revolves.⁵⁶ Because God is one Being, however, we must keep in mind that each role and action of the Son is also true of the Father. Therefore, Balthasar clarifies “that the Father, who seems to be a Spectator, is just as much in the play as the acting Son and the mediating Spirit. Indeed, we could say that he is the central Actor, for *he* “so loved the world that he gave his only Son (Jn 3:16).”⁵⁷ While affirming the indivisibility of God’s triune identity and action, it is equally true that because God the Son became human on the world stage, it is theologically accurate to assert with Francesca Murphy: “The Actor in the ‘family’ of the Trinity is God the Son: the Playwright Father’s Word in historical flesh.”⁵⁸ As the main protagonist in the theodrama, the mission of Jesus is intertwined with the plan of the playwright Father; Jesus has the mission of “an Actor putting the Playwright’s idea into action.”⁵⁹ The role of the Son as protagonist, however, is not a new development within the triune Godhead, but reflects the eternal drama of the Trinity, which Balthasar describes as “the drama of the “emptying” of the Father’s heart, in the generation of the Son, that contains and surpasses all possible drama between God and a world.”⁶⁰ Vanhoozer concurs with Balthasar that the drama of the economic Trinity arises from the drama of the immanent Trinity, but insists that the latter is a *plerosis* rather than a *kenosis* of divine fullness.⁶¹ Despite this difference, both Balthasar and Vanhoozer conclude that God the Son is the Protagonist by virtue of authorial self-employment in the historical theodrama as a revelation of the eternal triune drama.⁶²

⁵⁴ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 323.

⁵⁵ Balthasar, *TD III*, 201.

⁵⁶ This is not to deny that God entered the theodrama before the incarnation, but it is affirming that the incarnation was the pinnacle of God’s involvement as the fullness of God appearing as a man.

⁵⁷ Balthasar, *TD III*, 530.

⁵⁸ Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation*, 338.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Balthasar, *TD IV*, 327.

⁶¹ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 243. David Brown advances a fascinating account of kenosis in which Jesus, like a method actor, gets under the skin and character of humanity to the extent that “it is appropriate to talk of [Jesus’] total identification” with every characteristic of the human condition. *Divine Humanity: Kenosis and the Construction of a Christian Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 254.

⁶² Consequently, God’s identity is not *constituted* by his involvement in the theodrama but is *revealed* and *known* through his historical performance. See *Remythologizing Theology*, 107-09 and 184-85 in

If participating in the theodrama is more akin to improvisation than scripted performance, however, it may seem strange to identify Jesus as the divine protagonist. The very idea of a protagonist is inimical to the collaborative process of improvisation in which improvisers work together as a team to develop scenarios and stories. Improvisational theatre is most commonly ensemble theatre in which actors often take turns playing the main role, if one even exists. Consequently, attempting to stand out as the “star of the show” usually results in a poor performance. Viola Spolin expresses the heart of improvisation: “Individual freedom (expressing self) while respecting community responsibility (group agreement) is our goal.”⁶³ Within the dynamic interplay of individuals acting in response to the community with proper disponibility and fittingness, however, it is sometimes the case that one or several improvisers will show particular skill and promise. It is possible to understand Jesus both as the hero of the play as in traditional scripted theatre and as the most skillful improviser in the theodrama.⁶⁴

3.3.2 *God the Son as Protagonist*

As God incarnate and Word of the Playwright, Jesus is the protagonist of the theodrama, making his embodied entrance onto the world stage in order to play the most important role and bring the theodrama to its climax. Jesus is the protagonist, therefore, in the sense that every person and event in the theodrama either sets the stage for his performance or results from the role he plays. But if being protagonist also means that Jesus improvised the “preeminent performance” in the theodrama, as his followers claim, what exactly does this mean?⁶⁵ If we view formation as disponibility and performance as fittingness, one way to address this question is to explore Jesus’ masterful disponibility and fittingness toward the playwright, producer, story, other actors, audience, performance traditions, and cultural context.⁶⁶

contrast with Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Triune God*, vol. 1 (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64.

⁶³ Spolin, *Improvisation for Theater*, 44.

⁶⁴ For more on Jesus as improviser, at least from the perspective of musical improvisation, see Peter Goodwin Heltzel, *Resurrection City: A Theology of Improvisation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), Chapter 3.

⁶⁵ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 189. Cf. Wyndy Corbin Reuschling, *Reviving Evangelical Ethics: The Promises and Pitfalls of Classic Models of Morality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 96.

⁶⁶ Identifying the preeminence of Jesus’ performance assumes its historical veracity accessed through the canonical Gospels as eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ life. While the Gospels are literary

First, even though Jesus the Son is one with the playwright Father (Jn 10:30; 17:11, 22), the Gospel writers still present Jesus as developing disponibility toward the Father. Jesus submits himself to the Father's will and makes himself utterly open and available to the Father in order to perform his mission and role in the theodrama. Indeed, a sign that Jesus possesses the very nature of God is his perfect disponibility to the Father.⁶⁷ Disponibility constitutes his very being, while also distinguishing himself from the Father.⁶⁸ This is displayed most poignantly in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus pleads with the Father in prayer, making himself totally available to the Father's will and to his imminent suffering (Lk 22:39-44). Jesus' disponibility to the Father prepares him to perform his mission with fittingness to the plan and will of the Playwright.⁶⁹ Although an apparent tension exists between the scripted plan of the Father and the freedom of the Son, Aidan Nichols summarizes Balthasar's insight that Jesus "overcomes that antithesis by a perfect readiness or well-disposedness, *Verfügbarkeit* (the French have a good word for it, *disponibilité*), to follow where both the author's intention and his own inspired reading of the significance of the text are leading."⁷⁰

Second, and in a similar manner, Jesus developed disponibility to the Spirit as the producer of the theodrama. For instance, Luke records the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness (Lk 4:1), leading him back to Galilee (Lk 4:13), and anointing Jesus for ministry and preaching (Lk 4:18), all which implies a complete availability to the Spirit as Jesus began his ministry. Having developed this disponibility to the Spirit, Jesus is empowered to improvise his role with fittingness in not just proclaiming good news to the poor, liberty for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and the year of the Lord's favor (Lk 4:18-19), but practicing and embodying these signs of the kingdom throughout his life and ultimately in his death and resurrection. According to Balthasar, Jesus' receptivity to the Father and Spirit makes him like "an actor playing a part for the first time, receiving it by inspiration, scene by

documents written from four particular perspectives, I am presupposing that these perspectives add rather than subtract to an accurate portrait of Jesus' improvisational performance.

⁶⁷ Balthasar, *TD IV*, 325-26.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 326. Cf. Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 33-34.

⁶⁹ Balthasar observes that Jesus' willingness to be poured out as a sacrificial offering is the ultimate fitting performance that flows from his availability (*Gelöstheit*) to the Father and his readiness to obey. *TD IV*, 329-30.

⁷⁰ Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar*, 51.

scene, word by word.”⁷¹ In sum, Jesus’ disponibility to the Father as playwright and the Spirit as producer prepared him for fitting performance in the theodrama as the suffering Messiah.

Third, Jesus is the master improviser by virtue of his disponibility and fittingness to the plot and history of previous performances in the theodrama. Jesus developed an intimate awareness of the story of Israel and a responsive attentiveness to how this story was unfolding in his context and in his own character, even at an early age (Lk 2:41-52). Jesus’ disponibility to the development of the theodrama enabled him to see his unique role within its trajectory and how he was enacting a fitting fulfillment of that story (Lk 4:21). This disponibility to the theodramatic plot enabled Jesus’ own fitting performance by reincorporating the past in order to move the story forward in faithful yet creative ways. Keith Johnstone, the founder of the Theatre Machine Improvisation group, teaches that the best improviser is the one who is most responsible for the story.⁷² Reincorporation of past elements of the story to create something new is the essence of improvisational skill. When Jesus identifies himself as the new Adam and the true Israel through his teaching and action, he improvises the ultimate reincorporation of previous Acts in the theodrama. Vanhoozer explains: “God was in Christ, we may now say, *reincorporating* (with a difference) the history of Adam and the history of Israel, *improvising with a canonical script*.”⁷³ Wells identifies several masterful moments of reincorporation in Jesus’ life and ministry, such as choosing twelve disciples to reincorporate the twelve tribes of Israel, feeding five thousand to reincorporate the miraculous manna provided during Israel’s wilderness wanderings, or reincorporating the Passover in his Last Supper.⁷⁴ Vanhoozer focuses particularly on the atonement as a masterful act of reincorporation: “To say that God was improvising the atonement is not to say that Jesus’ death took God by surprise but rather that the cross was God’s creative response to a new situation (Israel’s rejection of the Messiah) that was at the same time entirely in keeping with what had gone before (the covenant with Israel).”⁷⁵ In sum, Jesus’ disponibility to the theodramatic plot equipped him for fitting improvisation by reincorporating the old in order to make everything new.

A fourth way Jesus stands out as master improviser is his disponibility toward other actors on stage, whether his friends or enemies, and his fitting overacceptance of their offers. An

⁷¹ Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 39.

⁷² Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 115.

⁷³ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 388.

⁷⁴ Wells, *Improvisation*, 150–51.

⁷⁵ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 388.

offer is anything an actor says or does on stage, and in order for an improviser to keep a story going, she has to learn the skill of accepting rather than blocking offers. According to Johnstone, to block an offer is to do or say “anything that prevents the action from developing,” whereas to accept an offer is build off what the other improviser says or does.⁷⁶ Moreover, to *overaccept* an offer is to respond with delight in a way that makes the story even more interesting and raises it to a new level.⁷⁷ Readiness to overaccept an offer is possible only when an improviser has developed disponibility toward the other actors on stage. Without relaxed awareness of and responsive attentiveness to other actors, an improviser is not aware of the relational dynamics of the action and his responses to offers will fall short of fittingness. One example of this from Jesus’ life is the disponibility he developed toward the Pharisees, being attentive to their motives and actions, which enabled him to improvise fitting and often witty responses. Consequently, when the Pharisees begin to question him about working on the Sabbath, he does not simply block the query or accept the query and play into their game, but he overaccepts the situation and transfers the issue of Sabbath observance to an entirely new level (Lk 6:1-5). Wells identifies other instances of Jesus’ masterful disponibility and fittingness toward other people, noting that ultimately Jesus overaccepts his accusers by submitting to death on the cross, thereby overaccepting death itself.⁷⁸ In all of these instances, Vanhoozer concludes, Jesus improvises by “offering to, overaccepting, and reincorporating the human response.”⁷⁹

Fifth and finally, Jesus is the master improviser in the way he displays disponibility and fittingness to particular places, to the characteristics of the stage on which he improvises. Viola Spolin taught that actors improvise skillfully only by “giving full attention to the environment.”⁸⁰ Jesus was aware that Galilee was considered the “backwater” of Judea, a relatively insignificant place far away from Jerusalem, as indicated earlier by the prophets (Mt 3:12-17). And yet, rather than starting his ministry in the hub of religious activity, Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee (Lk 4:14), reiterating through his purposeful interaction with place that in the kingdom of God, the last will be first and the first will be last. Similarly, Jesus’ disponibility toward Jerusalem and its religious and political world enabled him to navigate those dynamics with fitting improvisational skill by, for example, riding into

⁷⁶ Johnstone, *Impro*, 79.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁷⁸ Wells, *Improvisation*, 135–40.

⁷⁹ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 341.

⁸⁰ Spolin, *Improvisation for Theater*, 40.

Jerusalem on a donkey (Lk 19:28-40).⁸¹ More specifically, Jesus' awareness of the Temple and its meaning for the Jewish people emboldened him to accomplish what others, too blinded by the cultural status quo, were too powerless to perform: turning over the tables and pronouncing judgment on this misuse of God's dwelling (Lk 19:45-46). Overall, Jesus' awareness and attentiveness to the characteristics and significance of particular places enabled him to perform his ministry with fittingness and with powerful effect.

3.3.3 *Disponibility and Fittingness to the Protagonist-Son*

Thus far we have seen how Jesus is the protagonist in the theodrama, meaning not only that Jesus performs the most important role and brings the theodrama to its climax, but also that Jesus accomplishes this role with masterful improvisation, making his performance the preeminent one. Does Jesus' unique and perfect performance entail, as Barth articulates, that he is the "only One who truly acts," with humans appearing on stage as members of the chorus?⁸² Barth does not mean, of course, that humans are passive spectators in the theodrama, only that our action is never autonomous, never purely *our* action, but always a response to and participation in the action of God in Christ.⁸³ Barth reminds us that Jesus can never be merely a masterful example of fitting improvisation; he is the one on whom our free and fitting participation in the theodrama depends. As Trevor Hart explains, the grace we receive in union with Christ and his concrete commands "*makes us* responsible rather than *robbing us* of responsibility."⁸⁴ On the one hand, therefore, Jesus' role as protagonist is entirely unique: God the playwright becoming human for the sake of revealing and accomplishing his mission. By living a perfect life, being crucified despite his innocence, and then rising again to establish victory over death, Jesus was the first actor of the new creation, inaugurating an entirely new Act in the theodrama. Developing disponibility to Jesus as protagonist means never confusing our role with his. Trying to "play Jesus," observes Wells, means forgetting

⁸¹ Jesus' attitude toward and improvisation in Jerusalem also indicates disponibility and fittingness toward the theodramatic plot, in which the fate of the Messiah and Jerusalem are intertwined.

⁸² Barth, *CD* III/4, 441.

⁸³ For detailed discussions of the place of human action in Barth's theological ethics, see John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); Paul Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2007).

⁸⁴ Trevor A. Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Essays Toward a Reading of His Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 92.

that “the most important things have already happened.”⁸⁵ Our actions are witnessing performances before they contribute anything new.⁸⁶

On the other hand, Jesus’ performance also liberates our free action in the theodrama. As Myk Habets observes, we are not spectators watching God “perform his magnum opus” or functioning as “extras in an all star cast,” but are “characters integral to the entire plot.”⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the nature and success of every performance in the theodrama is related to the performance of Christ, and only in union with him do participants become truly liberated “fellow actors.” Balthasar remarks:

“As the perfect man with his peerless drama, he [Jesus] is the living framework within which every human destiny is acted out; every human destiny is judged by his perfection and saved by his redeeming meaning. Thus the individual’s own drama can be either crossed out, rejected and “burned” (while the actor himself “will be saved only as through fire”: 1 Cor 3:15), or, by grace, it can be recognized as a dramatic action within the dramatic action of Christ, in which case the actor becomes a “fellow actor”, a “fellow worker” with God (1 Cor 3:9).”⁸⁸

As fellow actors, we are given the responsibility and privilege of reenacting the shape of Jesus’ masterful performance.⁸⁹ Enabling this reenactment, however, involves formation into the form of Christ, or *conformation* into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). According to Bonhoeffer, ethics is formation into the image of Christ “in a manner which is neither abstract nor casuistic, neither programmatic nor purely speculative.”⁹⁰ Imitation of Christ, therefore, arises from our incorporation into the triune life of God in Christ by the Spirit.⁹¹ While inseparable from formation, practical imitation of Jesus still remains a necessary responsibility and arises from disponibility to his example. As the New Testament authors testify, following Jesus’ example means serving one another (Jn 13:14-15), loving one another (Jn 15:12-13), pleasing our neighbors (Rom 15:1-3), walking in love (Eph 3:1-2), laying down our lives (1 Jn 3:16), and enduring suffering with joy (1 Pet 2:20-21). It is not the unique

⁸⁵ Wells, *Improvisation*, 56–57.

⁸⁶ Barth, *CD II/2*, 536; Cf. Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth*, 76–77. Hart concludes: “We are who and what we are precisely and only in relation to Jesus Christ. Apart from him we have nothing but the most shadowy and wraithlike of existences, and any ethics which fails to consider human action in this proper context...is doomed to failure.”

⁸⁷ Myk Habets, *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 272.

⁸⁸ Balthasar, *TD II*, 87.

⁸⁹ This is a major theme in Joseph Sittler, *The Structure of Christian Ethics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), see especially 36–48.

⁹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (London: SCM Press, 1955), 25.

⁹¹ Habets, *The Anointed Son*, 273.

features of Jesus that we are called to imitate—his job as a carpenter, his singleness, his miracle-working power as Messiah—but the general pattern of his life in which, according to John Howard Yoder, “servanthood replaces domination, forgiveness absorbs hostility.”⁹² This pattern of life is not original, since it stems from Jesus’ paradigmatic performance, but we are required to improvise off this paradigm in each particular context.⁹³ As Hauerwas maintains: “All performance of God’s called people...are repeat performances, at once emulating the one true performance of God in Christ but also an extension and variation—an improvisation, if you will—of that singularly defining performance.”⁹⁴ Christians are called to creative repetition of Jesus’ disponibility and fittingness displayed through his words and actions.⁹⁵

Since Jesus’ role was unique and because he performed in a radically different context, our imitation of Jesus cannot follow what David Brown calls “identical patterning,” but rather must seek “innovation into a radically different context.”⁹⁶ The particularity of Jesus’ improvisation does not prohibit creative repetition in new contexts; rather, it provides a universal paradigm for fitting improvisation in particular situations. For instance, rather than an abstract and universal principle of love, the performance of Jesus is a paradigm by virtue of his selfless interaction with particular people in particular places.⁹⁷ Appropriating this paradigm for contemporary theodramatic performance, therefore, requires what Brown identifies as an “imaginative capacity to maintain continuities” despite differences in time and place.⁹⁸ Similarly, Richard Hays proposes an “integrative act of the imagination” to help us discern “how our lives, despite their historical dissimilarities to the lives narrated in the New Testament, might fitly answer to that narration and participate in the truth that it tells.”⁹⁹

⁹² Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 131.

⁹³ Kelly Kopic compares this to the jazz musician who riffs off a form in *God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 158.

⁹⁴ Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 103. This implies that Jesus’ improvisations have the ultimate authority in shaping our own. Cf. Benson, “Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities: Jazz, Interpretation, Heterophony, and the Ekklesia,” 309.

⁹⁵ That imitation should include the entirety of Jesus’ life is a point argued at length by Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁹⁶ David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 62–63.

⁹⁷ Similarly, Richard Bauckham concludes: “Jesus’ potential universality becomes actual as the Gospel story is told and remembered and intersects the equally concrete and particular stories of other men and women in other times and places.” “Christology Today,” *Scriptura* 27 (1988): 22.

⁹⁸ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 94–95.

⁹⁹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 289.

William Spohn agrees that a form of analogical imagination is necessary for plunging into “the concrete details of the life of Jesus in order to become universal.”¹⁰⁰ As the title to Spohn’s book suggests, creative improvisation on Jesus’ masterful performance in contemporary contexts through an act of analogical imagination enables us to “go and do *likewise*,” not to go and do exactly the same.¹⁰¹

Imagination is necessary in order to develop disponibility toward Jesus and to perform in ways fitting to his performance. Attending to the Gospel narratives is the most obvious way to develop this disponibility, the result being an awareness of Jesus’ performance and a readiness to improvise likewise. Discerning the fittingness of our own actions involves detailed study of Jesus’ life and his particular words and actions not as “fixed scripts,” but as scenarios from which we improvise imaginatively and with similar particularity in different contexts.¹⁰² For example, since Jesus’ masterful performance included the practice of washing his disciples’ feet and encouraging them to do likewise (Jn 13:14), fitting performance today will utilize the analogical imagination to perform similar yet not necessarily identical actions today. Given its specific relevance and cultural significance in the first century, however, fitting performance does not require the actual act of footwashing, but similarly fitting actions that display humble service to others.¹⁰³ Spohn concludes: “The moral implications are drawn less by strict logic than by a sense of what is appropriate and fitting.”¹⁰⁴

As the protagonist in the theodrama, Jesus is the focal point for developing triune disponibility and displaying triune fittingness. God the Son as protagonist is the incarnation of God the Father as playwright, thus revealing and perfectly performing the Playwright’s plan. Likewise, the Spirit who produces and directs the theodrama is the Spirit of Christ, who performed his own role by the power and direction of the Spirit. In order to complete our exploration of trinitarian disponibility and fittingness, therefore, we turn now to consider the Spirit as producer, the one who enables identification with and improvisational imitation of Jesus.

¹⁰⁰ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 50. Here Spohn is relying on the work of David Tracy, particularly *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981).

¹⁰¹ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 61.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁰³ Because of this, improvisation that is fitting to Jesus’ performance of footwashing should not be limited to liturgical and ritual improvisations, as William Spohn suggests, but broadened to include everyday acts of service. *Ibid.*, 52–54.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 55. Spohn calls this “discernment,” or the “a well-tuned ear for judging what fits with the person and mission of Jesus and what does not.” *Ibid.*, 153.

3.4 THE PRODUCER AND DISCERNING DIRECTION

3.4.1 *Creative, Responsive Production*

The role of producer is perhaps lesser known in theatre than in film. Just as film producers are acknowledged for selecting the screenplay and overseeing the entire production of a film, so theatrical producers are the ones responsible for the overall production of a play. Given this overarching role and the financial factors involved in producing a play, many people have a negative opinion of the producer, conjuring images of “the cigar-chomping producer with dollar signs in his eyes, vetoing the extravagant requests of the tantrum-prone director.”¹⁰⁵ Regardless of how the public perceives theatrical producers, their work is essential for the staging and success of a play, so much so that Gabriel Fallon concludes: “A theatre without producers is as inconceivable as a theatre without actors.”¹⁰⁶ Fallon describes the work of a theatrical producer as “that individual whose business is to *produce* the work of the playwright *through* the players to the audience *in terms of the theatre*.”¹⁰⁷ Contrary to common opinion, therefore, the producer is not concerned merely with numbers and figures, but is intimately involved in the creative play-making process. Laura Baggaley confirms this by noting the growing propensity for compound or hyphenated titles such as Creative Producer, Artistic Producer, or Producer-Director.¹⁰⁸

As the last title suggests, it is common for the producer’s role to overlap with or double as the role of director.¹⁰⁹ Like a producer, the director is concerned with the production of the play, weaving together concerns regarding authorial intention, set design, actor training, and audience reception. William Ball describes the task of a director as a “missionary” task: “He must feel strongly about the theme of the play—to the extent that he feels it is important for other people to share or to witness that theme. He has to feel that civilization will be enhanced and society will be enriched if the message of that play is revealed.”¹¹⁰ Not only

¹⁰⁵ Laura Baggaley, “What’s the Producer’s Role?,” *The Guardian: The Stage*, April 4, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2008/apr/04/whatstheproducersrole>.

¹⁰⁶ Gabriel Fallon, “The Producer in the Theatre,” *The Irish Monthly* 75, no. 892 (October 1947): 430.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 429.

¹⁰⁸ Baggaley, “What’s the Producer’s Role?”.

¹⁰⁹ Louis Jouvét, “The Profession of the Director,” in *Directors on Directing: A Sourcebook of the Modern Theater*, ed. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1963), 227.

¹¹⁰ William Ball, *Sense of Direction: Some Observations on the Art of Directing* (New York: Drama Publishers, 1984), 23.

that, but the director is responsible for the playwright's vision and intention, aiming "to realize the vision of the author and to persuade the actors of the enjoyability of entering into the world of that vision."¹¹¹ In improvisational theatre, of course, there is rarely a playwright or even a detailed plan for the production as a whole. In fact, Frost and Yarrow observe that a strong directorial role is sometimes opposed to improvisational theatre, since direction can be valued more than "improvised creativity."¹¹² Improvisational theatre requires a different kind of director, one who is more responsive and supportive than authoritarian.¹¹³ These directors provide creative support and guidance throughout the process of formation and performance. Whether in scripted or improvisational theatre, a primary aim of the director is "nourishing, sustaining, and revitalizing the actors" and even "bringing forth and raising that family."¹¹⁴

3.4.2 *God the Spirit as Producer*

In adapting this theatrical role as a model for God's identity and involvement in the theodrama, most theologians identify the Holy Spirit as director rather than producer.¹¹⁵ There are good reasons for this identification, as we will see below, but it also seems advantageous to recognize the Spirit as producer. By doing so, we are acknowledging the Spirit's role in overseeing the entire production of the play, from beginning to end. For as P. T. Forsyth observes, "There is nothing more analogous to God's production of men than Shakespeare's production of his characters and world."¹¹⁶ Adapting Gabriel Fallon's definition above, the producer-Spirit is that divine Person whose business [read: mission] is to *produce* the theodrama of God the playwright *through* Jesus the protagonist and other players to the world audience *in terms of the theodrama*. In short, the Spirit is the "improvisation of God."¹¹⁷ While responsible for the entire production of the theodrama, the Spirit is also

¹¹¹ Ibid., 30. Cf. Jouvett, "The Profession of the Director," 228.

¹¹² Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 9.

¹¹³ See Ibid., 163.

¹¹⁴ Jouvett, "The Profession of the Director," 228.

¹¹⁵ Exceptions include Jürgen Moltmann, who identifies God as both an actor and producer in the world drama, and Daniel Hardy, who uses the same terms. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 309; Daniel W. Hardy, "The Future of Theology in a Complex World: An Opening to Discussion," in *Christ and Context*, ed. Hilary Regan and Alan J. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 40.

¹¹⁶ Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Christ on Parnassus: Lectures on Art, Ethic, and Theology* (London: Independent Press, 1959), 295.

¹¹⁷ David Emmanuel Goatley, "The Improvisation of God: Toward an African-American Pneumatology," *Memphis Theological Seminary Journal* 33, no. 1 (September 6, 2010): 3–13.

intimately involved in directing the theodrama, prompting the actors, equipping them with gifts, and empowering their performance. Consequently, it may be best to identify the Spirit as the producer-director, with the freedom of using these titles interchangeably and in a complementary fashion.

As the producer-director, the identity and action of the Spirit is united with the creative mission of the triune God throughout history and all eternity. Balthasar describes why the Spirit's role is indispensable within the triune economy: "the Father entrusts his play to him to be translated into real life (and we saw that the initiative was his even at the Incarnation); the Son entrusts himself to the Spirit's guidance, and, above all, the Church must entrust herself to him if her mission to proclaim the word, administer the sacraments and shepherd souls is to succeed."¹¹⁸ The relation between the work of the producer-Spirit and the playwright-Father is unique, analogous to aspects of this relationship in both traditional and improvised theatre. As in traditional theatre, the Spirit as producer develops the plan and intention of the Father as playwright by overseeing the transcription of performances in Scripture and guiding subsequent performances. As in improvised theatre, the Spirit as producer does not usually prompt actors to perform specific lines, but guides and supports them in creative improvisation. Thus, in contrast to Kevin Vanhoozer's proposal, the Spirit guides the church's "improvisatory variations" on a *transcript* of previous performances, not on a script.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, Vanhoozer is right to emphasize the Spirit's role in mediating between the playwright's work and the church's performance: "Far from being an alternative source of authority to the Word, the Spirit as director of the church's performance is the dynamic bridge between the script and the contemporary actors."¹²⁰ Therefore, Timothy Gorringer correctly denies that God works with a script, yet his subsequent statement that God works "without a plan" and only with "the profoundest understanding of the play" minimizes God's role as producer-Spirit.¹²¹ The Spirit as producer is on a mission to carry out the plan of the playwright, centered on the mission of Jesus as protagonist and master improviser. At this point, Trevor Hart offers a salient reminder that whereas a theatrical

¹¹⁸ Balthasar, *TD III*, 533-34

¹¹⁹ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 102. Vanhoozer does refer to Scripture as transcript twice, but still maintains the primary metaphor of Scripture as script through, which I will discuss more in the next chapter. *Ibid.*, 167, 189.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹²¹ Gorringer, *God's Theatre*, 78. I think it is obvious that God has a plan, as all producers have a plan for their play. The more pressing question, in my judgment, is "will the play inevitably turn out as God has planned?"

director remains outside the play, the Spirit as producer-director entered the theodrama as the Spirit of Jesus the protagonist.¹²² Moreover, the Spirit as producer is involved in the theodrama at present in leading Christians to identify with Jesus and guiding us in improvisational imitation by offering stage directions.¹²³ Vanhoozer thus summarizes the Spirit's multi-dimensional role in the theodrama: "The Spirit, as the one who unites us to Christ, is the dresser who clothes us with Christ's righteousness, the prompter who helps us remember our biblical lines, and the prop master who gives gifts (accessories) to each church member, equipping us to play our parts."¹²⁴ As described in the New Testament, it is through the Spirit's gift of faith (Eph 2:8-9) that we become a part of Christ's body in which we find our role in the theodrama (1 Cor 12:12-26). We are able to perform our role as Christians on the basis of the Spirit's gifts (1 Cor 12:4-11) and by performing according to his direction (John 16:13; Rom 8:4; Gal 6:16, 25).

If the Spirit as producer is involved in the theodrama by uniting participants to Christ, giving us a part to play and gifts to play it well, and directing us to carry out our mission in imitation of Jesus, do we really have freedom to improvise in the theodrama? In order to preserve the initiative of the Spirit as producer *and* our freedom to improvise in the theodrama, we need to eliminate two extreme models of directorial involvement. At one extreme, *deterministic directing* is the work of an authoritarian director who makes all the decisions, gives instructions to actors in monological style, and uses the actors to promote his vision for the play. Vsevolod Meyerhold critiques this kind of directing because it restrains the freedom of the actors and audience instead of liberating them to use their imaginations.¹²⁵ Peter Brook recounts one of his first attempts at directing, which followed a deterministic style of placing actors exactly in the positions he had planned the night before. The resulting rehearsal, however, was a disaster, and so Brook changed his style: "I stopped, and walked away from my book, in amongst the actors, and I have never looked at a written plan

¹²² Trevor A. Hart, "Art, Performance, and the Practice of Christian Faith," in *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, ed. Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 7. This is especially significant given the fact that Edward Gordon Craig observes that the only perfect director would be the perfect actor. "The Artist of the Theatre," in *Directors on Directing: A Sourcebook of the Modern Theater*, ed. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1963), 159.

¹²³ Francesca Murphy notes that faithful performance "requires stage directions from the Holy Spirit, lest our crusade run amok." *The Comedy of Revelation*, 339.

¹²⁴ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 448. This could be strengthened, however, by saying that the Spirit helps us improvise new lines more rather than assisting us "to remember our biblical lines."

¹²⁵ Vsevolod Meyerhold, "The Theater Theatrical," in *Directors on Directing: A Sourcebook of the Modern Theater*, ed. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1963), 170.

since.”¹²⁶ According to Brook, deterministic directing is *deadly* directing, that is, directing that sucks the life out of theatre.¹²⁷ Timothy Gorringe detects a similar deadliness within a theology of deterministic divine direction, “exactly the mistake so many theologians have made in their understanding of the ‘theatre’ of world history, encouraged by the classical analogies for God’s activity.”¹²⁸

The opposite extreme is *detached directing*, where the director simply sits back and lets the actors figure the play out for themselves. Brook doubts that this model is any better than deterministic directing, for “it is the modest director, the honourable unassuming one, often the nicest man, who should be trusted least.”¹²⁹ Indeed, the theological equivalent is Deism, “which believes that the autonomy of the universe is only respected by God’s nonintervention.”¹³⁰ But as Brook concludes, this way of “respecting” the actor is not respect at all, for without the director’s involvement, the actors tend to become “intoxicated by their own talent and the excitement of their work,” eventually losing sight of the play and its purpose.¹³¹ Either that, or the actors will become frustrated with a lazy director who forces them to improvise everything from scratch. Chesterton remarks that in the drama of life, there is a great comfort in knowing that certain parts of the play have already been settled, since liberty without boundaries has no romance.¹³² Consequently, the theodrama is full of romance, because the producer-Spirit neither directs deterministically nor does he direct, as Frederick Buechner suggests, like “a great director who no matter what role fate casts us in conveys to us somehow from the wings,” but as one who is involved personally and dialogically with the actors.¹³³

A third option for directorial involvement, therefore, is *dialogical directing*. This is the type of directing Peter Brook believes will produce living rather than deadly theatre, imagining the dialogue as a “waltz between director, player, and text.”¹³⁴ A key question, as Gorringe remarks, is whether the Spirit can enter into dialogue with his creatures “without resorting to

¹²⁶ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 120.

¹²⁷ Cf. Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre* (London: Methuen Drama, 1995), 112.

¹²⁸ Gorringe, *God’s Theatre*, 79.

¹²⁹ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 121.

¹³⁰ Gorringe, *God’s Theatre*, 79.

¹³¹ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 141.

¹³² G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, vol. 1, *Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 144.

¹³³ Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 32.

¹³⁴ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 138.

force majeure or manipulation.”¹³⁵ Balthasar’s solution was to deny any *autonomous* freedom, affirming that true freedom is found by participating in God’s infinite freedom as a result of the Spirit’s liberation.¹³⁶ Only by responding to the Spirit’s direction can we experience *authentic* freedom and possess the “inner free spontaneity to carry out, recall and follow his plan.”¹³⁷ Vanhoozer offers a similar solution by viewing providence as dialogical consummation and convincing persuasion. God neither moves people like chess pieces nor lets them control the board. “Rather, God convincingly persuades some of the pieces freely to play of their own accord in a way that so corresponds to God’s will that we can speak (albeit hesitantly) in terms of dual agency.”¹³⁸ The Spirit plays a prominent role in this persuasion because he draws actors into communion with himself, thereby acting within and through persons and not on them from the outside.¹³⁹ The Spirit’s relationship with human actors is not just a matter of external stage directions, but more like the scenario described by Stanislavski in which the director’s desires become a part of the actor’s very self.¹⁴⁰

Promoting dialogical direction enables us to demure from Derrida, who claims that the theological stage is populated by “enslaved interpreters” who represent the meaning of the master and cling to the illusion of freedom and creativity.¹⁴¹ In the theodrama, the stage is certainly theological, but it is also a space in which the *Logos* liberates participants for living theatre. One wonders, therefore, if Vanhoozer’s notion of the Spirit’s “effectual prompt” leaves enough possibility for true dialogue and improvisation, and if the prompt can really be rejected. Does it have, as Paul Fiddes proposes, a “blend of triumph and tragedy” that leaves room for our “contribution to the creative project”?¹⁴² Nicholas Healy adds an honest supplement regarding the church’s improvisation, recognizing that its dramatic form arises from “the embodiment of its struggle to follow, reject or ignore the movement of the Spirit in

¹³⁵ Gorringer, *God’s Theatre*, 80.

¹³⁶ Balthasar, *TD II*, 230.

¹³⁷ Balthasar, *TD III*, 533-34.

¹³⁸ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 367.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 370. Michael Horton articulates a similar view of God’s dramatic direction that is “simultaneously effective and uncoerced.” *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 225.

¹⁴⁰ Constantin Stanislavski, *Creating a Role* (London: Methuen Drama, 2008), 50.

¹⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1990), 235.

¹⁴² Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), 142. Fiddes also endorses Gorringer’s model of God as director in *Ibid.*, 140. John Polkinghorne also advocates the improvisation of humanity in dialogue with God, in contrast to a cosmic puppet theatre. See *Faith, Science and Understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 109–10; *Questions of Truth: Fifty-One Responses to Questions About God, Science, and Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 15.

its midst.”¹⁴³ In sum, Gorringer highlights the theological and practical possibilities for espousing a model of dialogical directing for the Holy Spirit’s involvement in the theodrama.

“To think of God in terms of a theatre director, then, is to think of one whose job it is to evoke talents, skills, and capabilities the creature (who remains the ‘actor’) did not know it had. It gives God a supremely active and creative role, leading and being alongside as Orthodoxy conceived it (*praecurrit et concurrit*), but it does not destroy the autonomy of the creature. It is creative without being manipulative.”¹⁴⁴

3.4.3 *Disponibility and Fittingness to the Producer-Spirit*

If dialogical direction is the best way to conceive of the Spirit’s involvement in the theodrama, what does it mean to develop disponibility toward the Spirit’s direction and improvise in ways that display fittingness to this direction? In the book of Acts, we observe Jesus’ disciples improvising in various situations as a result of disponibility to the Spirit and his leading. Whether in the case of Philip hearing and responding to the Spirit’s voice (Acts 8:29-40), Peter’s responsive awareness of the Spirit’s direction (Acts 10:19-21; 11:12), the responsiveness of the church in Antioch to the Spirit’s choice of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2-4), the openness and Paul and others to the Spirit’s prohibition and constraint (Acts 16:6-7; 20:22), and the availability of the whole Jerusalem church to the Spirit in deciding the fitting requirements for Gentiles (Acts 15:28), each example demonstrates disponibility toward the Spirit as producer-director. While some of these stage directions from the Spirit were uniquely related to that particular scene in the theodrama in order to spread the gospel to the Gentiles, the Spirit continues to direct the church today, requiring continual disponibility to the Spirit’s leading and speaking. The first step in the church’s ethical discernment, therefore, is to be people who are receptive and responsive to the Spirit, a process Steven Guthrie describes as nurturing availability and living expectantly, “looking attentively for the Spirit’s activity, listening carefully for the Spirit’s voice.”¹⁴⁵

The Spirit does not just direct externally, however, but through what Vanhoozer calls “incardiation,” or by indwelling, transforming, and conforming individuals to the Playwright’s plan and the Protagonist’s performance.¹⁴⁶ In other words, the Spirit as producer

¹⁴³ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 68.

¹⁴⁴ Gorringer, *God’s Theatre*, 82.

¹⁴⁵ Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 157–58.

¹⁴⁶ Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 361–62.

is the agent who makes every other dimension of theodramatic disponibility possible.¹⁴⁷ Without the Spirit, we would not be able to develop disponibility to the triune God, Scripture, tradition, the church, unbelievers, or the world. The Spirit is, as Khaled Anatolios maintains, “the principle of availability indwelling us and rendering us efficacious agents of perichoretic availability.”¹⁴⁸ Disponibility is essentially a *spiritual* capability, enabling our receptivity to God’s work in the church and the world.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, disponibility *to* the Spirit is itself a gift of the Spirit and therefore is disponibility *in* the Spirit.¹⁵⁰

Spirit-enabled and Spirit-directed disponibility is the root of fitting and improvisational obedience.¹⁵¹ Along the way, the Spirit convicts of sin, shows us our errors in blocking offers, and gives gifts for fitting contributions to the church’s mission in the world. According to Wolfgang Vondey, theodramatic performance is always improvisational because it is a “corporeal, kinesthetic response to the present of the Holy Spirit that propels forward the imagination intellectually, practically, and communally.”¹⁵² Fitting performance, therefore, means relying on and walking by the Spirit (Rom 8:4; Gal 6:16-26), living as those who belong to Jesus Christ. Although Vondey critiques Vanhoozer of favoring “Christo-dramatic fittingness” over “Spirit-energetic freedom,” this is clearly a false dichotomy, since the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ as revealed in Scripture.¹⁵³ Because the Spirit is the one sent by the Son who is sent by the Father, performance fitting to the Spirit as producer is also fitting to the Son as protagonist and the Father as playwright.¹⁵⁴ This brings us back to where we began, with the identity and action of the triune God as the ultimate framework for theodramatic formation and performance. Without disponibility and fittingness to the triune God, it is impossible to be a well-formed actor who participates fittingly in the theodrama. Catherine LaCugna argues that only trinitarian ethics qualifies as a Christian ethics, since “Christian

¹⁴⁷ As a result, Wolfgang Vondey prefers not to refer to the Spirit as the director of a scripted drama, but as the very energy of the church’s improvisational play. *Beyond Pentecostalism: The Crisis of Global Christianity and the Renewal of the Theological Agenda* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 39.

¹⁴⁸ Anatolios, “Divine Disponibilité,” 307.

¹⁴⁹ Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 231.

¹⁵⁰ “Availability for the Spirit must always feed on the Spirit’s own availability, be an availability in the Spirit.” Balthasar, *ET IV*, 342.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁵² Vondey, *Beyond Pentecostalism*, 38.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* In other words, whereas Vondey critiques Vanhoozer of overemphasizing drama and performance imitating Christ, Vondey overemphasizes theatre and improvisational play in the Spirit.

¹⁵⁴ Balthasar, *ET IV*, 342.

ethics is not generic, but christological and pneumatological.”¹⁵⁵ By exploring the identity and action of God as playwright, protagonist and producer, we have seen that theodramatic formation and performance is not only continually oriented toward the triune God, but gifted, enabled, and sustained by Father, Son, and Spirit. Even as we turn to consider other dimensions of formation and performance, each dimension will contain inseparable links to the drama of trinitarian disponibility and fittingness.

¹⁵⁵ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 408. For other perspectives on trinitarian ethics, see L. Gregory Jones, *Transformed Judgment: Toward a Trinitarian Account of the Moral Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Cunningham, *These Three Are One*.



SCRIPTS, PLOTS AND BIBLICAL THEODRAMATICS

The fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of scripture is the life, activity and organization of the Christian community, construed as performance of the biblical text.

∞ Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*¹

Improvising transforms the Bible from a script that needs performing into a manual that trains disciples to take the right things for granted.

∞ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation*²

4.1 THEATRICAL SCRIPTS, PLOTS, AND THEMED IMPROVISATIONS

According to Aristotle, the essence of drama is *mythos*, the plot by which action is imitated.³ Dramatic characters are subordinate to the *mythos* and exist to move the plot from beginning to end. In modern theatre, however, many playwrights have questioned the preeminence of plot, such as Anton Chekhov and other Russian realists, placing plot in subservience to the interaction of realistic characters. Putting the actions of characters at the forefront of theatrical creativity is even more common in experimental and improvisational theatre. Clive Barker summarizes this perspective: “In theatre people meet, and plot is the result of their action.”⁴

Rather than adjudicating between the preeminence of theatrical plots or characters, a better approach is to place them in dynamic interplay: plots require performers and performers enact plots. From both angles, the essence of theatre is actors performing a plot, whether the plot is linear or non-linear, simple or complex, ordered or chaotic.⁵ In traditional theatre, actors internalize a scripted plot and perform this script for an audience. In improvisational theatre, actors create a plot with little or no background information or resources. In this setting, a good plot contains a theme or objective tying together the action. In fact, a common exercise in theatre rehearsals and games is improvising a scene based on a

¹ Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, 45.

² Wells, *Improvisation*, 69.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 50a1.

⁴ Clive Barker, *Theatre Games* (London: A&C Black, 2003), 124.

⁵ As Jonathan Fox concludes: “Theatre is the performance of a story by actors in a role.” Fox, *Acts of Service*, 189. Regarding the difference between plot and story, the basic consensus is that a story is a sequence of events whereas plot is the *ordered* sequence of events. In this chapter, “story” and “plot” are used interchangeably. Cf. David Edgar, *How Plays Work* (London: Nick Hern, 2009), 6.

theme, with sparse details regarding character and setting. The point of this exercise is to learn, as Viola Spolin masterfully instructed, how “the theme is the moving thread that weaves itself into every beat of the play or scene.”⁶ Even spontaneous, improvised performances contain a themed plot.

Situated between scripted theatre and pure improv are forms of theatre in which actors utilize resources to create a story while not relying on a detailed script. One example is *commedia dell’arte*, comedic theatre that originated in sixteenth-century Italy. In this form of theatre, actors perform scenes based on stock scenarios and characters, improvising within this structure and adapting in response to particular audiences.⁷ According to Richard Andrews, a scenario does not function like a script by giving detailed information about scenes, but “outlines the story, says who is on stage at any given moment, but then leaves space for the material, new and old, of the individual performers.”⁸ In other words, actors of *commedia dell’arte* know the basic plot and their roles, but are still free for creative improvisation. Many forms of improvisational theatre today claim to be progeny of *commedia dell’arte*, but perhaps the most similar is “interactive theatre” in which characters, plot, and setting are pre-established but the performance unfolds through improvisational interaction with audience members and particular situations.⁹

In sum, scripted theatre, *commedia dell’arte*, interactive theatre, and improvisational theatre all share the basic structure of characters performing plots. The way in which characters perform the plot, however, differs in each theatrical form. On the one hand, actors in scripted theatre perform lines and follow stage directions delineated by the script and guided by the director. On the other hand, actors in improvisational theatre spontaneously create dialogue, interactions and plots without previously memorized material. *Commedia dell’arte* and interactive theatre as its contemporary cousin share characteristics with both these traditions, since actors improvise within the constraints of scenarios and stock characters. As we turn to consider the place of Scripture in the theodrama, which theatrical form serves as the best model for the nature of Scripture and its role in theodramatic

⁶ Spolin, *Improvisation for Theater*, 299.

⁷ Giacomo Oreglia describes a scenario, or *canavaccio*, as “a schematic description of the performance” including a list of characters, props, plot summary, and a basic division of the acts. *The Commedia dell’Arte*, trans. Lovett F. Edwards (London: Methuen, 1968), 18.

⁸ Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 196.

⁹ For an excellent description of interactive theatre, see Gary Izzo, *The Art of Play: New Genre of Interactive Theatre* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 1997), 26. Interactive theatre will be explored in greater details in conjunction with missional theodramatics in Chapter 7.

formation and performance? Is Scripture a script, or is it some other kind of resource for theodramatic improvisation?

Among scholars interested in the theatrical turn in Christian theology, the most common approach is to identify Scripture as the script for the theodrama. Others, however, prefer an improvisational model in which Scripture plays a less directive role. This chapter begins, therefore, by describing current proposals for Scripture within the theodrama: script, non-script, and partial script. Next, it proposes an alternative understanding of Scripture as theodramatic transcript and prescript. Then, it explores the process of biblical emplotment, themetization, and theodramatic development. This sets the stage to consider the process for developing biblical disponibility and displaying biblical fittingness. Finally, this chapter concludes by showing how biblical disponibility and fittingness relate to other dimensions of theodramatic formation and performance, and explores the resulting consequences for the use and authority of Scripture in the theodrama today.

4.2 SCRIPTURE IN THE THEODRAMA: CURRENT PROPOSALS

4.2.1 *Scripture as Script*

Although some scholars construe Scripture as script simply because it seems appropriate within a theatrical model, others articulate specific reasons for using this model. First, just as most scripts present a unified plot and main theme, so does Scripture. If Scripture is a script, then it is not an inchoate collection of literature, but presents a coherent, unified story. For example, Kevin Vanhoozer asserts the plot of Scripture is covenantal and the main idea is the gospel embodied and enacted by Jesus Christ, the main character. Consequently, particular portions of Scripture must be interpreted in light of what Vanhoozer calls the whole “covenant-comedy of cosmic significance.”¹⁰

Second, if Scripture is a unified script, then it seems logical to posit the influence of a divine playwright. Scripture is the product of human authors, to be sure, but it is also the work of a divine playwright who communicates through human authors.¹¹ As indicated in the previous chapter, theologians such as Balthasar and Vanhoozer recognize that God is a

¹⁰ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 53.

¹¹ Again, Vanhoozer is representative of this view. *Ibid.*, 272. Cf. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 26, 478; Vanhoozer, “The Drama-of-Redemption Model,” 160.

dialogical playwright, enlisting the participation of others in creating the script and performing the theodrama, while remaining sovereign over the entire process.

A third motivation for viewing Scripture as a script is the importance of faithful performance—not just perception and understanding—of Scripture. Performing Scripture is not an afterthought, but the inevitable result and the means of interpreting the script.¹² Shannon Craigo-Snell suggests that Scripture is in one sense incomplete unless it is performed, just like a theatrical script is incomplete if it remains inert ink on a page.¹³ Similarly, Allen Verhey suggests the Christian life in its totality is the performance of the biblical script, since God’s people perform Scripture “in the rhetoric and practices of the churches, in their theology and in their worship, in their ethics and in their politics.”¹⁴

Fourth, as the unified work of a divine playwright issuing in performance, Scripture as script demarcates the boundaries for faithful perception of and performance in the theodrama. Actors cannot ignore the intentions of the playwright or the way the theodrama is presented in Scripture, simply perceiving and performing in the theodrama as they please. The script demands to be understood and followed; it is not a mere suggestion. Nicholas Lash explains: “What we may *not* do, if it is *this* text which we are to continue to perform, is to tell a different story.”¹⁵ Or as Michael Horton observes, “Even to speak of intentionally *departing* from the script is to assume that the script is normative.”¹⁶

To claim the biblical script as normative, however, is a loaded statement open to a variety of interpretations. Indeed, most theologians emphasize a fifth element in construing Scripture as script, namely, the variety of interpretations and performances of Scripture. Sandra Schneider compares Scripture to a script with a plethora of potential realizations, and therefore recognizes the essential place of tradition, much like the performance traditions

¹² In a chapter entitled “Scripture as Script: Playing our Part,” Eugene Peterson describes interpreting Scripture as a process of inhabiting the world presented by the biblical script, a process in which understanding and participation are inseparable. *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 69.

¹³ Craigo-Snell, “Command Performance,” 490–91.

¹⁴ Allen Verhey, “Scripture as Script and as Scripted,” in *Character Ethics and the New Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 19.

¹⁵ Or, to be more consistent with the metaphor, we cannot perform a different drama. Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus*, 44.

¹⁶ Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 96.

surrounding a particular theatrical script.¹⁷ In addition, both Craigo-Snell and Khovacs draw attention to the ongoing interpretation that occurs when a script is studied and performed in rehearsal, thereby cautioning against any final or supremely authoritative interpretations and performances of Scripture.¹⁸ Vanhoozer recognizes this inevitable diversity, but desires to maintain Scripture's role as a norm for the proliferation of interpretative and performance traditions, a claim we will explore in connection with traditional theodramatics.¹⁹

Sixth, viewing Scripture as a script highlights the centrality of exegesis and studying the script. For example, Verhey asserts that exegesis and detailed study of Scripture as a script is absolutely crucial in order to understand the play, as long as understanding does not neglect performance as the main point of study.²⁰ In other words, exegesis is not an end in itself, but must be oriented toward faithful performance in the theodrama today.

A seventh and final reason that Scripture as script is a compelling model for many is the communal nature of script interpretation and performance. An individual may have the responsibility to study and understand his or her part, but the process of understanding and performing a scripted play is almost always the work of an entire theatre company. Craigo-Snell acknowledges that interpretation and performance of the biblical script happens within the context of tradition, a community of believers, and society as a whole, a process in which everyone has different roles, gifts, and responsibilities.²¹ Likewise, Ron Martoia develops this metaphor at length, presenting Christian communities as places for creative conversations and interchanges regarding the meaning of the biblical script and how to perform it in particular contexts, a process resembling improvisation more than scripted performance.²²

Before moving on to consider alternative proposals for the role of Scripture in the theodrama, it is important to consider the perspective of Walter Brueggemann, who refers to

¹⁷ Sandra Marie Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 149–50.

¹⁸ Craigo-Snell, “Command Performance”; Khovacs, “Divine Reckoning in Profane Spaces,” 47–48.

¹⁹ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 235–36.

²⁰ Verhey, “Scripture as Script and as Scripted,” 25f. Cf. Allen Verhey, *Remembering Jesus: Christian Community, Scripture, and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 60–61. Vanhoozer defines exegesis as “the disciplined attempt to understand the theo-drama in its canonically scripted version” (*Drama of Doctrine*, 249) while being clear that exegesis is much more than “mastering information” about the script; it is an imaginative exercise oriented toward participation in the theodrama (*Ibid.*, 285).

²¹ Craigo-Snell, “Command Performance,” 479.

²² Ron Martoia, *The Bible as Improv: Seeing and Living the Script in New Ways* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). A general critique of this book is that it lacks consistency in applying the theatrical model, as the juxtaposition of “improv” and “script” in the title implies.

Scripture as script but gleans his metaphor more directly from social psychology than theatre.²³ According to Brueggemann, everyone lives according to a social or cultural script that guides our beliefs and behaviors. Since being scripted is inevitable, the most urgent task is to be formed by the right script: the biblical “counterdrama.”²⁴ Scripture presents a script for the counterdrama that subverts dominant cultural scripts and reforms our imaginations.²⁵ Performing this script, however, is nothing like rote memorization and repetition, but an act of “guerilla theatre” involving endless “re-enactment, retelling, rehearsing, redescribing [and] reperformance” in new contexts.²⁶ Scripture is not a “fixed, frozen” script, but a script constantly reread and reinterpreted.²⁷

This cursory glance at Brueggemann’s perspective on Scripture illustrates the extensive diversity among scholars construing Scripture as script. Some, such as Horton and Vanhoozer, emphasize Scripture as the scripted norm for understanding and performing the theodrama today. Others, like Craigo-Snell, Khovacs, and Brueggemann, employ the metaphor of Scripture as script to suggest the collaborative and continually changing process of performing Scripture in new situations. All of these scholars recognize both the unique place of Scripture as script in the Christian life and the role of communities in interpreting and performing that script in new and fresh ways. The difference, therefore, pertains more to what elements of the metaphor they choose to emphasize rather than their awareness of what the metaphor entails. In order to avoid the ambiguities and even confusion inherent in calling Scripture a script, we turn now to consider those who choose to modify the metaphor or abandon it completely.

²³ At various points, Brueggemann acknowledges his debt to the theory of transactional analysis and the work of Erving Goffman, Eric Berne, and Kenneth Burke, all influential in promoting sociological dramaturgy.

²⁴ Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, 57–91.

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006), 3f; Walter Brueggemann, “Counterscript: Living with the Elusive God,” *Christian Century* 122, no. 24 (2005): 22–28; Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991), 110.

²⁶ Brueggemann, *Ichabod Toward Home*, 120.

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Book That Breathes New Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005), 12.

4.2.2 *Scripture as Non-Script and Partial Script*

In an effort to highlight the improvisational nature of Christian ethics, Wells delineates several weaknesses of viewing Scripture as a script: Scripture does not provide all the answers for contemporary performance, encompass the whole theodrama, or present a golden era to emulate; rather, it leaves room for further discovery and improvisation.²⁸ Because Wells desires consistency in applying improvisation as a model for Christian ethics, Scripture cannot function as a script, although it does reveal the theodrama in which we are improvising. Other theologians and ethicists take a similar position, such as David Cunningham, who calls Scripture “a diverse collection of material” informing Christian improvisation. Similarly, Hauerwas describes Scripture as “the definitive story of God’s way with the world,” but not a story structured like a script.²⁹ In addition, William Spohn insists that Scripture is not a script that gives specific lines and dialogue to enact, but a collection of paradigms with potential to train our imaginations and dispositions for fitting performance.³⁰ Furthermore, Ben Witherington rejects the script metaphor because Scripture is more like testimony to a play already performed rather than a script for a future performance, and proceeds to critique the theatrical model for biblical studies and theology as a whole.³¹ Among those interested in a theatrical model, therefore, the metaphors of Scripture as script and the Christian life as improvisation seem difficult to reconcile. If participation in the theodrama involves improvisation, then surely Scripture cannot be a script. But if Scripture is not a script, then how does it relate to the Christian life, and why is it necessary?

One way to answer this question is to present Scripture as an *unfinished* or *partial* script forming the basis for improvisation. Tom Wright was the original advocate of this position, claiming that Scripture comprises four Acts of a five-Act play, leaving the church responsible to improvise the fifth and final Act in a way consistent both with previous Acts and the prophesied end of the play.³² Consequently, Wright speaks of improvising with a partial

²⁸ Wells, *Improvisation*, 62–63.

²⁹ David S. Cunningham, *Christian Ethics: The End of the Law* (Milton Park/New York: Routledge, 2008), 99; Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 93–94.

³⁰ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 135, 154.

³¹ Ben Witherington, *The Indelible Image: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament: The Collective Witness*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2010), 50–51, 438. Ironically, despite this critique, Witherington continues to refer to theatrical improvisation as a model for Christian living.

³² Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?”; Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 43; Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 121–27.

script, and thus shares concerns for the primacy and authority of the biblical script while leaving room for improvisation pursued with “innovation and consistency.”³³ Because of his firm commitment to the authority of Scripture, Wright claims regarding Christian living: “No actor, no company, is free to improvise scenes from another play, or one with a different ending.”³⁴ Within this framework, however, there is ample room for creative and innovative performances.³⁵

Kevin Vanhoozer develops a related model, acknowledging his debt to Wright and weaving together the notion of Scripture as script and the Christian life as improvisation. In more recent work, however, Vanhoozer has attempted to clarify his position on Scripture as a script, given the potentially confusing notion of improvising from a script. Even though he still identifies Scripture as a script, he explains that Christians do not actually perform the scripted discourse, but “the theodrama it describes and enacts” or the world the script “presupposes, entails, and implies.”³⁶ Attention to the script is pivotal, but the purpose is not to perform specific lines, but to improvise faithfully in the world the script projects. Vanhoozer’s modified position, therefore, is a variation on Wright’s suggestion that Scripture is a partial script on the basis of which Christians improvise.³⁷ With all of these qualifications, however, is it still helpful to conceive of Scripture as a script? Does Scripture function enough like a script to maintain this metaphor? And if not, is there another model we could employ that maintains the priority of Scripture and other positive elements of the script metaphor while appropriately emphasizing the improvisational nature of interpretation and Christian living?

4.3 SCRIPTURE AS TRANSCRIPT AND PRESCRIPT

Imagine a playwright (God the Father) who has a comprehensive plan for a play, but guides certain writers in transcribing a long series of improvised performances in interaction

³³ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 140.

³⁴ Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 127.

³⁵ Wright’s model has gained widespread popularity, and it is common to see reference to this model in commentaries, academic theology, and popular literature alike. One extended development of the model that acknowledged debt to Wright is Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

³⁶ Vanhoozer, “The Drama-of-Redemption Model,” 165. Therefore, Vanhoozer prefers not to speak of biblical application, but “living in the world implied by the script,” which involves a complete transformation of perceptual and performative habits. *Ibid.*, 170-71.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 172-74.

with his own performance (the theodrama). He does not record every word and action, but only those events, interactions, and explanatory notes that contribute to a cohesive story (the Old Testament). These transcriptions are taken up by another group of actors (disciples of Jesus) with the task of improvising creatively and consistently with these earlier performances as interpreted and enacted by the playwright himself performing the lead role (Jesus). Later, the playwright also includes letters from various assistant directors (Paul, Peter, John, etc.) to their companies (churches) that suggest more faithful and creative ways of performing in various situations as guided by the producer (Holy Spirit). In the end, the resource given to actors today is not a script *per se* but a collection of adapted performance transcriptions serving as prescriptions for further performance (the Christian Scriptures). Some of these transcriptions even include predictions of how the play will end (prophecy), so the actors are required to reincorporate by memory what is transcribed while preincorporating with hope and imagination elements from the ending.

In this model, actors have freedom to improvise within the overall structure provided by the playwright-Father through a collection of transcriptions and prescriptions featuring the protagonist-Son and guided by the producer-Spirit. Because of God's involvement in this entire process, Scripture is also rightly conceived as a triune performance, with each human text also constituting divine discourse. Accordingly, Scripture is not strictly a script, but a divine-human textual performance constituting a theodramatic *transcript* that serves as a *prescript* for fitting participation in that same drama.³⁸ These metaphors contain great potential and more accurately describe the nature and role of Scripture in the theodrama. They allow us to maintain the theatrical metaphor while more accurately describing the nature of Scripture, the method of biblical interpretation, and the place of Scripture in theodramatic formation and performance.

4.3.1 *Scripture as Transcript*

Scripture as theodramatic transcript highlights the historical and testimonial nature of the biblical texts. In this sense, Scripture is not a script yet to be performed, but a transcript of

³⁸ Credit for these particular terms belongs to Vanhoozer, one of the few times he describes Scripture in another way besides a script, although he does not develop the metaphors (*Drama of Doctrine*, 167). Wells also uses the term "transcript" at one point, but only in association with the work of James C. Scott (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance*), and the contrast between the "public transcript" of the powerful and the "hidden transcript" of social subversives. Wells utilizes these concepts to remark on status interactions, however, and not in relation to Scripture (*Improvisation*, 98f.)

previous performances.³⁹ Balthasar suggests a similar view by objecting to Scripture as a finished stage text, preferring to speak of Scripture as Spirit-inspired human testimony to the speech and acts of God in history.⁴⁰ Likewise, Vanhoozer maintains that Scripture “gives true *testimony* to the words and works of the triune God of the old and new covenants,” although overall he still insists the canon functions as a script.⁴¹ The metaphor of transcript indicates, therefore, that Scripture is a faithful record of and witness to historical performances in the theodrama.

To clarify this position, it is beneficial to discuss Scripture as transcript in relation to the “worlds” behind, within, and in front of Scripture. The world “behind” the text refers to *pre-canonical performances* of the theodrama to which Scripture bears testimony. The world “within” the biblical text refers to the oral and textual *canonical performances* that now constitute Christian Scripture. And the world “in front” of the text refers to *post-canonical* performances enacted on the world stage. Consequently, theodramatic performance has three different senses, whether preceding, constituting, or resulting from Scripture.⁴² Identifying Scripture as a theodramatic transcript, therefore, highlights the process of transcribing pre-canonical performances, most notably the performance of God incarnate. Max Harris reflects on how God’s revelatory appearance on the world stage—the incarnation of Jesus—engendered the textual record of this performance.⁴³ As such, he is right to claim Christianity as a “religion of the Stage,” not just a “religion of the Book.”⁴⁴

Scripture also functions as a transcript in relation to canonical performances: whether direct authorial transcription, scribal transcription, or the transcription of oral traditions and performances. Whereas the first two types of canonical transcription are widely recognized, the latter type is a relatively new field in biblical studies known as “biblical performance criticism.” David Rhoads, a leading figure in the field, observes that stories about Jesus performed to whole communities were often transcribed to produce particular textual

³⁹ The exception, of course, is prophecy that point to future scenes in the theodrama.

⁴⁰ Balthasar, *TD II*, 103-06.

⁴¹ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 178–79 [emphasis mine].

⁴² David Ford refers to these multiple senses of performance in his essay “Dramatic Theology: York, Lambeth and Cambridge,” in *Sounding the Depths*, ed. Jeremy Begbie (London: SCM Press, 2002), 75. In addition, Scott Swain, while using the metaphor of script loosely, concludes that Scripture as script “announces the drama that unfolded behind the text and directs the drama that happens in front of the text.” *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 114.

⁴³ Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

records, such as the Gospel of Mark.⁴⁵ If this is correct, the Gospel of Mark is both a transcript of pre-canonical performance (Jesus' life and ministry), and a transcript of the canonical performances by which this particular sto'ry became Scripture.⁴⁶ Rhoads explains how viewing Scripture in this way has significant impact on interpretation, since understanding a particular text requires consideration of the performative context in which it was originally delivered.⁴⁷ Even if Scripture was originally performed and transcribed for particular audiences, however, it is still legitimate to assert that Scripture addresses all Christians.⁴⁸ As the work of human authors *and* the divine playwright, Scripture is a trustworthy transcription with significance transcending one particular context.

To identify Scripture as a theodramatic transcript, therefore, is to show how the stage preceded the page, how Scripture is a transcript of pre-canonical performances. In addition, Scripture is a transcript by virtue of the process by which the canon was performed, written, and transmitted: canonical performances. Both of these elements point to the testimonial nature of Scripture revealing key performances in the theodrama. Does this model of Scripture as transcript, however, have any correspondence in the world of theatre? Is Ben Witherington correct to claim that “a script for a play is never written after the fact on the basis of observing a play”?⁴⁹ In traditional theatre this is generally accurate, but there are several cases where a playwright or group of writers craft a script on the basis of improvised performances. For example, the author and playwright Jeffrey Sweet explains the process of writing plays based on transcribed improvisations, describing this method as a successful way to create realistic dialogue and interaction. In improvisation, “dialogue is always an extension of behavior,” so plays built from transcribed improvisations are replete with performative wisdom.⁵⁰ Creating dialogue from improvisation has the benefit of the actors' shared body of knowledge, “the dramatic equivalent to keys, tempo, time signatures, and chord

⁴⁵ Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies—Part I.” Rhoads, “Performance Criticism.”

⁴⁶ Cf. L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

⁴⁷ If at least some Scripture is a transcript of stories performed for particular communities, one practical implication is that proper interpretation requires the public performance of Scripture before a group of people.

⁴⁸ Cf. Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁴⁹ Witherington, *The Indelible Image*, 2:50–51. One recent example of a playwright providing a general plan or scheme that is improvised by a cast and/or audience members is Rob Drummond's “Mr Write” sponsored by the National Theatre of Scotland in Spring 2010.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Sweet, “Improvisation as a Playwriting Tool,” *The Spolin Center*, n.d., http://www.spolin.com/playwriting_tool.html.

progressions.”⁵¹ The practice of writing a play based on improvised performances, therefore, is not an unprecedented idea. The difference between this process and the creation of the canon, however, is that biblical transcripts do not function as a script to be repeated verbatim, but as a prescript to guide new, improvised performances.

4.3.2 *Scripture as Prescript*

If Scripture as transcript relates to pre-canonical and canonical performances, Scripture as prescript points to Scripture’s role in generating and guiding post-canonical performances. Balthasar refers to this as the gestative role of Scripture, the way in which the Spirit accompanies Scripture and generates new life and movements within the continuing theodrama.⁵² Similarly, Vanhoozer speaks of the way Scripture summons participation in the theodrama and provides direction for fitting performance in contemporary contexts.⁵³ As such, both Balthasar and Vanhoozer share the view that Scripture is not merely a testimony to theodramatic performances, but an invitation for further theodramatic participation.⁵⁴ Identifying Scripture as prescript in this theodramatic sense, however, differs from what has been traditionally called the “prescriptive use of Scripture.” Christian ethicists employ this phrase to describe the approach of gleaning laws and rules from Scripture that structure moral life today. For the purpose of this study, however, “prescription” refers to the full extent of Scripture’s dramatic direction rather than just its propositional rules. Whereas Scripture does contain specific laws and rules that remain universally applicable, limiting the use of Scripture to this kind of prescription truncates the function of Scripture in theodramatic performance.⁵⁵ As Richard Hays notes, following direct commandments and prohibitions is only one mode of appeal to Scripture in Christian ethics alongside an appeal to principles, paradigms and the symbolic world of Scripture, and he pleads for due consideration to biblical genres and different ways the biblical texts should be interpreted and

⁵¹ Jeffrey Sweet, *The Dramatist’s Toolkit: The Craft of the Working Playwright* (London: Heinemann Drama, 1993), 140.

⁵² Balthasar, *TD II*, 111.

⁵³ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 178–89. Furthermore, at one point Vanhoozer mixes metaphors and uses prescription in the pharmaceutical sense, in that we Scripture for better spiritual health (Ibid., 152).

⁵⁴ Balthasar, *TD II*, 112-15. Vanhoozer emphasizes this as an improvisational process of developing *phronesis* in *Drama of Doctrine*, 335ff.

⁵⁵ Cf. Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1976), 158. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 208–09.

applied.⁵⁶ Consequently, the role of Scripture as prescript includes all the diverse ways Scripture generates and guides further theodramatic performances, and we will explore some of these below.

Is there an overall approach, however, enabling us to discern how Scripture functions as a theodramatic prescript and relates to Scripture's dual function as transcript? One promising approach is to identify the biblical transcript in all its literary variety as a *prescriptive paradigm* for subsequent performances. In other words, Scripture provides direction for further participation in the theodrama by virtue of giving literary testimony to particular performances on the world stage. Christopher Wright explains that a paradigmatic approach to Scripture begins with "particular, specific, concrete cases" that supply relevance beyond their particularity.⁵⁷ Vanhoozer is careful to explain how paradigms are not limited to biblical narratives and characters, but include every particular way that Scripture transcribes the theodrama, "the sum total of the communicative practices that comprise the canon."⁵⁸ In short, only by attending carefully to the details of the transcript does Scripture function as a prescriptive paradigm.⁵⁹ Scripture is prescriptive by virtue of being descriptive of particular performances.⁶⁰ Moreover, the way Scripture prescribes subsequent performances depends on the literary mode of transcription, whether prosaic, poetic, prophetic, or proverbial.⁶¹ We may observe this dynamic within Scripture itself by the use of Old Testament texts as prescriptive paradigms by New Testament authors. For example, when Paul writes that the poor performance of the Israelites in the wilderness was recorded—or transcribed—as an example or pattern for the Corinthians, Paul is using this Old Testament passage as a prescript, albeit by highlighting what to avoid (1 Cor 10:1-10). Of course, portions of the Old Testament are often used as positive prescripts, such as the author of Hebrews showcasing

⁵⁶ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 293-95.

⁵⁷ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004), 65.

⁵⁸ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 316-17.

⁵⁹ Contrary to Nicholas Wolterstorff, therefore, "performance interpretation" does not run roughshod over the details of textual discourse. *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 181-82.

⁶⁰ Cf. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 64. Allen Verhey makes the same point, maintaining that performing Scripture as script (or prescript) entails paying attention to it as scripted (or transcript). See "Scripture as Script and as Scripted"; *Ephesians: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 19-20.

⁶¹ A good example of this is Waldemar Janzen's paradigmatic approach to Old Testament ethics, although his treatment is limited to prescriptive characters, neglecting events or states of affairs as prescriptive. *Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

various characters for their exemplary and imitable faith (Heb 11). As a result, the practice of interpreting Scripture as a prescript is latent with Scripture itself, a process requiring creative fidelity to improvise biblical prescriptions in new contexts.⁶²

Of all the paradigms in Scripture, the transcriptions of Jesus' performance provide the ultimate prescriptions. As God himself performing the lead role on the world stage, Jesus' performance is, on the one hand, entirely unique. Even though Jesus' performance is unique and unrepeatably, it is on the other hand the ultimate paradigm for every subsequent performance seeking to improvise in his steps (1 Pet 2:21). The performance of Jesus cannot and should not be exactly reproduced; Jesus' performance constitutes a prescriptive paradigm for similar yet not identical performances in contemporary contexts. Indeed, this is true of every other biblical paradigm to varying degrees, since these paradigms do not require identical imitation or repetition, but rather imaginative improvisation and creative transposition of this paradigm into a different context. Richard Hays identifies the transposition of biblical paradigms as an "integrative act of the imagination," an act of "metaphor-making, placing our community's life imaginatively within the world articulated by the texts."⁶³ This practice promotes not just an understanding of the text, but also the performance of biblical paradigms by the church.⁶⁴ Overall, it equips us not for the self-centered goal of "using" Scripture, but for participating in the theodrama Scripture reveals.⁶⁵

While particular texts of Scripture provide prescriptive paradigms, requiring imagination to inhabit these paradigms and to transpose them into different contexts, Scripture as a whole is a prescript for further performance by providing the overall plot of the theodrama. Taken as a whole, Scripture testifies to how the theodrama began, envisions how the theodrama will end, and demonstrates how the theodrama progresses from creation to new creation through the story of Israel, Jesus and the church. While Scripture does not function like a script in providing a precise prescription for how it will end, Scripture does contain imaginative visions of the end.⁶⁶ Because the theodrama has not ended, Scripture as a whole is a prescript to

⁶² Wells, *Improvisation*, 66. Witherington, *The Indelible Image*, 2:104. For the same observation made from the perspective of musical improvisation, see Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 222-23.

⁶³ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 298-99.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 305. Vanhoozer also gives a prominent role to the imagination in utilizing biblical texts as a prescript while protecting their particularity as theodramatic transcripts in *Drama of Doctrine*, 317.

⁶⁵ Cf. Angus Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), see especially page 44.

⁶⁶ Trevor Hart rightly asserts that Scripture is not a script, but does offer an "imaginative vision of an end, a closure, a *telos* to our living which bestows meaning and worth upon it, and which grants a

guide fitting and imaginative performance in the theodrama in memory of what came before and in anticipation of what is yet to come.

So far, it has been argued that despite the popularity of describing Scripture as script, critiques of this metaphor are accurate, and it is more appropriate to construe Scripture as transcript and prescript. As a transcript, Scripture provides a testimony to pre-canonical performances and is itself the product of divine-human canonical performances. These transcripts serve as paradigmatic prescripts for post-canonical performance in different contexts. In addition, Scripture is a transcript for the theodrama as a unified whole, thus serving as a prescript for finding our place within the theodrama today.

4.4 THEODRAMATIC EMPLOTMENT

4.4.1 *Unity and Diversity*

Does Scripture really present an “all-embracing, creative, redemptive drama” despite containing a vast diversity of texts and genres?⁶⁷ It is true that appeals to canonical unity can easily stifle diversity and ignore textual particularity, ambiguity, and complexity. Richard Bauckham recognizes several ways in which the Bible does not possess seamless unity, including the fact that some books—such as Proverbs—do not fit neatly into the narrative structure, as well as the different styles, purposes and contexts of the various human authors.⁶⁸ Walter Brueggemann offers a more robust warning against homogenization, since “the Bible does not consist in a single, large drama, but in many small, disordered dramas.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Brueggemann does admit that a narrative coherence slowly emerges after being immersed in the individual dramas transcribed in Scripture, but a tension remains between the small, disordering dramas and the large, unifying drama.⁷⁰

Whereas Scripture contains diverse genres, historical situations, and authorial perspectives, it transcribes and prescribes performances in a unified theodrama. This unity

sense of direction.” Hart, “The Sense of an Ending: Finitude and the Authentic Performance of Life,” 176.

⁶⁷ Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 531.

⁶⁸ Richard Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 38–40.

⁶⁹ Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, 70.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

does not flatten out every contingency and complexity, but allows particularities to cohere within a greater whole. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen observe that affirming the unity of Scripture actually liberates rather than oppresses interpretation by providing a framework for what otherwise might seem like an inchoate collection of literature.⁷¹ Indeed, Scripture itself includes overviews of the unified theodrama, such as Stephen's summary in Acts 7 or the numerous synopses in the Psalms (e.g. Ps 78; 105; 136). Of course, Bauckham correctly cautions that "the summaries cannot replace what they summarize; the story they summarize resists closure."⁷² We must resist imposing "premature eschatological closure" on the theodramatic unity of Scripture, yet a unified story emerges from the unique cases, complex characters, and surprising and unresolved plot permutations. As the second thesis of the Scripture Project asserts, "Scripture is rightly understood in light of the church's rule of faith as a coherent dramatic narrative."⁷³ Ultimately, confidence in the coherent theodrama revealed by Scripture rests on a belief in a divine playwright who does not dictate a script to human authors, but who nevertheless communicates through just these transcriptive texts and remains involved as producer in their prescriptive power in the life of the church. In short, Scripture testifies to and invites participation in a unified theodrama because it is divine discourse, a performance of the triune God.

4.4.2 *Thematization and Development*

It is one thing to recognize "a coherent dramatic narrative" in Scripture; it is quite another to determine the main theme and plot developments. This is an important and necessary move, however, if particular paradigms are to function properly as prescripts in the theodrama today. Correct interpretation of Scripture demands readers to locate particular biblical texts and their own historical location within the larger theodrama. Paul Ricoeur utilizes the term "emplotment" to describe the joint work of text and reader in configuring a plot.⁷⁴ He observes that just as emplotment helps us make sense of our own lives, the same

⁷¹ Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, "Story and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary Healy, Karl Moller, and Robin Parry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 167.

⁷² Bauckham, "Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story," 44.

⁷³ The Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture are an introduction to the book that resulted from the Scripture Project: Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁷⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 76.

skill is used to bring cohesion to other stories, which when applied to Scripture takes the form of narrative theology.⁷⁵ He also affirms the possibility of maintaining complex diversity within a unified plot, since “the triumphant concordance between the beginning and the end does not suppress, but enhances, the militant discordance of the middle.”⁷⁶

Although Constantin Stanislavski never used the term “emplotment,” his theatrical practices correspond to Ricoeur’s theoretical concerns. To prepare a play for performance, Stanislavski insisted on discerning the development of the play and its main theme, or dividing the play into units and discerning the “super-objective.” This practice helps actors discern the direction of the play, out of which emerges a main theme or super-objective.⁷⁷ For Stanislavski, discerning the super-objective is supremely important, because “in the play the whole stream of individual, minor objectives, all the imaginative thoughts, feelings and actions of an actor, should converge to carry out the super-objective of the plot.”⁷⁸ He instructs actors to consider this carefully, although sometimes it is not possible to discern the super-objective until performing the play. As it emerges, however, the objective becomes the “fountainhead of the actor’s artistic creation,” a theatrical aid containing a “miraculous, life-giving quality.”⁷⁹

Discerning the super-objective and plot of Scripture can be equally life-giving for actors in the theodrama, helping them understand the theodrama in which they are participating and giving meaning to the text and their own lives. In this “dramatic mode of reading,” observes Rowan Williams, the “movements, transaction, and transformations” of Scripture become ours and motivate fitting participation in the theodrama.⁸⁰ The tasks of theodramatic emplotment and thematization, therefore, are not mere academic exercises, but pastoral, practical and performance-oriented activities. In a similar vein, Daniel Brendsel makes a convincing case that discerning the biblical plot and central theme are inextricably linked with ethical responsibility, since different emplotments and main themes imply different responsibilities.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 236f.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁷⁷ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 116–19.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 273, 276.

⁸⁰ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 50. This appeared earlier as Williams, “The Literal Sense of Scripture.”

⁸¹ Daniel J. Brendsel, “Plots, Themes, and Responsibilities: The Search for a Center of Biblical Theology Reexamined,” *Themelios* 35, no. 5 (2010): 400–412.

Most scholars exploring a theatrical model for theology and ethics have attempted to emplot the biblical theodrama according to different Acts, and the results are largely similar despite slight differences.⁸² Emplotting the theodrama by dividing it into Acts highlights its overall unity as well as its progression and development. For example, Tom Wright emplots Scripture as a five-Act play under the theme of a creation comedy as follows:

Act 1: Creation
 Act 2: Fall
 Act 3: Israel
 Act 4: Jesus
 Act 5: Church⁸³

Wells purposefully sets his emplotment in counterpoint to Wright's, criticizing Wright for putting the church at the end of the theodrama rather than the eschaton, failing to place Jesus at the center of the drama, and separating creation and fall into two Acts.⁸⁴ In this way, Wells similarly delineates a five-Act theodrama, with contemporary Christians finding their role in Act 4.⁸⁵ Rather than summarizing the story with a theme, Wells simply highlights the main developments in the story:

Act 1: Creation
 Act 2: Israel
 Act 3: Jesus
 Act 4: Church
 Act 5: Eschaton

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen also acknowledge their debt to Wright, and offer yet another variation on his influential theodramatic emplotment.⁸⁶ Like Wells, Bartholomew and Goheen add a final Act beyond the church, and include subheadings for several Acts to highlight the themes of kingdom and redemption.

⁸² I am not aware that Balthasar ever attempted an overarching theodramatic emplotment, but he did articulate the five acts of Christ's courtroom drama in conjunction with the work of Markus Barth (*TD II*, 156-59) and the three-act play of theodramatic anthropology (*TD II*, 335-36).

⁸³ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 141-42.

⁸⁴ Wells, *Improvisation*, 53-55. Wright dealt with Wells' objections in *Scripture and the Authority of God* (122-23) and preserved his emplotment.

⁸⁵ Vanhoozer also follows this emplotment and expresses the main theme as a covenantal comedy centered on the person and work of Jesus. See *Drama of Doctrine*, 2-3.

⁸⁶ Goheen and Bartholomew, *Drama of Scripture*. The six acts are conveniently used as chapter divisions.

- Act 1: God establishes his kingdom: creation
- Act 2: Rebellion in the kingdom: fall
- Act 3: The king chooses Israel: redemption initiated
- Act 4: The coming of the King: redemption accomplished
- Act 5: Spreading the news of the King: the mission of the church
- Act 6: The return of the King: redemption completed

Although not every scholar emplots the biblical theodrama in a similar manner, there exists a common impulse to emplot and identify main themes and super-objectives. Even Walter Brueggemann, who resists cohesive emplotments, recognizes creation-covenant-consummation as the theodramatic plot, albeit one that is “enormously variegated in its detail and nuance.”⁸⁷ What is more, all of these emplotments share a general movement from creation to new creation through the climactic person and work of Jesus. The major differences between these emplotments include the choice of a super-objective or theme (e.g. new creation, covenant, kingdom), the exact number of Acts and how they are apportioned (whether four, five, or six), and the presence of additional modifiers (e.g. redemption initiated) to provide more insight into the theodramatic theme.

Interestingly, only Bartholomew and Goheen name individual Acts in order to correspond with the overall theme of the theodrama rather than simply describing a particular era in the theodrama. Assigning thematic titles to various Acts constitutes, to a certain extent, imaginative interpretation and is always open to modification, but it represents a helpful and honest way to clarify the thematic unity and development of the theodrama. While Bartholomew and Goheen succeed in communicating thematic unity and development within their emplotment, they also introduce confusion by weaving together two themes—kingdom and redemption—and mixing in other popular monikers for theodramatic eras, such as creation, fall, and church. A more successful emplotment, it seems, would combine both consistent thematic descriptions of Acts and historical monikers common in most emplotments. The following is one example of how this might be accomplished:

- Act 1: Formation (Creation)
- Act 2: Deformation (Fall)
- Act 3: Transformation emerged (Israel)
- Act 4: Transformation embodied (Jesus)
- Act 5: Transformation empowered (Church)
- Act 6: Re-formation (New Creation)

⁸⁷ Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 8.

Consider several benefits of this particular emplotment. First, each Act title contains a common root word—*form*—emphasizing theodramatic unity while highlighting the progression by prefix changes: de-, trans- and re-. Thus, the relationship between each Act is more obvious and organic than the typical scheme of creation-fall-redemption-consummation. Second, the different permutations of *formation* highlight the relationship between the tragic and comic elements of theodrama. If formation sets the stage for a comedy, then deformation introduces the tragic element (the bad news), while the comic reemerges through transformation (the good news) and finally swallows up the tragic in complete re-formation.⁸⁸ Third, focusing the plot around the theme of *form* emphasizes not merely theodramatic truth or performative goodness, but the beauty of the theodrama: beauty formed, deformed, transformed, and reformed. Fourth, “redemption” may be the most common title for the Act following the fall, but “redemption” is only one possible description of God’s action throughout the theodrama. It is simply one metaphor among many to describe God’s salvific action, including reconciliation, ransom, adoption, victory, liberation, justification, and more. Transformation, on the other hand, is a concept expansive enough to include all of these metaphors within its conceptual reach. Therefore, it calls for rather than limits further description of the theodramatic plot utilizing other biblical metaphors and themes.

Although this is merely one example of a theodramatic emplotment, it illustrates the importance of identifying a theme and discerning development within the theodrama. Without a main theme or super-objective, the Acts of the theodrama easily become disconnected. The dispensationalist error is not recognizing the dramatic development and connection between the Acts, and how the earlier acts continue to influence the latter.⁸⁹ Again, this is the benefit of naming the Acts in order to discern theodramatic continuity and discontinuity. Careful attention to development and thematization enables fruitful interpretation of Scripture as transcript and prescript, placing each text and paradigm within the context of the whole theodrama. Next, we turn to consider how developing biblical disponibility and displaying biblical fittingness are related to Scripture as transcript and prescript and the practices of exegeting paradigmatic texts and emplotting the theodrama.

⁸⁸ As such, I am inclined to view the theodrama, like C. S. Lewis does, as a “tragic-comedy.” For a good introduction to this theme in Lewis, see Michael Wards’s essay “The Tragedy Is in the Pity: C. S. Lewis and the Song of the Goat” in Taylor and Waller, *Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory*, 149–63.

⁸⁹ Wells observes that dispensationalism is more “epic” than dramatic (*Improvisation*, 53).

4.5 BIBLICAL DISPONIBILITY AND FITTINGNESS

4.5.1 *Developing Biblical Disponibility*

Biblical disponibility is an attitude and an action: an attitude of availability and the act of being receptive to Scripture out of which particular practices emerge. Approaching Scripture with disponibility, therefore, involves the practice of attending to particular parts of Scripture as theodramatic transcripts and prescripts and building awareness of Scripture's plot and theme. Many perspectives on the role of Scripture in Christian ethics focus on the character, dispositions, and moral vision *resulting* from exegetical attention and biblical-theological awareness, rather than the act of being disposed toward Scripture in the first place.⁹⁰ Biblical disponibility is the availability, receptivity and readiness to respond to the Bible as the communicative Word of God.⁹¹ It is crucial to observe how Scripture forms our imagination and character, but these observations often take for granted the fundamental disposition of listening to and learning from Scripture. The importance of biblical disponibility arises from the assumption that Scripture is not just human words, but texts through which God has revealed himself and continues to communicate his ways and will. As such, biblical disponibility is another form of trinitarian disponibility, because being disposed and receptive to Scripture means being available to receive communication from God.

Lamentably, it is common to approach Scripture as either a historical object of academic attention or a textbook for confirming default beliefs or answers to particular conundrums, rather than approaching Scripture on its own terms and being immersed in this act of divine-human communication. Ron Martoia calls this an “inattentional blindness” toward Scripture, which is actually a “trained inattention” due to our usual practices of reading Scripture.⁹² James Fodor concurs and offers an alterative: “Religious reading is training in the art of attention, a listening that anticipates creative obedience, an abandoning of oneself to the

⁹⁰ For example, Birch and Rasmussen conclude the Bible forms our “perception, dispositions, and intentions” and use the example of how the parable of the Good Samaritan aids us in developing a disposition to care for the needy. *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, 106–07.

⁹¹ Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 9.

⁹² Martoia, *The Bible as Improv*, 151–52.

Word.”⁹³ But what does this attentive abandonment actually look like? How do we relate biblical disponibility to ways the Church has read and interpreted Scripture throughout the centuries?

One helpful way to describe biblical disponibility is to look at it through the lens of *lectio divina*. The ancient practice of *lectio divina*, which has seen widespread contemporary retrieval, is the act of attending to Scripture not as a technique, but as a way of life.⁹⁴ This practice involves reading (*lectio*), meditating (*meditatio*), praying (*oratio*), and living (*contemplatio*) the text.⁹⁵ Eugene Peterson describes *lectio divina* as an art that “cultivates personal, participatory attentiveness” toward Scripture.⁹⁶ This attentiveness toward Scripture includes the discipline of exegesis, reveling in the details of the text as an act of love.⁹⁷ David Yeago underscores the first step of faithful reading: “Pay attention, meticulous attention, to what the scriptures say,” which includes the way they communicate in their “linguistic and culture matrix.”⁹⁸ But it also involves developing an awareness of Scripture as a “connected, coherent whole” and drawing on the resources of biblical theology.⁹⁹ *Lectio divina* is never a mere technique or academic exercise, however, and combines rigorous attention to the text with responsive obedience and active participation in the theodrama.¹⁰⁰ In short, *lectio divina* does not jettison the scholarly disciplines of exegesis and biblical theology, but keeps these disciplines from degenerating into dry techniques. Another safeguard for this dangerous tendency is attending to Scripture in the context of Christian community. Developing biblical disponibility is never merely an individual task, but “obedient, participatory listening to Holy Scripture *in the company of the holy community* through time...and space.”¹⁰¹

⁹³ James Fodor, “Reading the Scriptures: Rehearsing Identity, Practising Character,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 167.

⁹⁴ Michael Casey describes *lectio divina* as akin to following the way of a master, requiring readers who are “receptive, docile, willing to be changed.” *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1996), 6.

⁹⁵ It is possible to practice these four movements of *lectio divina* without endorsing their common link to the four senses of Scripture (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical).

⁹⁶ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 84.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹⁸ David S. Yeago, “The Spirit, the Church, and the Scriptures: Biblical Inspiration and Interpretation Revisited,” in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James Joseph Buckley and David S. Yeago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 66–67. Cf. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 90.

⁹⁹ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 100.

¹⁰⁰ As such, contemplation and action form an indissoluble unity in this practice. See Balthasar’s excellent essay “Action and Contemplation” in *ETI*, 227–40. Cf. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 110.

¹⁰¹ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 75.

In sum, readers of Scripture develop biblical disponibility as they approach Scripture with attuned receptivity, attending to the details and overall emplotment of Scripture in the spirit of *lectio divina* and through the practices of individual reading, corporate worship, and communal dialogue. According to Brian Brock, true wisdom results from “attentiveness to God’s word learned and practiced within a community.”¹⁰² Biblical disponibility is both a gift of the Spirit and a human responsibility. It is both the pre-condition for proper biblical interpretation and the disposition that keeps interpretation inseparably linked to theodramatic performance. As a result, disponible readers of Scripture “become, over time, figured and re-figured by Scripture, much in the same way that an actor, by rehearsing his or her part, learns to “take on” a character in a play.”¹⁰³

4.5.2 *Displaying Biblical Fittingness*

There is not a neat, linear progression from developing biblical disponibility to performing in the theodrama with biblical fittingness. Theodramatic formation and performance, much like contemplation and action, are not as much different *moments* in the Christian life as they are reciprocal and dynamic *movements* of theodramatic participation. Developing biblical disponibility empowers biblically fitting performance and seeking to display biblical fittingness shapes biblical disponibility. It is incorrect, therefore, to attempt to master biblical disponibility before seeking to display biblical fittingness. Indeed, biblical disponibility and fittingness dispel mastery while existing in dynamic interplay. On a similar note, playwright and director Peter Brook expressed his frustration with the Middle European performance technique, “which consists in sitting for weeks around the table to clarify the meanings of a text before allowing oneself to feel it in the body.”¹⁰⁴ Speaking of literary interpretation in general, George Steiner insists that a true hermeneutic is a performative one; interpretation is tested in “responsible responses.”¹⁰⁵ Likewise, the test and means of biblical disponibility is active and fitting participation in the theodrama that Scripture transcribes and prescribes.

Displaying biblical fittingness involves both internalized habits and deliberate decisions. One the one hand, someone who regularly inhabits the world of Scripture and is developing

¹⁰² Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God*, 191.

¹⁰³ Fodor, “Reading the Scriptures,” 164.

¹⁰⁴ Brook, *No Secrets*, 73–74.

¹⁰⁵ George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber, 1989), 8.

biblical disponibility begins to internalize and get a sense for what is biblically fitting, such as acting generously toward the poor and needy. A plethora of particular texts and the overall plot of Scripture attest to the overwhelming fittingness of caring for the poor and needy. Displaying biblical fittingness in this regard, therefore, has the potential to become an improvisational habit rather than requiring a complex decision-making process. Becoming attentive to the particulars and the whole of Scripture as transcript and prescript enables natural and spontaneous improvisations displaying biblical fittingness in particular situations.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, discerning precisely *how* to serve the poor and needy in particular contexts requires considerably more deliberation in order to display biblical fittingness. In these cases, it is necessary to understand the process of displaying biblical fittingness that otherwise remains hidden and unconscious in everyday improvisations.

The deliberative process of discerning biblical fittingness operates on two levels: fittingness to particular texts as transcripts and prescriptive paradigms and fittingness to the whole of Scripture based on emplotments and thematizations.¹⁰⁷ Beginning with the latter, biblical fittingness means the ability, as Allen Verhey describes, “to plot our lives to ‘fit’ the whole of Scripture, to order our lives toward that whole.”¹⁰⁸ This level of discernment dovetails with how one understands the biblical plot, its developments and the progression between Acts as articulated above.¹⁰⁹ Fittingness to the biblical theodrama as a whole involves the skills of *reincorporating* what has come before and *preincorporating* what it yet to come. In theatrical improvisation, an action is fitting if the improvisers are like “men walking backwards,” remembering what has come before and reincorporating it into current scenes.¹¹⁰ Actors in the theodrama do the same, with memories formed by the biblical transcript and prescript.¹¹¹ But fitting performance also requires preincorporating how Scripture prescribes the end of the play. This practice does not involve guessing precisely how or when the theodrama will

¹⁰⁶ James Fodor articulates this similarly: “As faithful readers continually re-enter and gain their bearing from the biblical narrative that depicts God’s identity in Jesus Christ, they come to learn not only *what* affections and desires are appropriate, but *how* and *when* and *with whom* to exercise and express them” (“Reading the Scriptures,” 150).

¹⁰⁷ These two levels of discerning biblical fittingness are similar to Vanhoozer’s “AAA” model: *attending* to particular texts, *appraising* the theodramatic plot, and then *advancing* our own performances (“The Drama-of-Redemption Model,” 198).

¹⁰⁸ Verhey, *Remembering Jesus*, 70.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Allen Verhey, “Scripture and Ethics: Practices, Performances, and Prescriptions,” in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 33.

¹¹⁰ Johnstone, *Impro*, 116.

¹¹¹ This is a central thesis in Verhey’s *Remembering Jesus*.

end, for only the divine playwright knows this, but trusting in God's promises for the sake of faithful performance in the present.¹¹² According to John Webster, performers driven by humble hope are "instructed in action which is fitting."¹¹³ If, for example, our hope is informed by the theodramatic emplotment of formation-deformation-transformation-reformation, particular performances will display fittingness if they follow the theodramatic through-line of transformation, reincorporating formation and preincorporating reformation. These judgments of fittingness have assisted Christian communities to determine, for instance, that seeking long-term solutions to poverty is generally more fitting than simply giving handouts to the destitute, although the latter might be fitting in some particular situations.¹¹⁴

At another level, displaying biblical fittingness requires consideration of how particular biblical texts as transcripts and prescriptive paradigms impact contemporary performance. Christopher Wright exemplifies this approach with his paradigmatic interpretation of the Jubilee year in Leviticus 25:8-22.¹¹⁵ By paying attention to this particular text, Wright identifies how the Jubilee year can serve as a paradigm for economic, social, and theological performances in different contexts, such as a commitment to economic sustainability and a personal reliance on God's provision. In addition, Wright provides typological and eschatological interpretations, seeking to situate this passage within the larger biblical story and to discern fittingness to the entire plot. The only weakness in Wright's paradigmatic approach, in my view, is how he limits interpretation of paradigms to discerning principles that are then applied in different contexts. Whereas discerning fittingness does at times involve identifying principles, this process is more imaginative, aesthetic and complex when combined with every other dimension of theodramatic fittingness. In addition, the danger of simply distilling principles is that the details of the text are quickly left behind once the necessary information has been gleaned and packaged.¹¹⁶ To reverse the famous dictum of

¹¹² C. S. Lewis reflects on our ignorance of the end of the play, concluding that humble commitment to "playing it well" in the present is "what matters infinitely." *The World's Last Night: And Other Essays* (Orlando: Mariner Books, 2002), 106.

¹¹³ John Webster, "Hope," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 292.

¹¹⁴ For example, see the biblical emplotment that leads Bryant Myers to similar conclusions in *Walking With the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

¹¹⁵ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 206–09.

¹¹⁶ I am not indicating that Wright succumbs to this danger, but I do believe his commitment to pay attention to particular texts is focused too narrowly on distilling principles. For more on these dangers, see Janzen, *Old Testament Ethics*, 56.

Dorothy Sayers, the drama *is* the dogma, and merely mining biblical texts for principles is one way of reducing the drama to dogma.¹¹⁷

Displaying biblical fittingness on the basis of diverse biblical literature, therefore, is more like what Spohn calls “spotting the rhyme” or what Vanhoozer dubs “transposing” canonical communication, keeping the interpreter in constant conversation with the text.¹¹⁸ These musical metaphors indicate the aesthetic and imaginative capacity required to discern and display biblical fittingness, along with the constant necessity of biblical disponibility. Imagination is required both at the level of displaying fittingness to paradigmatic texts and in displaying fittingness to the theodrama as a whole and one’s place within it. While Spohn, Hays, and others utilize the phrase “analogical imagination,” Vanhoozer more accurately speaks of the “theodramatic imagination,” which encompasses several different forms of imagination: exegetical, historical, canonical, theological, analogical, and eschatological. Discerning and displaying biblical fittingness is an act of theodramatic imagination because it involves detailed attention to Scripture as transcript (exegetical and historical imagination), awareness of the biblical plot (canonical and theological imagination), and improvising using the skills of reincorporation and preincorporation (analogical and eschatological imagination).

4.6 BIBLICAL AUTHORITY IN THEODRAMATIC PERSPECTIVE

For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to explore biblical disponibility and fittingness separately from other dimensions of theodramatic formation and performance. In reality, however, participating in the theodrama is an organic process that resists tidy compartmentalization of the complex whole. Developing biblical disponibility and displaying biblical fittingness occur in dynamic interplay with disponibility and fittingness toward the triune God, tradition, the church, unbelievers, and particular contexts. Even though theodramatic participation is inherently dynamic and impossible to partition precisely into constituent parts, it remains crucial to trace the theological and practical relationships between each dimension, exploring how this impacts the locus of authority and appeal in theodramatic performance.

What kind of authority does Scripture yield in the theodrama? To what extent is Scripture a norm for theodramatic formation and performance? As already indicated in the

¹¹⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938).

¹¹⁸ Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 55–61. Vanhoozer, “The Drama-of-Redemption Model,” 183.

previous chapter, the triune God alone has absolute authority and his own performance is the ultimate norm of every other performances.¹¹⁹ To the extent that Scripture is also part of God's performance and revealing action, it also serves as a norm in the theodrama, but Scripture alone is not the locus of authority.¹²⁰ In other words, to develop biblical disponibility is ultimately to develop trinitarian disponibility, and to display biblical fittingness is to display trinitarian fittingness. More specifically, the ultimate paradigm for theodramatic fittingness is the performance of Jesus the Christ to which Scripture testifies.¹²¹ Jerome famously articulated that to lack knowledge of Scripture is to be ignorant of Christ, which is true on multiple levels: Christ is the climax and key of the entire theodrama as revealed in Scripture, Christ's performance is the ultimate paradigm, and Christ the Son, together with the Father and Spirit, is the divine author of Scripture.¹²² Consequently, Vanhoozer rightly identifies the essence of fittingness as "Christo-dramatic," with fitting performance being a matter of performing in a Christ-like manner and under Christ's rule.¹²³

Scripture remains, however, the primary means by which Jesus the Christ is revealed, and therefore functions as a norm for Christo-dramatic fittingness. As the definitive transcript of the theodrama and God's historical performance, Scripture provides boundaries for fitting theodramatic performance. Scripture is an authoritative norm for theodramatic fittingness, but that does not mean it is the only source by which fittingness is judged. The Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*, while affirming the authority of Scripture, should not degenerate into shallow biblicism, what Vanhoozer calls "*solo Scriptura*."¹²⁴ By contrast, *sola Scriptura* refers to the centrality of biblical disponibility in theodramatic formation and the normative status of biblical fittingness in theodramatic performance.¹²⁵ This perspective does not jettison the importance of other sources for guiding theodramatic participation or diminish the

¹¹⁹ Balthasar argues that locating ultimate authority in Scripture is an epic rather than theodramatic tendency because it focuses on only one way, albeit a primary way, that God is involved in the theodrama (*TD II*, 56).

¹²⁰ Identifying the triune God as the ultimate horizon of biblical interpretation is emphasized by David Scott in "Speaking to Form."

¹²¹ Cf. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 32; Reuschling, *Reviving Evangelical Ethics*, 99.

¹²² Jerome, *Isaiam Prophetam*, Prologus 102.

¹²³ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 256. Likewise, Brian Brock asserts: "Reading the Bible in Christian ethics turns out to be a question about how we can live within Christ's rule, becoming actors in his drama" (*Singing the Ethos of God*, 243).

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 154. Cf. A. N. S. Lane, "Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan," in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. D. F. Wright and Philip Satterthwaite (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297–328.

¹²⁵ Vanhoozer refers to *sola Scriptura* as "the practice of biblical authority in the church" (*Drama of Doctrine*, 232).

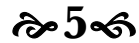
necessity of developing other dimensions of theodramatic disponibility and fittingness. But Scripture remains a norm for the dynamic process of displaying trinitarian, traditional, ecclesial, missional and contextual fittingness.

Scripture as theodramatic transcript and prescript provides neither comprehensive information nor scripted direction for fitting performance, which is why “transcript” and “prescript” are more preferable metaphors than “script.” Nevertheless, viewing Scripture as transcript and prescript leads to similar strengths as construing Scripture as script: Scripture’s divine-human authorship, unity, trustworthiness and authority, the importance of both careful exegesis and comprehensive emplotment fostered with imagination in community, and the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling biblical disponibility for the purpose of biblically fitting performances. Although some clear principles do emerge from Scripture, it is not primarily a textbook for providing black-and-white answers to contemporary conundrums, which is why every other dimension—trinitarian, traditional, ecclesial, missional, and contextual—is necessary for dispoible formation and fitting performance. Scripture remains unique, however, in providing a trustworthy transcript of the theodrama and normative paradigms for prescribing contemporary performance.

In sum, Scripture is a central aspect of God’s own performance by which he reveals the theodrama and invites participation. The Spirit speaking through Scripture forms characters who are biblically dispoible and capable of displaying biblical fittingness. Scripture records particular performances in the theodrama that, taken individually and as a canonical whole, provide trustworthy transcripts of the theodrama and paradigmatic prescripts for continued participation in the theodrama today. Biblical disponibility entails an active receptivity to the Spirit speaking through Scripture and to the protagonist-Son, bearing many similarities to the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. Approaching Scripture in this manner involves paying attention to particular texts through careful exegesis and gaining an awareness of the whole through the theological task of emplotment, both in terms of the plot’s overall theme and its development. Displaying biblical fittingness in theodramatic performance, therefore, is the aesthetic and imaginative process of fitting our lives to particular biblical paradigms and the biblical plot as a whole. “What is required,” concludes Stephen Barton, “is creative fidelity, where fidelity involves recognizable continuity with our scriptural faith tradition, and creativity is an openness to the Spirit to inspire us to interpret and ‘perform’ that tradition in

ways which are life-giving.”¹²⁶ This creative fidelity occurs in the context of a whole company of actors called the church, which leads us to consider the ecclesial dimension of theodramatic formation and performance.

¹²⁶ Stephen C. Barton, “The Epistles and Christian Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 71.



COMPANIES, CHARACTERS, AND ECCLESIAL THEODRAMATICS

The best thing about theatre is that you can't do it by yourself.

∞ Praxis Theatre, "101 Sentences about Theatre"¹

We are most fully ourselves when we are most available for communion.

∞ Joe McCown, *Availability*²

5.1 THEATRE COMPANIES

Acting is a relational art. An actor is never alone, but forms and performs dialogue and action in the company of other people: the director, fellow actors, technicians, and the audience. Even if an actor performs a monologue, the relational context of rehearsal and relational contact with the audience inevitably shapes the performance. The most influential relationships, however, are the relationships within a theatre company, the group working together to prepare and perform a theatrical event. The nature of theatre companies range from repertory companies requiring long-term commitments to community or school companies that may work together for only a single performance. Whatever the case, performances come to fruition in the context of a company of actors, which means theatre is inextricably relational. As Clive Barker remarks, "theatre is the art of human relationships in action."³

The goal of a theatre company, quite simply, is to offer good performances, which involves bringing out the best in each individual actor. Some actors may possess more natural or nurtured talents than others, but the goal of a company is a relational mutuality that strengthens each individual for the sake of the group. The director Jonathan Fox observes that while actors maintain their individuality, the ultimate aim is cooperation, ensemble, and "mutuality of relations."⁴ Viola Spolin makes a similar remark regarding the exchange

¹ Praxis Theatre, "101 Sentences about Theatre," Sentence 1, <http://praxistheatre.com/2007/09/101-sentences-about-theatre/> (Sept 5, 2007).

² Joe McCown, *Availability: Gabriel Marcel and the Phenomenology of Human Openness* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 45.

³ Barker, *Theatre Games*, 124.

⁴ Fox, *Acts of Service*, 178.

between members of an improv troupe: “Improvisation is not exchange of information between players; it is communion.”⁵ In other words, relationships between actors are not merely a means to the end of producing an intended effect on the audience. Rather, the goal is company communion.

Communion among a theatre company does not occur, however, without hard work and healthy habits. For one, actors need to be sensitive to one another with an acute sensitivity to details of each interaction and situation. Peter Brook observes that if relational sensitivity is absent and if actors assume they already know what other actors will say or how they will respond, the result is “deadly” theatre. Developing sensitivity to other actors takes time and an enormous amount of mutual support, which is why Brook recognizes that without a commitment to a permanent company, “few actors can thrive indefinitely.”⁶ Within committed relationships, trust can develop, which Gary Izzo identifies as the key to company life, as opposed to individual genius. “It makes no difference how clever, quick-witted, or funny the individuals of the company are; if there is no mutual trust among them, the ensemble’s work will be chaotic and uninspired.”⁷ When actors trust each other, they are able to enter fully into the moment and experience what Nick Rowe calls “open performing,” when performance emerges out of mutual reliance on and responsiveness to each participant.⁸ When actors cease being responsive to one another, however, “the performance is lost.”⁹ While authentic, risky openness may be intimidating at first, participating in a supportive company is the way to experience a sense of belonging and security.¹⁰

In sum, at the core of theatre company life is relational disponibility: relational awareness, attention, responsiveness, openness, availability, and trust. If acting is a relational art, then relational disponibility is the means of its successful production and presentation. As Frost and Yarrow indicate, disponibility is simply the actor’s “way of being.”¹¹ Relational disponibility among the company gives each moment of performance what Peter Brook calls

⁵ Spolin, *Improvisation for Theater*, 45.

⁶ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 34.

⁷ Izzo, *The Art of Play*, 140.

⁸ Nick Rowe, *Playing the Other: Dramatizing Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 38–39.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 120. One might argue that this is especially important in improvised drama, but even in scripted drama there is an enduring improvisational element. Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow highlight the important of trust and responsiveness in improvisation, observing that “when an improvising actor gets into difficulties, he or she has to know that somebody will come to their rescue.” *Improvisation in Drama*, 105.

¹⁰ Spolin, *Improvisation for Theater*, 45.

¹¹ Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 153.

“constant renewal,” together with the assurance that “no performance can ever be exactly like another.”¹² Consequently, developing disponibility toward one another enables actors to enact fitting performances in relation to the entire company. Before exploring whether the same is true in the theodrama, we first turn to consider philosophical and theological perspective on the relational, theatrical self.

5.2 THE RELATIONAL, THEATRICAL SELF

5.2.1 *Philosophical Perspectives*

Individualism was a difficult philosophical fortress to overthrow in the West, but Martin Buber and other philosophers advocating dialogical personalism dealt debilitating blows.¹³ Buber contrasted monological, I-It relations between subjects and objects with I-Thou relations emerging through dialogical encounter.¹⁴ Buber insisted that dialogical encounter lies at the heart of human identity, and his work influenced a relational turn across the social sciences. Similarly, Emmanuel Levinas propelled a concern for the Other into philosophical parlance, maintaining that face-to-face encounters with others constitute individuality.¹⁵ At the same time, sociologists and social anthropologists, particularly after G. H. Mead, drew attention to the theatricality of the relational self whose identity is wrapped up in social roles and performances.¹⁶ According to Erving Goffman, for example, “all relationships are also roles” enacted in social dramas bound by space and time.¹⁷ The self, therefore, is a “performed character” arising from relational encounters in a shared drama.¹⁸ We should not assume, however, that the theatrical self is inauthentic, since it is possible to achieve integration between our inner life and the roles we play.¹⁹ Tabling the issue of authenticity

¹² Brook, *No Secrets*, 170.

¹³ Besides Buber (1878-1965), Ferdinand Ebner (1882-1931) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) are key figures in the rise of dialogical personalism.

¹⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), originally published as *Ich und Du* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1923).

¹⁵ Most famously articulated in Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), originally published as *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961).

¹⁶ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*.

¹⁷ Erving Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (London: Penguin, 1961), 134.

¹⁸ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 223.

¹⁹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, vol. 2, Gifford Lectures: The Form of the Personal (London: Faber, 1961), 172. Cf. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 15–18.

until later in the chapter, the issue in focus at this juncture is the relational, theatrical nature of personhood and its implications for formation and performance. If the essence of human identity is to be in relationship with others through the roles we play in everyday life, then formation necessarily involves relational disponibility, and performance is a matter of relational fittingness.

According to Otto Friedrich Bollnow, French philosopher Gabriel Marcel was the first to employ the term *disponibilité* to describe the relational identity of humanity, making it one of his greatest discoveries.²⁰ Scholars admit, however, that the term is notoriously difficult to translate, and although most render it as either “disposability” or “availability,” this is really “to replace a suggestive word with a rather unhelpful and misleading one.”²¹ Consequently, as consistent with previous chapters and as suggested by Kenneth Gallagher, it is best simply to anglicize the French word—disponibility—while recognizing it contains a cornucopia of connotations. Fortunately, Marcel teased out those connotations by approaching disponibility from various angles.

First, he contrasts disponibility with a common phrase used to advertise an available dwelling (*local disponible*), since this implies emptiness or vacancy. Disponibility is not vacant, passive availability, but active receptivity and a readiness to give and receive.²² Reception always involves active welcome, as Marcel explains in his Gifford Lectures by unpacking the phrase *chez soi*.²³ As a result, “responsiveness”, understood as the opposite of “insensibility or apathy,” is a fitting correlative of disponibility.²⁴ Second, disponibility is the path to discover true freedom in communion with others. To elucidate disponibility, Marcel investigates *indisponibility*, defined simply as shutting in on oneself, or keeping oneself at the center.²⁵ Consequently, the indisponible person is incapable of responding to and receiving offers from

²⁰ Otto Friedrich Bollnow, “Marcel’s Concept of Availability,” in *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp and Lewis Edwin Hahn (La Salle: Open Court, 1983), 182.

²¹ Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, revised ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975), 26. Marcel usually encouraged his translators not to translate *disponibilité*, claiming that attempts are usually unsuccessful (although *openness* and *availability* come close). See Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. Peter McCormick and Stephen Jolin (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1980), 242, n1.

²² Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper, 1962), 23–25.

²³ Gabriel Marcel, *Reflection and Mystery* (London: Harvill Press, 1950), 118. Similarly, in Christian theology there is a long tradition of understanding sin as *incurvatus in se*, curving in on oneself instead of being outwardly oriented toward the grace of God and serving others.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁵ Gabriel Marcel, *Faith and Reality* (London: Harvill Press, 1951), 181.

others, and thus incapable of sympathy and love.²⁶ Indisponibility must be destroyed, therefore, in order to enjoy true freedom and communion with others.²⁷ As Joe McCown summarizes: “We are most fully ourselves when we are most available for communion.”²⁸ Third, disponibility means being fully present to someone, present in a mysterious way, not treating people as problems to be solved.²⁹ It means encountering others just as they are and receiving them as a gift, rather than imposing selfish constraints and expectations. Fourth and finally, disponibility is the precondition for participating in dramatic dialogue and for playing a role with creative fidelity in the drama of existence. Whereas a spectator goes through life with an air of relational indifference, brushing off other people like “one brushes dust off a coat,” a participant is committed and ready to act on behalf of other people.³⁰ Part of the difference between a spectator and a participant, observes Marcel, is that the former rejects an overall plot and therefore abdicates any responsibility for faithful performance and disponibility to other actors.³¹ As in theatre, disponibility to the story is intrinsically connected with disponibility to other actors. Marcel identifies the absence of these elements as a primary pitfall of existentialism, illustrated most memorably in Sartre’s play *No Exit*, which presents life as a series of plotless moments in which hell is other people.³² Jettisoning a plot and disregarding people go hand in hand. By contrast, Marcel believes that the drama of existence does have a plot, and that one discovers this plot through relational encounters with others.³³ This belief emerges poignantly in Marcel’s skill as a playwright, and at one point, one of his characters in *Le Coeur des Autres* exclaims, “There is only one suffering, it is to be alone.”³⁴

²⁶ Marcel, *Reflection and Mystery*, 163.

²⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 53. Originally published as *Du Refus à L’Invocation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940).

²⁸ McCown, *Availability*, 45.

²⁹ Marcel, *Reflection and Mystery*, 211. As George Mac Lean concluded: “En profondeur, la disponibilité permet de considérer les autres, non comme problèmes à résoudre, mais comme mystère qu’il faut nourrir en les approfondissant.” “La Disponibilité Chez Gabriel Marcel: Les Fondements Métaphysiques De L’éthique,” in *Actes Du Colloque Gabriel Marcel*, ed. Paul Ricoeur and Michele Sacquin (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1989), 178.

³⁰ Marcel, *Reflection and Mystery*, 122.

³¹ Although humans are always participants in the theodrama, we waver in our ability to maintain the full disponibility of an engaged participant.

³² Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit [Huis Clos]* (1944). As evident in interviews toward the end of his life, Sartre eventually became more open to the essentially relational nature of existence and human identity. See Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Levy, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, trans. Adrian van den Hoven (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007).

³³ Marcel, *Reflection and Mystery*, 173–74.

³⁴ “Il n’y a qu’une souffrance, c’est d’être seule.” Gabriel Marcel, *Le Coeur des Autres* (1921), 111.

In sum, Marcel indicates that personhood is essentially relational and theatrical; we become more fully human by acting our roles in the drama of existence and performing with disponibility toward other participants. As such, disponibility forges a dynamic convergence between “being” and “acting,” motivating Paul Ricoeur to conclude that disponibility brilliantly bridges ontology and ethics.³⁵ Disponibility describes the quality of a person who performs with fittingness in relation to others. Like Marcel, Ricoeur believes that selfhood is the convergence of relational and narrative elements. Reacting to a substantialist view of the self and the notion of *ipse*-identity, Ricoeur argues instead that the self is constituted by *idem*-identity that develops over time and in relationship with others. Ricoeur remarks how Marcel’s concept of disponibility is a “beautiful name” for the constancy and development of the self in relational dialogue with others in the context of developing narrative.³⁶ To be a person, therefore, is to be disponible to others and to craft performances with relational fittingness, a view that has profound implications for ecclesial theodramatics. But before exploring these implications, it is crucial to consider some theological perspectives that bolster an understanding of the relational, theatrical self.

5.2.2 *Theological Perspectives*

Instead of beginning with the drama of human relationships, a theological perspective on personhood begins with the drama of divine relationality. Indeed, at the core of Christian orthodoxy is belief in the triune God—one *ousia* existing as three *hypostases* in eternal communion—who created humanity in his own image by placing them in relationship with himself, each other, and the rest of creation (Gen 1:26-27). God created Eve because it was not good for Adam to be alone as a singular human being, and he needed a fitting life partner (Gen 2:18). From the very beginning, therefore, Scripture provides hints of God’s identity as a triune being who created humans in his relational image, giving them a pivotal role in the theodrama as his representatives and vice-regents. In the New Testament, witness to God’s relational Being finds expression in the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and is preeminently revealed through the words and deeds of Jesus the Son and his relationship with the Father and the Spirit (Mt 3:13-17). For example, Jesus’ words in John’s Gospel affirm that

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Entre Éthique Et Ontologie, La Disponibilité,” in *Actes Du Colloque Gabriel Marcel*, ed. Michele Sacquin (Paris: Bibliotheque Nationale, 1989).

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 268, cf. 143.

God the Father is one with Jesus, who is God the Son (Jn 10:30; 14:9; 17:11), and the Father and Son are one with God the Spirit (Jn 3:34-36; 15:26).³⁷ This unity within the triune God undergirds Jesus' prayer for the unity of God's people as he draws them into his triune communion (Jn 17:11).

As the early church enacted its missional role in the theodrama to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19), conflicts arose regarding the nature of this trinitarian mission, but the core confession of God's triunity remained. The fourth century Cappadocian Fathers—Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus—are often credited with crystallizing the doctrine of God's three-in-oneness in contrast to heretical interlocutors, and are frequently quoted by theologians seeking to recover trinitarian theology and relational personhood in recent decades. For instance, John Zizioulas, who describes God as “being in communion” with credit to the Cappadocians, defines personhood as being in relation and the church as “otherness in communion and communion in otherness.”³⁸ For Zizioulas, therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity is “not a matter for academic speculation, but for personal relationship” with God and others.³⁹ Created in the image of a triune God, humans are made for communion with God, one another and the rest of creation.⁴⁰

Although some accuse Zizioulas of being an “existentialist in disguise,” Zizioulas rejects this label, for these philosophers begin and end with human personhood without reference to divine, triune personhood.⁴¹ Nevertheless, he still freely utilizes the language of “otherness” popularized by existentialists, just as Barth utilizes Buber's I-Thou terminology and develops similar concepts, though from a thoroughly trinitarian and christological perspective.⁴² Barth insists that a “pure, absolute, and self-sufficient I is an illusion,” because to be human being to be in relationship.⁴³ In a series of pithy phrases, Barth communicates his position on

³⁷ For an excellent account of the Trinity in the New Testament, see Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2001).

³⁸ John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 76.; John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, trans. John Meyendorff (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

³⁹ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 170.

⁴⁰ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1997), 26–31.

⁴¹ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 177.

⁴² Mark McInroy provides a balanced assessment of Barth's “critical appropriation” of personalist philosophy in “Karl Barth and Personalist Philosophy: A Critical Appropriation,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 1 (2011): 45–63.

⁴³ Barth, *CD III/2*, 245.

personhood: “I am as I am in relation,” “I am in encounter,” and “I am as Thou art.”⁴⁴ The most pivotal relationship and encounter, according to Barth, is covenant partnership with God, out of which flows mutual and glad assistance of others. To be a human person, therefore, is to be a responsive participant in the covenantal drama. As a result, Barth argues that we cannot discover personhood through natural revelation, but only through relationship with the one God who exists as “three distinctive modes of being subsisting in their mutual relations: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁴⁵ This relational God is “not mirrored in a *homo solitarius*,” but in the communion of co-humanity.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the person of Christ ultimately reveals the true relational nature of humanity and enables us to play a responsive role in the drama of redemption in loving relationship with God and others.⁴⁷

Balthasar develops a similar perspective to Barth, but enlists theatrical categories to delineate the dynamics of divine and human relationality. To be a human is to be a participant in the theodrama and to embrace the role one plays in relationship with others.⁴⁸ To be a person is to be a character in the theodrama with an identity discovered and displayed through action and “through encounter with others and decisions.”⁴⁹ If being human means possessing a role in the theodrama in dynamic relationship with God and other characters, it also involves embracing the mission to perform faithfully. “To be a person,” therefore, “is to respond by taking hold of one’s mission.”⁵⁰ For Balthasar, this theodramatic, relational, and missional identity constitutes the *imago dei*, or more accurately, the *imago trinitatis*, since Balthasar roots relational and missional identity in the trinitarian drama.⁵¹

As discussed in Chapter 3, Balthasar explains how characters in the theodrama accomplish their mission by developing disponibility and displaying fittingness toward the triune God, just as Jesus accomplished his mission through disponibility and fittingness to the Father by the Spirit. As creatures made in the image of the disponible God, humans find their role and fulfill their mission in the theodrama not only by developing disponibility to God,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 246-48.

⁴⁵ Barth, *CD I/1*, 348.

⁴⁶ Barth, *CD III/4*, 117. It is important to note that the triune communion is in no way a projection of human communion; rather, human relationality is merely a broken mirror reflecting God’s three-in-oneness, his “unique intrasubstantial hypostases in eternal perichoretic union and communion,” which remains a “permanent antinomy.” Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth*, 115.

⁴⁷ Barth, *CD III/2*, 203-22.

⁴⁸ Balthasar, *TD I*, 252-54.

⁴⁹ Balthasar, *TD II*, 11.

⁵⁰ Balthasar, *TD III*, 458.

⁵¹ Ibid., 450.

but toward each other. Balthasar describes how relational disponibility, or “letting the other be,” mirrors trinitarian disponibility, “since in God each Hypostasis can only be itself insofar as it “lets” the other “be” in equal concreteness.”⁵² Humans bear the image of the disponible, trinitarian God through a capacity for relational disponibility, which comes to fruition in the company of the redeemed.⁵³

Besides Balthasar, Barth, and Zizioulas, a host of other theologians articulate a relational anthropology and ecclesiology based on trinitarian theology.⁵⁴ Although these theologians do not always agree how church and society mirror the Trinity, they share a common belief that responsive relationality constitutes the core of human personhood, and that the church is the company of people among whom the Spirit is perfecting relational disponibility and fittingness. Emphasizing relationality does not deny that the image of God involves rationality, representation, or other elements, nor does it neglect the individual, but locates these elements within a relational matrix.⁵⁵ As the apostle Paul explains to the Philippian church, participating in Christ by the Spirit involves renewed relationality—having the mind of Christ—but this is ultimately demonstrated through renewed relationality, attending to the interests of others and serving with Christ-like humility and love (Phil 2:1-11).

In sum, human beings are relational because we are created in the image of the triune God. Thomas Reynolds suggests that disponibility, a concept he borrows from Gabriel Marcel and translates from the French as “availability,” constitutes the core of the *imago dei* as creative relationality. Simply stated, disponibility or availability is “sympathetic attunement”

⁵² Balthasar, *TD V*, 75.

⁵³ Balthasar, *TD I*, 647.

⁵⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981); Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988); Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); LaCugna, *God for Us*; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Cunningham, *These Three Are One*; Fiddes, *Participating in God*; Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

⁵⁵ It is not the case, therefore, that performing with others “erases the traces of our individuality within the ensemble of humanity” as argued by Marshall Soules in “Improvising Character: Jazz, the Actor, and Protocols of Improvisation,” in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 294. Stanley Grenz worries that the “dramaturgical model” fails to “take into the consideration the contribution of the individual agent to the social world,” but this is mitigated in a theodramatic approach developed with emphasis on both company life and individual roles (*The Social God and the Relational Self*, 312). Articles that correct potential weaknesses of relational anthropology include the following: Harriet A. Harris, “Should We Say That Personhood Is Relational?,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, no. 02 (1998): 214–234; Edward Russell, “Reconsidering Relational Anthropology: A Critical Assessment of John Zizioulas’s Theological Anthropology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 2 (2003): 168–186.

and “vulnerable openness” toward others.⁵⁶ Reynolds elaborates: “Created in God’s image, we are beings with the capacity to respect, be faithful to, and show compassionate regard for others...Availability is not simply a freedom from being casually determined and constrained by our relationship; it is a freedom for these relationships.”⁵⁷ Living in a fallen world and wracked with sin, however, humans are debilitated by indisponibility: a relational wreck. Consequently, it is only through relationship with the triune God and life with the company of the redeemed that relational disponibility can be restored and fitting performances are possible. All humans are capable of relational disponibility and fittingness, but we experience relational disponibility and fittingness in their fullness only through participation in the dynamic communion of the triune God and his acting company, the church.

5.3 DISPONIBILITY AND FITTINGNESS IN ECCLESIAL COMPANIES

Like theatrical performance, theodramatic performance is a relational art, performed in company with others. In the theodrama, the church is best understood as the company of actors who are witnesses to and participants in the performance of the triune God. As Vanhoozer writes, “the church is the company of the gospel, whose nature and task alike pertain to performing the word in the power of the Spirit.”⁵⁸ In addition, if personhood is inherently relational and theatrical, then the church is the company in which actors are becoming more fully human, conformed to the image of the protagonist-Son by the power of the producer-Spirit. Within this company, there are “no little people,” because each has a pivotal role in what Vanhoozer calls “the playerhood of all believers.”⁵⁹ It is this playerhood that God elected as the chosen race, royal priesthood, and holy nation, not as the stars of the show, but people who bear witness to the one Star born in Bethlehem, the one who is the light (1 Pet 2:9). The mission of each ecclesial company, therefore, is to proclaim and practice reconciliation as a testimony to the reconciliation accomplished by the Father in Christ through the Spirit.⁶⁰

The church exists as a Company of many companies. The universal Company includes all believing performers in every time and place, whereas a local company is a “community of

⁵⁶ Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 123–24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵⁸ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 401.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 414. Cf. Francis A. Schaeffer, *No Little People* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003).

⁶⁰ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 435.

costumed interpreters” at a particular time and place.⁶¹ In this chapter, the focus will be the dynamics of performing with disponibility and fittingness within local companies. In the following chapter, disponibility and fittingness to the Company will be addressed in connection with tradition, which includes the saintly performers of the past. Exploring disponibility and fittingness to local companies is an exercise in what Nicholas Healy calls a “practical-prophetic ecclesiology,” focusing on the “concrete church” that “performs its tasks of witness and discipleship within particular, ever-shifting contexts.”⁶² Like Healy, the following section will attend to the concrete dynamics of the church as a company of actors as it participates in the theodrama, rather than seeking to outline a normative or theoretical “blueprint ecclesiology.”

5.3.1 *Power Plays and Status Subversions*

To begin, it is crucial to recognize how every interaction, both in theatre and the theodrama, is a navigation of status. Playing high status means taking control; playing low status entails submitting. While status can be accurately described as a role or position, Keith Johnstone remarks that status is primarily something done, something actors embody through dialogue and action.⁶³ To explain how this works in ordinary interaction, Johnstone uses the example of two strangers walking toward each other on a narrow street. As they approach each other, both look for status signals to determine who should step aside. Whoever is playing low status usually steps aside, but Johnstone describes the awkward situation where both are trying to play high status, and so they meet face to face, and “do a sideways dance, while muttering confused apologies.”⁶⁴ Of course, status interactions occur in more serious situations as well, and social scientists are keen to observe how every culture has a social script determining who wields high status and who plays low, and how challenging these expectations creates social unrest.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid., 413.

⁶² Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 39.

⁶³ Johnstone, *Impro*, 36. Nevertheless, Frost and Yarrow are still correct in asserting that status is “both a noun and a verb.” Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 115.

⁶⁴ Johnstone, *Impro*, 61.

⁶⁵ James C. Scott calls this the “public transcript” that governs behavior and status interactions, but also recognizes the presence of a “hidden transcript” with different status rules held by subordinate groups “offstage.” *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

In theatre, the ability to portray status effectively and to play the “see-saw” between status positions is the mark of skillful acting.⁶⁶ Audiences delight in seeing status subversions, like the servant of normally low status playing high status to the master, and vice versa. In real life, however, status is often used to get one’s way or to stay in control of a situation. At first it may seem like only those playing high status are clamoring for control, but as Johnstone points out, it is just as easy for the servant to “throttle the master while remaining visibly the servant.”⁶⁷ In theatre, actors are experts at status power plays because they are highly trained. In everyday life, however, people are experts at power plays because they are sinful.

If status interactions are ultimately about power plays and getting one’s way, what should status interactions look like within the ecclesial company, especially in cultures plagued with “status anxiety?”⁶⁸ Drawing on the work of Johnstone, Wells finds nothing inherently moral in playing high or low status. Rather, the goal of Christian performance is to be expert status players, learning how to subvert status for the sake of holiness.⁶⁹ He points to the performance of Jesus as our example, who was a master at playing both high and low status, exposing the power plays inherent in worldly status interactions. Taking Wells’s observation one step further, Jesus’ status interactions were subversive because he used status not as a power play, but as a way to serve. Another way of explaining this point is to distinguish between a status *position* or social role and a status *posture* as a way of enacting that role. Using this distinction, the role of master may be a high status *position*, but it can be played with either a high or low status *posture*. Similarly, a servant is a low status position, but it can be acted with either a high or low posture. Playing a high status position with a low status posture is the essence of Jesus’ fitting performance, who “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:6b-7). As we observed in Chapter 3, Jesus’ performance is unique, but he is also our paradigm for contemporary improvisation as we seek to do “likewise,” maintaining low status postures regardless of our status positions.

Developing ecclesial disponibility is a matter of taking postures of low status toward one another, submitting to one another in love. Whether occupying a high status, leadership position or a low status, low-profile position in the company, Christians are called to perform

⁶⁶ Johnstone identifies the constant movement between high and low status as the “see-saw principle” (*Impro*, 37ff). While the goal of actors in scripted drama is to embody the status interactions in scripted dialogue, actors of improvisational drama need to master attentiveness to status changes.

⁶⁷ Johnstone, *Impro*, 63.

⁶⁸ Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (New York: Vintage, 2005).

⁶⁹ Wells, *Improvisation*, 99–101.

these roles with low status postures. Developing disponible, low status postures enables actors in ecclesial companies to perform any status position or role with fittingness to their identity as ambassadors of Christ's reconciliation (2 Cor 5:20-21). Practically speaking, interacting with low status postures means listening to each other with attentiveness, asking good questions, pursuing the interests of others, and always being willing to learn. Playing low status is a sign of being filled with the Spirit, of which one primary fruit is "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21). The way Christians perform this posture will differ from typical low status tendencies outside the company, which both Johnstone and Wells describe as the "fear crouch."⁷⁰ Since God has given his people high status positions in the theodrama—children of God, reigning with Christ—there is no reason to perform with postures of fear (Rom 8:15). Rather, united to Christ and empowered by the Spirit, Christians relate with the low yet courageous posture of disponibility, which like Christ, leads to suffering (Rom 8:17). Advocating low status postures and being willing to suffer, however, does not condone avoidable abuse, prohibit expressions of righteous anger, or promote tedious interactions of endless deference. As such, it should not be confused with Nietzsche's distortion of Christianity as passive, enforced submissiveness, but understood as willing availability to serve and suffer for one another and Christ by the power of the Spirit.⁷¹ The default status posture of the ecclesial company is disponibility as an act of love and submission, but this does not mean Christians should be light on sin, weak in personality, or replete with platitudes.

What is true of relationships within the ecclesial company is also true of relationships between the company and the audience, which will be explored further in Chapter 7. While it is true that the ecclesial company has a mission in relationship to the audience, the company's mission is also the very nature of its company life and relationships among actors.⁷² Whereas the natural state of affairs outside the church is the "see-saw principle" where low status battles high status and vice versa, the ecclesial company subverts what is "natural" through mutual submission, service, and relational disponibility. Ecclesial companies are not perfect companies, however, so status see-saws and power plays persist. But an ecclesial company is a place of grace, and grace gives hope that one day, the performances will be perfected.

⁷⁰ Johnstone, *Impro*, 59; Wells, *Improvisation*, 96.

⁷¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968).

⁷² Or in the words of Hauerwas, the church not only *has* a social ethics, but *is* a social ethic. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 99.

5.3.2 *Offers You Can't Refuse*

As introduced briefly in Chapter 3, an “offer” is anything an actor says or does on stage, including status interactions, and these offers can be blocked, accepted, or overaccepted. For example, if one actor begins a scene with “It’s Tuesday,” a simple block is to say in response, “No it’s not,” which kills the momentum. For many beginning improvisers, blocking is the most natural tendency, since it is “safer.” According to Johnstone, therefore, the motto of scared and unseasoned improvisers is “when in doubt, say ‘NO’.”⁷³ Patricia Ryan Madsen agrees with Johnstone that “the cardinal sin is blocking,” since it is an expression of selfish control instead of risky trust.⁷⁴ The liberating alternative, therefore, is “when in doubt, say ‘YES’.” In other words, accepting offers by saying ‘yes,’ whether literally or figuratively, is the essence of skillful improvisation. “It’s Tuesday” may seem like a boring offer, but when another actor accepts it with “Yes, and there’s just been a horrible accident,” suddenly the story develops and becomes much more interesting. Often known as the rule of “yes...and,” accepting offers is the key to exciting theatre and for building trust among a company of actors, knowing all offers will be accepted. Johnstone offers an even more radical alternative, however, which is to “overaccept” offers by completely delighting in them and incorporating them into the overall story. To overaccept means to view everything as a gift and to release one’s imagination to enjoy and make something beautiful out of each individual offer.⁷⁵

The ecclesial company, too, is often guilty of blocking offers, especially when they are viewed as a threat. Wells documents multiple ways the church has blocked offers from the outside through various forms of sectarianism and withdrawal.⁷⁶ Each block belies a lack of ecclesial disponibility and fittingness, whether avoiding moody teenagers who ignore unwritten dress codes, refusing to worship with those whose music preference differs from ours, or corralling children into safe and sequestered activities where they can be educated but not heard. In some of these cases, what the church may consider accepting responses, like creating separate worship services or programmatic alternatives for various ages, may actually be forms of blocking, creating relational distance rather than creating opportunities to develop relational disponibility.

⁷³ Johnstone, *Impro*, 94.

⁷⁴ Patricia Ryan Madson, *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up* (New York: Harmony/Bell Tower, 2005), 29. Cf. Johnstone, *Impro*, 101.

⁷⁵ Johnstone, *Impro*, 102–03.

⁷⁶ Wells, *Improvisation*, 130ff.

What would happen, however, if each supposed abnormality and disturbance, each seemingly threatening difference within the church, was accepted or even overaccepted by each member? Social psychologist Kenneth Gergen records a story of a young couple who brought their infant along to a lunch featuring a Jamaican band. In the middle of the lunch, the infant began wailing uncontrollably, and the couple was overwhelmed with embarrassment. They were about to leave, when the musicians began to incorporate into their music the sounds and rhythms of the crying infant. The result was astounding and the audience erupted in applause. For Gergen, this story illustrates how even a threatening offer can be overaccepted as a gift, how “with deft and spontaneous movement the ill-fitting and disruptive becomes integrated into the process of making meaning.”⁷⁷ Likewise, the ecclesial company is a community where the ill-fitted and disruptive are overaccepted and integrated into their performance. In doing so, the company participates in the pattern of God’s own creative overacceptance, a harmonious performance of redemption arising out of “a sea of turbulent sound.”⁷⁸ Dissonances should be overaccepted as gifts, because as Bruce Ellis Benson observes, “while we seek harmony as brothers and sisters, we must also recognize that dissonance is often productive and, in any case, an inevitable result of a continually improvised *ekklesia*.”⁷⁹ Tragically, the history of the church’s performance is riddled with blocks, whether arguments, schisms, or abiding errors. But this does not destroy all hope, for God in Christ has already overaccepted sin through his death and resurrection and will one day return to put the whole theodrama right, so the result of the performance is not ours to control through fearful blocks.⁸⁰ United to Christ’s victorious overacceptance in faith and hope, the church is free in love to overaccept all offers by the power of the Spirit, what David Ford calls a “constantly new improvisation of *parrhesia*,” boldness toward God (Heb 10:19; 1 John 3:21), one another (2 Cor 7:4; Phlm 1:8), and the whole world (Acts 28:31; Eph 6:19).⁸¹

⁷⁷ Kenneth J. Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 160.

⁷⁸ This metaphor comes from J. R. R. Tolkien, who describes the creative energy of Lúvatar (God) as the production of Great Music in harmony with the music of the Ainur (angels). When Melkor (Satan) introduces a “sea of turbulent sound,” Lúvatar introduces a third theme that weaves the “most triumphant notes” from Melkor’s music into its pattern. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977), 15–17.

⁷⁹ Benson, “Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities: Jazz, Interpretation, Heterophony, and the Ekklesia,” 319.

⁸⁰ To overaccept, therefore, is to place each offer in eschatological perspective. See Wells, *Improvisation*, 133.

⁸¹ Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 110.

Ecclesial disponibility takes the form of responsive receptiveness to everything and everyone in the company as a gift, even the moody teenager, musical differences, and noisy children. Just as the Jamaican musicians received the infant's cries as music to their ears rather than disturbing noise, so the ecclesial company must be disponible to each member, no matter how supposedly weird, weak, or disruptive, and not just in corporate gatherings, but in every area of life. Ecclesial disponibility is a matter of being attentive to the pivotal role each member plays within the body, as Paul reminded the Romans (Rom 12:3-8). This disponibility produces fitting performances exhibiting radical love for one another, outdoing one another in receiving offers (Rom 12:10). This is a portrait of harmonious company life, not blocking evil, but overaccepting evil with good (Rom 12:21). These same dynamics apply to those outside the company, including governing authorities (Rom 13:1-7), but for the moment we are focusing on how ecclesial disponibility leads to fitting overacceptance of offers from fellow company members, especially the weak. Paul specifically instructs the Roman company to overaccept those who are weak in faith, just as God has overaccepted them in Christ (Rom 14:1-15:7).⁸² When weaknesses are not received as a gift, they become a "stumbling block," a form of prideful judgment rather than a joyful means to keep the story going and to strengthen the entire company (Rom 14:13f).

Jeremy Begbie, although primarily utilizing musical performance as a model, indicates how performing with others-centered attentiveness is a necessary but liberating constraint. Performing on stage with others is constrained by relational disponibility, where "listening in patient silence, sensitive decision-making, flexibility of response," and "benefiting from conflict" opens new possibilities for performance that no participant could have imagined before.⁸³ Because theodramatic performance is a company affair, there are no stars, only saints. Stanislavski's resistance to the theatrical "star system" easily transfers to theodramatic performance: "In spite of my great admiration for individual splendid talents I do not accept the star system. Collective creative effort is the root of our kind of art. That requires ensemble acting and whoever mars that ensemble is committing a crime not only against his comrades but also against the very art of which he is the servant."⁸⁴ Unlike a star performance, saintly performance never stands alone, but requires the gifts and grace of the entire company and

⁸² In Romans 14:1, 14:3 and 15:7, Paul uses the term *παραλαμβάνω*, which connotes a combination of reception, welcome, and acceptance, which together comes close to the concept of overacceptance, especially in this context of God's own receptivity (14:3; 15:7).

⁸³ Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 206.

⁸⁴ Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, 257.

Producer who keeps on giving and gracing.⁸⁵ In theodramatic performance, seeking stardom not only mars the art in which saints are servants, but it also upstages the suffering Servant who made those performances possible. Saints are still sinners who block, but repenting from this grasp for control, saints are a Spirit-filled company: “the improvising community, living out of the expanding and limitless movement of gracious exchange which God has set in motion.”⁸⁶

5.3.3 *Freedom, Failure, and Faithfulness*

Performing with a company of actors who expertly navigate status, joyfully overaccept offers, and maintain relational disponibility brings incredible freedom. First, it brings the freedom to be obvious rather than original. When actors know that their offers will be overaccepted, they are free to do whatever comes to mind, rather than conjuring a brilliant idea. In fact, Johnstone explains how commanding improvisers to produce an original idea throws them into chaos, but encouraging them to be obvious enables them to relax, trust the group, give up control, and release their imagination.⁸⁷ As a result, originality kills a story, but being obvious keeps the story going.⁸⁸ Actors within an ecclesial company have even more profound reasons to be obvious rather than original, because not only is this a company of radical love, but one in which the Spirit is at work forming character and empowering performances. In other words, “being obvious” is shorthand for relying on and trusting company members, trusting the Spirit’s work among the company, and doing the next thing in responsive attentiveness each other’s gifts and roles. Consequently, being obvious is intrinsically linked to ecclesial disponibility. In addition, Christians can be obvious because there is no pressure to determine the direction of the theodrama or make it come out right, because this is God’s role as Playwright, Protagonist and Producer.⁸⁹ Since God is sovereign,

⁸⁵ In a similar vein, Wells describes five ways that heroes differ from saints (*Improvisation*, 42-44).

⁸⁶ Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 265.

⁸⁷ Johnstone, *Impro*, 87–88.

⁸⁸ Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 70.

⁸⁹ As Wells observes, “To be original is to sin by supposing oneself to be in either the first or the last act. Either one assumes one is at creation, and one is in the position of originating all things; or one is at the end, ensuring that all things comes out right” (*Improvisation*, 67). In this way, being obvious also arises from developing biblical disponibility.

he is for us, and since we are for each other, “the church has no reason to be paralyzed: it has permission to be obvious.”⁹⁰

Second, performing in company with the saints entails freedom to fail. Every director and participant of improvisational theatre knows that failure is absolutely essential, because lack of failure usually indicates an actor who is clamoring for control and originality. In his blunt style, Johnstone asks timid actors, “Why aren’t you screwing up?” followed by the advice: “Don’t do your best; be average.”⁹¹ Not surprisingly, Johnstone observes how this advice motivates actors to stop seeking selfish perfection and causes them to pay more attention to each other and to make valuable contributions.⁹² Failure is not to be avoided or ignored, because “failure is the point.”⁹³ Of course, just because failure is the point does not mean that the whole performance is doomed to fail. Rather, the purpose is to show how the company can overaccept failure and incorporate it into the larger story. For the ecclesial company, overacceptance sometimes involves repentance for past failure, and other times it requires rebuke and the messy details of discipline. In both cases, failure is not denied, ignored, or trivialized, because failure is to be expected amidst a company of sinner-saints. The inevitability of failure is not an excuse to keep on sinning, but an opportunity for each person to keep putting on Christ and to bear with one another in love (Col 3:1-17). Ultimately, the freedom to fail rests not only in communion with the ecclesial company, but in communion with the triune God, by whom we have been justified by faith, assuring us that our present failure will be overaccepted by God’s grace (Rom 5:1-11). As Wells rightly observes, “Christians can afford to fail, because they trust in Christ’s victory and in God’s ultimate sovereignty. Their faithful failures point all the more to their faith in their story and its author.”⁹⁴ For performers of the theodrama, fitting faithfulness is not a matter of originality or mastery, but of apprenticeship to the faithful Master in whom we have received reconciliation. “This is a great liberation for the church. It leaves Christians free, in faith, to make honest mistakes.”⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Wells, *Improvisation*, 67.

⁹¹ Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 63–64.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹³ Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 2.

⁹⁴ Wells, *Improvisation*, 55.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

5.4 REALIZING ROLES AND FORMING CHARACTER

Even while recognizing inevitable failure, ecclesial companies still strive for fitting performances, accompanied by a belief that God has issued a casting call for people to play particular roles in the theodrama. But what exactly are these roles, and what constitutes faithful formation of character in order to perform these roles in a fitting manner? How do actors in the theodrama avoid hypocrisy and perform with integrity and authenticity? In order to address these questions, we turn first to consider two long-standing and divergent perspectives on theatrical character formation and role realization.

5.4.1 *Theatrical Role Identification and Role Distance*

Role identification is a widely familiar approach to acting, and is what many actors are referring to when they speak of “getting into character.” The most famous defender of this approach in modern theatre is Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), the Russian actor, director, and originator of the celebrated “system” for creating a theatrical role.⁹⁶ In this system, the ultimate objective is to identify completely with a role. Living the part with true feeling and experience is the actor’s goal, and consequently “to be right, logical, coherent, to think, strive, feel and act in unison with your role.”⁹⁷ Mechanical acting and over-acting are extremes to avoid, both of which replace living feeling with lifeless clichés.⁹⁸ Stanislavski outlined a detailed process for generating this living feeling that enables role identification, at the center of which is the imaginative power to enter into the character and the theatrical world “as if” it were real. As a result, “Every movement you make on the stage, every word you speak, is the result of the right life of your imagination.”⁹⁹ An active imagination also enables the actor to relate every word and action of the character to the main theme or “super-objective” of the play and the developing plot. This imaginative vision of the whole is essential for role identification, leading Stanislavski to conclude that within the stew of creativity, “the super-objective and the through line of action constitute the fire which does

⁹⁶ Stanislavski’s “system” is distinct from “method acting” as developed by Lee Strasberg in the United States, although Strasberg bases his approach on Stanislavski’s system.

⁹⁷ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 14.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24–26.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

the cooking.”¹⁰⁰ To continue the metaphor, the fuel for this fire is the life of the actor, and an actor enters into a role by drawing on emotional memory from real life. In his autobiography, Stanislavski summarizes his view that living and feeling the part is paramount: “Nine tenths of the labor of an actor, nine tenths of everything lies in beginning to live and feel the role spiritually.”¹⁰¹ Stanislavski is not hesitant to invoke spiritual themes in describing the art of acting, and confesses that this system is not just a method, but a comprehensive way of life.¹⁰² To summarize, role identification involves complete disponibility to a role, total identification and availability to a character through the power of an inner creative state fueled by feeling. Only when an actor identifies with a role in this way will the performance display fittingness. Emotional disponibility to the character leads to fitting action on stage.

Even before Stanislavski solidified his influential system, other voices in theatre were objecting to role identification, promoting instead the value of role distance. Already in the eighteenth century, Denis Diderot demurred that the essence of acting is emotional role identification, pointing out the paradox of the emotionally unmoved actor who is best able to move an audience. For Diderot, the actor should simply represent a role on stage by acting with intelligence (*jouer d'intelligence*) rather than seeking to experience or live the role by acting with soul (*jouer d'âme*).¹⁰³ This perspective prevailed in many forms, but the most influential propagator of role distance in modern theatre is Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), considered by many to be “the most radical theorist and practitioner of twentieth century theatre.”¹⁰⁴ Like Diderot, Brecht desired an intellectual theatre with actors leading the audience to confront reality rather than portraying characters that carry the audience into an alternative reality. Brecht originally called this “epic theatre,” a phrase he eventually abandoned, but his goal for theatre to produce *Verfremdung* remained the same throughout his career.¹⁰⁵ Although some have translated *Verfremdung* as “alienation,” this translation misleads because it easily gets mixed up with Marxist views rather than communicating the theatrical concept, namely,

¹⁰⁰ Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, 285.

¹⁰¹ Constantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, 4th ed. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), 568.

¹⁰² Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, 290.

¹⁰³ Denis Diderot, *Paradox sur le Comédien* (Paris: Sautet, 1830); Although this work was published posthumously, Diderot wrote the essay between 1773 and 1777.

¹⁰⁴ Mary Luckhurst, “Revolutionising Theatre: Brecht’s Reinvention of the Dramaturg,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 193.

¹⁰⁵ In his notes for the opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagony*, Brecht records a useful table delineating the different between epic and dramatic theatre (*Brecht on Theatre*, 37).

defamiliarisation or distancing from the illusion of the role and theatrical reality.¹⁰⁶ In order to produce the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or distancing effect, Brecht emphasizes the importance of *gestus*, the actors' external gestures and attitudes that communicate the story. By focusing on external *gestus* rather than internal, emotional identification with a role, Brecht believes it is more possible to display the character's personal growth and social reality, thereby causing the audience to consider their own process of growth and relationship with one another.¹⁰⁷ It is not that these performances are without emotion, but only that actors are not required to undergo a complete conversion to identify emotionally with a character, for "doing is better than feeling."¹⁰⁸ In sum, when actors perform their parts with role distance, it allows the audience to maintain appropriate distance from theatrical illusion, to understand the story, and ultimately, to be transformed.

Are these two approaches—Stanislovskian role identification and Brechtian role distance—completely incommensurable, or is there a place for both? Often, those who are passionately committed to one approach tend to disparage the other, whether calling role distance uninspired or role identification a sham. The American actor and director David Mamet, for example, passionately opposes Stanislavski's system, calling it "nonsense," "uninteresting," "hogwash," "useless" and "antipractical," or more recently, "unimplementable," "solipsistic" and "pointless."¹⁰⁹ But is this rant really necessary? Does an actor have to choose between either role identification or role distance? Eric Bentley answers to the contrary, arguing that Stanislavskian role identification can be utilized to perform a Brechtian play.¹¹⁰ Likewise, Robert Cohen, basing his observations on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, explains how these approaches are simply different ways of being authentic: Brechtian authenticity mirrors the adult proclivity to remain outside the moment, whereas Stanislavskian authenticity imitates childlike playfulness in the moment. Both are necessary at different times and for different purposes in theatrical performance.¹¹¹ Richard Schechner

¹⁰⁶ Likewise, Peter Brooker suggests the translations "defamiliarisation," "estrangement," or simply "V-effect" rather than "alienation." "Key Words in Brecht's Theory and Practice of Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 217.

¹⁰⁷ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 54–55, 196.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 32. But Brecht did not deny the place of emotion (*Ibid.*, 23).

¹⁰⁹ The first string of quotes are from Mamet's earlier book *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 6, 10, 12, 15. The more recent quotes are from David Mamet, *Theatre* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 40, 56, 129.

¹¹⁰ Bentley, "Are Stanislavsky and Brecht Commensurable?," 41.

¹¹¹ Robert Cohen, "Role Distance: On Stage and On the Merry-Go-Round," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 29, no. 1 (2004): 118.

agrees, observing that authenticity in a performance is simply mastery over any acting style, whether Stanislavskian role identification or Brechtian role difference.¹¹² Others disagree that these approaches are commensurable, although usually less adamantly than Mamet, either by virtue of one approach superseding but not negating the other, or by virtue of different theatrical phenomenologies on which these approaches are based.¹¹³ In practice, however, many actors often utilize insights and techniques from both approaches, despite the theoretical tension. In theodramatic performance, a similar tension is at work between role identification and distance, and as a result, the following section explores whether it is possible to draw from both Stanislavski and Brecht to construct a uniquely theodramatic approach to character formation and role realization.

5.4.2 *Theodramatic Role Identification and Role Distance*

Throughout church history, the idea of playing a role on stage was used as a model in either denouncing Christian hypocrisy as play-acting or in buttressing Christian obedience to God the role-giver. As an example of the latter, Clement of Alexandria describes a wise person as someone who “faultlessly plays the role God has given him in the drama of life; for he knows what he has to do and to suffer.”¹¹⁴ The idea of playing a God-given role, however, can easily resemble the Stoic view of performance, which diminishes the free responsibility and improvisation of human actors. As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a dynamic interplay between divine direction and the responsibility of human actors. But what are the possible roles in the theodrama, and what does it mean to perform a God-given and God-graced role with fittingness and authenticity?

The roles we play in the theodrama are identified by our relationships: son, daughter, employee, friend, wife, teammate, etc. In this way, people understand and perform their identity as defined by these relational roles. In the theodrama, however, the most pivotal role, the most important relationship, is the role we play in relation to God. The options for this role stand in stark contrast: we are either righteous or unrighteous before God (Rom 4:23-24), children of light or children of darkness (Eph 5:8), God’s friends or his enemies (Rom 5:10),

¹¹² Schechner, *Between Theater & Anthropology*, 52.

¹¹³ The former position is represented by Mordecai Gorelik, “An Epic Theatre Catechism,” in *Brecht Sourcebook*, ed. Carol Martin and Henry Bial (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 35. The latter is represented by Edelman, “Can an Act Be True?,” 62–63.

¹¹⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VII.2, in *ANF* II.

alive with Christ or dead in sin (Rom 6:11). In other words, we are either disponible to God through faith in Christ by the Spirit, or we are indisponible to God because of our sin. Receiving the role of God's friend is a gift of his grace; it is not a role we can simply decide to play (Eph 2:8-9). And having received this role, the only way to perform it is through constant reliance on the Spirit of God (Gal 3:2-3). But what is our responsibility in performing this role? How do we "work out our salvation" that is itself a work of God (Phil 2:12-13)? Does this require role identification, role distance, or both?

According to Balthasar, Stanislavski is the best guide for articulating our responsibility to this role. Balthasar presents Stanislavski's position as one of complete disponibility to a role, being completely available to and at the service of a role. The actor neither gets completely lost in a role nor remains distant, but embraces the role with disponibility while preserving self-identity.¹¹⁵ Balthasar critiques Brecht for not respecting the power of human freedom, which enables a person to embrace a role, "without surrendering his self."¹¹⁶ It is possible, therefore, to accept the mission of one's God-given role without sacrificing human freedom. To be a person, in fact, is to respond to God by taking hold of the mission he gives us in the theodrama.¹¹⁷ It is impossible to embrace this role and mission perfectly given the "incompleteness of human existence," so the possibility of fitting performance remains a gift and grace from God.¹¹⁸

Like Balthasar, Vanhoozer also utilizes Stanislavski's system as a model for getting into character in the theodrama. The goal, according to Vanhoozer, is learning "not simply how to play-act a role but rather to become the role we play."¹¹⁹ Election is the divine casting call by which God gives some the role of disciple, and for these people, the incongruence between the actor and the role is a matter of sin.¹²⁰ Sanctification, therefore, is not just becoming who we are *pretending* to be, but becoming who we *already are* in Christ and embracing this identity.¹²¹ Not every disciple performs this role identically, for there is a whole company of actors, and the Spirit guides each one in improvising the role with fittingness. Christians do not cease playing their social roles, but the role of being a disciple and the vocation of being

¹¹⁵ Balthasar, *TD I*, 288-90.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹¹⁷ Balthasar, *TD III*, 458.

¹¹⁸ Balthasar, *TD I*, 295-96.

¹¹⁹ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 366, cf. 370.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 368-69.

¹²¹ For the idea of identity forged through pretence, see William Ian Miller, *Faking It* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 118-20.

in Christ redefines these roles and puts them in proper perspective.¹²² Josh Edelman critiques Vanhoozer on various accounts, but especially in regard to his persistent use of Stanislavski in a post-Stanislavskian milieu. What matters the most, according to Edelman, is not that Christians completely believe or feel their roles in the theodrama, but only that they act the part so the audience gets the gospel message. Edelman concedes that interesting parallels can be forged between Stanislavski's system and Christian character formation, but given the uniqueness of Christ's performance, he recommends a broader model for Christian mission gleaned from a Brechtian or Mametian concern for story over character.¹²³

An inherent tension exists between the role Christians have received from God—his adopted children—and the continual struggle to perform this role with faithfulness and fittingness. Rather than simply despair over the impossibility of role identification, however, can employing models of both role identification and role distance assist us in understanding the eschatological tension of Christian existence between the “now” of the old self and the “not yet” of the new self? To begin, there is a crucial distinction between theodramatic and theatrical roles, namely, that theodramatic roles actually constitute personal identity whereas theatrical roles are fictional. An actor in theatre plays a variety of roles on stage while maintaining a personal identity off stage. In the theodrama, by contrast, everything is on stage, and human identity is wrapped up in the roles we play, whether in relationship with God, each other, or the rest of creation. Like theatre, however, the key question is how well we are performing these roles, and whether or not we are faking it.¹²⁴ The goal is not to be free of these roles, but to be “authentically roled in the drama of redemption.”¹²⁵ Consequently, Vanhoozer is correct: when Christians pursue role identification, we are not just imagining *as if* we were disciples, but imagining what really *is* the case in God's eschatological kingdom.¹²⁶

On the one hand, Stanislavski's system provides a partial model for Christian role identification where the goal is not just to pretend to be a Christian, but to perform the role of loving service to God and neighbor with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mt 22:36-40).

¹²² Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 395–97.

¹²³ Edelman, “Can an Act Be True?,” 66–71.

¹²⁴ Larry Bouchard explain through dialogue with theatre how personal and moral integrity are achieved not by escaping from roles, but enacting these roles faithfully. *Theater and Integrity: Emptying Selves in Drama, Ethics, and Religion* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 340.

¹²⁵ Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 72.

¹²⁶ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 374.

The desire of every Christian is not merely to perform the outward actions of love, but to be inwardly compelled by the love of God to love others. One may already be converted to the role of Christian, but every Christian laments the tension of not yet being fully transformed into a Christ-like character. To paraphrase Paul, we do not perform how we want to perform, but we perform the way we hate (Rom 7:15). Nevertheless, there is no condemnation for those who have received this role (Rom 8:1). In other words, Christians are not like Stanislavskian actors in that we have learned to live the part before walking on stage, because the Christian role is learned through performance. In addition, living this role does not involve conjuring emotions and expecting fitting actions to follow. For the Christian, obedient performance often proceeds without the corresponding emotions, although in hope that feeling will follow.

Whereas Stanislavski may present the ideal fusion between feeling and doing, Brecht, on the other hand, supplements Stanislavski with a more realistic portrait of performance in the eschatological now-and-not-yet of the current theodramatic Act. Even if Christians struggle to “get into character,” we have a responsibility to keep performing, not afraid to show the challenges and growth of our character to the audience, as Brecht instructed.¹²⁷ Ultimately, since we know we will not enact our parts perfectly, the goal is to show the truth of the theodrama through authentic performances. Authenticity, in this sense, is not a bold, brazen, existential authenticity in which action completely corresponds with feelings. Performing with this kind of emotional authenticity—doing exactly what one feels—is a recipe for disaster.¹²⁸ Consequently, existential authenticity is neither desirable nor godly. Eschatological authenticity, on the other hand, embraces the tension between desired role identification and actual role distance, between who we are becoming and who we are now. Pursing eschatological authenticity means not always acting according to feelings, but in light of what is necessary to do in order to decrease role distance and increase role identification. In other words, Christians seek to perform with eschatological authenticity by narrowing the gap, through fitting words and actions, between who we already are in Christ and what we are actually like in everyday life. A person performing with eschatological authenticity admits that role distance is inevitable but not desirable, and so acts with a desire for role identification.

¹²⁷ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 56.

¹²⁸ This is true not only of Christians, but all humans as we interact with each other on a social stage. William Miller addresses the serious and humorous elements of “faking it” that is quite different from outright hypocrisy in *Faking It*.

To use the language of the Apostle Paul, performing with eschatological authenticity is a matter of costuming ourselves with the characteristics of our new role, to lay aside the old role and “to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24). Whether or not we feel the part, we are required to “put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...” (Col 3:12). If we do not put on these things, we perpetuate the role distance between who we already are in Christ and how we are performing that role. Even when we have desires for evil, therefore, fitting performance means to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13:14). Of course, the worst-case scenario is that Christians follow these commands like the Pharisees, putting on a virtuous yet hypocritical act, performing the part only when it is publicly praiseworthy (Mt 6:2, 16; 7:5; 15:7-9; 23:1-36). These performances are unfitting and, in fact, an indication that one may be without faith, faking the entire role. The best-case scenario, however, is that Christians will put on Christ-like virtues to please the role-Giver, with or without audience applause.

Cultivating performative habits and giving up illusory notion of pure spontaneity is the means to decrease role distance and form Christ-like character. As Brecht observes, skillful actors do not need to pretend they have never rehearsed their parts; in fact, forming habits creates a readiness to be spontaneous and improvise when necessary.¹²⁹ The more Christians become familiar with the theodrama and develop the right habits that accompany their roles, the more these habits will become natural. As Tom Wright remarks, “the more you know the play, the less you will be “playing a part” and the more you will simply be yourself. Sooner or later, you’ll be acting naturally. *Second* nature. That’s how virtue works.”¹³⁰ Virtuous habits are the means by which Christians perform with eschatological authenticity, not performing according to our “first nature”—the old self—but performing according to our “second nature”—our new self in Christ. In the theodrama, “we become the characters we play.”¹³¹ In other words, habits help Christian identify with their role and decrease role distance.¹³² Jennifer Herdt argues that virtues are theatrical in this sense, siding more with Erasmus than Luther in the dynamic interplay between virtues as a gift of the divine director and a responsibility of the human performer. According to Herdt, Luther has an “exaggerated

¹²⁹ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 194.

¹³⁰ N. T. Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (London: SPCK, 2010), 225.

¹³¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 260.

¹³² As Peter Berger notes in connection with playing social roles, “Normally, one becomes what one plays at.” *Invitation to Sociology*, 115.

insistence on passivity” based on a competitive understanding of divine grace and human action, so much so that we do not put on Christ, but Christ puts us on.¹³³ In both theatre and the theodrama, however, actors form authentic characters by acting like the character in dynamic interplay with God’s directorial assistance and enablement. David Mamet’s blunt advice to actors applies to performers in the theodrama as well: “If there’s something you want to do differently next time, *do* it.”¹³⁴ C. S. Lewis makes a similar observation: “Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”¹³⁵

Like a Brechtian or Mametian actor, therefore, Christians should not worry about feeling the part as much as acting the part as enabled by God’s grace, in prayerful expectation that the feelings will follow and role distance will diminish. This kind of habitual performance avoids hypocrisy by acting with the right aims (God’s glory) and with the right attitude (humility). Habitual performance avoids the pitfalls of existential authenticity by acting with eschatological authenticity. Like a Stanislavskian actor, this kind of formation and performance requires an active imagination, more specifically an eschatological imagination that integrates the “already” and the “not yet.” Wells indicates that imagination is absolutely essential in character formation, since it enables us “to take for granted those things that one needs to be able to rely on” and “to see simultaneously what is and what might yet be.”¹³⁶ Consequently, imagination both develops disponibility and enables us to display fittingness by performing with eschatological authenticity. With imagination, we see status in a different light in order to perform with subversive and fitting status postures. Imagination helps us develop disponibility toward others as gifts, enabling us to overaccept offers. Imagination enables us to keep role identification and role distance in proper balance, living the eschatological tension at the heart of character formation. Habit informs imagination and imagination fuels habits, and both are a gift from God.

¹³³ Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 188.

¹³⁴ Mamet, *True and False*, 102.

¹³⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 131.

¹³⁶ Wells, *Improvisation*, 76.

5.5 CHARACTER FORMATION IN THE ECCLESIAL COMPANY

It is crucial to explore the nature of individual roles in the theodrama and the dynamics of character formation, without forgetting that the whole process of role realization and character formation takes place in relationship with the entire company. Acting is a relational art, and this applies just as much to character formation as fitting performance. In this way, Brecht provides better direction than Stanislavski in pointing us to the relational, company-wide context of building a character. Brecht insists that individual characters develop in interaction with other actors. “The learning process must be co-ordinated so that the actor learns as the other actors are learning and develops his character as they are developing theirs. For the smallest social unity is not the single person but two people. In life too we develop one another.”¹³⁷ Of course, this is common sense when we realize that every role is a relationship, so the development of any particular role is the development of a relationship. Consequently, character formation is intrinsically linked to developing ecclesial disponibility. Responsive availability to others, taking a low status posture, and overaccepting offers are means for developing Christ-like character. As Brecht observes: “The actor masters his character by paying critical attention to its manifold utterances, and also to those of his counterparts and of all the other characters involved.”¹³⁸ At the core of character formation is disponible interest in others and a readiness to respond to their offers. Larry Bouchard calls this “kenotic integrity,” a pattern of losing ourselves in service to roles and to other actors in order to find ourselves. Kenotic or self-emptying disponibility toward others leads in turn to receiving the fullness of our identity from others.¹³⁹ As Brecht maintains: “Every character is built up from its relationship to other characters. That means that an actor has to be as interested in his partner’s playing as in his own.”¹⁴⁰ Mamet concurs that the best actor is not one who is turned inward, but the “outward-directed” actor with responsiveness to others in the company.¹⁴¹

The perspective of Bouchard, Brecht and Mamet is akin to the apostle Paul’s admonition to the Philippians: “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the

¹³⁷ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 197.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹³⁹ Bouchard, *Theater and Integrity*, 341–42, cf. 248–49.

¹⁴⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (London: Methuen, 1965), 81.

¹⁴¹ Mamet, *True and False*, 13.

interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4).¹⁴² Building our character to be like Christ requires a focus on building up others. Reflecting on Paul’s metaphor of the church as a body leads to similar conclusions, for the body needs all the parts in order to function. The eye needs the hand and the hand needs the eye, and they fulfill their role in the body by working together and realizing their mutual interdependence (1 Cor 12:14-26). Likewise, actors in the ecclesial company need each other in order to become who they are meant to be in the theodrama. As observed earlier, actors in the ecclesial company achieve fitting performance not by seeking stardom or heroism, but by humbly playing their part in the company in relational disponibility to each other. “To play our part well,” remarks Vanhoozer, “we need to play with others.”¹⁴³ The goal of theodramatic performance is not just fitting individual performances, but a “corporate witness to the reality of the new creation wrought by the Father in Christ through the Spirit.”¹⁴⁴

Because the ecclesial company exists to witness and not just to entertain, ecclesial disponibility and fittingness, character formation, and role realization are means toward a greater purpose, not ends in themselves. The purpose of being an adept actor, a believable character, and a skillful company is to bear witness to the truth of the theodrama. This is why Brecht insists the real way to master a character is to master the story.¹⁴⁵ If an actor does not know the play, it is impossible to form and perform a fitting character. In theodramatic terms, biblical disponibility and fittingness take priority over ecclesial disponibility and fittingness. Without biblical fittingness, the performances of ecclesial companies may be captivating and creative, but they will not fit within the plot of the theodrama. And ultimately, biblical disponibility and fittingness are a means for developing disponibility and displaying fittingness to the triune God as playwright, protagonist, and producer. In fact, as Paul Fiddes remarks, we discover our roles within the theodrama and the ecclesial company by participating in God and his mission.¹⁴⁶ More specifically, if formation is a matter of being like Christ, and the ecclesial company is the body of Christ, then developing ecclesial disponibility and displaying ecclesial fittingness is to be disponible and fitting to Christ. It is in the context of community that we come to know the triune God and his commands, thus “belonging to this social reality (in which God is abroad in his Spirit) makes us who we are, inculcates virtue,

¹⁴² Bouchard compares theatrical kenosis with the Christological and relational kenosis exhibited in Philippians 2. *Theater and Integrity*, 247–49.

¹⁴³ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 397.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 435.

¹⁴⁵ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 200.

¹⁴⁶ Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 51.

and thereby forms us for receptivity to the command.”¹⁴⁷ As with every area of theodramatic formation and performance, therefore, the ecclesial dimension is connected in a complex web to every other dimension, yet there is an inherent order to these connections. No matter where one enters the web, it will always lead to the triune God who encompasses the whole and constitutes the core.

¹⁴⁷ Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth*, 99.



REPETITION, INNOVATION, AND TRADITIONAL THEODRAMATICS

It may be, Heaven forgive me, that I did try to be original; but I only succeeded in inventing all by myself an inferior copy of the existing traditions of civilized religion...I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy.

∞G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*¹

Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

∞Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*²

6.1 THEATRICAL TRADITION

The world of theatre is awash with traditions, ranging from large traditions—Western, Eastern, African, Latin American, etc.—to small traditions with a select following. Some traditions involve the transmission of a particular form or style, like Greek tragedy; others arise from the theory and practice of a particular director or actor, such as Constantin Stanislavski’s “system.” Divergences and similarities between theatrical traditions can be traced chronologically, geographically, or stylistically. For example, Western theatre can be divided chronologically according to classical, medieval, renaissance, restoration, neoclassical and so on, or geographically according to the traditions of Greece, Rome, Italy, Britain and more, all of which converge or diverge based on their various forms, styles, and purposes. Furthermore, each tradition develops in connection with other traditions, whether borrowing, altering or sustaining elements from other traditions. For instance, although one might distinguish between *noh*, *bunraku*, *kabuki*, and *butoh* as different Japanese theatrical traditions, they all bear a family resemblance, and are often described and understood with reference to the others. Much contemporary avant-garde theatre draws from and juxtaposes various theatrical traditions, creating a pastiche that plays with established forms and styles, and by doing so, forges its own tradition.

In theatre, therefore, there is no escaping tradition. Every performance represents a certain tradition or mixture of traditions, every drama is enmeshed in an interpretive

¹ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 23–24.

² Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 9.

tradition, and every actor associates with tradition(s) through the influence of schools, instructors, personal interests, and cultural contexts. Some may suppose that improvisational theatre, with its emphasis on spontaneity, is free from the constraint of tradition. In reality, however, improvisation requires particular skills passed down from generation to generation of improvisers and troupes. Furthermore, as addressed in the previous chapter, improvisation is less about originality than being obvious, which entails disponibility and fittingness to momentary realities as well as the vast repertoire of knowledge and skills improvisers have acquired from past training and experience. Consequently, improvisational theatre is replete with tradition, even when it seeks to be anti-traditional.

Although tradition is an essential element in every theatrical performance, it is an illusive concept to define. Richard Schechner identifies that which “persists from enactment to enactment” as the “script,” not a dramatic script communicated in words, but a more active sense of script understood as “patterns of doing” rather than “patterns of written words.”³ These scripts are “all that can be transmitted from time to time and place to place” and from person to person, including expectations about what constitutes a good and beautiful performance. In other words, scripts are holistic performance traditions.⁴ Schechner has more than stage theatre in mind here, but his notion of scripted tradition applies just as much to a performance of *Othello* or a participatory improv event as it does to Balinese ritual. In each example, a constellation of beliefs and practices transmitted through time and place and from actor to actor constitutes a performance tradition. Taking cue from Schechner, therefore, theatrical tradition can be defined as patterns of belief and behavior that persist from performance to performance.

If tradition is what enables the art of theatrical performance to stay alive, it is also what threatens its death. Peter Brook recognizes that tradition is essential, but distinguishes between deadly tradition and living, vital tradition. He explains that while every theatre company follows a particular method or school, this tradition can become deadly through incompetence and ruinous repetition.⁵ Repetition can be creative and transformative when “harnessed to an aim, driven by a will.” But if cut off from this artful aim and creative will, repetition “is what leads to all that is meaningless in tradition...carbon-copy imitations.” This kind of repetition, therefore, “denies the living.”⁶ The problem is not tradition itself, as Hans-

³ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 68–69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 71, figure 3.1.

⁵ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 34–44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

Theis Lehmann observes, but whether actors handle tradition with “museum-like conventions” or with “more radical forms of dealing with it.”⁷ Brook concurs: “In some cases, a traditional form is still living; in another, tradition is the dead hand that strangles the vital experience.”⁸ Living theatrical tradition, therefore, is not regurgitating habits or strictly imitating the past, but performance that “takes yesterday’s action and makes it live again in every one of its aspects—including its immediacy.” In short, living tradition is representation, “a making present” of a performance tradition.⁹

Each actor and company has the responsibility to keep tradition alive, which also entails developing tradition in order to “make it present.” As such, theatrical traditions are never static; they are, as Joan Erdman observes, either “vigorous or lethargic, virile or languid, continually undergoing change because of their embodiment in new artists as well as the aging of mature artists.”¹⁰ For many actors, keeping tradition alive is not always a conscious decision, for tradition includes the culture in which they are submerged. David Mamet observes that for everyone, including actors, “submersion in a culture replaces a potentially universal array of choices with a specific model, which the individual imbibes so young and so naturally that its directives do not seem like choice at all, but merely the way things are.”¹¹ As a result, we need people who can observe and describe “the way things are” and make judgments regarding how actors and performances represent the best or worst of a theatrical tradition. David Roberts suggests this is the role of theatre critics, who recognize and praise paradigmatic performances, thus keeping theatrical traditions alive.¹² There is a constant danger, however, for theatre criticism to become abstracted and disconnected from actual performance, deadening the active, living sense of theatrical tradition. This is precisely why, as Schechner maintains, “a living tradition is one with roots and branches among the people. It can be studied at school but kept alive only in the streets.”¹³

In sum, tradition is an essential dimension of theatrical formation and performance. Theatrical formation involves developing disponibility toward theatrical traditions that shape the beliefs and practices of an actor and company. An actor with traditional disponibility will

⁷ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 52.

⁸ Brook, *No Secrets*, 88.

⁹ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 155.

¹⁰ Joan L. Erdman, “Inside Tradition: Scholar-Performers and Asian Arts,” *Asian Theatre Journal* 8, no. 2 (October 1991): 113.

¹¹ Mamet, *Theatre*, 118.

¹² David Roberts, “Shakespeare, Theater Criticism, and the Acting Tradition,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (October 2002): 344–45.

¹³ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 224.

be prepared to confess, like Eugenio Barba, “I no longer belong to myself. I belong to a small tradition whose ancestors remain alive through the coherence and continuity of my actions.”¹⁴ Furthermore, theatrical performance displays fittingness to tradition not simply by repeating previous performances and relying on tried and tested skills, but by appropriating these vast resources for innovative performances in the present. When actors and companies cultivate this kind of traditional fittingness, they transform potentially deadly rules learned in school and rehearsal into living realities embodied on stage.

6.2 THEODRAMATIC TRADITION

6.2.1 *Living Tradition*

The concept of living tradition is not unique to theatre, and most theologians who utilize the phrase make reference to Alasdair MacIntyre, who defines living tradition as a “historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.”¹⁵ Tradition is a lived argument that develops through time as a result of external opposition and internal debate.¹⁶ Furthermore, living tradition persists as a “not-yet completed narrative” concerned with applying knowledge to particular and ever-changing situations.¹⁷ In other words, living tradition is a developing body of knowledge and practice oriented toward a common good or goal. Translated into theodramatic terms, living tradition is the developing perception of and participation in the theodrama oriented toward faithful performance. As such, tradition is both an activity and a possession sustaining the theological and ethical continuity of the church.¹⁸

In contrast to common descriptions, Christian tradition is not merely a collection of doctrines and dogmas. A. N. Williams represents a common definition of tradition as “communal interpretation of the Bible which is above all, though not exclusively, doctrinal in content,” so that creeds, confessions, and catechisms are the most important expressions of

¹⁴ Eugenio Barba, “The Essence of Theatre,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 46, no. 3 (October 2002): 29.

¹⁵ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 2007), 222.

¹⁶ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 12.

¹⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 223.

¹⁸ Cf. O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love*, 32.

tradition.¹⁹ But if tradition is both beliefs about the theodrama and ways of performing in the theodrama, then creeds and confessions are only one part of theodramatic tradition, albeit a crucial one. For example, although *Dei Verbum* contains a high view of doctrinal, magisterial tradition, it also articulates a more comprehensive view of tradition as “everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God,” including the Church’s teaching, life, and worship.²⁰ Richard Bauckham summarizes this broader conception of tradition:

“Tradition, as the transmission and actualization of the Gospel in the life of the church, consists not only of creeds, council decrees and the teaching of bishops, but of liturgy, hymns, popular spirituality, art, poetry, stories, preaching, forms of pastoral and missionary activity, academic and popular theology, charitable and educational institutions, and so on. The ‘subject’ of tradition is the people, Christian believers in local congregations as they experience Christ and live the Gospel, and therefore the ‘teaching authorities’ only as one charism among others.”²¹

In other words, tradition is the constellation of beliefs and behaviors received and expressed by every performer, not just magisterial directors.²² In fact, as Michael Partridge observes, “each person lives their own ‘particularised version’ of the tradition. In turn, each affects and helps to shape the tradition.”²³ This is what it means for tradition to be living, because it is both a possession received from past performances and an active performance in the present.

To sum up thus far, living tradition is a pattern of theodramatic perception and performance effectively transmitted through time and from place to place. Several features are important to highlight, beginning with the comprehensive nature of theodramatic tradition, encompassing belief and behavior, perception and performance. Living tradition transmits not just doctrine, but as Trevor Hart articulates, “the story of the gospel faithfully

¹⁹ A. N. Williams, “Tradition,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iian Torrance (Oxford University Press, 2007), 363.

²⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Dei Verbum*, 1965, §8. A similar view was articulated at the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order. For a summary, see Patrick Campbell Rodger and Lukas Vischer, eds., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: Montreal 1963* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 52.

²¹ Richard Bauckham, “Scripture in Relation to Tradition,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 131.

²² Similarly, Balthasar describes living tradition as “a chain of Christian experience handed on from one generation to the other, and of a chain of distinctions and divisions which have been made in test cases as men have proved themselves, shown their worth, or been unmasked” in the context of everyday life. *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches (London: S.P.C.K., 1975), 80.

²³ Michael Partridge, “Performing Faiths: Patterns, Pluralities, and Problems in the Lives of Religious Tradition,” in *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, ed. Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 77.

interpreted in word and deed in the life of the community of faith.”²⁴ This fits with how the Apostle Paul refers to tradition as that which is taught or written down (1 Thess 2:15) and also the lifestyle of believers (2 Thess 3:6). Second and related, theodramatic tradition is performative, which means tradition can never be abstracted from daily life or reduced to the propagation of propositions. Vanhoozer is certainly correct that tradition is “a form of performance knowledge,” but even this explanation privileges performance *knowledge* over knowledgeable *performance*.²⁵ Third, as performance knowledge and knowledgeable performance, theodramatic tradition is irreducibly personal. People transmit tradition and keep it alive; tradition dies when it degenerates into impersonal doctrines. Locating tradition in the realm of personal performance also entails that tradition is improvisational, a dynamic interplay between repetition and innovation. Because tradition is usually seen as the opposite of improvisation, however, it is beneficial to consider in more detail the improvisational nature of tradition.

6.2.2 *Tradition and Improvisation*

Tradition is sometimes confused with traditionalism, which Jaroslav Pelikan famously described as “the dead faith of the living” rather than “the living faith of the dead.”²⁶ While traditionalism seeks to keep the past alive through strict repetition, tradition involves creative replication of the past in a process more akin to improvisation than scripted performance. David Brown doubts whether performance of musical or dramatic scripts is an appropriate model for Christian tradition, given the meager options for variation and development. As an alternative, he proposes that tradition is more like “certain elements in a piece being provided by the performers themselves,” giving more room for creative development in contemporary contexts.²⁷ Although Brown does not identify his proposal as improvisational, the idea is certainly implicit that Christian tradition develops by improvising on themes rather than repeating a script. In the theodrama, tradition is the improvisation of beliefs and behaviors in creative continuity with past performances.

²⁴ Trevor A. Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1995), 184.

²⁵ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 152.

²⁶ Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, 9.

²⁷ David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 124.

Improvised performance in the theodrama, therefore, does not leave tradition in its creative wake; on the contrary, it requires tradition. As Jeremy Begbie explains, improvisers need to train in a particular tradition in order to deal skillfully with the unpredictable particulars of performance. Masterful improvisation does not stem from originality, but from the ability to contribute to an ongoing story, whether in song or on stage.²⁸ Bruce Ellis Benson broadens these observations to include discourse and practice of every kind, all of which involve “the modification of a tradition by augmentation and transformation.”²⁹ Even if an improviser is going off a script, these improvisations are based on performance traditions surrounding that script.³⁰ Skillful improvisers in the theodrama, therefore, immerse themselves in theodramatic traditions in order to improvise fitting performances. David Ford’s advice to apprentice theologians is therefore true of any participant in the theodrama: to be fluent in tradition is “to be able to improvise well.”³¹ While we do our best to improvise well in light of tradition, this is ultimately a retrospective judgment. MacIntyre observes: “What seemed to us at one stage a perfect performance may later be recognized either as imperfect or as less perfect than some later achievement.”³²

The inevitable imperfections of theodramatic performance should be no cause for fear, especially when surrounded by a company of trustworthy improvisers as explored in the previous chapter. Improvisation always involves an element of risk, but developing disponibility to tradition and studying paradigmatic performances can diminish foolish risks.³³ Improvisation is pivotal for theodramatic performance because it keeps tradition alive, and conversely, living tradition is a liberating constraint for creative improvisation. At its worst, improvising the faith can be expressed through what David Bentley Hart describes as assembling “fragments of traditions we half remember,” which are selfishly “suited to our needs, temperaments, capacities, and imaginations.”³⁴ At its best and most mature, however, theodramatic improvisation relies on and expresses living tradition to enact fitting and faithful

²⁸ Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 217–19.

²⁹ Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 30. Elsewhere, he specifically discusses Christian tradition in terms of improvisation. “Improvising Texts, Improvising Communities: Jazz, Interpretation, Heterophony, and the Ekklesia,” 311–12.

³⁰ Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, 146.

³¹ Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 181.

³² MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 31.

³³ Cf. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 80.

³⁴ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 23.

performances. Improvising in the theodrama is like “a man walking backward,” reincorporating the past into present performance.³⁵ This improvisation also looks to the future, however, since it seeks “appropriate ways and means of dealing with new challenges and circumstances.”³⁶ Balthasar sums up these sentiments:

“The thought of previous generations (even if it has resulted in conciliar definitions) is never a pillow for future thought to rest on. Definitions are not so much an end as a beginning... Whatever is merely put in storage, handed down without fresh efforts being made on one’s own part putrifies, like the manna did. And the longer the living tradition has been broken through purely mechanical repetition, the more difficult it may become to renew it.”³⁷

If tradition can putrify, it can also stultify the church’s witness. Trevor Hart provides a similar call to resist the deadening effects of traditionalism, for “if we persist in such nostalgic inertia, we shall rapidly become a mere tourist attraction, a side stall in the fragmented freak show of contemporary pluralism, more pathetic than prophetic in the face of the needs and worries of our fellow human travelers through time.”³⁸ Instead, we need to embrace living tradition, drawing on all the resources of the past in order to improvise a performance with imaginative and prophetic power in the present. Of course, not every past performance in the theodrama is positive, so skillful improvisation requires selective emulation, reincorporating some performances while abandoning others based on their lack of fittingness to one or all dimensions of theodramatic performance. For example, when the Protestant reformers leveled critiques against the Roman Church, one of their main arguments was that some performance traditions of the Church had lost their biblical and trinitarian fittingness and were actually distracting from the drama of God’s grace. For example, indulgences may count as creative improvisations, but they contradict and distract from key elements in the theodrama, such the efficacious sacrifice of Jesus. Because of these misguided improvisations, Protestants often view tradition with suspicion, especially when the coherence between Scripture and tradition is difficult to determine. Brian Gerrish observes: “Our attitude toward tradition, which likewise is a living and human thing, is bound to have in it something of the same oscillation between attraction and aversion, so that we learn by conversation with the

³⁵ Johnstone, *Impro*, 116.

³⁶ Hart, *Faith Thinking*, 180.

³⁷ Balthasar, *ETI*, 157.

³⁸ Hart, *Faith Thinking*, 188.

past: neither going our own separate ways nor merely listening and absorbing passively.”³⁹ If Scripture is a higher norm of fittingness, then the attraction to tradition remains as long as tradition maintains biblical fittingness. But is not interpretation of Scripture itself a tradition? How can Scripture provide a norm for traditional fittingness when Christians disagree on what Scripture communicates? The next section addresses these questions, exploring the dynamic relationship between Scripture and tradition in the theodrama.

6.2.3 *Tradition and Scripture*

Chapter Four proposed that Scripture is not a script providing precise lines and stage directions for contemporary performance, but a transcript witnessing to the theodrama and a prescript guiding fitting improvisation. One benefit of departing from the metaphor of Scripture as script is that it makes room for both unity and diversity within the living tradition of theodramatic performance. All post-canonical performances are unified as a participation in the same theodrama transcribed in Scripture, but these performances have great diversity because they are improvisations rather than performances from a script. The biblical transcript prescribes paradigms and patterns requiring imaginative reincorporation rather than repetitive performance based on script memorization. This imaginative reincorporation of the biblical transcript into contemporary performance is the root of living tradition. In other words, theodramatic tradition is the way ecclesial companies continue to understand and perform the theodrama in creative continuity with Scripture. The process of discerning between living and dead tradition in relation to Scripture is ongoing, dynamic, and difficult to delineate, but several salient statements may help to clarify the relationship.

First, *Scripture and tradition are both a product and integral part of the triune God’s performance as playwright, protagonist, and producer.* Scripture is a transcript of God’s performance in the theodrama as protagonist, but Scripture is also the work of God as playwright and a means by which he continues to speak and direct the play as producer. Therefore, Scripture witnesses to God’s performance while at the same time being a trinitarian performance through which God accomplishes his sovereign purposes. Likewise, living tradition includes beliefs and behaviors resulting from God’s performance in history and Scripture while at the same time being the performance of the Spirit who lives in and among the ecclesial company.

³⁹ Brian Gerrish, “Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed Habit of Mind,” in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 15.

Indeed, living tradition does not result from the ingenuity of human actors alone; tradition is alive because the Spirit has regenerated these actors and empowers their performance. As D. H. Williams remarks, the Spirit is the “primary Actor in the church’s *actus tradendi*, the living transmission and acceptance of the apostolic message in the body of Christ.”⁴⁰ Consequently, both Scripture and tradition witness to God’s performance and are the very means by which God continues to perform. The living God is the link between living Scripture and living tradition.

But if both Scripture and tradition are living witnesses to God and a means by which God directs the theodrama, then what is the difference between them? This leads us to a second point, namely, that *Scripture is the authoritative, divinely inspired canon that sustains living tradition*. While divinely inspired, Scripture is at the same time entirely human, a diverse collection of literature written and gathered by different people at different times and places. Some scholars take this to mean, however, that Scripture itself is a tradition, various textual performances selected by the early church to serve as canon. For instance, David Brown refers to Scripture as only one element in the “moving stream” of revelatory tradition rather than a “changeless deposit” that sustains tradition.⁴¹ Brown correctly affirms that Scripture is entirely human and historical, but what is missing is a more prominent emphasis on Scripture as divine performance, a position misrepresented by the phrase “changeless deposit” (2 Tim 3:16). As an act of God, Scripture is a unique form of God’s communicative action, received by the church as the work of God as playwright and producer.⁴² As a result, Scripture is living and active, the means by which he reveals himself and performs regeneration, encouragement, conviction, and judgment (Jer 23:29; Heb 4:12; 1 Pet 1:23). To call Scripture “canon” means that it rules subsequent performances within the living tradition. This is not an arbitrary decision of the early church, but a recognition that the apostles wrote what they had received from the Lord, as Paul reminds the churches (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3; Gal 1:12). In other words, the church received Scripture as canon through an act of trinitarian

⁴⁰ D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 69.

⁴¹ David Brown, *God and Mystery in Words: Experience Through Metaphor and Drama* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

⁴² My perspective, therefore, has much in common with Kevin Vanhoozer’s in *Drama of Doctrine*, 177f.

disponibility, responsively receptive to God in Christ through apostolic testimony.⁴³ Tradition is living to the extent that it bears fittingness to the performance of God in the biblical canon.

Third, *although canonical Scripture rules tradition, understanding and performing the theodrama presented in Scripture requires living tradition*. There is an ongoing debate in contemporary theology about whether Protestants should continue to use the Reformational phrase *sola scriptura* to describe the unique authority of Scripture over doctrine and life. Most theologians agree that Scripture is not the *only* source guiding theodramatic performance; instead, the issue is how the authority of Scripture actually functions in relation to other sources. For example, Vanhoozer rejects the shallow biblicism dubbed “solo scriptura,” which jettisons tradition, and he seeks to revitalize *sola scriptura* as the practice of appealing to Scripture as the norm for performance traditions.⁴⁴ Some have accused Vanhoozer, however, of not providing enough room for tradition. Hans Boersma, for example, bemoans the bifurcation of Scripture and tradition, arguing that Vanhoozer fails to recognize the full extent to which the Spirit guides living tradition, just as the Spirit inspired and illumines Scripture. Scripture and tradition exist in dialogical relationship, because “norms of a tradition-based interpretation of Scripture are handed down within an authoritative ecclesial context, in the faith and hope that the Spirit is the guide of the Church’s tradition.”⁴⁵ The dialogical relationship between Scripture and tradition, however, does not imply exact equality, because the church still appeals to Scripture in order to critique and commend performance traditions, indicating Scripture’s material sufficiency.⁴⁶ And yet methods of appealing to Scripture are themselves part of tradition, and so the hermeneutical spiral continues. Reflecting on Tom Wright’s comparison of Scripture with a five-Act Shakespeare play with several scenes of the fifth Act missing and needing to be improvised, John Franke remarks how “actors are immersed not only in the first acts of the play, the textual authority, but also in the Shakespearean interpretive tradition, which also functions in an authoritative fashion, albeit a secondary one,

⁴³ John Webster concludes: “An account of the canon and canonization is therefore an account of the extension of Christ’s active, communicative presence through the commissioned apostolic testimony.” *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2001), 36.

⁴⁴ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 154; cf. 231–36.

⁴⁵ Hans Boersma, “On Baking Pumpkin Pie: Kevin Vanhoozer and Yves Congar on Tradition,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, no. 42 (2007): 255.

⁴⁶ This is why John Webster calls tradition a form of “hearing the word” rather than a “fresh act of speaking,” because it arises out of biblical disponibility (*Holy Scripture*, 51.) Nevertheless, this chapter emphasizes that tradition does involve innovative improvisation within the liberating constraint of biblical fittingness.

in the performance of the final act.”⁴⁷ Both Scripture and tradition are authoritative, but in different ways, a point clarified even more by understanding the distinction between Tradition and traditions.

6.2.4 *The Tradition and traditions*

At the center of performance traditions, whether for stage plays or the theodrama, lies a distillation of the play’s plot and theme. Regardless of the diverse traditions that develop for theodramatic performance, there is the Tradition that ties all traditions together. In other words, a crucial distinction exists between the core Tradition, which summarizes the essence of the theodrama as presented in Scripture and performed by the church, and traditions based on the Tradition, which display different levels of biblical fittingness.

What, then, is the Tradition? One way to answer this question is to link Tradition with the gospel—the good news as proclaimed and demonstrated by Jesus and believed by the apostles and the early church. Perhaps the clearest articulation of the gospel in the New Testament is found in 1 Corinthians 15: Jesus the Christ died for our sins and rose again according to the Scriptures (vv. 3-4), bringing victory over death, power over sin, and hope of resurrection to those who believe (vv. 54-57). The Tradition, therefore, is the good news about Jesus and his unique performance as Messiah and Savior. In short, “Jesus is the content of Tradition.”⁴⁸ In a broader sense, the four Gospels are the story of the gospel Tradition in the sense that they transcribe the performance of Jesus summarized by Paul. As Scot McKnight argues, the Gospels are the gospel.⁴⁹ Does identifying the Gospels with the gospel Tradition, however, lead to viewing the gospel as an invention of the early church? D. H. Williams argues that God’s revelation and the Tradition are actually two sides of the same coin, since it was Jesus himself, the revelation of God, who passed on the gospel Tradition to the apostles. In addition, Williams explains that although some distinguish between the gospel or kerygmatic Tradition and ethical traditions, these were indissolubly linked in the life of the early church.⁵⁰ One helpful way of putting it is that traditions are “the art of passing on the

⁴⁷ John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: A Postconservative Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 163.

⁴⁸ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 196.

⁴⁹ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), chapter 6. This observation is correct, as long as we recognize that the gospel existed in oral form before the Gospels were written.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*, 53–56.

gospel” in a complex matrix of beliefs and practices.⁵¹ In short, traditions artfully transmit the Tradition.⁵²

As Christians passed on the gospel Tradition in subsequent decades and centuries, the Tradition became known as the *regula fidei* or “rule of faith.” Richard Hanson observes continuity yet not strict identity between the earliest gospel and the rule of faith as circulated in the second and third centuries, making this distinction in order to recognize the inevitable development of the Tradition from person to person and place to place.⁵³ By the second century, in fact, the rule of faith had taken a more distinctly trinitarian shape.⁵⁴ For instance, Irenaeus explained the rule of faith in terms of God the Father as Creator, God the Son as incarnate Savior and coming Judge, and God the Holy Spirit as the wisdom of the prophets and power of the incarnate Word.⁵⁵ Tertullian articulated a trinitarian rule of faith in which the God who created all things is also the Son who was born of a virgin, suffered and died, rose from the dead, sent the Holy Spirit for our sanctification, and will come again in judgment.⁵⁶ Consequently, as “an abbreviated body of doctrine wherein the genuine articles of Christianity were articulated,”⁵⁷ the rule of faith articulates the main *dramatis personae* (Father, Son, Spirit) and the main events or turning points of the theodrama—creation, incarnation, passion, resurrection, Pentecost, and second coming. The Tradition, originating in the gospel and developed in the rule of faith, eventually became formalized in creeds like the one crafted at the Council of Nicea in AD 325 and passed down from generation to generation as the Church’s confession.

In sum, while the earliest gospel Tradition focused on the identity and mission of Jesus as Messiah and Savior, the Tradition as developed in the patristic rule of faith and creeds delineates the trinitarian *dramatis personae* and main events of the theodrama in which we have

⁵¹ George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 3, quoted in Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 125.

⁵² The distinction between Tradition as Gospel and traditions as ways of transmitting the gospel was famously articulated at the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in 1963. Cf. Rodger and Vischer, *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*, 50; Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

⁵³ Richard Patrick Crosland Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 124.

⁵⁴ The gospel as articulated by Jesus and then by Paul, of course, had trinitarian shape, but not as clearly defined as the rule of faith in the second century. One example is Paul’s articulation in Romans 1 of the gospel of God [the Father], concerning the Son, according to the Holy Spirit (Rom 1:1-6).

⁵⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.10, in *ANF I*; cf. *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 5, in *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Tertullian, *On Prescription of Heretics* 13, in *ANF IV*; cf. *Against Praxeas* 2, in *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*, 88.

a continuing part. Consequently, whether expressed in the gospel, rule of faith, or the creeds, the Tradition is not just information to receive or reject, but an authoritative emplotment of the theodrama as the act of God as playwright-protagonist-producer, an emplotment that has the power to save our own failing performances (Rom 1:16). In other words, the Tradition describes the theodrama, but is also a means by which God directs our continuing participation in the theodrama. The Tradition does not have authority independent of Scripture, but is a Spirit-directed means to keep us from making of Scripture what we will.⁵⁸ Tradition may not rule Scripture, but it does regulate our reading and interpretation of Scripture. It provides a liberating constraint for our understanding of God, Scripture, the Church, and the theodrama as a whole, and thus traditional disponibility and fittingness are necessary dimensions of theodramatic formation and performance. Before exploring this in more detail, however, it is crucial to investigate how living tradition is transmitted through the lives of the saints.

6.2.5 *Tradition and the Saints*

A central theme that emerged out of Chapter 3 is Jesus' identity as master improviser and protagonist who culminates and reveals the plot of the theodrama. In short, Jesus reveals and embodies the Tradition. As contended earlier, there is a sense in which Jesus' performance is entirely unique and unrepeatable, being fully God and the one who made possible our fitting performance through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. But in another sense, because Jesus is fully human, his performance is the ultimate paradigm for every human performance in terms of his character rather than his unique Messianic career. If participating in the theodrama is a matter of performing in fitting ways like Jesus, why pay attention to other performers? Why would the lives of the saints function as a pivotal resource for disponibility and fittingness to tradition?

David Brown suggests three reasons why Christians began to focus on the performances of saints rather than the performance of Jesus, all linked to varieties of distance.⁵⁹ First, the power and perfection of Jesus created metaphysical distance between Jesus and ordinary Christians, who looked to saints as sources of mediation and models of imitation. Second, ever since Jesus ascended into heaven, Christians have experienced a spatial distance from

⁵⁸ Trevor A. Hart, "Tradition, Authority, and a Christian Approach to the Bible as Scripture," in *Between Two Horizons*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 192.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, 64–79.

Christ, which led to fascination with physical relics and pilgrimages. Third, the particular performance of Jesus in first-century Palestine created a temporal distance, whereas the saints embody examples of Christ-like holiness in more contemporary contexts. Given our similar experiences of these distances today, Brown concludes that performances of discipleship require “imaginative re-identification” with Jesus’ performance by attending to the whole body of examples of which Jesus constitutes the head.⁶⁰

Despite the fact that each form of distance Brown mentions stems from christological and pneumatological deficiencies, the fact remains that saintly performances embody tradition and provide pivotal examples of theodramatic disponibility and fittingness and their christological core. For example, the apostle Paul commends his own performance to the extent that he imitates the performance of Christ (1 Cor 11:1). He also commends the example of other apostles and connects this with attentiveness to tradition (2 Thess 3:6-7). Tradition, therefore, is not merely a list of doctrines to believe, but a form of faithful, Christ-like performance guiding our contemporary improvisations of servanthood (1 Peter 3:7), holiness (Phil 3:17), and faith (Heb 13:7). While the author of Hebrews encourages us to imitate the performances of the faithful, our ultimate paradigm to follow remains the Faithful One, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2).

In others words, saints embody tradition and are examples to imitate, but no saint is a hero. According to Wells, all Christians are called to be saints—holy ones of God—instead of heroes, because saints keep God at the center of the story while heroes steal the limelight. We celebrate heroes because of their inherent virtues, whereas we celebrate the performances of the saints because of their faith in God. Heroes take scarcity for granted and enter into battle; saints assume abundance and work for peace. Heroes refuse to fail, while saints expect it. Heroes shine as isolated individuals. Saints are made for communion.⁶¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer accurately summarizes this sentiment in connection with daily discipleship: “Our task is simply to keep on following, looking only to our Leader who goes on before, taking no notice of ourselves or of what we are doing.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid., 99. In addition to the saints, Brown expands this range of examples to include fictional characters in secular novels and films.

⁶¹ Wells, *Improvisation*, 42–44.

⁶² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 6th ed. (London: SCM, 1959), 158.

Given that many Christians heroized Bonhoeffer after his martyr death at the hands of the Nazis, it is ironic that Bonhoeffer opposed any notion of Christian heroism.⁶³ While it may be inappropriate to call Bonhoeffer a hero, however, it is still suitable to recognize his life performance as a model of Christ-centered faith. Furthermore, viewing Bonhoeffer as a model or exemplar does not presume that his life was without failure or his theology without error. Unlike Jesus who is the perfect protagonist, saints embody tradition and provide paradigms of faithful performance despite imperfections and failures, enabling us to identify with their full and fallen humanity. In Scripture, Moses is a friend of God and a model leader despite his speech impediment and his struggles with doubt and anger. King David is a man after God's own heart and an example of faith despite murdering and committing adultery. Likewise, church history is riddled with receptive saints who show us how to perform in the theodrama with fittingness, despite all their character flaws. When we attend to performances of the saints throughout history, we encounter traditions of trusting the only one who is perfectly faithful and performing in a way that reveals the "normalcy and inevitability of imperfection."⁶⁴

With these qualifications in place, it is possible to identify performances of the saints as patterns for contemporary performance. L. Gregory Jones writes: "The saints are paradigmatic for the performance of Scripture because their lives are indispensable "patterns" in whose apprenticeship people learn and acquire skills and virtues such that their performances will become increasingly less inadequate."⁶⁵ Many Christians identify and follow one or several role models among the saints whose performances they particularly admire, much like actors study exemplary actors and seek to develop similar attitudes and habits. In doing so, there is value in studying *from* deceased performers, whose entire life is available for emulation, as well as studying *with* living performers and entering into their dynamic patterns of disponibility and fittingness. In fact, we might conclude that learning from living saints—whether living on earth or in heaven—is even more important than learning from theory and doctrinal texts in order to craft fitting performances.

Balthasar supports this view by calling saints the "authentic interpreters of the theodrama," although Balthasar has in mind special saints such as St. Francis, St. Ignatius,

⁶³ R. R. Reno and Brian Hook explore this irony in *Heroism and the Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), chapter 8.

⁶⁴ Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 82.

⁶⁵ Jones, *Transformed Judgment*, 155. As I have maintained elsewhere, the saints do not perform Scripture as much as improvise with fittingness to Scripture as transcript and prescript.

and St. Theresa rather than ordinary Christians in history and in the neighborhood.⁶⁶ And if tradition is understanding and interpreting the theodrama in word and deed, then all the saints—just ordinary Christians—are “tradition at its most living.”⁶⁷ By identifying saints as a class of Christians more in tune with the Spirit, however, Balthasar risks turning these saints into heroes. Or more accurately, as Ben Quash observes, Balthasar’s saints are distressingly similar to Hegel’s world-historical individuals, like Caesar and Napoleon, who were heroic agents of the World-Spirit realizing its Idea.⁶⁸ By contrast, ordinary Christian saints, those characters in the theodrama who have, are, and will be sanctified in Christ by the Spirit, are those who experience the eschatological tension of being holy like Christ and wholly unlike Christ: simultaneously saint and sinner. It is these saints who constitute living tradition, and developing disponibility to their witness shapes our imaginations and wills to enact fitting performances.

6.3 TRADITIONAL DISPONIBILITY AND FITTINGNESS

It is becoming increasingly clear that disponibility and fittingness to tradition are essential for theodramatic formation and performance. Since tradition is a complex phenomenon, however, traditional disponibility and fittingness include several components. First, actors develop disponibility and display fittingness to the Tradition: the gospel or rule of faith. Because Scripture communicates the gospel Tradition, traditional disponibility overlaps significantly with biblical disponibility, developed by reading, hearing, and attending to Scripture. Moreover, the entire liturgy of the church, itself a tradition, is a means by which Christians become receptive to the Tradition. When Christians gather for worship, they meet to experience, hear, see, sing, confess, proclaim and taste the gospel. Christian liturgy throughout the centuries has been structured, from the call to worship to the benediction, to attune participants to the gospel, engaging their imaginations so that this Tradition shapes every area and activity of life.⁶⁹ In this way, corporate worship itself should be an interactive performance marked by fittingness to the gospel Tradition. When this is so, worship becomes

⁶⁶ Balthasar, *TD II*, 14.

⁶⁷ Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 82.

⁶⁸ Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 65–70.

⁶⁹ Bryan Chapell gives compelling evidence for this in *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

a primary way Christians develop disponibility to the Tradition and are equipped to display traditional fittingness in the mundane and momentous.

Second, actors in the theodrama develop disponibility and display fittingness toward specific traditions. Just as theatrical actors learn and follow certain traditions, like Lee Strasberg's method or David Mamet's anti-method, actors in the theodrama also gain understanding of the theodrama and skill for performance through traditions, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, Presbyterian or Baptist, evangelical or liberal. Christians enter a tradition—or several traditions—not just by understanding doctrines, but as Brian Brock maintains, by “learning [the tradition's] ethos and the skills that make it function.”⁷⁰ Since most Christians learn the ethos or skills of several traditions, traditional disponibility requires attentiveness to and awareness of a complex network of traditions.⁷¹ With increased disponibility to traditions, Christians are able to appreciate and assess these traditions and their potential to engender fitting performances.⁷² In fact, Patrick Sherry observes how different Christian traditions tend to privilege particular Acts in the theodrama, which impacts our judgments and enactments of fitting performance. For example, Sherry maintains that while evangelical Protestants tend to focus on Act 4 (Jesus) and past salvation, Roman Catholics focus on Act 6 (new creation) and future salvation, and liberals focus on Act 5 (the church) and present salvation, resulting in different performances of social action.⁷³ Developing disponibility to a wide variety of traditions, therefore, is a way to discern strengths and weaknesses of these traditions and to combine insights and skills from several traditions to resource fitting performance.

A third element of traditional formation and performance is developing disponibility to particular saints and their performances, which provides paradigms for fitting performance in particular contexts. As indicated in the previous section, saints are tradition at its most living, so disponibility and fittingness to the Tradition and traditions must always be oriented toward real people and their practices, not just their ideas. The saints who deserve our disponibility, of course, are not those who perform for public applause, but those who are quietly keeping the tradition alive through faithful service. These are the actors, as Rosemary Haughton

⁷⁰ Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God*, 104.

⁷¹ Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 223.

⁷² Fowl and Jones affirm the necessity of tradition in formation and performance, since moral action “requires the formation of character within the particular communities that embody a tradition's moral vision.” *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991), 12.

⁷³ Patrick Sherry, *Images of Redemption: Art, Literature and Salvation* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 52.

observes, who “convinced of the value of the drama, continue patiently rehearsing, keeping the tradition alive in attics and hired rooms, rejected and hated by respectable theatergoers.”⁷⁴ One practical way for an ecclesial company to develop disponibility to these saints is to become a story-reading and story-telling community, ingesting and sharing wisdom available through memories, biographies, festivals, and contemporary testimonies. In doing so, our imaginations will be filled with real and personal examples of living tradition, which enables us to keep tradition alive in the details of our own lives.

In sum, traditional theodramatics involves developing disponibility and displaying fittingness toward the Tradition, traditions, and saints. Moreover, there is a delightful circularity in this dimension of formation and performance, for the transmission of tradition is itself a form of disponibility, “an ethos giving priority to attentiveness in intellectual, moral, and affective forms.”⁷⁵ While tradition is a form of disponibility, disponibility is also the heart of tradition. For what is the theodrama if not the performance of an eternally disponible God who is graciously disponible to us, even to the point of death, and enables us to live with disponibility to him, each other, and the rest of creation? Radical disponibility leads to dispossession, which Balthasar concludes is the heart of a saint, and thus the heart of tradition.⁷⁶ Traditional disponibility and fittingness, therefore, are radically counter-cultural, especially in cultures replete with selfish individualism and distracted, web-addicted attention spans.⁷⁷ Disponibility to living tradition guides theodramatic formation and performance between the Scylla of deadly repetition and the Charybdis of rootless innovation, freeing the saints to improvise with fittingness and creative consistency in the present, being rooted to the past and filled with hope for the future.

⁷⁴ Haughton, *The Drama of Salvation*, 97.

⁷⁵ Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God*, 103.

⁷⁶ Balthasar, *Elucidations*, 81.

⁷⁷ Cf. Brian Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 277.



AUDIENCES, INTERACTION, AND MISSIONAL THEODRAMATICS

The only thing that all forms of theatre have in common is the need for an audience.

∞ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*¹

In the interactive theatre of the gospel...*all* the world's a stage, and *everyone* is a potential guest.

∞ Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*²

7.1 THEATRE AUDIENCES AND THE MISSION OF PERFORMANCE

Peter Brook succinctly expresses the unanimous sentiment among theatre scholars and practitioners that audiences are necessary for theatre, especially in post-dramatic theatre, where “the turn to performance is thus at the same time always a turn toward the audience.”³ Even before this official turn, Constantin Stanislavski claimed: “To act without a public is like singing in a place without resonance.”⁴ Whereas the essential role of audiences in theatrical performance is beyond dispute, the nature and extent of audience participation is a matter of great debate. On one end of the spectrum, audience members are spectators in traditional theatre settings, observing a performance for a certain kind of personal experience or benefit. This position maintains the immovable and impenetrable “fourth wall” separating actors and audience.⁵ On the other end of the spectrum, various forms of experimental theatre eliminate the distinction between actors and audience, focusing on the theatrical experience where all participate as “spect-actors.”⁶ This kind of event tears down the fourth wall so that spectators become actors and actors become spectators.

In general, the trend in contemporary theatre is toward the “emancipation of the spectator,” resulting in greater audience participation, although not all these approaches

¹ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 147.

² Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 416.

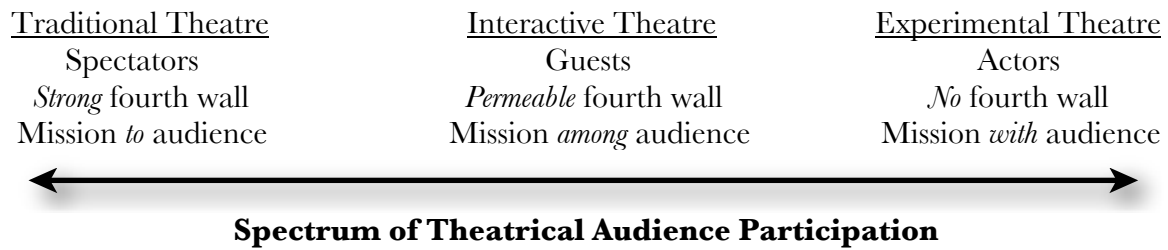
³ Karen Jürs-Munby, “Introduction,” in Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 5.

⁴ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 204.

⁵ The “fourth wall” was a concept developed by Denis Diderot (1713–1784) to indicate the invisible wall through which spectators view the theatrical performance, corresponding to the rise of realism in theatre.

⁶ “Spect-actors” is a term coined by Augusto Boal, who through his Forum Theatre and other initiatives advocated the fourth wall to be broken down between actors and spectators. See especially *Theater of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1998).

completely eliminate the actor-audience distinction.⁷ Interactive theatre is a mediating approach in which actors and audience interact while remaining distinct. In interactive theatre, the audience reacts, responds, and even participates in the theatrical action as a guest, representing a permeable fourth wall between characters and guests.⁸



At each level of audience participation, the actors possess a particular mission in relation to the audience.⁹ On one hand, traditional theatre companies have a commitment to maintain a strong fourth wall, and thus a mission *to* the audience on the other side of the wall, whether to educate, enthrall, or simply entertain. On the other hand, experimental theatre companies eliminate the fourth wall and have a common mission together *with* the audience-members-turned-actors in co-creating a theatrical experience. In interactive theatre companies, however, actors have a mission *among* the audience through a permeable fourth wall, seeking to incorporate them into the play while maintaining the actor-audience distinction. Interactive theatre tends to be improvisational, because once the company begins to interact with and invite responses from the audience, it is impossible to predict what will happen next. This means, according to Peter Brook, “that the actors come before an audience prepared to produce a dialogue, not to give a demonstration.”¹⁰ Does this kind of interactive theatre provide a promising model for the church’s mission to an unbelieving world? What would it take for the church to move beyond merely demonstrating the faith, sometimes from an all-too-comfortable distance, and toward a more interactive model of Christian mission? In the next section, we first explore the nature of theodramatic audiences,

⁷ Susan Bennett traces the emancipation of the spectator, but recognizes that some amount of distance between actors and audience is intrinsic to theatre, and to art and aesthetic experience in general. *Theatre Audiences*, 2nd ed. (Milton Park/New York: Routledge, 1997), 186.

⁸ “Characters” and “guests” are the terms Gary Izzo uses to describe actors and audience members in interactive theatre. *The Art of Play*, 22–26.

⁹ This remains true even with less structured, improvisational theatre, which has a mission Viola Spolin identifies as “sharing with the audience.” *Improvisation for Theater*, 127.

¹⁰ Brook, *The Shifting Point*, 111.

and then investigate how interactive theatre provides a promising model for missional theodramatics.

7.2 THEODRAMATIC AUDIENCES AND MISSION

7.2.1 *Identifying the Audience*

In one sense, there is no audience in the theodrama, since everyone is a participant in this cosmic drama.¹¹ But in another sense, every participant also observes the performances of others as part of the audience. The most important audience member is the triune God—the playwright, protagonist, and producer—who has a complete view of the world stage and every performance past, present, or future. No aspect of our finite performances, including every inner thought and diminutive details of physical appearance, escapes the attention of our divine audience (Ps 139:1-6; Matt 10:30). Kierkegaard claims that God is the only real spectator in the “The Drama of Dramas,” for only God has a complete view of world history.¹² In addition, God’s role as audience corresponds with his role as judge: “God is the critical theatergoer, who looks on to see how the lines are spoken.”¹³ While it is true that God is an audience and judge, the danger of these metaphors is that they accentuate God’s transcendence over the theodrama rather than his immanence and involvement in the theodrama. As such, it is important to link God’s watching and judging roles with his acting and directing roles, refusing to sacrifice either his transcendence or immanence.

In addition to the divine audience, angels also observe the theodrama unfolding on the world stage. Angels are part of the “heavenly authorities” to whom the “manifold wisdom” of God is made manifest through Jesus Christ (Eph 3:10). Furthermore, Paul writes that he and the other apostles have been made a spectacle (θέατρον) before the world, including angels and the rest of humanity (1 Cor 4:9). Karl Barth speaks of angels as witnesses who are “in some way present to see and hear what takes place” in the theodrama.¹⁴ In sum, angels act as

¹¹ Vanhoozer remarks: “Strictly speaking, there are no passive spectators in the theodrama.” *Drama of Doctrine*, 404.

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 158.

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession* (Philadelphia: Harper & Row, 1965), 181.

¹⁴ Barth, *CD III/3*, 500.

audience members while at the same time participating in the plot as “ministering spirits” (Heb 1:14).

For the purpose of this study, however, we will be focusing on the human audience in the theodrama, more specifically those who are not participants in God’s chosen performance company. When God entered into covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants, those outside this covenant relationship became an audience “who would be impressed, enraged, or frightened...by the way God cared for his people” (Deut 4:25-28).¹⁵ In the next Act of the theodrama, when this covenant company expanded to include Gentiles through the climactic work of Christ, this mixed company “were the ones chosen to enact the drama of salvation before all the world, and the world’s gaze was much more part of their daily awareness than it was for the Jews.”¹⁶ Peter writes that this company is “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9), just as God chose Israel and set this people apart from other nations (Ex 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2), in order that an unbelieving audience might see their fitting performances and glorify God (1 Pet 2:12).

The distinction between the company and audience, therefore, is the same distinction the Paul has in mind when describing the Ephesians’ miraculous movement from being covenant strangers to being God’s covenant household or family (Eph 2:12–19). As covenant strangers, they were without hope (Eph 2:12) and full of enmity against God (Eph 2:16), but as covenant family members they have access to God through the work of Jesus (Eph 2:13–14, 18), having gained peace and reconciliation with God (Eph 2:15–16) and adoption as God’s children (Eph 1:5). Tragically, it is often difficult to distinguish between the covenant company and those outside the company. Moreover, some professed members of the company are merely feigning their parts. Another problem is that some claim to be part of the company, but their conduct contradicts this confession. As a result, the ultimate distinction between company and audience, between covenant family and covenant strangers, exists in eschatological tension. At the end of the theodrama, God will judge between believing participants and those who have either faked their performances or failed to participate with faith, hope, and love (Matt 3:12; 13:20; 25:32-34). Since God is also sovereign over the casting call, it is not our prerogative to judge who is in the company and who is not, but we do know that publicly associating with the company involves confessing Christ as Lord and seeking to perform under the Spirit’s direction. The company’s mission to incorporate people who confess Christ

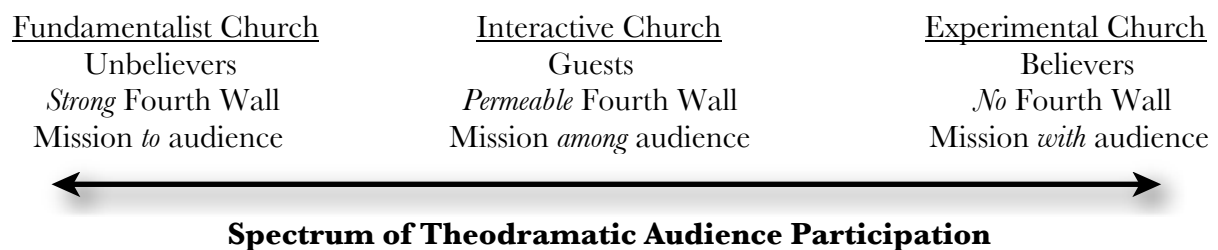
¹⁵ Haughton, *The Drama of Salvation*, 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

and perform by the power of the Spirit relies entirely on the triune God and continues until the day when God closes the curtain on the current Act and opens it again to his promised new creation.

7.2.2 *Theodramatic audience participation*

Like the spectrum of theatrical audience participation, there are a variety of ways to understand the relationship between the ecclesial company and an unbelieving audience, thus impacting the idea of mission. On the one hand, a fundamentalist view of church posits a strong distinction and separation—a strong fourth wall—between the ecclesial company and the audience.¹⁷ In this view, the church has a *mission to* an unbelieving audience while remaining separate from them. On the other hand, many experimental forms of church tear down the fourth wall separating the ecclesial company from the audience, claiming that everyone is potentially a company member. Consequently, in this view the church has a *mission with* the rest of humanity, sharing the same experience and working toward the same goal. A mediating position is the church as interactive theatre with a permeable fourth wall, where a distinction exists between the company and the audience, but the company interacts with the audience and invites them to participate in the play. In this model, the church enacts its *mission among* the audience conceived as guests rather than spectators.



Consequently, just as the identity of a theatre company depends on its distinction from the audience, the identity of the ecclesial company is defined by its distinction from an

¹⁷ In using the term “fundamentalist,” I am referring particularly to a separatist and sectarian impulse as defined most poignantly by George Marsden in relation to American church history. While Marsden helpfully explores fundamentalism as a separatist *movement*, particularly as it arose in the United States after the Scopes trial in 1925 and in distinction from evangelicalism, it is important to note that a separatist *impulse* can arise within any tradition, and is not limited to the particular expression of American fundamentalism. See George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

unbelieving audience.¹⁸ This distinction fuels the mission of the company among the audience, a mission to bless them and incorporate them into the company.¹⁹ In the words of Lesslie Newbigin, the company is chosen and set apart for the sake of all, not for the privilege of the few.²⁰ In the theodrama, therefore, the mission of the ecclesial company faces two dangers: either completely separating from the audience or destroying all distinction from the audience. In other words, the dynamic interplay between the company's distinction from the audience and their presence among the audience keeps theodramatic mission alive.

So far, reference has been made to one company and audience in the theodrama, which is theologically coherent, but practically speaking, there are a myriad of local church performances in interaction with audience members in the midst of all life situations. As Max Harris observes: "The relationship between performance and audience has to be conceived not in terms of...a transhistorical audience, but in terms of a series of relationships between particular performances and local, historically embedded audiences."²¹ In other words, while it may be fruitful to speak of a universal Company and Audience, actual interactive performances take place between local companies and audiences, and between particular actors and the people with whom they interact. In addition, these performances are not periodic events, but encompass all of life as part of the theodrama. But what is the nature of these performances? How do we conceive of Christian mission using this model of interactive theatre? To answer these questions, we now turn to consider the mission, means, method, *mise en scène*, and meaning of interactive theatre as a model for theodramatic performance.

7.3 THEODRAMATIC PERFORMANCE AS INTERACTIVE THEATRE

7.3.1 *The Mission*

A diverse range of theatre companies around the world practice interactive theatre, ranging from entertainment companies to groups utilizing interactive theatre for education, holistic care, or social change. Despite differences of purpose, all interactive theatre

¹⁸ In the most radical forms of experimental theatre, company and audience often merge.

¹⁹ Christopher Wright demonstrates how the entire divine drama unfolds according to the mission of God to the world and the participation of Israel/the Church in this mission. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006).

²⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (London: S.P.C.K, 1978), 34–35.

²¹ Harris, *Theater and Incarnation*, 64.

companies embrace a commitment to dynamic audience participation.²² The mission of interactive theatre companies, therefore, is not simply to instruct, amuse, shock, or lead the audience toward emotional catharsis, but to invite the audience to participate in the play alongside a company of actors bound together by mutual trust, commitment, and the joy of performance.²³ Likewise, the mission of ecclesial theatre is to invite the audience, those who are strangers to the company, to join the performance as guests and eventually to share the same faith, hope, and love. In addition, the whole ecclesial company carries out this mission; it is not the effort of isolated individuals but the work of an entire ensemble bound together by a common faith and commitment to risk, trust, and joy for the sake of God's mission.

In other words, while remembering that those outside the ecclesial company are already actors of a certain sort in the theodrama, the mission of the company is "to change the audience to actors...or at the very least to reveal by their playing the nature of good and evil and so to make choices plain."²⁴ The point is not to manipulate an unbelieving audience, but to present the truth, goodness, and beauty of the theodrama through faithful performances. What Peter Brook observes regarding his "immediate theatre" applies equally to the theodrama: "It is not just a question of wooing an audience. It is an even harder matter of creating works that evoke in audiences an undeniable hunger and thirst."²⁵ The hope of the ecclesial company is that this longing and desire will lead people to become *believing* participants in the theodrama and co-members in the company, with the drama of salvation not just being played *among* the audience, but *by* the audience.²⁶ Success in this mission is not equivalent with increasing the number of people attending Sunday worship services. Houghton asserts that "the criterion of the success of the salvation drama is not whether it fills houses but whether it *saves*,"²⁷ a salvation from ultimate hunger and thirst through faith in Christ, the bread of life and living water, who provides fullness of life.

²² For introductions to interactive theatre, see Gary Izzo's work in *The Art of Play and Acting Interactive Theatre: A Handbook* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Drama, 1998). Interactive theatre is also discussed and practiced using alternative terminology, such as playback theatre, for which an excellent introduction is Rowe, *Playing the Other*.

²³ Izzo, *The Art of Play*, 136.

²⁴ Houghton, *The Drama of Salvation*, 88.

²⁵ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 148.

²⁶ Houghton, *The Drama of Salvation*, 93.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

7.3.2 *The Means*

In order to incorporate the audience into the play as believing participants, interactive theatre companies pursue relational interaction between actors and audience members, or rather, between *characters* and *guests*. Consequently, interactive theatre progresses on the basis of making connections and building relationships with guests and inviting them to participate in the story.²⁸ Likewise, actors in the ecclesial company carry out their mission among audience members by making connections and building relationships with covenant strangers received as guests. Potential guests are not limited to those who show up at worship services, but include everyone who does not share the same faith. As Vanhoozer observes: “In the interactive theatre of the gospel, however, *all* the world’s a stage, and *everyone* is a potential guest.”²⁹ Approaching everyone outside the ecclesial company as a guest implies that Christians must be willing to receive offers from these guests, which may come in the form of actions, reactions, questions, or even accusations. As Gary Izzo explains: “The word *interaction* means reciprocal action or effect, an exchange of needs and offers, of action and reaction.”³⁰ All too often, however, “a bad habit can develop when actors continually throw their performance at the guests but, through a lack of trust, never leave them an opportunity to react or respond. If they can’t react, they can’t interact.”³¹ Consequently, the mission of the ecclesial company is not a scripted performance with predictable outcomes. Instead, it is a relational and improvisational process in which each actor and company responds to particular questions, personalities, scenarios, and life situations offered by guests. It involves finding common ground with these guests and incorporating their offers. Brook comments on the power of this approach: “The audience feels this at once, understands that it is a partner in unfolding the action, and feels surprised and happy to discover that it is taking part in the event.”³² In sum, interactive theatre requires complete disponibility to the audience, while not losing disponibility to one’s fellow actors or the unfolding story.³³

In this process of building relationships with guests, a key skill is to know how and when to incorporate them into the performance. This skill depends on developing disponibility to the guests and adopting a benevolent posture, which enables fitting responses to their offers and

²⁸ Izzo, *The Art of Play*, 188.

²⁹ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 416.

³⁰ Izzo, *The Art of Play*, 188.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

³² Brook, *The Shifting Point*, 111.

³³ *Ibid.*, 234.

questions. Izzo elucidates the posture that precedes fitting improvisation: “In every aspect of the actors’ relationships with the guests, they must let the audience know that they are there for them...To do this, actors must approach the work in the proper spirit and truly believe that their performance is for the guests.”³⁴ Approaching guests in this manner assures them that they are respected and prepares the way for an authentic encounter. Brook concurs: “Genuine improvisation, leading up a real encounter with the audience, only occurs when the spectators feel that they are loved and respected by the actors.”³⁵ Rooted in receptivity to the gift of unbelieving guests, fitting improvisation involves knowing when to deepen relationships, ask for more involvement, and invite guests to participate.

7.3.3 *The Method*

When relationships do begin to form, what will motivate those outside the company to accept their role as guests and to believe and participate in the drama performed by the ecclesial company? In interactive theatre, even if characters successfully make connections and build relationships with guests, these guests may lack the motivation to participate unless the actors develop and display believable characters with the power to generate interest in the story. The more precise method of interactive theatre, in other words, is to be believable. Izzo comments: “Interactive theatre may tell a story, but in its purest form it reveals its subject or theme through the characters who live it....The real interaction takes place between guest and character, not guest and story line.”³⁶ Actors in interactive theatre learn how to embody a story in their characters and interactions, which allows them to react appropriately to unknown situations and offers from guests.³⁷

Articulating the method of interactive theatre also evokes hints of Constantin Stanislavski’s theatrical system adapted as “the method” by American director Lee Strasberg. The goal of “method actors” is to immerse themselves in the process of character building so that the characters they play are completely real and believable. Something similar is required of actors in ecclesial companies, for whom building believable characters is essential

³⁴ Izzo, *The Art of Play*, 219.

³⁵ Brook, *The Shifting Point*, 112.

³⁶ Izzo, *The Art of Play*, 36.

³⁷ Vanhoozer makes a connection with Christians as “costumed interpreters,” since “the best costumed interpreters are not those who have memorized speeches but those whose speech and action is appropriate to the subject matter or play while at the same time interactive with the audience.” *Drama of Doctrine*, 417.

for their mission. The mission of the ecclesial company is not just what they do; it is who they are. As discussed in Chapter 5, however, Christians are not like Stanislavskian actors since living this role does not involve conjuring emotions and expecting fitting actions to follow. The church is a company of actors seeking to play their role with eschatological authenticity, becoming who we already are in Christ. The method of ecclesial theatre, therefore, is not to draw attention to ourselves, but to interact with guests in order to show them Christ as he is displayed in our character and conduct by the power of the Spirit. Our desire is not for the audience to believe in us, but for them to believe in Christ, and developing a character that displays Christ's character will, according to Haughton, "change people who watch it so that they become moved to an act of faith, of willed involvement, or at least it challenges them to choose whether or not they will respond."³⁸ If the guests respond positively, there is no room for boasting in our skillful performances, since this is the work of the triune God, who casts actors in the theodrama, calls them to participate, and forms their character to be like Christ in faith, hope, and love through his Spirit.

7.3.4 *The Mise en Scène*

In discussing the setting or *mise en scène* of interactive theatre, Izzo refers to the *temenos*, or sacred space, occupied by the characters and in which the guests are invited to participate.³⁹ Similarly, Vanhoozer posits that Christians have a sacred space: "The church 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."⁴⁰ Worship and the sacraments, according to Vanhoozer, are two primary ways in which the ecclesial company seeks to incorporate guests. But even though corporate worship is an appropriate milieu in which to encourage guest participation, it is detrimental to associate the theodramatic *temenos* or *mise en scène* solely with worship services or church buildings. In the theodrama, all space is sacred space; all of life is part of the theodrama and the whole world is the theodramatic *temenos*. An important way in which interactive church *does not* resemble interactive theatre, therefore, is that there is no separation between sacred performance space and everyday life. Since interactive church is a matter of relational interaction, it happens at home, at work, around town, and at Sunday worship services. Limiting the *mise en scène* often corresponds with limiting the responsibility of

³⁸ Haughton, *The Drama of Salvation*, 90.

³⁹ Izzo, *The Art of Play*, 13–16.

⁴⁰ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 415–416.

mission to a select few deemed “ministers” or “missionaries,” rather than viewing mission as the responsibility of the entire ecclesial company. In short, interactive church involves “the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.”⁴¹

7.3.5 *The Meaning*

Does interaction with and receiving offers from guests threaten to diminish the power and truth of the company’s performance or to change the meaning of the play? Most theatre scholars affirm that the audience is crucial in discovering the meaning of a performance. This is especially true in improvisational and interactive theatre, where audience reactions and participation can change the trajectory of the performance.⁴² Even within these forms of theatre, however, some directors and actors hesitate to bestow too much power to the audience. Izzo explains, for example, how characters should not be devastated when guests reject their invitations, since some rejection is inevitable.⁴³ In fact, according to Viola Spolin, when seduced by audience reactions, acting and improvising quickly turns stale.⁴⁴ In addition, Brook warns that adapting a performance simply to please audiences destroys the meaning of those adaptations.⁴⁵ And yet, “theatre is always both a search for meaning and a way of making this meaning meaningful for others. This is the mystery.”⁴⁶ Interactive theatre companies, therefore, develop a sense for what will be meaningful and interesting to an audience. “Interest is captured when a character performs an activity that inspires the guest to want to see more. It creates suspense or raises a question that the guest needs answered.”⁴⁷

Likewise, the performance of the ecclesial company should inspire guests to want to see more, even creating suspense and raising important questions about the theodrama and the God who wrote and directs it (Deut 4:5-8). More important than crafting attractional worship services is embodying attractional lifestyles, displaying the truth, goodness, and beauty of the theodrama and shining like stars in the midst of a crooked world (Phil 2:15). The ecclesial company must be self-aware by continually ascertaining if the interest of unbelieving guests is piqued because of consumerist gimmicks and alluring advertising or because the irresistible

⁴¹ The words of John Stott in the Lausanne Covenant (1974).

⁴² Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 171f.

⁴³ Izzo, *The Art of Play*, 217.

⁴⁴ Spolin, *Improvisation for Theater*, 327.

⁴⁵ Brook, *The Shifting Point*, 230.

⁴⁶ Brook, *No Secrets*, 76.

⁴⁷ Izzo, *The Art of Play*, 224.

truth and Spirit-filled power and beauty of the performance. Sometimes, however, the audience rejects even the most beautiful performances. These rejections should not motivate the church to dilute the meaning of the theodrama or to clamor for positive reactions, expecting that at times the audience will perceive the performance as foolish.⁴⁸ Constant rejection from guests, however, may indicate a lack of contextualization, hypocritical characters, or improper methods of inviting and incorporating guests into the theodrama. Consequently, critical reflection on guest reactions can produce creative methods for contextualizing the story, relational connections with guests, and improvising in truthful ways, thereby removing any unnecessary barriers to the company's mission. This dialogical interaction with guests means that within the liberating constraints of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, missional theodramatics entails situational flexibility and a multiplicity of faithful performances, promoting contextualization and resisting colonization.⁴⁹ Despite the contextual fluidity of ecclesial performances, some guests will continue to resist any presentation of the theodrama in word or deed. Despite all this, the show must go on.⁵⁰ In sum, ecclesial theatre shares the same paradox of theatrical performances as articulated by Brook: "The actor's work is never for an audience, yet always is for one."⁵¹

7.4 MISSIONAL DISPONIBILITY, FITTINGNESS AND IMPROVISED HOSPITALITY

One way to rephrase Brook's conclusion is that both interactive and ecclesial theatre are by their very nature hospitable. As such, concrete practices of hospitality clarify the mission, means, method, *mise en scène*, and meaning of ecclesial theatre delineated above, showing what it means to develop missional disponibility and display missional fittingness. Before exploring this in more detail, however, it is instructive to observe the prominent pattern of hospitality in Scripture.

⁴⁸ Jesus taught that the world would hate his disciples (Mt 10:16; Jn 15:18–19; 1 Jn 3:13), and the Apostle Paul taught that the truth of the theodrama and the performance of this truth are often perceived as foolishness to those on the outside (1 Cor 1:20–25).

⁴⁹ See Max Harris, *The Dialogical Theatre: Dramatizations of the Conquest of Mexico and the Question of the Other* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 146–53. This point will be developed in greater detail in the next chapter on contextual theodramatics.

⁵⁰ Moreover, reactions are sometimes delayed, which is why Brecht concluded: "It would be quite wrong to judge a play's relevance or lack of relevance by its current effectiveness. Theatres don't work that way." *Brecht on Theatre*, 7.

⁵¹ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 57.

7.4.1 *Hospitality in the Theodrama*

Several powerful performances of hospitality are worth noting from the Old Testament, particularly the story of Abraham, Sarah, and the three guests in Genesis 18. For Abraham and Sarah, showing hospitality to these strangers was a divine encounter bringing unexpected blessing (Gn 18:1–15). Lot also showed hospitality to angels in disguise and was commended for his faithfulness despite disastrous consequences (Gn 19:1–11). The Mosaic Law encapsulated the pattern of hospitality demonstrated in these stories, grounding the practice of welcoming strangers in God’s liberating love for strangers (Lv 19:33–34). In addition, other narratives show patterns not only of God’s people showing hospitality to others, but those outside the covenant family playing the role of host, such as Rahab showing hospitality to the Hebrew spies (Jo 2; Jas 2:25–26).

In the New Testament, Jesus taught in several parables and demonstrated through his actions that God’s kingdom is for poor and needy strangers, challenging his disciples to love and care for them (Lk 10:25–37; 14:12–24). Through these parables, observes Eugene Peterson, Jesus “was training the imagination of his listeners (us!) to see salvation being worked out in a foreigner, a neighbor’s midnight demand for bread, a beggar at a rich man’s door.”⁵² Opinion is divided on whether the hospitality commended by Paul in Romans 12:13 extends to covenant strangers, but most agree that the practice of hospitality involves welcoming all strangers as guests.⁵³ A lifestyle of receiving guests is evident in the early church (Acts 10:6, 18, 23; 21:16; 28:7) and becomes a qualification for overseers and an expectation for faithful widows (1 Tm 3:2; 5:10; Ti 1:8). In the end, Christians will be judged according to their care for strangers, which Jesus interprets as love for himself (Mt 25:35). In doing so, we are imitators of God in Christ by the Spirit, who loved us and gave himself for us (Eph 5:2), emptying himself and serving with full humility (Phil 2:7). Our own hospitality, therefore, mirrors the hospitality of the triune God as “Giver, Given, and Giving” who “initiates, sustains, and solicits our giving.”⁵⁴

⁵² Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 213–14.

⁵³ Cranfield argues that Paul advocated hospitality just to fellow Christians (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ed. William Sanday, 6th ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 639.), whereas Dunn contends that the responsibility extends to all neighbors (Dunn, *Romans 9-16.*, 734-44, 754).

⁵⁴ Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 127. For an excellent treatment of generosity and hospitality rooted in the movement of triune generosity, see Kopic, *God So Loved, He Gave*.

This brief sketch of the canonical witness demonstrates that Christians participate in God's mission by receiving strangers as guests and improvising hospitality. The ecclesial company shows hospitality while playing the role of resident aliens and visiting strangers in the world (1 Pt 1:7; 2:11). Luke Bretherton writes: "Thus the church, through the practice of hospitality, is to host the world even as it journeys as a stranger through the midst of the world, thereby bearing witness to the world's own eschatological possibilities."⁵⁵ Much debate surrounds the nature of "the stranger" to whom the church is committed to show hospitality, but these discussions reveal that almost anyone can be a stranger, especially in a culture of "relative strangers" where we hardly know our next-door neighbor.⁵⁶ In the daily practice of hospitality, Christians may not be able to discern whether our guests are members of the Company or the Audience, but a readiness and openness to interact with those we might consider strangers and even enemies ensures that the ecclesial company will be making connections and building relationships with unbelieving guests.⁵⁷

7.4.2 *Hosts, Guests, and Gifts*

What does it mean practically for the ecclesial company to interact and build relationships with strangers-turned-guests through practices of hospitality? Jennifer Kilps suggests that hospitable interaction involves invitation, welcome, and the offering and receiving of gifts.⁵⁸ The host gives to the guest, but the guest also gives to the host. The gifts may include physical provision—food, shelter and possessions—or more intangible elements, including perspective, relationship, joy, and challenge. A crucial element of hospitable interaction, therefore, involves disponibility to guests and the gifts they bring, including the gift of their very presence. Wells highlights the difference between approaching strangers as a gift and approaching them as a burden and with sense of duty or responsibility. The latter approach is mere altruism whereas the former implies true care for the stranger, "done in the

⁵⁵ Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 138.

⁵⁶ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality As a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 89–91. Pohl also remarks that although strangers may be described as *the other*, they can be remarkably like us! (Ibid., 97-98)

⁵⁷ Regarding our interaction with enemies, Wells writes: "Dependence on the enemy is the climax of the Church's performance, because it most appropriately imitates Christ, it most provocatively displays the practice of the Church...and it ultimately displays abundance in a context that assumes scarcity." *God's Companions: Reimagining Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 109.

⁵⁸ Jennifer Kilps, "Hospitality to the Stranger: The Experience of Christian Churches in the Resettlement of African Refugees to the United States" (PhD, University of St Andrews, 2008), 25–27.

simple trust that this person has something precious that will sustain or build up the life of the community, even if that gift is slow to be revealed or hard to receive.”⁵⁹ Developing hospitable and missional disponibility toward strangers, therefore, recognizes their inherent worth and giftedness. Thomas Reynolds describes this disposition as “an attuned openness to the difference of the other, without pretext or conditions that limit welcome.”⁶⁰

Missional disponibility is intrinsically connected to poverty of spirit, which is essential for improvising hospitality with missional fittingness. The poverty of spirit that marks disciples of Jesus (Mt 5:3) implies complete dependence on God and leads to an others-centered humility and receptivity. Henri Nouwen observes that if poverty makes a good host, this poverty extends to the heart and creates “an inner disposition that allows us to take away our defenses and convert our enemies into friends.”⁶¹ Poverty of spirit makes us ready to receive the gift of the other, especially strangers. Having received the gifts of the Spirit, members of the ecclesial company recognize the Spirit’s work in others, including strangers, making us open, as John Koenig remarks, to “forming of alliances with outsiders, foreigners, enemies, and so forth, in the conviction that God’s redeeming work always discloses itself along these frontiers as well.”⁶² Of course, poverty of spirit must be combined with a fitting discernment of when alliances endanger the truth of the theodrama or the identity of the ecclesial company.⁶³ In general, however, this combination of humility and wisdom requires attentiveness to guests without expectations, which according to Christine Pohl, is the greatest gift a host can give to a guest, apart from shelter and sustenance.⁶⁴

7.4.3 *Receptivity and Confrontation*

Even when a host receives a guest without expectations, fitting improvisation of hospitality involves the dynamic interplay between reception and confrontation. Hosts must avoid imposing their viewpoints or way of life, remaining disponible to gifts offered by strangers in their midst. But it is also important to set appropriate boundaries. Nouwen

⁵⁹ Wells, *God’s Companions*, 107.

⁶⁰ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 125.

⁶¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1980), 95.

⁶² John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 9.

⁶³ David Ford explores in more detail this “drama of mutual hospitality” as it relates to inter-faith dialogue in *The Future of Christian Theology*, 143.

⁶⁴ Pohl, *Making Room*, 178.

remarks: “Receptivity and confrontation are the two inseparable sides of Christian witness. They have to remain in careful balance. Receptivity without confrontation leads to a bland neutrality that serves nobody. Confrontation without receptivity leads to an oppressive aggression which hurts everybody.”⁶⁵ One of the best ways to balance receptivity and confrontation is to share and listen to one another’s stories. This practice of interpretive listening will keep us, as Fowl and Jones observe, from “interpretive arrogance,” or “thinking that our words are God’s words.”⁶⁶ Indeed, “the continued health of Christian interpretation and performance of Scripture depends on engaging outsiders” through attentive listening and a willingness to learn.⁶⁷ This does not entail, however, that hosts have to agree with everything guests offer, although the process of receptive listening opens our eyes to view their ideas as gifts to overaccept. Neither does it entail that the identity of the church as host is reduced to the “regulated improvisation” of welcoming the neighbor.⁶⁸ Tradition and the rule of faith, as explored in the last chapter, should not crumble in the process of improvising hospitality, but they must become hospitable orthodoxy and orthopraxy.⁶⁹ Actors in the ecclesial company demonstrate authentic interaction with strangers as guests when they are able, as Nicholas Healy observes, to view these people “not as nuisances to be endured or overcome, not as mere passive receptacles of the gospel, but as active players in the theodrama who, as gifts of the Spirit of truth, help the church more adequately to conform to its Lord.”⁷⁰

7.4.4 *Free and Friendly Space*

Inviting strangers to become guests requires preparing a space in which relational interaction and mutual giving and receiving can take place. As mentioned earlier, Izzo calls this space the *temenos*, while Brook famously refers to “empty space” as the only precondition

⁶⁵ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 92. Christine Pohl expands on this observation: “To welcome strangers into a distinctly Christian environment without coercing them into conformity requires that their basic well-being not be dependent on sharing certain commitments.” *Making Room*, 83.

⁶⁶ Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 110.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁶⁸ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “‘They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Regulated Improvisation’: Ecclesial Hybridity and the Unity of the Church,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 277.

⁶⁹ Kapic, *God So Loved, He Gave*, 195. Cf. Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

⁷⁰ Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 110.

for holy and hospitable theatre.⁷¹ Nouwen suggests that the space required for hospitality is empty to the extent that it is not occupied by frenetic busyness and cumbersome expectations. The empty space that allows for the fitting improvisation of hospitality, therefore, includes the entire atmosphere and not just the physical arrangement, an atmosphere “where we can reach out to our fellow human beings and invite them to a new relationship.”⁷² In this free and friendly space, strangers can enter and become guests, not so we can change them, but “to offer them space where change can take place,” whatever that looks like.⁷³ Missional disponibility enables us to create a free space because it involves acknowledging our need for others, even unbelieving strangers, and a willingness to interact with and learn from them. The space of hospitable performance, therefore, involves a particular atmosphere, but the physical elements are also important. Indeed, Brook contends that a living and hospitable theatrical space depends on the physical position of people in relation to each other.⁷⁴ Thus, in addition to arranging our inner dispositions, the physical arrangement of our spaces—homes, churches, even public places—to aid genuine interaction is significant for improvising hospitality and achieving missional fittingness.

7.5.5 *The Drama of Embrace*

In conclusion, hospitality involves developing missional disponibility to strangers received as guests and a readiness to give and receive through a process of interactive and fitting improvisation. In contrast to the fundamentalist church model, hospitality is not merely a matter of inviting guests into our holy spaces and huddles, whether homes or church buildings, and interacting with them on our own terms. Rather, it involves a willingness to risk relationships of mutuality that force us out of our comfortable surroundings and into the spaces of strangers. And in contrast to the experimental church model, hospitality does not entail breaking down all boundaries and erasing distinctions between host and guest, even if this relationship is fluid and unpredictable. Rather, an interactive church model follows a process that Miroslav Volf has aptly described as a four-Act “drama of embrace.”⁷⁵

⁷¹ “A man walks across this empty space, someone is watching him, and that is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.” Brook, *The Empty Space*, 1.

⁷² Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 73.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 68–69.

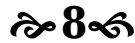
⁷⁴ Brook, *The Shifting Point*, 147.

⁷⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 140–147.

The drama of embrace begins with an act of opening the arms: desiring, creating space, and inviting the stranger. Once the arms are open, however, we need to wait. Waiting purges the embrace from any grasp after power, acknowledging the importance of reciprocity. When the other responds and enters the embrace, it is time for closing the arms. The closure must be a “soft touch,” to avoid smothering or assimilating each other, and to preserve individual identity. Finally, the drama of embrace ends by opening the arms again, which maintains the circular movement of the drama. Volf observes that the drama of embrace is a risky business, and the outcome is always underdetermined. Nevertheless, one outcome is certain: “a genuine embrace cannot leave both or either completely unchanged.”⁷⁶ Interactive ecclesial theatre is hospitable theatre, and both individual actors and ecclesial companies advance the mission of incorporating audience members as guests by embodying concrete practices of hospitality. The mission of ecclesial theatre, therefore, is neither a mission to an audience on the other side of an impenetrable fourth wall, nor a mission together with the audience, but rather a mission among audience members received as guests in hope that they will become, by God’s grace, believing participants in the theodrama.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 147.

⁷⁷ A version of this chapter was published as “Church Beyond the Fourth Wall: Incorporating the Audience as Guest in Interactive and Ecclesial Theater,” *Cultural Encounters* 8.1 (2012): 7-22.



ENVIRONMENT, PLACE, AND CONTEXTUAL THEODRAMATICS

In the theatre, every form once born is mortal; every form must be reconceived, and its new conception will bear the marks of all the influences that surround it.”

∞ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*¹

Contextual theology is the attempt, as bold as it is humble, to understand and perform the theo-drama in terms of a particular context.”

∞ Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*²

8.1 THEATRICAL ENVIRONMENT AND PLACE

Underlying, surrounding, and permeating every personal dimension of theatrical formation and performance—relationships between actors and the director, others actors, and the audience—is the pervasive theatrical environment and place. Theatre as an art form is unique because the same word—*theatre*—also refers to the location where theatrical performance occurs. This is a fitting congruence, because theatre is a uniquely environmental, emplaced, embodied, and material art form. As Gay McAuley contends, theatre is communication between live actors and live spectators within a given space. Although it is true that theatre can take place anywhere, it always takes place somewhere.³ Attempting to define the “somewhere” of theatre, however, is a notoriously difficult task. McAuley discusses the “terminological minefield” in this regard, identifying the difference between theatre space, rehearsal space, stage space, presentational space, theatrical space, textual space, and thematic space, all of which attempt to distinguish between space that is real or fictional, physical or nonphysical, onstage or offstage.⁴ While these distinctions are important in the realm of theatrical semiotics, the most important distinction for the purpose of this project is between the *theatrical environment*, or the physical stage, set, scenery and props of any given performance, and the *theatrical place*, or the larger context in which theatrical

¹ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 19.

² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 314 [emphasis mine].

³ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 3–4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25–35.

performance is situated, including the fictional world of the play, the real world of actors and audience, and the local culture in which plays are written, produced and performed.⁵

Every theatrical performance occurs in particular environments, but these settings vary from the stages and buildings of traditional theatre to the amorphous environments of avant-garde theatre. Richard Schechner, for example, views the whole environment of the theatre, not just the stage, as the “living space” of performance ready to be “transformed, articulated, and animated” by the actors and spectators.⁶ The same is true for interactive theatre, which Gary Izzo describes as “theatre without a stage,” at least not a traditional, fixed stage.⁷ Even when the theatrical environment occupies the same physical environment of everyday life, as in street theatre, there is a moment when that environment is transformed into a theatrical stage, enabling spectators to realize a play is in process.⁸ These theatrical environments, whether traditional stages or theatricalized everyday settings, are not just “empty containers” waiting to be filled with theatrical action; every element of a theatrical environment is an “active agent” that “shapes what goes on within it.”⁹ A stage, for instance, is not a static environment; it is “an object in its own right.”¹⁰ Performing the same play in different physical environments can radically alter the way actors interact with one another and with the audience. For example, the original set and stage directions for Sam Shepard’s *Tooth of Crime* are quite minimal, suggesting only a “bare stage” and an “evil-looking” chair.¹¹ When Schechner directed the play, however, he used a large structure that divided the performance space into “public” and “private” sides requiring the audience to move around and assume different positions as scenes shifted from side to side. This environmental rearrangement

⁵ I have chosen to refer to “environment” and “place” instead of “space” (as commonly used in theatre studies) because of the more particular, contextual connotations of the former terms versus the abstract, theoretical connotations of “space,” plus the fact that place is phenomenologically prior to space. See Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 6.

⁶ Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater* (New York: Applause, 1994), 1–2.

⁷ Gary Izzo, *The Art of Play: New Genre of Interactive Theatre* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 1997), 30. Stanley Longman explains three different kinds of theatrical stages on a spectrum from fixed to floating to fluid. As such, environmental theatre and interactive theatre have floating or fixed stages. “Fixed, Floating, and Fluid Stages,” in *Theatrical Space*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 151–60.

⁸ Cf. Hanna Scolnicov, “Theatre Space, Theatrical Space, and the Theatrical Space Without,” in *Theatrical Space*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 12–14. Prime examples are the performances of Improv Everywhere, who transform everyday spaces like Grand Central Station into theatrical stages for the duration of their performances.

⁹ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 41.

¹⁰ Scolnicov, “Theatre Space,” 25.

¹¹ Sam Shepard, *Tooth of Crime: Second Dance*, revised ed. (New York: Vintage, 2006), 7.

greatly influenced the actors' performance of each scene as well as the audience's attitude toward and engagement with these scenes, which in turn impacted performance.¹²

Spolin recognizes that a key element in avoiding stale acting is developing attentiveness to the theatrical environment, not losing focus on the details or generalizing objects.¹³ Seasoned actors have developed a "penetrating eye" and an "open consciousness" to the stage and props, giving them the ability and freedom to respond appropriately at any given moment.¹⁴ For this reason, McAuley discourages referring to stage objects as "props," since this connotes that they only exist to serve actors, rather than possessing independent value and meaning.¹⁵ Once actors realize that their interaction with objects can radically change the meaning of a scene, they will appreciate these objects not as mere decorative background, but as necessary elements of the play.¹⁶ Developing disponibility to the stage and objects in the theatre environment, therefore, is integral to fitting performance.¹⁷ This process begins with the very first rehearsal and the technicalities of blocking scenes and continues throughout each performance.¹⁸ When actors are receptive and available to the whole theatrical environment—the stage, set, and stage objects—the play will be demonstrated, not just told, in the most fitting ways.

In addition to the physical context of theatrical performance, another critical context is the particular place and culture of the play, actors, and audience. Theatre is "at the crossroads of culture" because actors in traditional theatre often perform texts from one culture to an audience of a different culture.¹⁹ Even improvisational theatre, which does not feature translation from page to stage, is an experiment in cultural exchange, since improvisers need to be attentive to and aware of audience expectations, cultural conventions, popular stereotypes, unacceptable gestures, and familiar stories in order to be most effective. Traveling theatre companies face greater challenges in this regard than repertory or community theatre companies, since the latter perform for relatively consistent audiences in the same location. To take a performance from place to place, however, requires great

¹² Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 78–86.

¹³ Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for Theater*, 3rd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44, 85.

¹⁵ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 175–76.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 186, 205.

¹⁷ Frost and Yarrow describe this kind of disponibility as "total awareness, a sense of being at one with the...theatre space" (*Improvisation in Drama*, 52).

¹⁸ Blocking scenes is the action of director in designating the position and action of actors on stage and in relation to stage objects.

¹⁹ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991).

knowledge of the national, regional, and local cultures a company or troupe encounters. As a result, an ongoing debate within intercultural theatre studies is whether to translate significant portions of the play to fit linguistic and social conventions or to maintain cultural differences for the sake of effect.²⁰ Whatever a director decides in this regard, the challenges of translation and adaptation occur not merely on the linguistic level, but on the level of embodied and concrete action.²¹

Given the locational, contextual nature of each performance, actor formation must include the ability to understand and adapt to particular places. Stanislavski, for example, explains how adaptation allows a performance to emit “vividness, colorfulness, boldness, delicacy, shading, exquisiteness, taste.”²² This adaptation should not be pursued just to please the audience, but in order to help the play display greater fittingness.²³ In fact, failing to adapt performances for particular places and cultures is a sign of what Peter Brook calls “deadly theatre.” Rather, “In the theatre...every form must be reconceived, and its new conception will bear the marks of all the influences that surround it.”²⁴ This living theatre is immediate theatre, which “lives in the present close to the pulse of the time,” becoming a “Whatever It Needs Theatre” in changing contexts.²⁵ Cultural and local adaptations are inevitable, and those actors, companies, and directors who ignore the need to develop cultural disponibility and display cultural fittingness are delusional.²⁶

In sum, seasoned actors are those who develop disponibility to the details of physical theatre environments and who remain receptive to the whole culture of theatrical places. Likewise, performative fittingness extends beyond the way actors treat a script and each other to include the way they interact with the physical, onstage environments and the cultural context offstage. All of these features of theatrical formation and performance provide a rich model for reflecting on and developing a contextual theodramatics.

²⁰ Albert-Reiner Glaap explores the challenges of adapting a play from its London original to its Broadway version in “Whose Life Is It Anyway?” in London and in Broadway: A Contrastive Analysis of the British and American Versions of Brian Clark’s Play,” in *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture*, ed. Hanna Scolnicov and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 214–223.

²¹ Patrice Pavis, “Problems of Translations for the Stage: Interculturalism and Post-Modern Theatre,” in *Ibid.*, 25-44.

²² Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 227.

²³ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁴ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 19.

²⁵ Brook, *No Secrets*, 61.

²⁶ For as Schechner observes, “Theater doesn’t arrive suddenly and stay fixed either in its cultural or individual manifestations” (*Performance Studies*, 208).

8.2 THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL RESOURCES FOR A CONTEXTUAL THEODRAMATICS

Contextual theodramatics is the dimension of formation and performance oriented toward the environments and places of the theodrama. In one sense, of course, the context of theodramatic formation and performance includes all the interrelated conditions and elements of characters and actions, and so the dimensions discussed in previous chapters are also an integral part of the context. Moreover, place is an inherently relational and social concept, and “implacement” involves developing meaningful human connections.²⁷ Because the personal and social elements were explored in previous chapters, however, this chapter will limit its exploration of environment and place in the theodrama to its creational and cultural elements. In other words, whereas trinitarian, traditional, ecclesial and missional theodramatics focus on formation and performance in the presence of “someone,” or indeed many people, contextual theodramatics emphasizes that every actor and action is “somewhere” in particular cultures and places within creation. Consequently, it is essential for actors and companies in the theodrama to develop contextual disponibility and to craft contextually fitting performances if these performances are going to succeed somewhere or anywhere.

8.2.1 *Contextual Theology*

In Christian theology, two of the most common labels for theology arising out of and crafted with reference to particular places and cultures are “local theology”²⁸ and “contextual theology.”²⁹ While “local theology” carries advantageous overtones of theology arising out of local communities, “contextual theology” leaves room for the local and global milieus that inform theology while maintaining focus on particular places. Although contextual theology may be the preferred terminology, contextual and local theologians utilize a similar methodological spectrum. For example, Robert Schreiter identifies three models for doing

²⁷ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 31.

²⁸ John Reader, *Local Theology: Church and Community in Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 1994); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM Press, 1985); Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).

²⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992); Paul Duane Matheny, *Contextual Theology: The Drama of Our Times* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

local theology while Stephen Bevans distinguishes five models for doing contextual theology. Each author places these models on a spectrum from those prioritizing context to those prioritizing a trans-cultural message.³⁰ Bevans explores each way of doing contextual theology, concluding that “no model is exhaustive or applicable to all situations of faith.”³¹ What each model has in common is simply the “attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context.”³² Whatever model one might follow to accomplish this task, the process is complex and dialogical, “more like producing a work of art than following a rigid set of directions.”³³ Bevans mentions Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama as one who crafts particularly artful contextual theology.³⁴ For example, Koyama recognizes a dissonance between the linear view of history in Scripture and the cyclical view of nature in Thailand. Rather than flattening out the Thai perspective or rounding out the biblical view, however, “why can we not have the image of an ascending spiral view of one unified history-nature?” According to Koyama, this is one way of relating the God of Scripture to people immersed in a “monsoon orientation.”³⁵

Vanhoozer follows the lead of Bevans in outlining a model for contextual theology, but transposes this approach into theodramatic terms: “contextual theology is the attempt, as bold as it is humble, to understand and *perform the theo-drama* in terms of a particular context.”³⁶ Although Vanhoozer is not reticent to speak of contextual theology in terms of “translation” and “transmission,” terms many contextual theologians resist, he insists that “contextualizing involves more than an import/export business that trades in supracultural truths and abstract principles.”³⁷ The gospel of Jesus as revealed in canonical Scripture and transmitted through the great Tradition is not acultural or supracultural, but a *transcultural* truth bearing universal significance to every culture and place. In seeking to contextualize the gospel into local forms of understanding and performing, therefore, the Spirit guides the process of maintaining “canonicity” and “catholicity.”³⁸ Consequently, for Vanhoozer, contextual theology is phronetic and sapiential because it enables participants in the theodrama to improvise wise patterns of thinking and doing with fittingness to particular

³⁰ Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 6–16; Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 24–29.

³¹ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 28.

³² *Ibid.*, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁴ Bevans presents Koyama as an example of his “synthetic model” (*Ibid.*, 95–99.)

³⁵ Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1974), 41.

³⁶ Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 314 [emphasis mine].

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

cultural contexts while maintaining their canonical shape. On the one hand, contextual theology resists relativism in which contextual fittingness rules, ignoring the distant voice of Scripture. On the other hand, contextual theology resists Biblicism in which timeless biblical principles rule, ignoring the particularities of different contexts. While the canon remains authoritative in Vanhoozer's proposal, he maintains that crafting contextually fitting performances is an ongoing, dialogical process that stands at odds with absolute principlizing.³⁹

8.2.2 *Contextual Ethics*

A similar approach exists among ethicists who navigate their way between ethical relativism and absolutism. Whereas in the former approach everything depends on the features of particular situations, the latter approach only seeks to apply absolute rules and principles. Wise observers of this dilemma recognize the false dichotomy between principles and situations, a dichotomy James Gustafson calls “academically unjust and increasingly morally fruitless.”⁴⁰ But while Gustafson believes that “contextual ethics” is an unhelpful umbrella term claimed by various theologians and ethicists to combat a dichotomy that should never have existed in the first place, it seems worthwhile to maintain the term. Rowan Williams states the obvious: “no one learns their Christianity without a local accent,” since we enter into a process of formation and performance in particular places and situations.⁴¹ “Concrete ethics” is another term sometimes used for this approach, as exemplified in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For Bonhoeffer, timeless and placeless ethics can never be authentic ethics because it would involve “an adolescent, presumptuous and illegitimate declamation of ethical principles.”⁴² By contrast, responsible ethics is always conducted in a “concrete context;” rather than being a “system of propositions,” it is “inseparably linked with particular persons, times, and places.”⁴³ Ethics may be “locally and temporally restricted,” but these are restrictions that liberate ethics to obey the concrete command of

³⁹ Ibid., 316. He thus agrees with David Clark, who advocates “dialogical contextualization” and “soft principlizing” in which “feedback loops abound” (*To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, 114).

⁴⁰ James M. Gustafson, “Context Versus Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 58, no. 2 (April 1, 1965): 192.

⁴¹ Rowan Williams, “Making Moral Decisions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.

⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 237.

⁴³ Ibid., 238–39.

God.⁴⁴ To illustrate, Bonhoeffer tells the story of a teacher who asks a child in front of the whole class whether his father often comes home drunk, which is in fact true. What is the right thing for the child to say in this situation, and what does it mean to tell the truth? The child has responsibility to his family as well as to the teacher, and while saying “no” is false, it also betrays his father’s weakness. Since a child lacks the maturity to improvise wisely, the child should not be punished for lying in this situation, but if a mature adult were faced with this situation, they would have the responsibility to tell the truth while finding just the “right words” to respond without dishonoring the father.⁴⁵ Telling the truth, therefore, is a concrete action, never an abstract principle. “A truthfulness which is not concrete is not truthful before God.”⁴⁶ As this story illustrates, concrete ethics involves a certain level of ambiguity and risk, which brings us face to face with difficult decisions and drives us to trust in the sovereign purpose and action of God.⁴⁷ In addition, the courage to embrace a concrete ethics is based on God’s decisive justification received as a gift by faith, not as a result of improvised fittingness to the law (Rom 3:21-28). Overall, this “necessary improvisation” of Christian ethics “freshly embodied in different contexts” gives “testimony to God’s creativity and abundance” and the “particularizing activity of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:11).⁴⁸

In light of these perspectives, is contextual theodramatics any different than contextual theology or contextual ethics? While contextual theodramatics shares with these approaches a concern for the inevitably contextual nature of understanding, formation, and performance, several benefits arise from placing this concern within a theodramatic framework. For one, theatre provides compelling models and examples for how contextualization actually occurs through the embodied formation and performance of actors in particular places. Max Harris observes: “whatever may be true of other art forms, therefore, the theater is irredeemably fleshy, incapable of losing its link entirely with the world of flesh and blood in which we live.”⁴⁹ Theatre is a cooked version of raw life, but the same meal is often served and presented in very different ways in different places.⁵⁰ Like theatrical drama, the theodrama is replete with concrete performances in particular contexts and localities, all of which

⁴⁴ Ibid., 243–44.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 330–31.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 329.

⁴⁷ Paul L. Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), 144.

⁴⁸ Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 144.

⁴⁹ Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 39.

⁵⁰ This analogy is drawn from Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 30; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

contributes to its indeterminacy.⁵¹ Consequently, contextual theodramatics follows its theatrical model in affirming that our performances do not occur in empty spaces waiting for our grandiose contributions, but in places delightfully full of concrete particularities into which our performances must fit.⁵² Space, like time, is never empty; it is living space.⁵³

Another benefit of a theodramatic approach is that it presents an organic way to integrate the contextual dimension of formation and performance with trinitarian, biblical, ecclesial, traditional, and missional dimensions. A brief reflection on the relationship between these dimensions will conclude this chapter, but it is crucial to mention at this juncture that their inseparable connection is what keeps contextual theodramatics from degenerating into either relativism or absolutism. In addition, focusing on the creational and cultural elements of contextual theodramatics provides an important opportunity to focus specifically on certain portions of context that are sometimes undistinguished or confused. When Vanhoozer refers to the contemporary context of the theodrama, for example, he means everything except canonical Scripture. Although it is appropriate to speak of context in these broader terms, the rest of this chapter explores two specific elements of context—creation and culture—that are easily ignored or confused in contextual theology and ethics.

8.3 CREATION AS STAGE AND PARTICIPANT

The world is a stage. Many trace this metaphor to a line from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, where the character Jacques melancholically muses:

All the world's a stage
and all the men and women merely players
They have their exits and their entrances
And one man in his time plays many parts
his acts being seven ages.⁵⁴

In reality, however, Shakespeare is drawing on an ancient metaphor that can be traced as far back as the ancient Stoic philosophers Seneca and Epictetus.⁵⁵ Beginning with these

⁵¹ Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35.

⁵² This plays off Peter Brooks's *The Empty Space* and builds from Collingwood's statement that ethical action seeks fittingness in a "room" full of activity. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, ed. W. J. van der Dussen, revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 316. Quoted in Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 22.

⁵³ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 145–48.

⁵⁴ *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII, lines 139–144.

philosophers, the world stage metaphor was often employed to encourage either resignation (*apatheia*) to one's role in the play of life or satirical reflection on the meaninglessness of attempting to play a lead role. Several early Christian writers also utilized this theme, such as Clement of Alexandria, who highlighted the Word as the protagonist of a universal theatre, and John Chrysostom and Lactantius, who warned that although the theatre of the world has a human audience, God is also watching and will judge every performance.⁵⁶ Like the Apostle Paul, who compared the church's existence to athletes or gladiators sentenced to death in the *theatron* (1 Cor 4:9), early Christians often referenced the gladiator coliseum when employing the world stage metaphor.⁵⁷

Building on the general use of this metaphor, John Calvin made frequent and specific reference to the created world as a theatre revealing the glory of God.⁵⁸ Calvin describes heaven and earth as a "magnificent theatre" filled with "innumerable miracles" enabling humans to know God.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, humans are "stone-blind" and cannot see these wonders without the Holy Spirit's gift of sight, enabling believers to appreciate God's alluring performance.⁶⁰ In addition, the theatre of creation, no matter how glorious, is not able to provide saving knowledge of God, which is available only in the ultimate theatre of the cross as revealed in Scripture.⁶¹ Belden Lane summarizes Calvin's perspective on two possible responses to God's performance of creation: "Some marvel at the set or gawk at the special effects of thunder and lightening. Others laugh in inappropriate places, missing the point of the dialogue. Yet a few are stirred to the depths of their being, breaking into song along with

⁵⁵ See Balthasar's history of this concept in *TDI*, 135-257. Cf. Lynda Gregorian Christian, *Theatrum Mundi: The History of an Idea*, Harvard Dissertations in Comparative Literature (New York: Garland, 1987).

⁵⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation of the Heathens* I.3, in *ANF II*; John Chrysostom, *Homily* III.5, in *NPNF2 XII*; *Homily* XV.5, in *NPNF2 XII*; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* VI.21, in *ANF VII*.

⁵⁷ See Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* VII.3, in *ANF II*.

⁵⁸ Belden Lane has studied this metaphor in Calvin, presenting his research in an article and a recent monograph. Belden C. Lane, "Spirituality as the Performance of Desire: Calvin on the World as a Theatre of God's Glory," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1, no. 1 (2001): 1-30; *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), especially chapter 2.

⁵⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: SCM, 1961), I/341.

⁶⁰ John Calvin, "I & II Corinthians," In *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 20 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 85 [1 Cor 1:21].

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 22, 266 [Heb 11:3]; Cf. Vol. 28, 73 [Jn 13:31].

the performers on the stage.”⁶² Those who break into song become the orchestra, which according to Calvin is “the most conspicuous part” of the theatre.⁶³

Other theologians followed Calvin’s lead in describing creation as a stage or theatre revealing God’s glory. Jonathan Edwards, for example, called creation “a theatre for the display of his [God’s] adorable perfections” and a stage for God’s work of redemption.⁶⁴ Similarly, Karl Barth frequently employed this metaphor, referring to the whole universe as a theatre for God’s acts of grace and salvation.⁶⁵ Like Calvin, Barth places the Church—“the theatre of the Word”—at the heart of the world theatre.⁶⁶ While there is significant testimony in the Christian tradition, particularly among the church fathers and in the Reformed tradition, to speak of creation as a stage for the performance of salvation, what might be the theological and practical benefit of this particular metaphor?

First, viewing creation as a stage where ordinary and extraordinary things happen motivates us to respond to the very existence of such a stage with wonder. Filled with wonder, the most fitting response to existing on this kind of stage is to preserve and care for it rather than merely manipulating it in order to meet our own purposes and penchant for progress. Second, according to Balthasar, viewing both heaven and earth as a theodramatic stage maintains the distinction between the Creator and his creation while recognizing the dynamic interaction between them, with God acting *on* the stage while remaining distinct *from* the stage.⁶⁷ Third, if the world is a stage for God’s glory, it follows that this theatre begins with God’s action, which John Inge describes as “sacramental gracing.”⁶⁸ Fourth, viewing creation as a stage for God’s glory provides a starting point for a “poetic theology,” theology that celebrates the interplay between divine creativity and poetic human performance.⁶⁹

Despite these helpful resonances, calling creation a stage is problematic in several ways within a theodramatic framework. Donald Mackinnon, while writing favorably of the “drama of redemption” metaphor, worries about viewing creation merely as the setting or stage for

⁶² Lane, *Ravished by Beauty*, 73.

⁶³ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 6, 178 [Ps 135:13].

⁶⁴ Jonathan Edwards, “Ordination Sermon (Lk 14:23),” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sereno Edwards Dwight and Edward Hickman, vol. 2, revised ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 442.

⁶⁵ Barth, *CD* III/3, 44; Cf. III/3, 48; II/2, 94.

⁶⁶ Barth, *CD* I/2, 690.

⁶⁷ Balthasar, *TD* II, 173-88.

⁶⁸ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 89.

⁶⁹ William A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 286.

this drama.⁷⁰ He argues that this metaphor does not allow for God's animation of other non-human creatures as vehicles of revelation and recipients of restorative grace, thus diminishing the role of creation and the status of the Creator.⁷¹ Similarly, Daniel Migliore observes that treating creation like "stage props" diminishes its role as a participant in the drama of redemption.⁷² This observation aligns with Michael Northcott's concern for the imbalance inherent in language of humanity's "dominion" over or "stewardship" of creation, which assumes that humans are masters and creation is a servant to fulfill human needs.⁷³ Similarly, Richard Bauckham argues that the dominant tradition emphasizes humanity's relationship with God to the neglect of humanity's relationship with other creatures, a relationship of responsibility and receptivity rather than dominion.⁷⁴ This is a perennial problem, because sinful humanity, in Pannenberg's words, is "no longer willing to fit into an order of the world or of nature, but wants to rule over the world."⁷⁵

To alleviate these concerns, one option is to maintain the stage metaphor while recognizing that creation is also a full participant in the theodrama. Scripture, particularly the Psalms, often speaks of animals and other non-human members of creation praising and serving God. Heaven and earth emit speech about God (Ps 19:1-3), the rivers clap their hands while the hills jump for joy (Ps 98:7-8), and all variety of creatures praise the Lord (Ps 148). Moreover, Paul proclaims that all creation groans for the redemption available in Christ (Rom 8:22), and John envisions and longs for the day when every creature will worship before the throne of the Lamb (Rev 5:13). Consequently, the biblical testimony suggests that it is not

⁷⁰ D. M. Mackinnon, *Borderlands of Theology, and Other Essays* (Lutterworth Press, 1968), 45. Mackinnon builds his argument from the earlier work of Charles Raven, who writes: "Our generation... must see the theatre [of the universe] not as a mere setting, itself subsidiary and irrelevant, but as an integral and essential part of the play." (*Natural Religion and Christian Theology: Science and Religion*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 20. This builds off an earlier observation in *The Creator Spirit: A Survey of Christian Doctrine in the Light of Biology, Psychology and Mysticism* (London: M. Hopkinson & Co, 1932), 6.)

⁷¹ Mackinnon, *Borderlands of Theology*, 50–51.

⁷² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 94, see also 98.

⁷³ Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 129. Ironically, a similar critique could be leveled at his use of the term "environment," which implies that creation is merely background for the real action.

⁷⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 3–7. In contrast to Northcott, however, Bauckham does not resist the language of 'stewardship' as a fitting action of humanity within the "community of creation" (*Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), chapter 1.)

⁷⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What Is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 1.

enough to identify creation as a theodramatic stage, since creation itself is part of the cast.⁷⁶ Humanity is the crown of God's good creation, charged with responsibility over the earth and everything in it (Gen 1:26), but humans are still made from the same dust, and so are, as Wendell Berry insists, "members of the holy community of Creation."⁷⁷ While it is true that humans have a unique role in the theodrama, both humans and the earth are central characters.⁷⁸ According to Christopher Wright, "Creation is not just the disposable backdrop to the lives of human creatures who were really intended to live somewhere else."⁷⁹ Humans voice creation's praise, but they also participate with creation as co-praisers.⁸⁰ Consequently, Belden Lane appropriately concludes that humans are "poets and narrators of all that is mimed, danced, and sung so irresistibly by an enormous cast of characters on the world stage."⁸¹

Theodramatic formation and performance, like every aspect of human existence, is unavoidably situated in a particular place within creation. As Edward Casey observes, a person's body and the physical landscape are "epicenters around which places pivot and radiate."⁸² Without attending to creation as a stage and participant in the theodrama, therefore, performances will most certainly be "out of place." In a later section of this chapter, we will explore in more detail the process of developing disponibility and displaying fittingness in relation to creation. But the created world is only one element of place, since places also have distinct cultures.⁸³ As a result, in the following section we turn to consider the role of culture in formation and performance.

⁷⁶ Haughton, *The Drama of Salvation*, 41.

⁷⁷ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 106.

⁷⁸ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 12.

⁷⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 56. C. S. Lewis is even more adamant to avoid this error: "To find that all the woods, and small streams in the middle of the woods, and odd corners of mountain valleys, and the wind and the grass were only a sort of scenery, only backcloths for some kind of play, and that play perhaps one with a moral—what flatness, what an anticlimax, what an unendurable bore!" *Miracles*, 78, cf. 81.

⁸⁰ This might complement how God's created artistry corresponds to human artistry as explored in Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (London: T&T Clark, 1991).

⁸¹ Lane, *Ravished by Beauty*, 228.

⁸² Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 29.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

8.4 CULTURAL DESCRIPTION, COUNTERSCRIPTION, AND INSCRIPTION

Craig Bartholomew suggests that the entire theodrama can be emplotted as a story of implacement, displacement, and (re)implacement.⁸⁴ The earthly theodrama begins in the perfection of a particular place—the Garden of Eden—but Adam and Eve suffer displacement as a result of their sinful disobedience. The rest of the theodrama follows a recurring pattern of the displacement of God’s people as a result of their rebellion (wilderness wanderings, exile) followed by God’s gracious implacement (Promised Land, post-exilic return), a drama leading toward the place of ultimate hope: the heavenly Jerusalem in the new heavens and new earth. As such, Scripture is unrelentingly full of the names, geographies, and cultures of particular places. Most significantly, God decided to dwell in a particular place among his people, first in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple. All of this foreshadowed God’s place-specific incarnation, born as a particular human being named Jesus to a particular woman from Nazareth with the experience of growing up in ancient Near-Eastern culture. As he began his ministry, Jesus proved a master at navigating his cultural context. His attentiveness to religious culture, social class, political climate, economic practices, common idioms, and other contextual factors contributed to his “well-placed” inauguration of the kingdom of God, which at the same time was appropriately “out of place” with reference to the religious establishment and misguided Messianic expectations.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he promised that the Holy Spirit would come to enable his disciples to perform their mission as his witnesses. But unlike previous Acts in the theodrama, which are structured by centripetal force toward Jerusalem and the Promised Land, Jesus indicates that in the next Act there will be centrifugal movement starting from Jerusalem and going through Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).⁸⁵ Rather than remaining in the land promised to Israel and blessing the nations from within their familiar culture, Jesus commissioned his disciples to bring the gospel to other lands and cultures. Jesus was not encouraging displacement, but teaching his disciples that every place—not merely the original parameters of the Promised Land—is an appropriate place for making disciples and demonstrating the kingdom of God. But in order for this world-encompassing, disciple-making mission to succeed, early Christian leaders needed to learn, through the power of the

⁸⁴ Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell*, 32.

⁸⁵ In *The Mission of God*, Christopher Wright correctly indicates how the mission of God has always been to bless the whole world through a particular people (Gen 12:3), and therefore Jesus’ great commandment can be seen as the fulfillment of this trajectory in the “grand narrative.”

Holy Spirit, to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel in culturally fitting ways. This is particularly evident in Paul's sermons recorded in Acts, crafted to resonate with audiences in different cultures, whether Jews in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-43) or Greek intellectuals in the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-34). In fact, the whole narrative in Acts can be viewed as a series of culturally sensitive improvisations in service to the mission given by the Messiah.⁸⁶ Paul explains in his first letter to the Corinthians that he is not attempting to be contextually relevant as an end in itself, but for the sake of bringing salvation to all people (1 Cor 9:22; 10:32-33).

The mission of Paul and these early followers of Jesus is the same mission of the church today: to enact culturally fitting performances in order to be faithful witnesses to God and his gospel. But how should we understand culture, particularly in theodramatic perspective, and when should the church seek fittingness to culture and when it is more appropriate to be counter-cultural and seemingly "out of place?"

Culture is a complex and contested concept, but one possible definition is "the distinctive ideas, customs, social behavior, products, or way of life of a particular society, people, or period."⁸⁷ According to this definition, culture never exists as a monolithic entity, but as particular cultures in particular places. As a result, although there is room to explore the posture Christians should take toward culture in general, it is essential to consider how Christian formation and performance relate to particular cultures.⁸⁸ Furthermore, if culture is a way of life, then there is credence for the tradition, beginning with Augustine, of understanding culture in religious terms. More recently, T. S. Eliot maintained that culture and religion are intrinsically related, since culture is the "the incarnation of a religion of a people."⁸⁹ By living in particular ways and making particular things, people express what they value the most, and these worshipful expressions are the essence of culture.

Based on these preliminary observations on culture, how does culture fit within a theodramatic framework? On the one hand, if culture includes the products and projects of particular people, then it is appropriate to identify culture with the props that fill the stage

⁸⁶ Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 218.

⁸⁷ "culture, n." OED Online (Oxford University Press, 2011). <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45746?rskey=D6w5wr&result=1> (accessed January 23, 2012).

⁸⁸ Charles Mathewes argues that traditional conversations about theology and culture share a similar weakness in investigating *culture* rather than *cultures*, such as H. Richard Niebuhr's famous treatment in *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). Charles T. Mathewes, "Culture," in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 59.

⁸⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 28.

and other physical elements of a place. But on the other hand, if culture is an entire way of life and an incarnation of religion, it also includes the ultimate values and beliefs of the actors and audience. Consequently, in its broadest sense, culture is what Vanhoozer calls “a concrete way of ‘staging’ one’s religion.”⁹⁰ This “staging” includes a particular vision or worldview that emplots the drama of existence, sustains particular habits and styles of ethical performance, and is expressed in the physical places we inhabit and the objects that fill them. If cultures are rooted in dramatic visions, then cultures are like unwritten scripts guiding patterns of choices, activities, habits, and creativity. Cultural scripts may produce traditions of doing and making, as Richard Schechner observes, but more fundamentally they are traditions of understanding, imagining, and worshipping.⁹¹ Similarly, Kathryn Tanner explains how anthropologists commonly view culture as a collection of ordering principles for social behavior, and kind of “blueprint for action.”⁹² Culture is not a script or blueprint in that it determines specific words and actions like a typical play script, but it does provide an imaginative, dramatic vision influencing every word and action.

Walter Brueggemann uses this metaphor when he claims that every individual and community lives according to a cultural script, adopting this script through “a process of nurture, formation and socialization that might go under the rubric of liturgy.” In the American context, he claims the dominant script affecting every area of life is “therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism.”⁹³ Although people embrace this script because they think it will make them secure and happy, the script has failed, because it is actually a script of “amnesia, autonomy, despair, and self-sufficiency.”⁹⁴ Consequently, the challenge and responsibility of the church is to assist people in the process of “descripting” from the failed script and “rescripting” into the alternative script rooted in the Bible, tradition, and church practice.⁹⁵ Baptism marks the beginning of this “counterscripting,” which continues through the nurturing, formative, and socializing work of ministry, whether liturgy, preaching,

⁹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 310. Vanhoozer also refers to culture using other theodramatic terms, whether more narrowly as “props” or more broadly as “the scenery, the environment, the world into which one is thrown when one appears on stage.”

⁹¹ Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 71.

⁹² Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 31.

⁹³ Brueggemann, “Counterscript,” 22.

⁹⁴ Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 57.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46; “Counterscript,” 23–24.

teaching, pastoral care, or diaconal work.⁹⁶ Through this process of formation, God's people are equipped for "an alternative performance of human life in the world, a performance that requires precisely the kind of imagination, courage, energy, and freedom for which this script vouches in peculiar ways."⁹⁷ And the process is not easy, for "our bodies revert to the old familiar script, so that rescripting takes great practice, patience, and passion."⁹⁸

Building on Brueggemann's work, the cultural element of contextual formation and performance can be described in terms of cultural description, counterscription, and inscription. To begin, formation involves building awareness of and attentiveness to dominant cultural scripts in particular places in order to provide accurate descriptions of those scripts. Often this kind of description will begin by examining particular cultural performances on their own terms—music videos, political gatherings, popular architecture, etc.—and then will discern patterns that arise between these performances. Then, according to the understanding of culture traced above, we will be able to discover the vision underlying these performances: what people value, and ultimately what or whom they worship.⁹⁹ Cultural *description*, in other words, is the skill of understanding and articulating how people envision and emplot the drama of existence and participate in this drama through concrete projects and daily performances.¹⁰⁰ While there may be dominant scripts on a national level, as Brueggemann describes, there are other scripts affecting cultural performances on regional and local levels, and therefore a great amount of collective discernment is needed to identify the common and unique features of these intertwining scripts.

Another aspect of cultural description emerges when we discover the false, failing, or conflictual nature of cultural scripts. For example, if the dominant American script is indeed "therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism," then Christians must be ready to *de*-script themselves from this emplotment so that it no longer captures their imaginations. This goes hand in hand with the need for rescription or counterscription: filling our imaginations with the script testified in Scripture, the gospel Tradition, and exemplary performance

⁹⁶ "Counterscript," 26–27. For more on theological education as counterscripting, see Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience*, 113.

⁹⁷ Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World*, 46.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹⁹ This process has much in common with the methodology recommended by Kevin Vanhoozer in *Everyday Theology*, where he acknowledges the religious nature of culture and provides ten guidelines for "reading" culture. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles Anderson, and Michael Sleasman, eds., *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ Lesslie Newbigin issues an important reminder that our attempts to understand and describe a particular culture are always partial in *The Open Secret*, 155.

traditions throughout the centuries. *Counterscription* is the ongoing process of replacing cultural scripts—popular emplotments of the drama of existence—with the gospel script. Again, this script is not a written document learned by rote, but a comprehensive vision of the theodrama guiding contemporary improvisation. In this sense, Christians are called to “‘lose ourselves’ in a script already written.”¹⁰¹ While there are universal elements of the church’s counterscript, Christian communities in different parts of the world will understand and perform this script differently according to their context. Although the counterscript is relevant to all contexts, it can never remain at the transcultural level, but must always be *inscripted* into particular contexts. This recognizes, moreover, that each culture, as the location of God’s redemptive activity and common grace, contains positive elements, and the process of de-scripting and counterscripting should not seek to separate the church’s formation and performance from these cultures.¹⁰² On the contrary, it should enable a fitting inscription of the church’s script into each cultural context in ways that preserve the counterscript. Consequently, the global mission of the church is not to reproduce carbon-copy performances regardless of context, but to practice skillful description of cultural scripts in order to inscribe the church’s counterscript in contextually fitting ways. As Max Harris observes: “Cross-cultural mission may be viewed not as a means of increasing the numbers of participants in a definitive performance but as a way of extending the range of performance that, in their very differences, bear witness to the riches of their common script.”¹⁰³

Throughout the continual process of cultural description, counterscription, and inscription, the church navigates between the Scylla of cultural accommodation and the Charybdis of cultural isolation.¹⁰⁴ To frame this *via media* within influential approaches to Christianity and culture, we should settle neither for a Christianity that completely confronts and separates from culture (à la fundamentalism) nor for a Christianity that completely correlates and fuses with culture (à la the correlationism of Paul Tillich).¹⁰⁵ When the church takes seriously cultural description and counterscription, there is always a sense in which

¹⁰¹ Harry J. Huebner, *An Introduction to Christian Ethics: History, Movements, People* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 641.

¹⁰² The concept of common grace was articulated John Calvin (*Institutes* 2.2.14-15), but this precise terminology became a major theme in neo-Calvinism as expressed by Abraham Kuyper. See especially his *De Gemeene Gratie*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: Hoveker & Wormser, 1902).

¹⁰³ Harris, *The Dialogical Theatre*, 153.

¹⁰⁴ See Newbiggin, *The Open Secret*, 163–64.

¹⁰⁵ Or in terms of Niebuhr’s taxonomy in *Christ and Culture*, we cannot settle for Christ Against Culture or Christ of Culture. For an excellent history of fundamentalism in America, see Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. For Paul Tillich’s position, see his *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

Christian formation and performance will seem “out of place” in any given culture. Since Christianity itself is a culture with a peculiar counterscript—an alternative emplotment of the drama of existence as a redemptive theodrama—it will always be counter-cultural. But because the church is a company of people situated in every culture, the church takes on local color so that these out-of-place people and their performances are at the same time “well-placed.” Well-placed performances, of course, arise out of place-oriented disponibility. Contextual theodramatics requires actors who are disponible to creation and culture in order to enact performances that fit within particular places and cultures. In the next section, we will consider both of these elements in turn, and then conclude by exploring the relationship between contextual theodramatics and other dimensions of formation and performance.

8.5 CONTEXTUAL DISPONIBILITY AND FITTINGNESS

Earlier it was maintained that creation is both the stage for the theodrama and an integral participant in the action, together with every creature in heaven and on earth. Although humans are participants in the theodrama along with the entire company of creation, there are several features that distinguish humans from the rest of creation. In Chapter 5, relationality was explored as one way humans bear the image of God, which includes the capacity for disponibility: being responsibly receptive to other humans and creatures. Wolfhart Pannenberg develops a similar thesis, identifying “openness to the world” as a distinguishing feature of humanity. In his view, openness to the world means being open to unexpected encounters and fresh experiences, and this world-directed openness presupposes openness to reality beyond the world and ultimately openness to the divine and his future.¹⁰⁶ But whereas Pannenberg writes about openness in the abstract, we must insist on the necessity of *concrete* openness to the world: disponibility to particular creatures and parts of creation. Brian Brock, for example, correctly maintains that appropriate care for animals, plants, and the land follows from attentiveness and receptivity to particular creatures and places.¹⁰⁷ Concrete, creation-oriented disponibility seeks to recognize and appreciate a creature’s particular role in the theodrama, discerning how to interact with that creature

¹⁰⁶ Pannenberg, *What Is Man?*, 1–12. Pannenberg gleans this concept from Max Scheler, *Man’s Place in Nature*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961). Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), 69. Moltmann makes the same observation but in the reverse, that openness to God grounds openness to the world (*God in Creation*, 151).

¹⁰⁷ Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*, 343.

respectfully and appropriately. Brock contrasts, therefore, the practice of breeding poultry for disease resistance and profit with the practice of “attentive husbandry” that pursues an “openness of mutual delight” between humans and animals.¹⁰⁸ Disponibility to particular creatures does not have to be the luxury of country-dwellers, for although this disponibility may be a greater challenge for urbanites and suburbanites, endless opportunities still exist for attentive relationships with plants, animals, and the land.¹⁰⁹

If disponibility by its very nature is oriented toward particular creatures and portions of creation, it is not difficult to discern how this concrete receptivity forms actors to enact fitting performances in relation to creation. Brock illumines how indisponibility fuels unfitting, mono-crop agriculture and inattentive super-market shopping, whereas disponibility leads to fitting, sustainable agriculture and local eating habits.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Eugene Peterson wisely warns that human performances can easily degenerate into hasty and impatient improvisations that are “dismissive of the intricacies and beauties of God’s gifts or time and place.”¹¹¹ In this regard, we might think of the dismissiveness of large-scale, profit-driven projects like unregulated surface mining and deforestation, but it is just as easy to identify our own complicity in ignoring the gift of creation in particular places, such as consistently purchasing and eating internationally imported and locally out-of-season fruit or sending compostable waste to landfills rather than working it back into the earth. Fitting performance, on the other hand, is a matter of improvisation with particular creatures and other parts of creation as valued participants in the theodrama that deserve our responsive care and attentive respect. Discerning precisely what this means for particular individuals and communities is an improvisational process requiring risk and the courage to do what seems most obvious, bolstered by union with Christ in whom there is no condemnation and true freedom (Rom 8:1-2).

Another difference between human improvisation and the performance of other creatures, of course, is that human improvisation is a culture-making endeavor. As indicated above, culture-making is a process, whether implicit or explicit, of crafting and enacting a script for the drama of existence.¹¹² Everyone participates in and contributes to this culture-making endeavor, which means that developing cultural disponibility is never completely

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 348–56.

¹⁰⁹ See Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*, 356–60.

¹¹¹ Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 85.

¹¹² Andy Crouch speaks of the “creative participation” involved in the “drama of culture making” in *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 94.

objective, since we participate in the very scripts we are seeking to describe, counterscribe, and inscribe. Nevertheless, to be culturally dispoñible is to be a keen cultural observer, someone who “listens” to and patiently describes culture before making judgments or beginning the process of counterscription and inscription. According to H. Richard Niebuhr, fitting and responsible action is preceded by an adequate grasp of what is happening in a particular culture and situation. In this sense, cultural dispoñibility involves the skill of interpretive observation that informs decisions regarding fitting action.¹¹³ Robert Schreiter observes that we often rush toward discovering the relevance of Christ to particular cultures (inscription) rather than being open and receptive to how Christ is already at work (description).¹¹⁴ Similarly, Gerald Arbuckle asserts that fitting inculturation—what I am calling inscription—begins with habits of open listening, a process that is personal, collaborative, inquisitive, dialogical, respectful of diversity, and replete with storytelling.¹¹⁵ We develop cultural dispoñibility, therefore, by being attentive to the concrete expressions of cultural scripts and gaining an awareness of how these scripts envision and emplot the theodrama. In doing so, the church should cultivate a genuine openness to discover and receive truth, goodness, and beauty in these scripts as the products of divine image-bearers and an arena of God’s common grace. At the same time, the church needs a readiness to recognize and overaccept those elements of cultural scripts and their concrete expressions that are distorted by sin and contradict the theodramatic counterscript. In short, cultural dispoñibility is an availability that allows for cultural description but does not necessarily entail complete cultural agreement or accommodation. To be culturally dispoñible is to be equally ready to endorse what fits with the theodrama and to oppose whatever lacks theodramatic fittingness.

Along these lines, cultural scripts are offers that improvisers in the theodrama may block, accept, or overaccept.¹¹⁶ At one extreme, blocking a cultural script means refusing to believe the script’s vision or perform according to its values. Blocking is the wholesale rejection of a cultural script: counterscription without inscription. At the other extreme, accepting a cultural script means to endorse the script, leaving no room for counterscription. In reality, the church often employs a mixture of blocking and accepting in seeking to perform with

¹¹³ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 60–61.

¹¹⁴ Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 39.

¹¹⁵ Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 154–64.

¹¹⁶ For more information on these improvisational methods, see Chapter 5, §5.3.2.

fittingness to the counterscript and particular cultures. Rather than employing a confusing mixture of blocking and accepting, however, the practice of overaccepting cultural scripts is a third, more fitting option for theodramatic formation and performance. This approach is committed to participating in cultural scripts but doing so as people who have a greater commitment to the counterscript. Overacceptance arises out of the presupposition that every cultural script is based on the legitimate desires of divine image-bearers, even though these desires are often misdirected and expressed through unfaithful performance.¹¹⁷ To overaccept, therefore, is to demonstrate through culturally-inscribed and fitting performances how the church's counterscript is able to fulfill and transform every cultural script. It is a call to faithful presence and attentiveness to particular people and place without capitulating to dominant cultural scripts.¹¹⁸ Formation and performance that is fitting to particular cultures will maintain what Mirosalv Volf calls a "soft difference" that resists the simplistic strategies of blocking and accepting and allows the theodrama to determine our identity and mission.¹¹⁹ Indeed, believing participants in the theodrama are "sojourners and exiles" in the world, but their culturally fitting performances are one way unbelievers are motivated to recognize the beauty of the counterscript and to glorify its Author (1 Peter 2:12).

8.6 WHICH CONTEXT IS KING?

Even though this chapter has focused on the creational and cultural aspects of context, every other dimension of formation and performance explored in previous chapters constitute elements of the larger context. Consequently, theodramatic formation and performance are not only situated within the context of concrete creatures and cultures, but in the context of the triune God, Scripture, tradition, and relationships with Christians and non-Christians. In considering these together, however, which context is king? Is there one dimension of formation and performance that rules them all, determining and shaping all the others? On the one hand, these questions are misplaced, because as we have seen, both formation and performance are complex and dynamic processes that engage the whole context simultaneously. But on the other hand, the answer to this question reveals one's ultimate

¹¹⁷ This approach corresponds, therefore, with Dyrness's reworking of theology as the poetry of desire in *Poetic Theology*.

¹¹⁸ See James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 253.

¹¹⁹ Mirosalv Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994).

theological commitments, so it is one that must be considered and articulated very carefully. Common answers often vacillate between identifying Scripture or the Church/Tradition as the ultimate context and rule for formation and performance. What both of these contexts have in common, however, is their dependence on the being and action of the triune God. Scripture is the Word of God and the Church is the household of God, both arising out of the gracious love of Father, Son, and Spirit. Our preliminary answer, therefore, must be that the ultimate context of theodramatic formation and performance is Father, Son and Spirit as the Playwright, Producer, and Protagonist of the theodrama.

On further consideration, however, even this answer is incomplete, because the triune God reveals himself in his Word and world, communes with the church as his body, empowers and sustains the church's tradition, and invites his people to know him by participating in his mission to the world in particular places. A more satisfying answer, therefore, is to say that the ultimate context of theodramatic formation and performance is the triune God who is known and enjoyed through Scripture, the church, tradition, creation, and our missional engagement with culture and the world. The center that holds the whole theodrama together is Christ who is one with the Father by the Spirit, through whom and for whom all things were created (Col 1:16-17). Disposition formation and fitting performance are not concerned, therefore, with how Christ impacts our character and action or how Christ relates to culture. Rather, disposition formation and fitting performance is possible only through union with Christ, which means Christ *is* our formation and performance; Christ is our character, action, and culture, not merely one dimension of life. No other context can be king, because Christ is King, and he deserves our ultimate allegiance.

❧ EPILOGUE ❧

In theatre, an epilogue is a speech delivered directly to the audience at the end of a play. Having reached the end of this literary performance, I have an opportunity to remark on what has transpired, but in doing so I have the sense of arriving at the end of Act One rather than the end of the play. It is my hope that the performance has been edifying and enjoyable, but even more I hope it has set the stage for further developments after the intermission. What follows, therefore, are some brief reflections on key themes introduced in this Act and possibilities for how the performance might continue beyond these pages.

One primary aim of this project was to advance the theatrical turn in theology by engaging in serious and sustained dialogue with theatrical theory and practice. My goal was not to research theatre merely to glean creative models to illustrate a pre-established agenda for theological ethics. Rather, I desired to discover if theatre might provide creative, heuristic insights for leading theological ethics in fresh and imaginative directions, while remaining faithful to God's revelation in his works, world, and Word. As such, it wasn't until I spent months reading Brecht, Brook, Izzo, Johnstone, Lecoq, Mamet, Stanislavski, Spolin and many others that insights emerged regarding the core features in both scripted and improvisational theatre: formation as a process of developing disponibility, performance as a process of displaying fittingness, the dynamic interplay between formation and performance, and their multi-dimensional orientation toward the playwright, producer-director, script or story, company, performance traditions, audience, and particular environments and places.

In relating these features to theological ethics, I had to make judgments regarding the correspondence between theatrical and theodramatic realities. While it is inevitable that my own theological convictions guided these decisions to some degree, I also relied on voices from the Christian tradition and a measure of common theological sense in delineating the theodrama as the play, God as playwright, protagonist, and producer, Scripture as transcript and prescript, tradition as ways the church has understood and performed the theodrama throughout history, the church as company, unbelievers as audience, and creation and culture as theatrical environment and place. The overall model gleaned from theatre, therefore, is that theodramatic formation as disponibility and performance as fittingness are multi-dimensional processes oriented simultaneously toward the triune God, Scripture, the church, tradition, unbelievers, and creational and cultural contexts. The dialogue with theatre continued as I explored each of these dimensions, sometimes consistently following

the trajectory of a theatrical model (as in articulating missional theodramatics as interactive theatre) and at other times modifying the model to describe more accurately elements in the theodrama (as in construing Scripture as transcript and prescript). As such, I sought to follow an interdisciplinary methodology genuinely open to new insights from theatre yet unabashedly committed to Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy and gratefully reliant on the creative contributions of theologians and ethicists such as Balthasar, Vanhoozer, Wells, and many others.

Despite an inevitable degree of incongruity between the theatrical model and the theological-ethical subject matter, I believe this project has demonstrated the theoretical and practical benefit of utilizing theatre as a model for theological ethics. In Chapter One, I proposed that an effective model used in the context of Christian theology and practice should have the potential to explain reality in relation to divine revelation, expand theological knowledge, and exert practical influence. It is beyond the scope of this epilogue to review each instance in which the theatrical model has met these criteria, but I hope this project has shown that conversation with theatre does not need to distort the testimony of Scripture and Christian tradition, but can actually enhance this testimony by teasing out its inherent truth and beauty through imaginative metaphors and models. I am not presuming that what I have presented is a super-model or that theodramatic disponibility and fittingness are the only ways to construe and connect formation and performance. I have discovered, however, that these concepts are packed with potential, and further investigation might more fully reveal how they relate to discussions regarding intuition, conscience, imagination, virtues, Christian practices, wisdom, and other crucial topics in theological ethics.

Besides advancing interdisciplinary dialogue between theatre and theological ethics, this project was motivated by several additional goals. For one, although scholars have long been interested in theological perspectives on Christian formation and ethical practices, few have attempted to integrate theology and ethics organically within one model. Since the purpose of understanding theatre is performance and the act of performance builds theatrical understanding, utilizing a theatrical model automatically orients theology toward ethics and ethics toward theology. There may be different models that are effective in linking these disciplines, but I surmise the most fruitful ones will continue to arise from the performing arts.

Another goal was to present the complex, relational, and organic nature of theological ethics while maintaining an appropriate level of structure and organization. One weakness of systematic theology is that it makes things a bit too, well, systematic, and ethics can fall into the same trap. Theological ethics does not progress neatly from the distillation of biblical,

creational, or logical principles to the application of those principles in theological judgments and ethical decisions. Rather, theological understanding, holistic formation, and ethical performance are processes occurring in an interconnected matrix of trinitarian, biblical, ecclesial, traditional, missional, and contextual relationships. Theo-logical distinctions and principles for belief and behavior are important, but we must never forget that understanding, identity, and action are shaped in the midst of theodramatic participation and in a cauldron of the quotidian. In this context, it is impossible to examine different dimensions of existence in isolation and abstraction or to create universal procedures for improvising theology and ethics. This study progressed in a logical order and offered principles when necessary, but this was mostly to encourage placing confidence and trust where they are due, namely, in the historical and canonical performance of the triune God.

A final goal of this project was to avoid prioritizing either actor or action. As such, I repeatedly emphasized the dynamic interplay between formation and performance in the theodrama. Disponible, available actors are those who perform fitting, appropriate action, and the process of performing with fittingness is the means for developing disponibility. Furthermore, all of this takes place in the midst of the theodrama at particular times, in particular places, and in between the times of God's climactic performance in Christ by the Spirit and his glorious return to usher in the last Act of re-formation. In the meantime, we are seeking, as enabled by the Holy Spirit and in union with Christ, to become available actors who enact appropriate action within an eschatological existence beautifully articulated by Micheal O'Siadhail:

...sweet tension of not yet and memory
between anticipation and fond repeat
interplay of riff and debt."¹

¹ Micheal O'Siadhail, "Tension," in *Globe* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2007), 29.

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