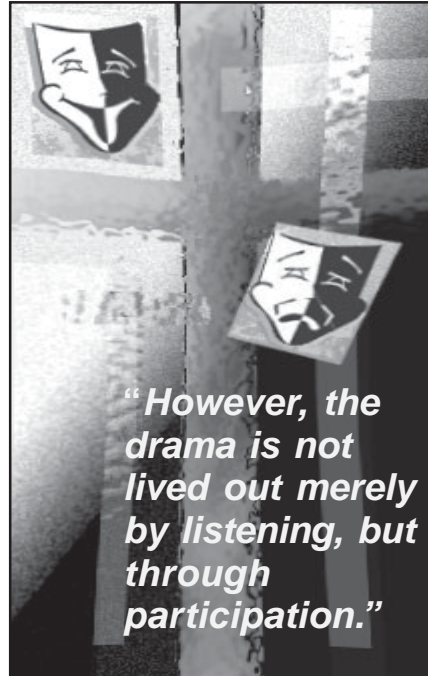


“The dogma is the drama”: dramatic developments in biblical theology

If you were asked to tell the story of Scripture to a friend how would you do it? What characters, events, and ideas would appear and what would form the centre of the story? If we changed the metaphor from story to drama and asked the same questions, then what or who drives the plot? Who are the main actors in the play? And what is our part in this great drama?

This approach to understanding Scripture is known as narrative theology and has been with the church for some time, coming into particular prominence throughout the 1970s and 80s through the work of such pioneers as Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and David Kelsey, otherwise known as the “Yale School”.¹ The essence of this approach is to read the Scriptures as a realistic narrative centred on the story of Jesus Christ. Associated directly with the “School” are certain hermeneutical assumptions which, for the day, were rather radical, most important of which was a replacement of propositional truth for narrative engagement. Other aspects of this “School” included a stress on the literal sense of Scripture (the *sensus literalis*) when read on its own terms (Frei), the role of the faith community (the *sensus fidelium*) as the location for theological exegesis (Lindbeck), and finally, an account for both how and why Scripture ought to be used in the church (Kelsey).

In the wake of the Yale School, narrative theology has taken many turns and now refers to a constellation of actual methodologies, some of which are mutually exclusive of each other. More recently a convergence of sorts has eventuated between literary studies, biblical studies, drama, and the arts. Each discipline has converged around a dominant



metaphor, that of *drama*. Importantly, biblical theology is at the forefront of this metaphorical convergence as it

“If you were asked to tell the story of Scripture to a friend how would you do it?”

utilises the idea of drama in its reading, interpretation, and presentation of the message of Scripture.² Drama thus serves as a useful metaphor for reading the Bible (biblical theology), for systematising its ideas (doctrine), and for applying the Bible (ministry and mission). It is thus evident that a “dramatic theology” has much in common with narrative theology and yet the two must not be simply conflated. So what is different about dramatic theology?

A dramatic theology departs from the older forms of narrative theology in rather significant ways. Rather than following the widely accepted schema proposed by Lindbeck of a cultural-linguistic approach to Scripture, a dramatic theology adopts a canonical-linguistic approach.³ This has several important consequences.

First, it establishes “a directive theory of doctrine that roots theology more firmly in Scripture while preserving Lindbeck’s emphasis on practice.”⁴ While the Yale School appeared to place theological authority in Scripture, it actually, due to its cultural-linguistic commitments, placed ultimate authority in the church, or more specifically a church “culture”.⁵

Second, narrative theology was finally unable to integrate the non-narrative portions of Scripture adequately and thus much of the propositional or didactic material found itself relegating to such a position of relative inferiority it all but fell off the stage. Dramatic theology understands that the didactic and propositional portions of Scripture are as important in the biblical drama as any others, and is thus able to account adequately for the canon in its entirety, as well as its linguistic nature. Thus dogma and drama are not, after all, uneasy bedfellows.

Third, by adopting a canonical-linguistic methodology, doctrine is no longer confined to the merely theoretical, unrelated to ecclesial practice as it is in the work of the Yale School. Rather, a dramatic theology understands that doctrine involves a particular way of life – that modelled by Jesus Christ and witnessed to in Word and Spirit.⁶ A dramatic theology thus establishes Jesus Christ as the central character in the drama, the Bible as the

authoritative script, performed by the Church as it seeks to live out its doctrine, by the Spirit in the world.

The theologian who has given the most consideration to the notion of dogma as drama is the creative Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.⁷ He searches for a genre that does justice to the dialogue between God and humanity, to the interaction between the finite freedom of humanity and the infinite freedom of God, and to the way that dialogue is played out through the reception and rejection of the Word. In a typically provocative move he proposes an understanding of salvation as a drama of “divine recklessness and human caution”.

In Balthasar’s *Theo-Drama* the Father is the author of the drama, the Son the primary actor, and the Spirit the director. The main characters are God – who is responsible for the play – humanity – which is endowed with and condemned to freedom – and the mediator, Jesus Christ – who is the true character, and a model for the others. Israel, the nations, individual Christians, and the angels and demonic powers all take their places among the *dramatis personae*.⁸

This idea of the drama of Scripture is catching on with many theologians, pastors, and practitioners; and for good reason – it is compelling. For too long the Bible, doctrine, and mission have been considered by many to be stale, outdated, and at worst, irrelevant to contemporary culture. However, when read as a divine drama the picture changes dramatically. As the American theologian Michael Horton wrote:

Of one thing we can be certain: God has given us the greatest show on earth, a drama full of intrigue that is not only interesting but actually brings us up onto the stage, writing us into the script as actors in the ongoing production. It gives us a role that contrasts sharply with those one-dimensional characters and shallow story lines of this present age. And because it is more than a play, “putting on Christ” involves a lot more than trying on different

*costumes and masks. Let’s go into the Scriptures, then, to better discover its plot and our own in its light...*⁹

When we do go into the Scriptures we find that which Horton promises: we find our place in the divine drama in which we participate in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father by the Spirit. We also find that the biblical drama requires some reflection, interpretation, and systematisation. In short, we begin to construct, in light of God’s revelation, a systematic theology intimately related to our ministry and mission in God’s world. Here the timeless words of Dorothy Sayers need to be heard once more:

“Through the drama of Scripture a dramatic theology offers each of us a way to re-script our lives ...”

*Official Christianity, of late years, has been having what is known as “a bad press”. We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine – “dull dogma,” as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man – and the dogma is the drama.*¹⁰

No less provocatively than Balthasar’s statement earlier, Sayers suggests:

*Now, we may call that doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish; but if we can call it dull, then words have no meaning at all. That God should play the tyrant over man is a dismal story of unrelieved oppression; that man should play the tyrant over man is the usual dreary record of human futility; but that man should play the tyrant over God and find Him a better man than himself is an astonishing drama indeed.*¹¹

Constructing a dramatic theology is a higher form of articulation of the

drama of Scripture itself. But this process is not complete until a still further aspect of the drama is attained; the performance of the drama in terms of ministry and mission. It is here that the words of Scripture and dogma are translated into contemporary idiom and a legitimate form of biblically dramatic *improvisation* is enacted on the world stage.

By nature children of Adam have no life plot, except the explicitly “plotless” postmodern plot.¹² There is nothing to make sense of our lives as a whole. For many people, hours, days, and years are “doomed” to an ocean of meaningless obscurity and

random futility.¹³ Even for those with good jobs and families, upon further assessment, the life of presumed independence from God is one-dimensional and flat, one trivial success or failure after another. It lacks a narrative or plot that unifies the events, characters and setting, and puts them in motion as part of a larger story. People living in this space long to be a part of something meaningful which is bigger than themselves.

Not only do most people lack a proper script, they lack any script at all. It’s all impromptu dialogue, or rather, monologue in a one-person show. However, much contemporary society clamours for community, most people gladly surrender it for more individual choice and autonomy. TV, Sony PlayStations®, and the virtual reality world of today has provided a ready placebo for their sense of community. The world, in short, is scripting the lives of most people today (Rom 12:2). What used to be called “multiple personalities disorder” is no longer regarded as pathological but as the normal key in which the score of postmodern life is played. Many today have one existence in the physical world and

another in a computer generated “second world” or cyber-space, an existence they feel is no less “real” than everyday life. For such people there is no personal identity, and they attempt in vain to remove the mask to reveal themselves. This is the Beatles’ “Nowhere Man”: “making all his nowhere plans for nobody. Doesn’t have a point of view, knows not where he’s going to. Isn’t he a bit like you and me?”¹⁴ Horton perceptively states, “While earlier Christians saw their lives in terms of ‘pilgrims progress’ to the Celestial City, most of our post-MTV contemporaries see themselves in terms of ‘aimless drifting’ from booth to booth at Vanity Fair.”¹⁵

Through the drama of Scripture a dramatic theology offers each of us a way to re-script our lives in order that we may live purposefully, meaningfully, with dignity and direction. Horton offers a glimpse of what this re-scripting involves:

*While today our identities are more the scattered clippings of ideal images packaged and marketed to us in a barrage of advertising masquerading as entertainment, the “self” who is rendered in the biblical drama of redemption is a solid self only because he or she belongs to a story that is much larger than oneself. In the former, the identities of others (usually celebrities) are consumed and made a part of my life and identity. In the latter, the real identities (not images) of the many biblical characters become the context in which my life makes sense. It is here where strangers and aliens finally belong to God and become part of his family throughout history.*¹⁶

This is where the drama of Scripture has something to contribute to mission.¹⁷

The good news is that God is in control, he has a plan, it is being worked out, and within that plan there is a place for each of us. God’s drama involves his creation of a good cosmos, which, unfortunately, was ruined by recklessly free humans. But in his grace and love God sent his beloved Son to do for us that which we could not do for ourselves. He then rose from the

dead and intercedes for us at the Father’s right hand, from which he sent the Holy Spirit and from which he will one day return in glory. In the meantime his life becomes the script for ours, “If anyone wishes to come after me, they must deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). Once more Sayers is salutary:

*Let us, in Heaven’s name, drag out the Divine Drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction... It is the dogma that is the drama – not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death – but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.*¹⁸

Each week Christians go to church to be reminded of what the script is and how we should perform it. However, the drama is not lived out merely by listening, but through participation. Horton offers the following advice:

*...it is as God the Spirit works on us through the proclamation of the Word [script] that we are rescripted: our lives, purpose, identities, and hopes conformed to that ‘new world’ into which the Word and Spirit give us new birth – instead of the other way around. Instead of our remaking God and his Word in terms of our experience and reason, we end up being remade – caught in the action of the divine drama. When it happens, it happens before we know it.*¹⁹

As we proclaim the biblical script in ministry and mission, from Genesis to Revelation, a unity emerges not only within the pages of the canon, and not only within the community of Christ, but also within us individually as we are incorporated into the drama. It doesn’t happen all at once. Gradually we find ourselves

identified, changed, and instead of scripting our lives according to our own reason and experience we are spoken to by God himself, addressed as sinners and enemies of God who are now saved and made children of God (Jn 15:15). Sceptical spectators thus become cautious enquirers, and the drama continues to unfold. In time the “in Adam” role is exchanged for the “in Christ” role and the person is home at last. And now cautious inquirers become actors on the stage in the drama of redemption. That is the new identity they trade for aimless drifting and self-creating.

But wonder of all wonders, as we continue to be scripted by the divine drama and participate in the drama of redemption we learn, to our surprise and delight, that in God’s electing purpose we were written into the script from the very beginning (Eph 2:1-7; Rom 8:30-34). Here we are re-scripted as new characters with a new role in the drama of redemption that will finally include not only us as individuals but the whole natural world as well (Rom 8:18-25). Jesus is raised as the “first-fruits” of the full harvest (1 Cor 15:20), and when that point arrives in the play, when believers are physically raised to everlasting life, the creation itself will be carried with us into newness of life.

One final image is required to complete this survey of drama as a model for understanding the Bible, the central plot, dogma, the churches articulation of the drama, and our place within that drama. This is the notion of *improvisation* mentioned in passing earlier. Improvisation in the theatre is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear. Within ecclesial contexts believers are called to become a community of trust in order that it may faithfully encounter the unknown of the future without fear.

When faith communities know the drama of Scripture so well that it becomes their story, when they are united to Christ by grace through

faith that they literally become participants in his acts and being, and when the church realises its call to be the body of Christ in the world as it awaits the final return of the Lord Jesus in glory, it finally comes to terms with what it means to be “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, able to proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9). In light of the past and in anticipation of the future the church is presently called to act, play, *improvise* under the leading of the Holy Spirit until Christ’s return.

The Christian ethicist Samuel Wells prefers the model of “improvisation” to “performance” or “practice” for a number of reasons. A performance, he argues, is too tied to a script and in many real life situations there is, in fact, no such authoritative script to follow. Here we may think about such issues as cloning or the use of technology, issues which Scripture never directly addresses. Practice or rehearsal as alternatives are closer to the reality but it too continues to presuppose a fixed script. It is not that the text of Scripture is not fixed, but that there is a dimension of Christian life that requires more than repetition, more even than interpretation – but not so much as origination, or creation *de novo*. The preferable model then, is that of improvisation.²⁰ When applied to the task of ethics – the skill of living after the pattern of Christ – Wells concludes, “When improvisers are trained to work in the theatre, they are schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they learn to act from habit in ways appropriate to the circumstance. This is exactly the goal of theological ethics.”²¹

This is also the goal of a dramatic theology, to be thoroughly formed by God’s gracious interactions with humanity throughout time, as recorded in Scripture, that we are equipped, as a community of Spirit-filled believers, to be Christ to our neighbour. This means learning the art of improvisation by which we intuitively respond to the needs of others in a Christ-like way when, as a

community of trust, we work together to proclaim in word and deed the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Truly then, the dogma is the drama.

Endnotes

1. For representative works see H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1974); G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1984); and D. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1975). For a more wide ranging survey see the helpful work edited by S. Hauerwas and L.G. Jones, *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).
2. See R. Girard, *Jesus im Heilsdrama: Entwürfe einer biblischen Erlösungslehre* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1990); G. Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); P.D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986), 519-546; B.W. Anderson, *The Unfolding Drama of the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988); and F.A. Spina, “Revelation, Reformation, Re-creation: Canon and the Theological Foundation of University,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 17 no. 4 (1989): 326. More recently C. Bartholomew and M. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004); N.T. Wright, “How Can the Bible be Authoritative?” *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 17-32; and K.J. Vanhoozer has produced a monumental work around this theme, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
3. For an articulation of this approach see Vanhoozer.
4. Vanhoozer, xiii.
5. Lindbeck’s defence for this was, of course, the appeal to a Wittgensteinian notion of linguistic meaning in which linguistic meaning is a function of language which varies according to the forms or cultures that users inhabit.
6. Vanhoozer considers the contemporary dichotomy between theory and practice to be today’s ‘ugly ditch’ replacing Lessing’s accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason. Vanhoozer, 12.
7. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* vol. 1. *Prolegomena*, trans. G. Harrison (San

- Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988); Vol. 2 *Man in God* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1990); Vol. 3 *Persons in Christ* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1992); Vol. 4 *The Action* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1994), Vol. 5 *The Last Act* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1998).
8. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, Vol. 3. *Persons in Christ*, and a summary by S. Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004), 49.
 9. M.S. Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 16.
 10. D. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1949), 3.
 11. Sayers, 7.
 12. Think of *Pulp Fiction* for instance.
 13. If you feel this is too pessimistic see Eccl 12:8.
 14. “Nowhere Man” (Lennon and McCartney) can be found on the 1965 Beatles album, *Rubber Soul*. See Horton, 47.
 15. Horton, 48.
 16. Horton, 34.
 17. The most comprehensive articulation of a dramatic theology of mission is C. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006).
 18. Sayers, 24.
 19. Horton, 52.
 20. Wells, 65, appeals to Gerard Lughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 20, when he writes: “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 baptised into a biblical and ecclesial drama. It is not so much being written into a book as taking part in a play, a play that has to be improvised on the spot. As Rowan Williams puts it, people are ‘invited to “create” themselves in finding a place within this drama – an improvisation in the theatre workshop, but one that purports to be about a comprehensive truth affecting one’s identity and future’.”
 21. Wells, 65.



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