

Theatrical Paradigm of Theodrama and Its Implications for Christian Life and Mission

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ABSTRACT

This thesis incorporates the theatrical concepts, such as speech-act, agency, drama, performance, simulation, and improvisation, to help enhance both theological education and missiological practice. These concepts may be integrated with the theme of “theodrama,” providing a critical analogy for understanding God-human interaction, creation-redemption history, incarnational-missional movement, and the “kingdom of God” eschatology.

The purpose of this thesis, then, is to examine how the theatrical paradigm of “theodrama” may have implications for Christian life in general and mission in specific. The outline of the thesis is as follows: (1) Theoretical Basis for Theodrama (speech-act theory, action/agency theory, performance theory, dramatic narrative view); (2) Practical Methodology of Theodrama (simulation on stage, improvisation in life); and (3) Missiological Implications of Theodrama (hermeneutical process, missional application).

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how the theatrical paradigm of “theodrama” may have implications for Christian life in general and mission in specific. The outline of the thesis is as follows: (1) Theoretical Basis for Theodrama (speech-act theory, action/agency theory, performance theory, dramatic narrative view); (2) Practical Methodology of Theodrama (simulation on stage, improvisation in life); and (3) Missiological Implications of Theodrama (hermeneutical process, missional application).

But before presenting the main contents of the thesis, I would like to address two pertinent issues. First, it has to do with the negative connotations associated with those critical terms/concepts (“theater,” “drama,” “performance,” “improvisation”) to be explored in this thesis. There is a tendency in Christianity to use the term, “theatric” or “dramatic,” in reference to what is “pretentious, showy, or over-the-top,” and to associate the term, “performance” or “improvisation,” with “hypocrisy, insincerity, or the prideful attempt to achieve salvation by works.”¹ However, for the purpose of this thesis, such terminology is used in a technical sense as in the theatrical world (not the popular stereotypical notion), which can serve as analogy/metaphor to depict both the biblical and contemporary realities. Second, there is a need to distinguish and clarify the key terms/concepts:

drama, performance, and theater. I find it adequate to differentiate these terms, as suggested by Kevin J. Vanhoozer:

*[D]rama is a shaped sequence of action, especially dialogical action, with a beginning, middle, and end. Performance is the realization or actualization of drama. Theater is the space-time performance by which persons present themselves – their being – to others.*²

Simply put, drama has to do with the content (idea, plot, characters, scenarios) related to the text/script, performance has to do with the actual enactment of the dramatic content, and theater has to do with the setting/context of performance.

This thesis, then, incorporates the theatrical concepts, such as speech-act, agency, drama, performance, simulation, and improvisation, to help enhance both theological education and missiological practice. These concepts may be integrated with the theme of “theodrama,” providing a critical analogy for understanding God-human interaction, creation-redemption history, incarnational-missional movement, and the “kingdom of God” eschatology.

THEORETICAL BASIS FOR THEODRAMA

Since the publishing of the seminal work, *Theo-Drama* (in 5 volumes, 1988-1998), by Hans Urs von Balthasar, there has been a growing number of scholars and ministers espousing the theatrical paradigm in their theological reflection and pastoral application. The movement is recognized as a clear sign of the “theatrical turn”³ in theology. “Theology is inherently theatrical,”⁴ because it has to do with “the historical performance of God” and “the ongoing performance of the church” in the theater of everyday life.⁵ This so-called “theatrical theology” is established on the theoretical foundations, such as speech-act theory, action/agency theory, performance theory, and dramatic narrative view.

1. Speech-Act Theory

In the field of philosophy of language, the so-called “speech-act” theory was first developed by J. L. Austin

1. Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 16.

2. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 23.

3. Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 2.

4. Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart, eds., *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), xiii.

5. Vander Lugt and Hart, eds., *Theatrical Theology*, xiv.

(1962) and further advanced by John Searle (1969).⁶ The premise of speech-act is based on the notion of illocution: “to say something is to do something . . . by saying and in saying something we are doing something.”⁷ In other words, our speech or utterance can be performative in nature. For example, in our utterance, associated with promise, contract, bet, curse, or judgment, to speak is not to merely describe/represent the action through words; it is an actual commitment to action. As Vanhoozer comments:

A promise, for example, has propositional content, but this is not what makes it a promise. An utterance becomes a promise only when an agent uses words to commit himself or herself to a course of future action. Promising is an act in its own right; to promise is to commit oneself to a future course of action that some hearer finds desirable. Promising is a form of doing something in saying something. To promise is to use words in such a way as to bring about a particular kind of interpersonal relationship.⁸

From the perspective of speech-act theory, then, the Scripture itself is not simply a deposit of the content of divine revelation; it signifies the dynamic revelatory and communicative acts of God. Vanhoozer comments:

*That speaking is a form of action is a familiar theme in the Bible. . . . [God] is the paradigm communicative agent. The word of God is something that God says, something God does, and (with reference to the incarnation) something God is. As to Scripture, it is not merely the disclosure of information about God (revelation) but a collection of diverse kinds of divine communicative acts (divine discourse). When God does make himself known, he is both agent (Father) and content (Son) of his discourse, as well as its power of reception (Spirit). Scripture is taken up in complex ways into God’s triune self-communicative action. God speaks in and through human words, not only to reveal but to promise, exhort, command, warn, comfort, predict, lament, even plead. Scripture is thus a vital ingredient in the economy of divine communicative action.*⁹

Moreover, the Scripture is the product of God’s people engaged in communicative response to God, as well as communicative activities in the world as God’s representatives. As such, the Scripture depicts the dynamic communicative activities between God and his people (Israel and the church) for the sake of communicative (and redemptive) mission to the world.

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

7. J. L. Austin, “How to Do Things with Words: Lecture II,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, 2nd edition, edited by Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2007, original 2004), 177.

8. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 64.

9. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 47.

2. Action/Agency Theory

In philosophy, particularly in the areas of ethics, jurisprudence, metaphysics, mind-body philosophy, and epistemology, there is a category known as “action” or “agency” theory, which deals with the themes of purpose, motive, desire, belief, intention, deliberation, decision, action, responsibility, and free will. Following the lead of Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* (3rd Book), many modern philosophers¹⁰ have engaged in the discussion especially on the theme of “intentionality,” as related to human agency.

According to John MacMurray, the human personhood should be understood in terms of relationality and agency, rather than individuality and rationality.¹¹ Specifically, he envisions the human person (in meaningful existence) as an embodied agent engaged in active participation in the society and the world. “As agent . . . the Self is the body. Conversely the Self, as subject, is the mind. For as subject, the Self is non-agent, withdrawn from action, and, therefore, non-body.”¹² Thus, the individual who exists merely as a “subject” (viewing the world as “object”) is someone who is isolated within the realm of the mind and disengaged from the bodily and actual reality of the world. The ability to engage in dynamic action in this world (of people, entities, environments), then, is the primary characteristic of being a truly existential person. And what distinguishes such an actional or agentic person is the element of “intentionality.” MacMurray comments:

*An action, in the sense in which we are using the term, is necessarily intentional. It is indeed the presence of intention which distinguishes it from activities which are non-rational, uninformed by knowledge. . . . What determines an action is its intention.*¹³

From a theological perspective, then, we humans have been created and called by God to intentionally and proactively engage in obedient action as his representative agents in this world. The implication of such agency model for mission is that our action/activity is not something we merely initiate as free-will agents, but something that we must abide by as God’s commission. This sense of human agency/instrumentality, then, is the means by which God

10. See the following: G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1957); Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, UK: The Clarendon Press, 1980); Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of Will and the Concept of a Person,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68/1 (1971): 5-20, and “The Problem of Action,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15/2 (1978): 157-162; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, original 1981); Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), and *Structure of Agency: Essays* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

11. The following two books are based on John MacMurray’s Gifford Lectures (at University of Glasgow) under the main heading of “The Form of the Personal”: “The Self as Agent” (1953) and “Persons in Relation” (1954). See John MacMurray, *The Self as Agent* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999, original 1957) and *Persons in Relation* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998, original 1957).

12. MacMurray, *The Self as Agent*, 91.

13. MacMurray, *The Self as Agent*, 195.

accomplishes his missional agendas in this world.

3. Performance Theory

The so-called “performance theory”¹⁴ was first introduced by Erving Goffman (sociologist) in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).¹⁵ He proposed the idea that all of social reality is, in essence, “performed” reality. People on a daily basis engage in various types of role-play, staging their multi-identities before the presence of others. They do so most naturally, without being aware of the fact that they are actually performing in the society. Goffman comments:

*The legitimate performances of everyday life is not “acted” or “put on” in the sense that the performer knows in advance just what he is going to do, and does this solely because of the effect it is likely to have. . . . But as in the case of less legitimate performers, the incapacity of the ordinary individual to formulate in advance the movements of his eyes and body does not mean that he will not express himself through these devices in a way that is dramatized and pre-formed in his repertoire of actions. In short, we all act better than we know how.*¹⁶

Thus, Goffman understands the “society as populated by living actors”¹⁷ who are engaged in playing roles and freely changing roles as a way of socializing.¹⁸ The reality, then, is that “we have been socialized into our roles, having had choices of behaviors and roles modeled for us and choosing our roles and how we perform them,” like actors in a theatrical production.¹⁹

Goffman’s view of everyday life as stage performance was further developed by Victor Turner (cultural anthropologist) in his book, *Dreams, Fields, and Metaphors* (1974),²⁰ as he applied the performance approach to culture, particularly in terms of ritual and social drama. Using the theatrical terminology, Turner described how social dramas arise especially during

the “conflict situations,” involving arguments, battles, or rites of passage in which the participants not only engage in the conflict, but they actually perform their acts before the presence of the audience.²¹ The critical factor in any performance, then, is the performer-audience relationship. So, the focus cannot be exclusively on acting/doing; there must also be a reciprocal watching/listening/responding.²² As a result, the participants cultivate a genuine sense of empathy/care for others, and become more fully human and communal.²³ Thus, the theatrical model is both performative, reflective, and formative in the context of community.

The implication of the performance theory for mission, then, is that we as God’s people are called to “perform” as good witnesses of Christ to others in this global theater. Thus, it is principally a matter of how well we perform in this world — that is, missionally speaking — according to the pattern of Christ and the biblical prophets and apostles.

4. Dramatic Narrative View

Since the main stream of the biblical revelation is the story of interaction between God and his people (Israel and the church), the Scripture can certainly be viewed as a grand narrative.²⁴ But a more accurate understanding is that the Scripture is basically a dramatic writing. Although both narrative and drama represent the biblical stories of creation, providence, and redemption, they depict them in different ways.²⁵ Vanhoozer well distinguishes the specific concept of drama from the general notion of narrative.

Narratives require narrators and recount their tales in the first or third person. Dramas, by contrast, show rather than tell. Moreover, in drama, the words are part of the action. . . . The theater is, after all, the “language of action,” and the dramatist’s task that of “teaching through action.” Not only do dramatic acts often have symbolic force, but the dialogue is “spoken action.” Finally, unlike narrative, the biblical text, along with its present-day reader, gets caught up in

14. Shannon Craigo-Snell, “In Praise of Empty Churches,” in *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 89-90, identifies 3 basic contours of performance: “First, a performance is an event that takes place in a specific time, location, and community. . . . Second, a performance is an interaction. It is deeply relational. . . . A third element of performance is doubleness. . . . a performance has doubleness in that it is made up of elements we have already performed or learned from someone else.” See also Shannon Craigo-Snell, “Theology as Performance,” *The Ecumenist* 16/4 (2008): 6-10.

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

16. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 73-74.

17. Peter Berger’s comment on Goffman, in Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963), 138.

18. Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory, revised and expanded version* (New York: Routledge Classic, 2003, original 1988), 196, well sums up Goffman’s theory: “all social interactions are staged — people prepare the roles (various personae or masks), different techniques of role playing ‘back stage’ and then enter the ‘main stage’ areas in order to play out key interactions and routines.”

19. Todd E. Johnson, “Doing God’s Story: Theatre, Christian Initiation, and Being Human Together,” in *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 165.

20. Victor Turner, *Dreams, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

21. Turner, *Dreams, Fields, and Metaphors*, 37-41, explains the performative nature of social drama in terms of four-phase process: (1) breach, (2) crisis, (3) redressive action, and (4) reintegration or social recognition (legitimation).

22. Paul Woodruff, *The Necessity of Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

23. Johnson, “Doing God’s Story,” 168.

24. Of course, the Bible is comprised of other forms/genres (law, wisdom, poetry, prophecy, apocalypse, prose discourse) as well. But the main flow is that of historical narrative(s) of God and his people.

25. N. T. Wright, “How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?” *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991), 18-19, presents the outline of the Bible in terms of divine drama in 5 acts: (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus; and (5) Church. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004, 2018), 33-37, suggests a more streamlined outline: (1) Creation; (2) Israel; (3) Jesus; (4) Church; and (5) Eschaton. See also the following: Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); Bernhard W. Anderson, *The Unfolding Drama of the Bible*, 3rd edition (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

the action too.²⁶

What then consists of drama? A drama essentially has to do with “doing, an enactment.”²⁷ The term derives from the Greek verb *draō* (to do, to act, to take action). But the genre of drama is specifically associated with “a type of literature designed for stage representation and performance with the ‘live’ enactment of the written drama.”²⁸ In this sense, drama is a unified sequence of action that “a script preserves or prescribes in writing” which humans bodily represent and enact through the means of “performance” in the context of “theater” (theatron = a place for seeing) in which the audience observes what happens.²⁹

Thus, in the biblical sense of drama (performed in the context of the theater of redemption), “God and humanity are alternately actor and audience.”³⁰ Moreover, in our contemporary setting, “life itself is divine-human interactive theater.”³¹ Theology, then, has to do with “what God has said and done for the world and what we must say and do in grateful response.”³²

Such theatrical paradigm known as “theodrama” (primarily attributed to Balthasar and Vanhoozer) emphasizes the dramatic nature of the Bible in connection to, but in distinction from, the narrative nature. Balthasar’s premise of theodrama was that the Scripture can be best interpreted in terms of dramatic rather than metaphysical categories. The inter-relationship between God, the church, and the world is best understood as a dramatic play with the primary theme of God’s love in Christ. Vanhoozer further developed the dynamic of theodrama by including the church’s performance as a response to Christ’s performance in history.³³ Moreover, as Christopher Wright (in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, 2006) has expounded, the biblical reality is that the entire theodrama unfolds in accordance with God’s purpose for and mission to the world, with the participation of God’s people (Israel and the church) in his mission.

26. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 48–49. Here, Vanhoozer borrows the expressions, “language of action” and “teaching through action,” from Keir Elam, “Much Ado about Doing Things with Words (and Other Means): Some Problems in the Pragmatics of Theatre and Drama,” in *Performing Texts*, edited by Michael Issacharoff and Robin F. Jones (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 41.

27. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 37.

28. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 22.

29. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, 22. Schechner, *Performance Theory*, explains theatric taxonomy in terms of 4 categories (drama, script, theater, performance), and places them consecutively in the concentric circles — expanding from strict definition to broader definition — with drama at the core. Schechner, 70, comments: “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.”

30. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 37.

31. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 37.

32. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 38.

33. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 44.

PRACTICAL METHODOLOGY OF THEODRAMA

Practically speaking, the theodrama model can be applied through simulation and improvisation. The idea of theodrama (derived from theatrical analogy) has generally been understood (hermeneutically) in dual terms of biblical interpretation and contemporary application. But I would like to suggest an intermediary mode of theatrical stage production (involving both rehearsal and performance) as a bridge between the biblical and contemporary theodramas. In this sense, the actual theodrama stage production may serve as a sort of simulation of both the biblical and contemporary realities, establishing the basis for life improvisation (consistent with the Word and the Spirit).

1. Simulation on Stage

Since 2014, I have been engaged in an experimental project at ACTS University in Korea. Here, while serving as professor of spiritual theology and mission theology, I have been training the students to articulate theology (and missiology) through innovative theatrical means. In the process, I have developed a performing arts genre, which I labelled as “theodrama,” and choreographed/directed six major productions at ACTS University.³⁴ Our theodrama productions have since gained recognition, so that we were granted the privilege of staging such a production at the upcoming 6th Lausanne Congress (2024) in Korea.

Regarding the general concept of theodrama, I am certainly indebted to those theodrama advocate theologians, such as Balthasar and Vanhoozer. But in my case, I have adopted the term “theodrama” for the actual theatrical production of theological/missiological themes to be performed live on stage.³⁵ This theodrama performance genre may be understood as a theatrical way of expression (through music, dance, mime, acting, design, and media), depicting the biblical-theological concepts in a visual-aural, kinesthetic, and experiential way. The theodrama production, then, is a way of theologizing

34. The ACTS University theodrama productions are as follows: “Imago” (2014) - biblical overview of salvation history from Genesis to Revelation; “Prophetic” (2015) - preaching drama portraying the biblical prophetic type lineage; “Communion” (2016) - theological meaning of communion based on John Calvin’s view; “Resurrectio” (2017) - essence of the cross/resurrection as depicted by the body of Christ; “Missio” (2020) - theological, historical, and strategic perspectives of mission; and “Vita” (2022) - portrayal of the entire human life journey, along with spiritual journey. It is acknowledged that all ACTS theodramas were produced in collaboration with Imago Christi Studio, an institute established for the multi-purpose vision of spiritual theological research, incarnational spirituality training, creative arts production, and strategic mission. In order to view the ACTS University theodrama productions, visit the following website (www.imagochrististudio.org) >> Creative Arts >> ACTS University Theodrama Productions).

35. For deeper insight into the paradigm of theatrical performance and its contribution to Christian life and mission, see the following: Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004, 2018); Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge, *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart, eds., *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014); and Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014).

(and missiologizing) on stage, depicting the biblical dramas of creation, redemption, incarnation, mission, kingdom, eschatology, and other significant themes through various theatrical means. As Trevor Hart comments:

If ... the divine Word presents itself most fully not as text or utterance but in the flesh and blood realities of an embodied existence, surely we ought to consider whether a natural and proper mode of the rehearsal and interpretation of this same Word in its form as Scripture might lie in actual embodied performances of those portions of the biblical text that lend themselves naturally to it.³⁶

Moreover, while the Bible depicts the drama of divine-human interaction (in dynamic words and acts), our contemporary life serves as the extension of such divine-human drama. The theodrama experiment at ACTS University, then, can be understood as a sort of simulation training of the student participants, so that they may learn to bridge the biblical and contemporary theodramas through the means of stage rehearsal and performance.

Significantly, in the process of training and preparation for theodrama performances, the students learned to expand beyond the typical academic discipline of assimilating knowledge to a more dynamic understanding of education. They had to transition from the cerebral to the experiential way of learning through bodily movements and dramatic enactments. In the process, the students began to explore and discover a vital incarnational-kinesthetic way of theologizing (and missiologizing). Moreover, the students as amateur performers had to learn to compensate for their lack of experience in theater and movement arts with their heart of passion and prayer. In the process, they learned to humble themselves before God and to rely on one another as they endeavored to move and perform in unity and harmony. In essence, they learned how to operate as the corporate body of Christ.

As a result, we as a theological community (at ACTS University) have come to appreciate how theatrical performing arts can offer a much-needed inspiration and challenge to theological education. Such theodramatic way of expression supplements the traditional concepts of the "written word" and the "audible word," with the "visible word," and even the "tangible word." It is a way of educating the students, not only to "read the word" and "hear the word," but also to imagine and "see the word," as well as to be "in touch with the word," so as to theatrically experience what it means to embody and enact God's Word.

2. Improvisation in Life

The methodology of "improvisation" is implemented in practically all disciplines of art, including music, dance, theater, film, design, and

36. Trevor Hart, "Beyond Theatre and Incarnation," in *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Wesley Vander Lugt and Trevor Hart (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 41.

craftwork. Of these, perhaps the most natural and holistic form is that of dance improvisation. To improvise in dance is to "dance the dance as it comes into being at this particular moment at this particular place."³⁷ Thus, improvisation is a way of experimenting in spontaneous (unrehearsed, non-premeditated) movements, without any set choreography. However, such improvisational flow should not be understood exclusively in terms of spontaneous integration of thought and movement. It also involves the environmental factor being explored in particular time and space. Dance improvisation, then, provides an innovative way of integrating kinesthetic, social, and environmental factors.

Basically, through dance (as well as other theatrical means), we learn the art of "spontaneity of kinesthetic flow" which may serve as an analogy for the way of life. This is so pertinent especially in light of the enormous flux and numerous variables of life we face in the 21st century. Life, then, ought to be lived as though (in an experimental studio) we are improvising with endless possibilities and variations. The best way to prepare for such reality of life, then, is by learning how to be open, flexible, and innovative. Perhaps the only guideline is that our improvisation should be as natural and instinctual, flowing from our true nature.

Improvisation, however, does not necessarily imply an anti-traditional attitude. Although traditionalism with its strict regulations and rigid formalities tend to quench the creative and innovative dynamics of improvisation, a truly "living tradition" actually provides an assuring foundation for the ongoing improvisation that is both liberating and constructive. Vander Lugt comments:

Improvisation always involves an element of risk, but developing disposability to tradition and studying paradigmatic performances can diminish foolish risks. Improvisation is pivotal for theodramatic performance, because it keeps tradition alive, and conversely living tradition is a liberating constraint for creative improvisation.³⁸

In Christianity, the living tradition, comprised of the biblical and historical legacies, provides both the foundation and inspiration for a continual improvement in performance through improvisation, rather than strict repetition of the scripted performance. Thus, from the perspective of theodrama, "tradition is the improvisation of beliefs and behaviors in creative continuity with past performance" of the biblical and historical characters.³⁹

37. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Primacy of Movement*, expanded 2nd edition (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2011), 420.

38. Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 149.

39. Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama*, 148. N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991), 19, suggests the following scenario for improvisation, based on the Scriptural givens: "Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play whose fifth act had been lost. The four acts provide, let us suppose, such a wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit

Improvisation, then, requires that we attune ourselves, not only to our inner self and the surrounding world, but also the past tradition (both biblical and ecclesial), which in essence is a transcript and pre-script for us. Moreover, we need to attune to the very presence of Christ in the midst of our improvisation (and performance). We need to be led and influenced by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said, “The wind [Spirit] blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (Jn. 3:8). As Paul said, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17).

MISSIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THEODRAMA

The missiological implications of the theatrical paradigm of theodrama can be explained in terms of two dynamics: hermeneutical and applicational.

1. Hermeneutical Process of Theodrama

Based on the classic theodrama theories — especially those of Balthasar and Vanhoozer, as well as our experimental stage productions at ACTS University — a holistic paradigm of theodrama can be formulated. In this (essentially) hermeneutical process, there are a number of key factors which need to be considered: (1) Scripture, (2) theology, (3) spirituality, (4) art, (5) life, and (6) mission. There are basically two directional flows in this process. First, the above factors contribute to the actual “formation” of the theodrama paradigm. Second, these factors themselves undergo significant “transformation” under the influence of the theodrama paradigm.

- The theodrama paradigm is multi-faceted and holistic in its formation as a result of the diverse contributing factors:
- The Scripture as the script (and our transcript/prescript) of the God-human drama is the initial starting point of the theodrama paradigm.
- The orthodox theology provides the inspiration and motivation in articulating the essential biblical themes underlying the grand theodrama.
- From a spirituality point of view, the Trinitarian spirituality and incarnational spirituality are foundational for conceptualizing and practicing theodrama.
- The realm of art, with its emphasis on aesthetics, imagination, creativity, and expression, naturally informs and enriches the ideology of theodrama.
- Life in general becomes the second axis of drama. Hermeneutically, theodrama takes place in mutual relationship between the biblical revelation and real life.
- The missional vision challenges the theodrama

paradigm to be actualized more dynamically and efficiently in the context of contemporary situations.

- Conversely, the theodrama paradigm is instrumental in help transforming the six areas of concern:
- The theodrama paradigm introduces the somatic, kinesthetic, and theatrical paradigm for a dynamic interpretation of the Bible.
- The theodrama paradigm helps enhance theological education by introducing the performative theory, which integrates mind, body, speech, and action.
- A sound biblical-theological theodrama, with its emphasis on the life of Christlikeness, establishes the basis for Christian spirituality.
- The theodrama vision helps to transform the realm of art/culture in accordance with Richard Niebuhr’s view of “Christ transforming culture.”⁴⁰
- Realizing that life itself is theodrama helps us to live a fuller life of intimacy with and trust in God.
- The theodrama paradigm contributes to evangelism/mission in terms of missional hermeneutics, performative methodology, and life drama encounter.

As a result, the theodrama paradigm signifies a dynamic transformative process, which Max Harris articulates as “theatrical hermeneutics”:

*If . . . there is a transformation effected when word becomes performance and, in reverse when performance is encoded in text, and if . . . the Christian concept of God’s mode of self-revelation is theatrical, then the sensitive reader of script and Scripture alike will need to engage in a form of theatrical hermeneutics that both animates and interprets text*⁴¹

2. Missional Application of Theodrama

At the turn of the 21st century, there emerged the so-called “missional church” movement,⁴² advocating the most natural and strategic way of witnessing to the

40. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

41. Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 12.

42. The missional church movement is indebted particularly to those seminal missiological writings of Francis Dubose, *God Who Sends* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1983); Charles Van Engen, *God’s Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991); and Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995, original 1978) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). The movement gained impetus mainly through the publishing of the book, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) (Darrell L. Guder, ed.), in association with the “Gospel and Our Culture Network” (COCN) in Britain, North America, and New Zealand. The missional church model is also acknowledged by a number of Korean scholars as follows: Sunil Kim, “Educational Ministry Revisited in the Light of the Missional Church’s Paradigm,” *Gospel and Mission*, vol. 17 (2012): 9-37; Soo-hwan Lee, “A Study on Missionary Spirituality for Missionaries,” *Gospel and Mission*, vol. 33 (2016): 89-121; Kyung-gu Shin, “The Classification of Missionary Spirituality,” *Gospel and Mission*, vol. 5 (2005): 144-169.

Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly-trained, sensitive, and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves.”

world. Basically, the movement emphasized the divine source of mission (*missio Dei*) and the missionary nature and purpose of the church. As Wright states, “Mission is not ours; mission is God’s. . . . Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission — God’s mission.”⁴³ Essentially, the *missio Dei* is equivalent to the *missio Trinitatis* (Trinitarian mission), which has its origin in the Father’s heart of loving grace toward humanity. And with the Father’s sending of his Son, Jesus Christ in his incarnation, servanthood, obedience, and suffering becomes the model for mission. Moreover, Jesus’ mission is continued through the mission of the Spirit who empowers the believers for mission in this world.⁴⁴ Thus, the *missio Dei* (*missio Trinitatis*) implies a divine invitation of human participation: *missio hominum* (human mission) in general and *missiones ecclesiarum* (church’s missions) in specific.⁴⁵

With such missional foundations (Trinitarian theology, incarnational Christology, pneumatology, theological anthropology, ecclesiology, eschatology), we must also be grounded in the reality of this world, which is the very cultural/societal context in which the church is to witness the gospel. This means that we must be well-versed in the contemporary cultural trends, such as globalization, urbanization, migration, digitalization, cybernization, virtualization, and cyborgization.⁴⁶ Moreover, we must come to terms with the reality that we are living in a post-Christian society plagued with humanism, secularism, materialism, relativism, and pluralism.⁴⁷ It is in this culture-specific context of the early 21st century that we must be instrumental in witnessing the gospel of Christ and expanding the kingdom of God.

The missional church, then, envisions all Christians as functioning missionaries in their

43. Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 62.

44. David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (London: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1980), 4.

45. Charles E. Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 27-28.

46. There are a number of Korean missiologists who have delved into these technological issues associated with the 4th Industrial Revolution and their implications for mission in the 21st century. See the following: Seong Mo Ku, “Mission Methods for the Net Generation in Cyberspace,” *Theology of Mission*, vol. 37 (2014): 11-41; Ki Mook Jung “Mission in the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” *Theology of Mission*, vol. 48 (2017): 265-294; Won Young Bong, “The Role and Outlook of a Missional Church in the Age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution” *Theology of Mission*, vol. 50 (2018): 190-224; Hae Lyong Cho, “What Should We Prepare for Korean Mission in the 4th Industrial Revolution?: Future Mission Strategy and Direction,” *Theology of Mission*, vol. 51 (2018): 178-211; and Hyun Joo Lee, “Necessity of New Mission Strategy in the 4th Industrial Revolution,” *Gospel and Mission*, vol. 41 (2018): 113-152.

47. According to Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 221, Christianity has been eroding and secularism has been gaining grounds since the modern era began under the influence of providential deism of the late 16th-17th century and the exclusive humanism of the 18th-19th centuries. As Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Post-Christian: A Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), states: “Modernism with its scientific materialism and trust in evolutionary progress is post-Christian. So is postmodernism with its relativistic mindset.” The result, then, is, as Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 2, pointed out, “churches are in a missionary situation in what once was Christendom.”

particular societal/cultural contexts and beyond. So, the missional church must interact purposefully and meaningfully with people and culture, exercising Christlike discernment of the world. Ultimately, the missional church must function as the transforming agent — as the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (Mt. 5:13-16) — embodying and enacting Christlikeness so that Christ (by his Spirit) may continue his ministry on earth through his church. The missional church, then, is committed to the incarnational approach to mission as embodied, proclaimed, and demonstrated by Christ. As Christ himself modelled and commissioned his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (Jn. 20:21). Thus, the missional church movement should essentially be understood as the “incarnational-missional” movement.⁴⁸

And from the theatrical theological perspective of “missional theodrama,” God the Father may be seen as the producer, the Son as the theatrical director, and the Spirit as the performance coach. Moreover, the incarnate Son may be regarded as the premier actor in this drama, while the Spirit may be understood as the hidden supporting actor behind all scenes. Ultimately, the Triune God would be the main spectator — as both the host-sponsor of the drama’s other players (the believers) and the final judge of the drama’s outcome (both the participant believers and the unbelieving world).

Thus, in this grand theodrama, we as God’s people are invited to play many and diverse roles as fellow-actors with Christ and his Spirit. As Christ’s agents, we are called and commissioned to fulfill our specific roles and functions on the world stage. Here, our vision and motivation derive from Christ, the principal actor who modelled the perfect image of God for us. He demonstrated what it means to be a truly incarnate human being. And he demonstrated what it means to be an intentional, agentic being, perfectly submissive to the Father’s will. Likewise, we are called — with our Spirit-awakened sensibility to God and fellow humans — to serve as Christ’s agents to accomplish his kingdom agendas on this global stage.

CONCLUSION

From a theatrical perspective, the Shakespearean statement — “All the world’s a stage. / And all the men and women are merely players. / They have their exits and their entrances. / And one man in his time plays many parts.”⁴⁹ — has a profound, and yet practical, ring to it. From a Christian perspective, John Calvin’s reference to the created universe as God’s “theater of glory” (*theatrum gloriae*)⁵⁰ —

48. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shape of the Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 56-59

49. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, scene vii, 146-149.

50. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559 edition), 2 volumes. Edited by John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.6.2 (cf. 1.5.8; 1.14.20; 2.6.1).

complemented by the notion of human history as God's "theater of redemption" — affirms such theatrical paradigm for life and mission. The Bible, then, serves as the authoritative script depicting God's creative-redemptive work in the midst of humanity and the earthly habitat. And based on this biblical transcript/prescript, we are called to carry out God's redemptive purposes in our particular theatrical stages of life. All of God's workings in our life, ministry, and mission, then, can be regarded as "theatrical" and "dramatic" in terms of characterization, plot, tension/suspense, setting/atmosphere, and symbol/meaning. Thus, the biblical history and the continual unfolding of kingdom history may be understood as an epic theodrama. Moreover, our own contemporary settings may be understood as the ongoing scenarios in the continuing saga of theodrama, both personal and corporate.

Here, the theodrama production/performance as experimented at ACTS University can serve as a working model of bridging the biblical and contemporary theodramas. It can be understood as a way of simulation training for the biblically-based real life theodramas on the world stage. Thus, the theodrama paradigm can help supplement and enhance the holistic vision of the missional church, in the following ways:

- **Community Revitalization:** The Christian communities (churches, schools, agencies) can be more creatively/aesthetically revitalized through theatrical productions and art-culture movements. The participants can learn how to rely on God and each other as they work together and coordinate with each other through theatrical art rehearsals and performances.
- **Theological Education:** The participants can receive inspiration and challenge in their biblical/theological education through bodily movements and theatrical expressions. Through such "physical" education, the participating students can discover the Word as "seen" and "felt," in addition to the Word as "read" and "heard."
- **Life Simulation:** The theodrama production/performance can serve as a simulation training for the real life play. For the participants, the means/method of training/rehearsal and stage performance can serve as a bridge between the biblical theodrama and the modern-day theodrama.
- **Holistic Ministry:** The theodrama expressions can serve as the means of manifold ministry: to God (worshiping and glorifying God), to self (activating one's true self and creativity in Christ), to the church (teaching and discipling the believers), and to the world (witnessing the gospel to the unbelievers).
- **Missional Strategy:** The theatrical arts (along with other art forms) can serve as the missional

bridge between the "word"-oriented modern generation and the "after-word" post-modern generation.

- **Prophetic Critique:** The artistic expressions, especially through theatrical arts, can serve the purpose of moral and social critique, confronting and challenging both the church and the society.

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