
THEATRE AS INCARNATION;
Toward a Vision for Redemption of Dramatic Art

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INTRODUCTION

Some Personal History

I do not remember just how old I was when I first read Francis Schaeffer's *Art and the Bible*. Whether I was in high school or already a college theatre major, I was eager to read anything I could find that might help me to know my interest in theatre was Christianly legitimate. My Free Methodist grandmother helped to create some uneasiness in me on the subject. I grew up knowing, for example, that as far as Grandma was concerned, going to a movie was a sin. (Though once, when a Billy Graham film came to town, she decided she *could* see it, providing it was one of us kids who actually walked to the box office and purchased her admission.) Still, Grandma doted on us, and managed, by being inconsistent with her own worldview, to encourage us in our various pursuits. Thus though drama was the root of all kinds of evil, she was weepingly proud when I spent the year after high school touring with a (dismal) Christian theatre company, for, the medium notwithstanding, I had been doing "the Lord's work."

It was in the context of Grandma's somewhat schizophrenic blessing of my efforts that I finally got my hands on *Art and the Bible*, longing to find some solid, intellectually satisfying justification that doing theatre was okay. I read with delight the relatively lengthy passages detailing the art of the tabernacle, the art of the temple and the *secular* art in Solomon's palace. I had no idea the Bible had so much good to say about art!

And then, at last! I arrived at the section I had been waiting for, the section entitled "Drama and the Dance!" When I had finished reading it, I laid the pamphlet aside, and responded with the only thought available to me: "That was *it*?"

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I was, it is true, relieved to learn that something sort of dramatic, Ezekiel's staging a siege against Jerusalem, was recorded in the Bible. But I was disappointed that Schaeffer's treatment of drama warranted a bare two paragraphs. To be sure, there was not much else he could write in a pamphlet called *Art and the Bible*, when the Bible says virtually nothing on the subject. All the same, I had been hoping for a feast and I had come away with pretty thin gruel.

In the intervening years, my stomach still grumbled. Where *is* thoughtful Christian guidance/scholarship on the drama? Where *are* the thoughtful, quality Christian production companies? I will not say they are nowhere to be found; God reserves his seven thousand in Elijah's day. Still, by and large, God has seen fit to keep me pretty hungry over the years.

As an undergraduate in a secular theatre department, I was exposed, largely unwittingly, to the despairing, hopeless worldview which informs much of modern art. As Schaeffer wrote in an updated edition of *Pollution and the Death of Man*:

In the 1980s [the time I was in college and grad school] there is not much [discussion about] philosophic pornography...etc. However...the thought-forms of the 1980s were laid in the earlier period of the 1960s.... People are now functioning on the ideas formulated in the earlier period—even though [they] do not consciously realize it.¹

What were some of those ideas?

A man...must stand up on the high place with gibberish in his mouth and rip out his own entrails.... Anything that falls short of this frightening spectacle, anything less...contaminated is not art. The rest is counterfeit. The rest is human.²

Insofar as my schooling was an artistic one, I learned such "lessons" nonverbally, intuitively, like poison absorbed through the skin. One would be better to learn such things via *words*; at least then the student is free to analyze and rebut the message, if he or she chooses. But the philosophically unwarned/unprepared art student learns, whether aware of it or not. I—like the students I knew then and know now, like those I pray to see preserved from such taint in their future training and careers—was like the "well-meaning ignoramus" H. R. Rookmaaker wrote of in *The Creative Gift*.

Even he is reached, perhaps against his will...by one message: look, these things are works of art, and a thing like this really means just as much as

¹Francis Schaeffer and Udo Middelman, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1970; Wheaton: Crossway, 1992), 11-12.

²Henry Miller quoted in H. R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1970; Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 146.

'your' Rembrandt... And so even he comes out with something destroyed, or at least wounded.³

Paul once praised the God "who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor 1:4). I have been harmed by nihilistic art, and while it has taken me many years to feel any "comfort" at all, looking back over the life God has crafted for me, it seems that none of that harm has been in vain. It is my hope that through my sufferings God has been endowing me with the wherewithal to comfort those in "artistic" trouble with the comfort I have received from him.

THEATRE AS INCARNATION

Towards Discovering the Creational Archetype for Dramatic Art

My motivation was twofold when some years ago I approached the English faculty at Covenant College with the idea that they develop a program of theatre studies through the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where I then worked. In addition to wanting to offer Covenant students training in which they had expressed interest but would not otherwise have, my primary motivation was to try to fill my secular theatre department with as many solid (academically and theologically) Christian students as I could. To date my UTC colleagues have been delighted with the Covenant students they have met, and they would be glad to meet others.

Eager as I was to have Covenant students enroll, I did not want just any student. My concern was that some immature Christian might further tarnish the glory of Christ in a place where his worshipers are viewed as crabby, ignorant wet-blankets.⁴ But mostly I was concerned

³H. R. Rookmaaker, *The Creative Gift* (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books, 1981), 161-62.

⁴One of my fellow faculty members' previous experiences with "Christians" included encounters with the youth minister of a prominent local church. This Christian used Klannish terror tactics to drive my colleague and his wife from the neighborhood, shortly after they moved to town. They next lived for years across the street from the home of the very "Christian" Byron de la Beckwith—jailed assassin of Black Civil Rights worker Medgar Evers. Still, God provides. This same professor got to know Clay, a former Covenant College student and son of a Covenant Seminary professor. Clay was an actor in the professor's production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. I do not think I am exaggerating to say that getting to know Clay changed my colleague. He loves Clay; he thinks Clay is a fine student, possessed of fine character. The fact that Clay is a Christian, too, is a puzzle to him. He has asked me about Clay from time to time, and I think my colleague wishes Clay were still around. I think he has caught the scent of life, though does not realize what it is.

lest those young Christian students be tarnished themselves. I wanted no starry-eyed, applause-hungry eighteen-year-olds. Knowing what temptation I fell prey to when I went off to study theatre, I wanted to spare them from repeating my experience. For that reason, my initial proposal for a course of study included this suggestion:

Students should complete a bridge course (working title: "Theatre and Christian Worldview") before beginning course work...at UTC. This course would meet the following needs: 1) develop thinking in the area of Christian philosophy of theatre (including ramifications for both practitioners and audience members), 2) provide an intro to and prep for transition to the "theatre culture" and 3) develop a vision for missions to and through the theatre.

Though I certainly could not have articulated it as such, for most of my student life the source of the "grumbling stomach" I complained of in the introduction has been my own education's inability to show me how the Dooyeweerdian "creation-fall-redemption" template applied to theatre. I have had plenty of opportunity to see the "fall" part of it. I have encountered pornography and splenetic tantrums proffered as art; I have seen eager-to-learn students led into performing dehumanizing material which must cauterize their very creative apparatus; I have seen marriages splinter under the economic and ego-warping pressures of starving artistry; I have seen the bed-hopping, the bar-hopping, the bong-hitting; the drag queens, the lonely-heart lesbians and the AIDS victims.

I have seen creativity made into a god. The "work" becomes all-important; it is the way to influence and change culture, the door to self-knowledge. I have heard two, maybe three of the men I taught with at the university refer to theatre as "sacred."

It is hard when living in the tight, intense theatre community not to get sucked into the "churchiness" of the group. This body of believers ("Can the actor say to the stagehand, 'I have no need of you,' or the wardrobe mistress to the prima donna, 'I have no need of you?") spends hours of their lives together, preparing to preach a message in the world. They dress and undress together, they do hard physical exercise together, they explore difficult emotional terrain and publicly wear their hearts on their sleeves together. When the rest of the world is at play, that is the time they are at work. When the rest of the world is at work, that is the time they are asleep. If the public loves their work, they rejoice together; if there is a public outrage, they are persecuted martyrs together. This intense community of working in the theatre is one of its chief joys—part of its good creation; but tainted by the fall, the theatre company can become something like its own cult.

So how can it be redeemed? To answer that question one needs first to ask *what would an "unfallen theatre" have been like?* Here, now, is the

question that has been the chief source of my stomach's grumbles. What is theatre *supposed* to be? What is it *good* for? I have, over the years, thought a good deal about the need for redemption, but without a solid, positive theoretical model—a creational archetype—I have found that my thinking can grow reactionary and crabbed. Feeling a need to provide balance in an atmosphere that idolizes itself, I have found myself thinking, "It's not like this work is brain surgery! It just isn't *that* important!"

But of course theatre *is* important, since it is a part of a good creation. I must obey Philippians 4:8, and think about "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy" in the theatre. For one cannot properly think about or achieve theatrical reform until one is caught a "pro-active" vision for what theatre *might have been*, and what theatre, therefore, by the power of the Holy Spirit, *can be*. I do not claim that by the end of this article I will have definitively answered the question, "What is the creational archetype for theatre?" But I have a few ideas that may contribute to finding an answer.

Drama in Worship?

Discussion with Implications for the WCF's Regulative Principle

As we have seen, the Bible is virtually silent on the topic of drama. While *Art and the Bible* mentions Ezekiel's staged siege against Jerusalem, similar examples of biblical "drama" could include Isaiah's going naked and barefoot for three years as a sign that the king of Assyria would lead away the Egyptians and Ethiopians barefoot with buttocks uncovered (Is 20:1-6), and Agabus tying his own hands and feet with Paul's belt saying, "In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt..." (Acts 21:11). To my satisfaction, only such events as these can legitimately be pointed to as examples of biblical dramatic activity.

Despite the desire of some to see texts for dramatic performance in the songs of Miriam and Deborah, in the books of Job and Solomon's Song or in various psalms, it seems clear to this actor's eye that such literature cannot be performed in the fashion of what we think of as a "play." And while it can not be denied that Job and Solomon's Song are written in something like dialogue, it should be remembered that the ancients were quite capable of writing "dialogues" (witness Plato) which were not created to be scores for performance.

"But surely the *parables*—" someone will object, "—and what about Jesus' calming the storm? *That* was pretty dramatic!" Here we encounter a nontechnical, popular parlance use of the word "drama," which muddies the waters of this discussion. Jesus' miracle was a *real event*, not a "drama," and "parable" is a form of *narrative*, a medium which at root is altogether different from *mimesis* —the telling of

tales by “doing.” *Drama* = “doing, acting, performing.” The *locus classicus* contrasting “narrative” and “drama” is Aristotle’s definition of “tragedy,” in *The Poetics*, chapter six.

Assuming I am right, why would the Bible have so little to say about drama? That silence, which I once saw as a frustrating disappointment, I now view as an important clue. Theatre as we know it in the West was invented as a *form of worship*. The elders of the ancient Greek Dionysian cult eventually progressed from the mere chanting of odes about the mythic heroes and gods to actually performing *as* them.

Though it took Greece to develop a fully realized professional theatre, many other religions have made use of drama. Native American and African religions, Confucianism, East Asian Shamanism and Animism all manifest various types of dramatic presentation. Javanese shadow puppet theatre and Balinese and Indian dance drama form parts of Hindu-Buddhist religious practice. The work of the *meddahs* (dramatic storytellers) is still popular in the Shi’ite Muslim communities of Iraq, Anatolia and Iran. Ancient Egyptians performed their *Ramesseum Coronation Drama*, *Edfu Drama* and *Memphite Theology*. There is persuasive evidence for the use of drama in the Babylonian and Assyrian worship of Marduk; various Hittite texts demonstrate their derivation from earlier dramatic performances; and Canaanite worship included:

A burlesque version of the primitive seasonal drama...the *Poem of Dawn and Sunset*...Two women encounter the aged supreme god El at the seashore while he is shooting down a bird and boiling it for his dinner. They make ribald remarks about his senility and seeming sexual impotence. Thereupon he gives forthright proof to the contrary. The ladies bear a pair of siblings. Someone...reports to the god that the children (of whose true parentage he is evidently unaware) glow like dawn and sunset—a common trait of divine offspring—whereupon El cynically suggests that their proper place would be up in the sky alongside the sun, moon, and fixed stars. Subsequently, further children, called the “gracious gods,” are born. El is informed that they have insatiable appetites—another common folkloric trait of divinely begotten children. He thereupon consigns them to the desert, there to forage for their food. After a time, they fall in with the official custodian of grain and beg food and drink. Although he has only a meager supply to meet his own needs, he apparently feeds them, or they break into his silo. The rest of the story is missing, but a few fragmentary words at the end may be interpreted to mean that as a reward for his generosity, the gods annually bestow a due measure of crops and fruits.⁵

⁵Theodor H. Gaster, “Drama: Ancient Near Eastern Ritual Drama,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4 (New York: MacMillan, 1987). This Canaanite story sounds so similar to the history of the Hebrew children in the desert and in Joseph’s Egypt (his family were sun, moon and stars in his dream, while he became “official guardian of the grain”) that I wonder if it might not have begun

In the midst of so much religious dramatic activity, the absence of drama in the Hebrew Scriptures becomes even more conspicuous. Why would drama *not* be present in Hebrew worship, especially since it already existed in the worship of the peoples around them?

The LORD your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same." You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates....See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it (Dt 12:29-32).

It seems clear that we do not find dramatic literature in the Bible for the simple reason that God did not want dramatic enactments taking place in the context of his OT worship. Assuming one agrees with the Westminster Confession's "regulative principle" of worship (XXI; 1), the prohibition against using drama in Christian worship is likewise implied. Though I believe there is a real *place* for drama in the life and ministry of Christ's church, eleven o'clock Sunday morning does not seem to be its proper *time*. If we can discover some reason for the implied prohibition, we might come that much closer to discovering a creational archetype for theatre.

In a thought-provoking book *Theater and Incarnation*, Covenant Theological Seminary graduate Max Harris has drawn a useful and convincing parallel between what takes place when theatrical texts are staged and what took place when the preexistent Word became man. In so doing, Harris has provided a category which helps us to understand better not only wherein lies the potential for *goodness* in theatre, but also (even if Harris may not see it that way) wherein lies the potential for *evil*.

Theatre has a hard time being ascetic...its medium is flesh, the flesh of the actor or actress who is, together with the audience, the irreducible minimum beyond which theatre disappears. To put it another way, theatre is a determinedly sensory medium, engaging in varying degree all the senses of the audience and not just, for example, the sight of the reader or the hearing of the listener. If [it is true that] art resists asceticism, the theatre, as the fleshiest, most sensual and, in the view of a long parade of ecclesiastical critics from the Church Fathers to the Puritans and Fundamentalists, the most "worldly" of art forms, does so more vigorously than any other medium....If the Incarnation and theatre can be not merely reconciled but shown, in some sense, to be paradigms of one another, then a significant

its Canaanite religious life as a parody of the "insatiable" Hebrew invaders. It would be an interesting parallel to the drama of pagan Rome, for as we will see, complaints of the church fathers against theatre focused on its licentious sexual depictions and parodies of Christianity.

advance may be made towards a “reconciliation...between the creative imagination and the Christian faith.” It is this that I propose: that the idea of the Incarnation is through and through theatrical, and that the theatre, at its most joyous, occupies common ground with the Incarnation in its advocacy of what Karl Barth has called “the good gift of [our] humanity.”⁶

Harris is right to see that an actor’s incarnation of the words of a dramatic text is fundamentally similar to the Word himself having put on flesh. And it is at this point, perhaps, that we can discover why God did not make dramatic enactment part of his worship in the Old Testament. It is not that true worship is *anti*-theatrical, rather, it is *supra*-theatrical. God is ever about the business of showing himself more glorious than the sham gods of the nations. And just as many religions have their sham dying-god myths, so many religions have, as we have seen, their sham “incarnations of words.” Unlike the pagans, whose drama tries to bring life to 1) *mythological* events which are 2) *supposed* to have taken place in 3) time *past* – the God of covenants, via the typology of a Moses, David, Abraham and Isaac, or 40-year trek through the desert, creates 1) *actual* lives which marvelously depict 2) *real* events which will not take place until 3) time *future*. Once that future time comes, God’s supra-theatrical glory shines even brighter as he “acts” like one of us. And after the ascension, supra-theatrical incarnation reaches greater heights of wonder, for “Now *you* are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:27). We are called “to be imitators of God” (Eph 5:1), for “God has chosen to make known among [those dramatically-active, yet spiritually-needy] Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery: Which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27).

Against this backdrop, let us now turn to a different scriptural idea: Namely, that the consequences of one’s public actions do not accrue to the individual alone.

The son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father went out among the Israelites, and a fight broke out in the camp between him and an Israelite. The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name with a curse.... Then the LORD said to Moses: “Take the blasphemer outside the camp. *All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head*, and the entire assembly is to stone him” (Lv 24:10-14).

A principle seems to emerge here for the theatre practitioner: I dare not do or say anything onstage which causes my neighbors, the audience, to stumble. But of course, we see ample evidence of plays, TV and films that encourage just that.

⁶Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), x-xi.

In a remarkable survey of children between the ages of 10 and 16, the Los Angeles polling firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maulin and Associates learned that one-third of the kids “often” want to try what they see other people doing on television, while two-thirds said their peers are influenced by what they see on the tube.... Sixty-five percent said programs like “The Simpsons” and “Married...With Children”...encourage children to disrespect their parents. Sixty-two percent said sex portrayed on TV shows and in movies influences kids to have sex when they’re too young....⁷

Lynn Smith, *L.A. Times* writer, polled Hollywood industry parents...Ted Harbert, president of ABC Entertainment, forbids his six-year-old to watch practically everything on commercial television. Joel Andryc, exec with Saban Entertainment, wouldn’t let his kids see *Jurassic Park*, and won’t let them view prime time sitcoms that show and discuss sex. Charles Rosen, executive director of *Beverly Hills 90210*, doesn’t like *The Simpsons*. He finds when his kids watch it, “They become antisocial. They fight with each other.”⁸

We, of course, need not be surprised by such evidence. Human beings are designed to learn through observation of their environments (acting as “audiences”) and emulation of those around them (acting as “players”). Language, physical gesture, cultural and gender norms are learned as children play “house,” “doctor” and “Star Wars.” “Let’s pretend” is a sort of apprenticeship for adult life. But even grown-ups learn via observation and emulation. That is part of why the Word became flesh: We needed a *model* who could demonstrate for us what it is like to be “tempted in every way just as we are—yet [remain] without sin” (Heb 4:15).

The incarnate Word, therefore, is a likely element of our creational archetype. Our neighbors *require* examples of how other people fully-yet-righteously experience, rejoice in, and walk through God’s good creation. Because we are often not creative enough to figure it out on our own, we need fully-fleshed *models* of how it is possible to have hope in a world of suffering, or how one can “hate evil but cling to what is good.” It has been argued that a well-developed imagination is a necessity for moral education.⁹ According to Romans 12:2, it takes creative thinking not to be conformed to the world. Paul writes, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1) not, presumably, because he was vain; rather he was meeting a need. A

⁷Cal Thomas, “Television: Children Respond,” *Chattanooga Free Press*, 4 March 1995.

⁸Newsletter of Mastermedia International, Inc., Redlands, CA, May 16, 1996.

⁹William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right from Wrong: Moral Illiteracy and the Case for Character Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

Theatre of Righteous, Imaginative, Joyous, Hopeful Incarnation could meet such a need too.

THEATRE AND MISSION

What Does the Church Owe the Theatre? A Field Allowed to Go to Seed

The professional theatre community is a mission field that the church has allowed to go to seed throughout virtually all of her 2,000-year existence.

The theatre must be infiltrated by Christians, for it is its own “people group,” under-served by gospel missions. One way to reach this people group is for believers to become sufficiently well trained in theatre craft to be competitive in the market place. In this way Christians can meet and work side by side with lost folk whose lifestyles and work schedules make it unlikely that more traditional evangelical endeavors will ever reach them.

To be sure, a glance at the opinions of many of the great minds of church history would seem to argue with my wisdom at this point. Christian “antitheatricalists” include, among others, Tatian, Tertullian, the Cappadocians, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine, Lollardy, numerous Puritans,¹⁰ Jansenism, one-time actor George Whitefield, Timothy Dwight, C. H. Spurgeon and, of course, my grandma.

The ancient Fathers objected to drama largely because of its connection to pagan worship. And well might they object to the arena and other Roman entertainments, which involved genuine murders and torture, gross licentiousness, as well as ridicule of the Christian sacraments. (Hence would Augustine raise the problem of the validity of baptism conferred onstage.)¹¹ While one wishes that the Fathers had thought about how, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, to *redeem* the theatre from such horrors, we can sympathize that such redemption was to them likely no more thinkable than “redemption” of cultic prostitution, gladiatorial combat or idol worship. Still, we can fault the Fathers for having allowed the philosophic dualism of their day to blind them to the antibiblical nature of some of their views. Tertullian, for example, stole from the glory of God, Creator of the *imago dei*, when he

¹⁰For a short history of a specifically “Presbyterian take,” see “Theatre, Christian Attitudes to,” in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993).

¹¹*De Baptismo* vii, 53. See “Entertainments,” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, vol. 1; produced by the Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum; ed. Angelo Di Berardino; trans. Adrian Walford; foreword and bibliographic amendments by W. H. C. Frend (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

wrote that *demons* were sufficient to the task of “granting [man] the artistic talents required by the shows.”¹² Paul by contrast writes that: “by [Christ] all things were created” (Col 1:16), and “God was pleased...through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col 1:19–20).

By contrast, too, we find early Reformers¹³ such as Luther and Melancthon actively championing and making use of Classical, as well as Protestant, biblical drama. In Geneva performances took place with Calvin’s approval, while his adjutant Theodore Bèze wrote, among other plays, *Abraham Sacrifiant*, an important early work of French Renaissance tragedy.¹⁴ Martin Bucer considered performing plays written by virtuous men a form of “honest recreation,”¹⁵ and in King Edward’s England, the Reformation moved apace partly via Protestant polemical plays written by John Foxe the martyrologist (and comedian!)¹⁶ and others. The seminal English tragedy *Gorbuduc* was co-authored by Thomas Norton, translator of the first English version of Calvin’s *Institutes*.¹⁷ And it is there that we read:

Let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theater [i.e., Creation]...God himself has shown by the order of Creation that he created all things for man’s sake.¹⁸

If it comes as a surprise to the reader that the Reformers did not castigate drama, it is perhaps because we are more familiar with condemnations of drama written by the Puritans and their spiritual heirs.

¹²*De Spectaculis*, as quoted in Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1982), 84.

¹³For some brief history on Reformers and theatre, see James A. Parente, “Drama,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁴Pieter Keegstra, *Abraham sacrifiant de Théodore de Bèze et le Théâtre calviniste de 1550 à 1566* (The Hague: Drukkerij van Haeringen, 1928).

¹⁵*De Regno Christi*, quoted in Ruth H. Blackburn, *Biblical Drama Under the Tudors* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton & Co., 1971), 119.

¹⁶J. H. Smith, ed, *Two Latin Comedies by John Foxe the Martyrologist*, Renaissance Society of America Renaissance Text Series, no. IV (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1973.)

¹⁷John T. McNeill, ed., *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols.; trans. and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), xliii.

¹⁸Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 171-82. “Calvin has similar references to the heavens and the earth as a theater (*theatrum*) in which we may behold the Creator’s glory in I. vi.2; I. xiv.20; II. vi.1; III.ix.2; Comm. Gen. 1:6; Comm Ps. 138:1; and frequently elsewhere” (McNeill, 61, n. 27).

We can hardly avoid the conclusion that the theatre, even at its moral best, is contrary to the whole tenor of the Christian faith. William Law [asserts that] "If you live in the use of this diversion you have no grounds to hope that you have the spirit and heart of a Christian....It is no uncharitable assertion to affirm that a player cannot be a living member of Christ, or in a true state of grace, till he renounces his profession with a sincere and deep repentance."¹⁹

In response, one contemporary voice helps to put all the above "antitheatricalism" into helpful Christian perspective:

One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing himself without wanting everyone else to give it up. That is not the Christian way. An individual Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reasons – marriage, or meat, or beer, or the cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people who do use them, he has taken the wrong turning.²⁰

It is such Christian "wrong turnings" that in part explain why actors have suffered economic and social injustice for millennia. Legal and ecclesiastical sanctions have often created atmospheres in which the actor was simply unable to shake off his social stigma. During the late Roman Empire, "the law bound them to their trade like serfs, forbade them to leave it for any other, and required their children to follow it in their turn."²¹ And "the sixteenth-century Ritual of Paris...lumped actors with usurers, magicians, blasphemers, whoremasters, and women of ill life as public sinners forbidden to receive communion during their lives or Christian burial after their deaths."²²

To be sure, the modern actor is free from the larger measure of this style of opprobrium; still, even if he can find work, and even if he is one of the highly overpaid few, the work itself is often a degradation:

In Losey's *The Go Between* one wonders what is the effect on the young boy who is involved in the scene of fornication in a hayloft. Or what effect did...certain scenes have on the adolescent in Mulligan's *Summer of '42*...the fourteen-year-old girl in *The Exorcist*...? Bertolucci, speaking of *Last Tango in Paris*, said "Even Marlon Brando was wiped out by the shooting of the film.

¹⁹S. M. Houghton, "The Christian and Theatrical Entertainment," *Banner of Truth* 99 (December 1971): 28.

²⁰C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952; New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone Books, 1996), 76.

²¹Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981; paperback, 1985.), 42.

²²*Ibid.*, 192-93.

Without bitterness he told me, 'I was completely and utterly violated by you. I will never make another film like that.'²³

So, lest the reader misunderstand, it is not my purpose to champion the dramatic arts against all reason or morality. The reader should understand that there is much in the critics I have cited with which I agree. Indeed, it is precisely because of my working and studying with theatre folk for the better part of twenty years, that I can say to the antitheatrical critics above, "Gentlemen, you don't know the half of it!"

Until one has lived and suffered with a people, perhaps it is nigh impossible to feel compassion for them. The Pharisees, in their day, were skilled at enumerating, at a distance, the faults of prostitutes and tax collectors. Jesus, by contrast, preferred to go to dinner parties with them, since, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Lk 5:31).

For several years, therefore, I have sent out prayer letters to friends who would pray for the university theatre department where I worked, as though it were a mission field. A portion of the November 1997 letter follows:

Earlier this fall we produced an evening of one-act plays by prominent women playwrights.... If I had been aware of the content of the one play before it started rehearsal, I would have objected to its being done. Not only were the verbal assault and sexual violence of the play an affront to the audience (I heard people around me *groaning*), but the student-actors who were called upon to enact such things have, in my opinion, been betrayed by a faculty (I include myself) which should have known better than to proffer such caustic lye as a profitable exercise for students to immerse themselves in....

In a post-production departmental meeting involving both faculty and students, I said that I thought it had been inappropriate to offer the students such a play to work on.... My fear for them, of course, is that since the *faculty* offered them this activity to do, they will (in a typical twenty-something, braggadocio fashion) assume in an unthinking way that "they can handle it." Of course, they do not even know what "it" is, much less that "it" is something that no human being was ever designed to handle.... [One student actress] is a Christian. I called her into my office after I saw the show and asked her about her experience. She had found it quite traumatic. Still, apparently, the director *had* asked her more than once if she was "ok" with doing the show, and, unfortunately, she did not have the gumption to tell him "no".... I think this student was wrong not to have told the director the truth. Unfortunately, I also think she was *wronged* to have ever been put in the position where she would have to make such a choice.... Students are between a rock and a hard place—they must *obey* the

²³Donald Drew, *Images of Man; A Critique of the Contemporary Cinema* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974), 86.

educational authorities if they wish to learn, but then they need to know when to say “no” if a teacher hands them an inappropriate assignment. It is not just for students to find themselves in such situations. Pray for them; it is impossible that they will have sufficient wisdom to make right choices unless God grants it to them.

One Way the Theatre Might Serve Christ’s Cause: Incarnation and Post-modern Apologetics

So how can we set about redeeming this bleak situation? What hope is there for the producers of dramatic art and their beleaguered audiences? The answer, of course, is just the same for them as it is for any other person or group: “The gospel, [which] is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Rom 1:16).

But the question now turns to “what is the apt mode for delivery of the gospel message to such a generation as ours?” In 1972, Schaeffer’s apologetic strategy was to show modern man that biblical faith must be based on knowledge. As such he wrote that, “The Bible teaches in two different ways: first, it teaches certain things in didactic statements.... Second, the Bible teaches by showing how God works in the world that he himself made.”²⁴

Today we must note, however, that the Bible does not merely teach in *two* ways; there is a third. In addition to teaching didactically and historically the Bible teaches *artistically*.²⁵ Experience tells me it is true. Take, by way of example, the poetic and allusive Song of Solomon.

Back in the fall of 1991, the student newspaper at the university where I taught asked me to write an opinion piece, explaining why I had testified against a famous, obscene New York play that wanted to perform on Chattanooga city property. Part of the piece follows:

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth/for your love is more delightful than wine.../Take me away with you – let us hurry! /Let the king bring me into his chambers.”

The preceding lines are taken from the opening passage of my most cherished erotic poem. That I should even have such a thing as a favorite erotic poem...may strike some as a puzzling inconsistency in one who has taken a public stand against obscenity....

²⁴Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1972), 78.

²⁵Still, perhaps we need not entirely separate biblical history and biblical art. V. Philips Long in *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) argues the point that the Bible’s historiography is conspicuously literary in style. He calls it “verbal representational art.” The artistic element does not compromise truth; indeed, art actually augments truth.

The difference between erotica and obscenity is that the former unabashedly delights in sexual partners as lovely, dignified, whole human beings, while the latter measures the entire worth of persons in terms of [certain vulgar physical qualifications].

I wrote that piece out of a good deal of passion; for having grown up exposed to pornography from age eight, I knew how warped views of sexuality were a soul-killing poison. Thus, over the years I had pored over Solomon's Song, desperately digging, trying to understand what could possibly be "holy" about "matrimony."

Though it has taken years, God has removed a substantial amount of the poison from my system. The realization of how God preserved me once moved me to write a poem, based on imagery taken from Ezekiel 16 and 23, Hosea 2:14-23 and similar passages. Sometime later, when I was teaching a section of the course "Voice and Diction for Actors," on a whim (but with some fear and trembling too) I included my scripture poem with the other texts we were working on that term. The students were rapt. "Where did you get this from," one asked—a young man who is homosexual and HIV positive. I told them that I had written it, and that it was based on OT imagery in which God speaks to Israel as his adulterous bride. We then proceeded to work on the text as we would any other. A number of years later, another of the students from that class contacted me specifically to ask for another copy of the poem: "I've lost mine, and need it." In conversations with this young man, it seems to me that the message of the Scriptures has somehow touched his heart. Though he is not yet a Christian, he has said to me, "I just have no patience with all those university types who malign Christianity. Do they know what they're talking about? It's such a *beautiful* religion!"

Post-modern man will not easily be evangelized with a propositional tract. He needs to know that the God of history *is there* before he will listen to what he *says*; but he may not even believe in *history* any more, so we will have to try to sneak in by another door. Move our listeners' hearts with an encounter with real Beauty, and we may just get them to ask, "Where did you get this from?" As Schaeffer insisted on a proper "order for...apologetics in the second half of the twentieth century"²⁶—that knowledge must precede faith—now a new order of apologetics is needed for the twenty-first century. If knowledge precedes faith for the modern man, it seems *memory of knowledge* must precede knowledge, preceding faith, for the post-modern man. Beauty, art, drama could help stir up that memory.

And then the Truth will set him free.

²⁶Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968), 129.