

IF WE SHADOWS HAVE OFFENDED: TOWARDS A WORSHIP-THEOLOGY
FOR DRAMA IN THE CHURCH

By Dale Harris

© 2007 by CCWS and the author

Summary:

Drama as skits or sketches is almost all that is known in contemporary evangelicalism. Harris explores some options beyond this idea. Included are concepts of drama related to reenactment rather than presenting a message. Reenactment of Passover, deliverance at the sea and the Eucharist are biblical examples. Included is this summary comment: "...we must begin, not with presentational, anthropocentric plays that emerge out of our own experience and felt needs, but with that participatory, theocentric "play" God has given us to perform, which we hear in the ministry of the Word and is made visible for us in the ministry of the Table."

Length: 23 pages

Drama and Worship: Strange but Strangely Familiar Bedfellows

The vital need for a theological study on the relationship between drama and worship was borne home to me deeply even as I was researching this paper. Early in my exploration of current material, I signed out from our library Max Harris' insightful and illuminating book, *Theatre and Incarnation*.¹ As the librarian scanned it through, she paused inquisitively to judge it by its cover: "Theatre and Incarnation? That seems like a strange combination." In many ways, her comment illustrates one of the two polarized views that the Evangelical Church commonly takes whenever theatre happens to find its way through the narthex (or out of the youth-ministries room) and into the sanctuary as part of the Sunday morning worship: "that's a strange combination." It sits there, awkward among the lofty harmonies of sacred hymnody, sophisticated expository sermons and spontaneous expressions of religious pathos, like some motley-hued, conical-capped side-show show curiosity. This, or it is enthusiastically embraced on purely pragmatic grounds.

A paradigmatic example of this second view, the pragmatic view, can be seen in the prominent and well promoted drama ministry of Willow Creek. In *Drama Ministry: Practical Help for Making Drama a Vital Part of Your Church*, Steve Pederson endorses Willow Creek's use of theatre almost exclusively on the basis of its practical, phenomenological effects: Drama is an effective weapon in our "arsenal" of communication; it stirs our memories, probes our psyches and exposes our pain; it has the power to "reduce people's defenses," thus allowing "communication to truly penetrate one's heart"; it inspires us to worship by helping us better "understand who we are."² Though Pederson insists that "using drama to evangelize" is an

¹ Max Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

² Steve Pederson, *Drama Ministry: Practical Help for Making Drama a Vital Part of Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 15-18.

“abuse of the art form,” he still sees the role of drama as a pragmatic (if emotive) mode of linear presentation parallel to the sermon: “The combination of drama presented by actors, with a message given by a pastor is a terrific ‘marriage.’ While the sketch helps people get in touch with an issue or problem, the pastor brings a biblical perspective to that issue.”³ We do it because it achieves goals.

What is missing from both these views—the curious “What’s *it* doing here?” and the pragmatic “What’s *it doing* here?”— is any theological or doxological consideration of drama specifically as a sacred act. Granted it might prepare our hearts *for* acts of worship, is there any legitimate ground from which we might claim that drama itself *is* an act of worship, one that belongs legitimately in the church service along with song, prayer and other such acts as a vital expression of our response to God and life together as his people? Is there any possibility of finding a home for theatre in the church beyond the opening act for the worship team or an elaborate but effective commercial for the sermon?⁴

As these questions rise to the surface, a wide range of theological, biblical and cultural considerations immediately emerge with them, not least because, as we will see, dramatized rites and ritualized theatre have an ancient history as a vital part of the human response to the numinous. Though theatre and worship may seem strange bed fellows to the Evangelical church, to most ancient and primitive cultures, religious activity is *de facto* dramatic activity; worship necessarily includes some form of dramatic representation. Drama begins as cultic act. Camille Hallstrom notes this primitive connection, suggesting that “theatre as we know it in the west was

³ Ibid., 25.

⁴ It is interesting to note that, while Willow Creek has used drama extensively as a ministry tool since it started its seeker services almost 30 years ago, it is primarily reserved for these “outreach services,” which they “do not consider worship,” and it seldom appears in the midweek worship service. Ibid., 18-9.

invented as a *form of worship*,” and that many religions make use of drama in their worship.⁵ In the context of such pervasive religious dramatic activity, however, Hallstrom will point to a “conspicuous” absence of drama in the Hebrew Scriptures. Appealing to the Westminster Confession’s “regulative principle,” she will argue that “It seems clear that we do not find dramatic literature in the Bible for the simple reason God did not want dramatic enactments taking place in the context of his OT worship.”⁶

Whether this explanation is clear *or* simple remains to be seen. To be sure, if we scour the Scriptures for something akin to *Death of a Salesman* or *Waiting for Godot* we can expect disappointment; even a search for something parallel to ancient dramatic masterpieces like *Antigone* or *Oedipus Rex* must come away empty handed. And indeed, though Job contains the “stuff of drama” in its dialogical structure, though the prophets were undoubtedly dramatic in their elaborate object lessons, though some critics have argued that Second Isaiah was actually a dramatist, it is both a hermeneutical *and* theatrical leap to call any of these texts plays.⁷ But this is not to deny that there is certainly something *dramaturgical* about many texts of Scripture, something that lends itself to a kind of ritualized performance, inviting a kind of enacted dramatic reality. One thinks, for instance, of the Book of Esther, which the Jews traditionally read at Purim. Here, at the very feast whose origins this ancient story of scandal, intrigue and heroism recounts, it is recalls *anamnetically* from the distant past to the festive present,

⁵ Camille Hallstrom, “Theatre as Incarnation: Toward a Vision for Redemption of Dramatic Art,” in *Presbyterion* 27.2 (Fall 2001): 137. She offers this list of contemporary examples: “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.”

⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷ On the “street theatre” of the ancient prophetic ministry, see Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation*, 9. On Second Isaiah as drama, see John G. F. Wilks, “The Prophet as Incompetent Dramatist” in *Vestus Testamentum* 43.4 (2003): 530-543.

dramatized with enthusiastic booing and “play-full” rattling of noise-makers whenever Haman’s name is read, and then further re-enacted with a meal and gift-exchange like the one that concludes the story (Es 9:18-19).⁸ More concretely, one thinks of the liturgical dialogue inherent in many of the Psalms—Psalm 136’s simple responsive refrain “for his steadfast love endures forever,” or the interrogative exchange in Psalm 24: “Who is this King of glory? The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory.”⁹ More concretely still, one thinks of the scripted dialogue, dramatic scenes and narrative movement of the Song of Songs, with its dramatized exchange between the Beloved, the Lover, and the Friends inviting a kind of dramatized performance that likely draws on the wedding rites of Ancient Israel.¹⁰

In the ritualized dialogue, the dramatized narrative and the festival context of such texts, we glimpse a form of that dramatized religious activity which F. W. Dillistone refers to when he suggests that “over a very long period of human history, certain forms of religion have been intimately related to certain forms of drama. In certain societies, all religion has been dramatic in form, and all drama has been religious.”¹¹ To be sure, we are still far removed from the

⁸ These traditions are still practiced by many Jews; notably children often dress in playful costumes at Purim, in a festival tradition similar to our Hallowe’en. For more see Jon Sarpong, “Jewish Communities Around the World Celebrate Purim - The Festival of Lots”; available from www.insidetoronto.com/news/Annex/Column/article/21056.

⁹ On the liturgical function of Psalm 24, see Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50 Word Biblical Commentary* 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 211-13: “if one assumes that the Psalm achieved its present unity prior to incorporation within the Psalter, the possibility remains that the entire psalm was a liturgical piece with a setting in some specific cultic activity”; thus “The basic image underlying vv 7-10, and reflected in the original liturgical usage of the passage, is that of the return of the Ark from war. . . . The [mythic language of the Psalm] is transformed . . . in liturgical usage, so that the “gates/doors” represent the gatekeepers of the temple; as the procession approaches them, twice they ask: ‘Who is the King of Glory’ . . . and twice they are answered by those in the Ark’s procession.” On the uses of this Psalm in the theatric rituals of the early Church, see Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology, and Drama* (London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 214, 276.

¹⁰ The connection between the Song of Songs and Israelite wedding practices is convoluted. As Duane Garrett suggests, rather than seeing it as the text of a wedding ritual, it is perhaps more helpful to understand it as drawing on “the wedding rituals of ancient Israel” to help orient the reader to the action (*Song of Songs Word Biblical Commentary* 23a (Waco, TX: 2004), 182).

¹¹ F. W. Dillistone, “Inter-Play Between the Religious and the Dramatic,” in *Theology Today* 31.2 (July 1974): 126.

cathartic vision of Lear’s tirade against the elements, but we are glimpsing the silhouette of a kind of dramatic, theatrical ritual that pervaded worship in the ancient world—Song of Songs is no play, but then neither are the liturgical “dramas” of ancient Egypt which are believed to be the distant ancestor of Greek tragedy.¹² The point here is that, though we do not find “plays-proper” in the Scriptures, we do find the kind of dramatic enactments and theatrical rites from which modern drama emerged, suggesting that simply dismissing of the question of drama-as-worship on the basis of the regulative principle is unnecessarily preemptive.

If we can consider drama in its ancient context, where the essential elements of theatre—symbolic gesture, mimetic movement, theatrical representation and ritualized dialogue—all played an important role as a medium for the human response to the divine, we discover that OT worship was fundamentally dramatic, and that Christian worship, emerging out of this Hebrew context, preserves a similar, intuitive theatricality. In Robert Webber’s words: “Hebrew worship, beginning with the early sacrifices made by Abel and his successors Abraham, the patriarchs, and the priesthood of Israel, is a dramatic portrayal of the relationship that men and women have with God”; and “The same approach to worship is found in New Testament times.”¹³ And we discover here, too, a thesis for understanding the role of drama in the church: Because it is rooted in the ancient modes of Hebrew and early Christian worship, where symbolic, dramatized enactment formed the context for the experience of the divine, and because it engages persons and communities holistically—the physical, emotive, imaginative and social self together—there is a necessary dramatic element to Christian worship, one in which the

¹² See Gerardus van der Leeuw *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, trans. David E. Green, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), 81-2, 93 for some interesting examples; See also Leslie Du S. Read, “Beginnings of Theatre in Africa and the Americas,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, ed. John Russell Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 93-4.

¹³ Robert Webber, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship: Volume 4, Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, Book 2 (Nashville, TE: Starsong, 1994), 657ff.

festive and the theatrical play an important role in our response to God and our life together as his people. While this thesis may make legitimate space for the drama *as play* in the worship service in particular contexts (nativity pageants on Christmas or passion plays on Easter for instance), what it calls for more urgently are faithful and creative efforts to allow the theatrical and festive potential already latent in many traditional and contemporary acts of worship (liturgical readings, dramatic hymnody, scripture readings, symbolic gestures and sacrament) to breathe deep and come to full life.

Theatre, Dance and Ritual Act: A Theory of Drama

As a variety of literary critics, historians of religion and historians of theatre alike have pointed out, dramatic activity appears to be one of the archetypal modes of human expression, emerging from sacred movement and symbolic gesture as one of our most deeply religious activities. Indeed it is interesting to note that theatre as we know it today actually developed very directly from the religious festivals of ancient Greece. In his relatively succinct account of the origins of Western drama, Oliver Taplin suggests that it developed as part of the *Dionysia*, the spring festival celebrating the fermentation of new wine in honour of the god Dionysus: “they dedicated for it a large area above the temple of Dionysus on the south-west slope below the Acropolis. At the foot they leveled a performance space.”¹⁴ The plays held at this festival seem to have been an artistic elaboration of the “dithramb”—“an elaborate song with circular choreography, originally about Dionysus” in which ten choruses of fifty men and ten choruses of fifty boys competed.¹⁵ Added to these poetic and choreographic elements was the use of masks, which allowed performers to “become” different characters: “whether these masks were derived

¹⁴ See *History of Theatre*, 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

from primeval cults of Dionysus or were invented for the theatre, the players, actors and chorus alike ... all wore whole-headed masks. ... Each role had a different mask, but not necessarily a different actor.”¹⁶ Though this art form was thoroughly Greek, it is interesting to note the discovery of the *Exagoge* (ca. 2nd century BC), a play dramatizing the Exodus story by an Alexandrine Jew named Ezechiel: “Here, for the edification of Jews and Gentiles in Egypt, we have a chorus of the daughters of Raguel, a messenger-speech telling of the inundation of Pharaoh’s troops, and the voice of God from the burning bush addressing Moses in Attic iambic in the style of Euripides.”¹⁷ This is notable first because it illustrates the pervasiveness of this art form in the Hellenistic world, and second because it suggests that, at least for the cosmopolitan Jews of Alexandria, the pagan origins of theatre did not prevent it from being adapted to Jewish culture and expressing biblical themes.

It is in consideration of such ancient religious origins that George Gurvitch can ask rhetorically: “Is it not obvious that in the various types of societies known as archaic, the social functions of the theatre are linked to ritual, prayer, magic and ordeals?”¹⁸ While we might justifiably cringe at this association between theatre and “magic,” in a broader sense the embodied, symbolic en-action that is the essence of drama—one of the fundamental ways of making the unseen seen—has always played a vital role in human response to and experience of the numinous.¹⁹ In his *Philosophy of Literary Form* for instance, Kenneth Burke describes *ritual drama* as the “Ur-form,” the hub from which all other *human* action radiates: “Ritual drama is

¹⁶ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹⁸ George Gurvitch, “The Sociology of the Theatre,” in *Sociology of Literature and Drama*, Elizabeth and Tom Burns, eds. (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), 78.

¹⁹ So Harris (*Theatre and Incarnation*, 112) will note that “the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts.

considered as the culminating form, from this point of view, and any other form [of symbolic action] is to be considered as the ‘efficient’ overstressing of one or another of the ingredients found in ritual drama.”²⁰ Lauren Friesen makes a similar observation when she suggests that “[t]he imitation of an action establishes the foundational image and form of expression for both theatre and religion. This re-enactment of prior deeds, portraying life, death and new life, is the transformative function of ritual. Religion and theatre arose from ritual and they are dependent on this social function.”²¹ In a somewhat different vein, van der Leeuw suggests that drama functioned primitively as a natural extension of the mimetic movements of sacred dance, an archetypal mode of artistic and thus inherently religious expression: “the dance is older than drama; the oldest form of drama is the dance...In Japan, drama likewise arose from the dance. There are traces which point to the fact that Greek comedy arose from animal dances, that is, pantomimic dances with animal masks.”²² Elsewhere he will claim that “dance is beyond doubt the art which plays the most important role in the structure of the drama.”²³ From this perspective, we might more fully appreciate the theatrical nature of Miriam’s sacred dance after the Exodus, where she reenacts in song *and movement* together the truth that the people of Israel had indeed “walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea” (Ex 15:19-22ff).²⁴

It is at this point in our discussion, however, that we must pause to consider two inherent dangers—one semantic, the other logistic—in our description of the “theatrical” nature of

²⁰ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 103.

²¹ Lauren Friesen, “Theatre and Religion,” in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 7.1 (Winter 1989): 14.

²² Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane*, 78.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ On the “theatricality” of the Exodus story proper, see Harris’ insightful comments in *Theatre and Incarnation*, 8-9.

biblical worship. Semantically, we must continually bear in mind that when they employ terms like “drama” and “theatricality,” writers like Webber, Dillistone van der Leeuw and Burke above are using them in a broadened and nuanced sense much different from the popular understanding of “play-acting” and much closer to their etymological sense of “a thing done” and “a thing beheld.”²⁵ To claim that gestures of Christian worship should be “dramatic” is adamantly *not* to suggest that we are to be “making-believe” or “pretending” when we gather together; rather, it is to notice that in the symbolic activity and gestures we perform when we worship the Creator as embodied-creatures (from lifting hands to kneeling to breaking a loaf of bread), we are “enacting” and “making visible” a kind of sacred experience in a way that was significant in OT *and* early Christian worship, and to modestly propose that such activity is the kind of intuitive, deeply human activity of which the modern phenomenon of “acting” and “plays” is a residual expression.

As a related logistic issue, we must note and grapple with the important question of dramatized ritual as “magic” that pervades much primitive, pagan and non-Christian practices of worship. Unlike the pagan notion that mimetic acts are a way of *effecting* a reality—perform these gestures in this mode so as to coerce or compel the gods to act in like way—the dramatic action of Christian worship must always be understood as a way of *expressing* a reality. In this regard, the theatricality of Christian worship must always have a historical dimension—anamnetically recalling God’s acts and proleptically recalling God’s promises. We do not dramatize our worship so as to *create* a reality, but to express and respond to the reality that God has already created in our midst. In his theory of drama, Dillistone will distinguish between primitive drama that develops from the *dance*—“the form of activity in which a society identifies

²⁵ “Drama,” from the Greek δράμα, “deed, action, play,” from δράν, “to do, act, perform”; Theatre, from the Greek θεᾶσθαι, “to behold”; OED.

itself artistically with some aspect of the rhythmic life process of the natural order”—and that which develops from the *covenant*— the “encounter and engagement... the critical surprises which befall the nomad in meeting with the stranger, or the prey, or even with the angel of the Lord.”²⁶ Within this framework, he will draw a distinction between the dramatic worship of Israel and that of pagan cultures like Egypt and Greece. Though the above example of Miriam suggests that such a distinction between covenant and dance seems perhaps too fine—the dramatic worship of Israel had a cyclic/rhythmic dimension in its Sabbath and harvest rituals as much as a linear/historical dimension in its Passovers and sacrificial feasts—his observations are helpful in that they remind us that the drama of Israel’s worship always maintained that historic orientation. Thus it “expresses itself ... through rare commemorative festivals when a whole society celebrates. As such, it “breaks the bounds of ordinary theater, but it still has every right to be known as drama.”²⁷

The Theatre and the Church

In light of the theory of drama discussed above, it is interesting to note the historic Church’s variegated relationship to the theatre, at times opposing it on moral grounds, at times embracing it in its festive celebrations, at times critic, at times patron of this form of human expression. Harris traces an anti-theatrical prejudice going back as far as Plato and based in a suspicion of its phenomenological effects, the multiple sensory bombardment and immediate response evoked by theatre that “bred fear in those who want to control the ways in which a public is affected.”²⁸ More concretely, however, the earliest Christian objections to theatre were

²⁶ Dillistone, “Inter-Play”: 128.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation*, 69.

based primarily on moral and religious indignation. As van der Leeuw suggests, “The Church in its infancy became acquainted with the heathen theatre, and this beyond doubt was more like vaudeville than like classic comedy or tragedy. Theatre, dance and salable love were inextricably bound up together. The theatre and the bordello were related concepts.”²⁹ Likewise, Hallstrom observes that “The ancient Fathers objected to drama largely because of its connection to pagan worship. . . . which involved gross licentiousness, as well as ridicule of the Christian sacraments.”³⁰ Thus Augustine would ridicule the pagans for worshipping gods who were represented performing shameful obscenities in the Roman theatre, but would also conjecture about the validity of mock Christian baptisms performed on stage. Tertullian would argue that demons granted a man the artistic talents required by the shows.³¹ In relation to the ridicule of the Christian faith in Roman theatre, van der Leeuw recounts the fascinating story of St. Gesenius, an actor who was converted Christianity while performing the role of a Christian in a play ridiculing the faith.³² In all this, the early attitude of the Church towards the theatre is perhaps best summarized by David Wiles: “From the point of view of the Church, theatre was not simply a source of obscenity and slander, it was part of an opposed religion. Since it could not be eliminated, the choice was either to restrain it or to appropriate it.”³³ Thus on the one hand we see the Byzantine Church declaring a wholesale ban on the satyr play, the comedy and the tragedy in the early 7th century, while on the other hand we have examples of plays on explicitly

²⁹ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane*, 53.

³⁰ Hallstrom, “Theatre as Incarnation”: 141.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “[In] his play, when he was brought before the Imperial Court and accused of being a Christian, [he] dropped his role and informed the people that he truly was a Christian: ‘Believe me, illustrious Emperor, and all you who have just laughed at these mysteries . . . believe me, that Christ is the true Lord, that He is the light, He is the truth, He is piety, and that you can obtain remission of your sins through Him.’” *Sacred and Profane*, 99.

³³ *History of Theatre*, 64.

Christian themes such as the undated Byzantine tragedy *Christos Paschon*.³⁴ This play is remarkable in that “the author has culled more than half his text from plays by Euripides, principally from the latter’s play about Dionysus.”³⁵ Despite such examples as this, more often the Church choose restraint over appropriation: “drama, the theatre, mime, puppets and such were viewed by Christians with distaste and even horror. When Constantine was converted and the empire was ‘Christianized’ somewhat, Christians dealt a decisive blow to drama and theatre.”³⁶

Even as it was opposing the public theatre, however, we see a gradual development of dramatic acts *in* the Church through the elaboration of the liturgy surrounding the sacraments. In this way, “The pleasures of the theatre were introduced into church services, first through antiphonal music, then through formal dramatic enactments, and in a final phase through allowing certain holy days to become anarchic festivals of role reversal.”³⁷ One of the most direct examples of this is in the dramatic rituals that developed around baptism. In his *The Devil at Baptism*, Henry Ansgar Kelly argues that by the beginning of the third century, baptism had developed into an elaborate ceremony at the heart of which was an powerful dramatization of the “resolute and sometimes fierce struggle against the devil, man’s spiritual oppressor and the instigator of his sins.”³⁸ “In such ways,” he argues, “the real-life drama of the struggle with

³⁴ Ibid., 65.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Webber, *Complete Library*, 658.

³⁷ *History of Theatre*, 65.

³⁸ Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology and Drama* (London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 10-11. His description bears extended reference: “Much of the dramatic action of the service had to be supplied by faith, of course, for the most important participants, namely Satan and his minions and God ... were invisible ... to the observers and the other participants. ... In one form of the service, the devil was elaborately summoned to court and was legally convicted of entertaining false claims over the candidates. The candidates themselves were then confiscated and were taken under the protection of Christ, who by dying *incognito* had deceived Satan into forfeiting his rights to tyrannize over the human race.”

Satan became ritualized and liturgized. Centuries later, in the West, the ritual and liturgy of the Church became dramatized in mimetic representations of the history of salvation.”³⁹ Thus we see the liturgy itself, with its antiphonal rhythms, readings and responses, and liturgical verse, develop with an increasingly dramatic character. A late example of this is the 9th Century *Quem Quaeritis*, a liturgical dialogue between the women at Christ’s tomb and the angels, an extended trope “which contains the nucleus of dramatic representation.”⁴⁰ Van der Leeuw suggests that the Passion plays and Easter plays that would later become a staple of mediaeval theatre grew out of the “holy drama” of such liturgical texts. In this context, too, we see the development of the saint play in the early mediaeval Church, one of the more fascinating examples of which is *The Conversion of Thais the Prostitute*, by the 10th century nun, Hroswitha.⁴¹

It is in the mediaeval era that drama generally and public theatre specifically played a central role in the Church’s worship and the religious experience of society as a whole.

Dillistone puts it thus: “The ritual actions and the liturgical language became increasingly formalized, and in medieval Europe drama existed only within a religious setting. The church *was* the theatre; the eternal passion of God *was* the drama; the sacred ministers *were* the actors. To all intents and purposes, religion and drama had become one.”⁴² The earliest forms of such religious drama involved reenactments of the events of Holy Week—a procession through the church with a person riding a donkey on Palm Sunday, a cross draped with cloth and laid in an empty tomb on Good Friday, and so on.⁴³ Likewise we see the development of elaborate street

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane*, 94.

⁴¹ See *History of Theatre*, 72-3, for an extended discussion.

⁴² Dillistone, “Inter-Play”: 127, emphasis original.

⁴³ Webber, *Complete Library*, 658.

theatre which presented biblical stories and religious themes for the education and edification of the laity: the mystery plays which reenacted Bible stories, the miracle plays which dramatized the lives of saints, and the morality plays which presented allegorized tales of the eternal psychomachia between virtue and vice. Van der Leeuw suggests that this development reflects a gradual secularization of drama: “One might say that the drama emerged from the church to the church square, from the temple in to the marketplace.”⁴⁴ What is important to note of these medieval religious dramas, however, is their highly participatory nature. Not only were citizens broadly involved in the productions (the shipwright’s guild producing the Noah play, for instance), but the audience of the plays were deeply involved in the dramatic action—they were not passive observers but active participants, often with roles implied or made explicit by the text.⁴⁵ In this way, theatre invited people into the spiritual reality of that which was staged for them: “The annual round of dramatic and paradramatic activity allowed medieval people not merely to view the cycle of sin, repentance, and redemption but to live that cycle.”⁴⁶ Though theatre would become increasingly bawdy—to the point that Pope Innocent III would expunge the players from the church in 1250—and though the Reformation and Puritan eras would remain highly suspicious of it⁴⁷—we see in the theatrical celebration of the mediaeval church’s annual

⁴⁴ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane*, 90.

⁴⁵ See Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation*, 15. Harris offers a fascinating example of this kind of implicit participation in his reading of the mediaeval Cornish mystery play *Ordinalia*. During the passion scene, while Christ is being crucified on one side of the stage, one of the torturers is sent to the smithy for nails and there, on the other side of the stage, he and the Smith’s Wife “forge nails to a dialogue that is crudely evocative of adultery.” Though early commentators decried the “inappropriate ribaldry” of this scene “even while Jesus was visibly stretched on the cross,” Harris suggests that the coarse laughter evoked from the audience by the dirty jokes actually implicates the audience in a powerful way: “by their laughter at the obscenity of human sin, even as Christ is dying for that sin, the spectators themselves are implicated. They have found funny the very thing for which Christ, in all seriousness is dying. The playwright has transformed his audience from ‘mere spectators’ to guilty participants even as he displays God’s gracious solution to their guilt” (*Theatre and Incarnation*, 33).

⁴⁶ *History of Theatre*, 88.

⁴⁷ See Webber, *Complete Library*, 659.

festivals, pageants and ceremonies a glimpse of how public theatre and its intuitively religious dimension has played an important role in the worship experience of the historic Church.

Theatre, Festival and the Ministry of the Table

This brings us to what Josef Pieper describes as the “festive reality,” an important concept that any worship-theology for drama must consider. To be sure, we need not look far in the history of the church to see that festivals—celebrations of feast days—have long had an inherently theatrical quality. Historically, theatre and feast have always been held together in close unity. The street performances, processions and *sacer ludus* of the mediaeval carnivals, the traveling Corpus Christi pageants and mystery plays, the performance of miracle plays on the feast days of particular saints are all examples of the inherent theatricality of festival celebrations.⁴⁸ Pieper suggests that as a “holy day,” the holiday is set aside from work specifically for the sake celebration, and that historically, the notion of the “feast” lies at the heart of holy celebration (thus the “holy-day” is also the “feast-ival”). His proposal that we reclaim the notion of the “festive,” the sacred meal, and what it means to “celebrate a feast” has implications for our understanding of the nature and role of the “theatrical” in Christian worship: “Man’s true existential lack would be his inability to celebrate a feast in a truly festive fashion. To do this requires, as everybody knows, that the reality of our life and our world be first wholeheartedly accepted and that this acceptance, then, on special occasions, be expressed and lived out in exceptional ritual: this indeed is what it means to ‘celebrate a feast’!”⁴⁹ As we consider here what it means to be “festal,” to celebrate a sacred feast—as we consider what “exceptional ritual” might serve to express and live out our whole-hearted acceptance of our life and our

⁴⁸ See *History of Theatre*, 75-85 for examples and illustrations of these practices and their festive nature.

⁴⁹ Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 66.

world as we have received it from the Creator—we both find a biblical basis for understanding the dramatic in worship, and begin also to understand the role that “theatre” has played historically in the worship of God’s people.

What we notice first in connection to the notion of the “festal reality” is that the theme of the sacred feast runs deep in biblical notions of worship, and that such feasts have an inherently dramatic character. We notice, for instance, how the sacrificial worship of the book of Leviticus centres around the notion of a dramatized holy meal where “both priests and people shared a great feast together with God as they ate the animal that had been offered.”⁵⁰ Robert Webber suggests that “This sense of dramatizing a relationship to God is central to all Jewish worship and finds a significant place in the feasts of Israel.”⁵¹ We have already mentioned the theatricality of Purim; to this we might add a festival like the Feast of Booths, in which the people of Israel theatrically represented and celebrated God’s grace during the desert wanderings by living in booths for seven days—“that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Lev 23:43). John Hartley suggests that such festivals “tie the people directly into their saving heritage. ... [They enable] each generation to participate in the formative events of the nation. This participation through memory keeps alive the benefits initiated in those great saving deeds.”⁵² These festivals, then, are dramatic because they not only remind but invite participatory performance of the event that they reenact; they are theatrical because they make visible the event they recall. We can see these theatric elements of the feast especially in the Passover, where all the elements of drama as discussed above come together in a kind of dramatized re-enactment of God’s saving act centred

⁵⁰ Webber, *Complete Library*, 657.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² John Hartely, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary 4 (Waco, TX: Word, 1992), 393.

around the sacred feast. There is symbolic reenactment and performance in the feast itself; there is scripted dialogue in the telling of the Exodus story (cf. Ex 12:26-7: “when your children say to you.... You shall say...”); there is even symbolic costume of sorts (“In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand,” Ex 12:11). Though, to be sure, none of this makes the Passover a “play” in the modern sense, given the context in which we have been discussing drama, we can see how the performance of the Passover becomes a “festival” which is fundamentally dramatic in nature. It is in this context that Dillistone can claim that “In Greece, drama reached its apogee in such a tragedy as *Antigone*. In Israel, drama gained its highest expression in the passover [*sic*] ceremony.”⁵³

As we turn to the New Testament and consider how the notion of the sacred meal and the festive reality was experienced and expressed by the early Christians, what we come to first is that the meal and the fellowship of the table played a symbolic and thus dramatic role in early Christian experience. Inasmuch as the act of eating a meal together functioned in the ancient world as a powerful symbol of intimacy, solidarity and identification with others, the open table fellowship that Christ himself enacted in his ministry and that Christians further reenacted through the early *agape* feast functioned as a way of dramatically representing the unity, equality and brotherhood that was present among the gathered people of God.⁵⁴ We see this dramatic power clearly when Luke notes that one of the fundamental ways the early Church bore witness to the Kingdom of God drawn near in Jesus was with the breaking of bread together in homes (Acts 2:46-7); we catch glimpses of it when Paul rebukes Peter for withdrawing from table fellowship with the Gentiles (Gal 2:11-13); we see a glimmer of it when he criticizes the

⁵³ Dillistone, “Inter-Play,” 129.

⁵⁴ For this idea I am indebted to a conversation with Marty Culy on the significance of table fellowship in the ancient world.

Corinthian church for doing more harm than good in their practice of elitism and exclusion at the table (1 Cor 11:17-34). Of course, it is ultimately in the Eucharist that all of these themes—the dramatic power of table fellowship, the theatrical festivals of the Jewish liturgical calendar, the sacred meals of Leviticus, and above all the dramatized reenactment of the story of God’s gracious act in the Passover—are experienced by the Church as they are taken up in and fulfilled by Christ. As Webber notes, “The connection the dramatic feast of the Old Testament has with the Eucharistic drama and feast of Christian worship is more than coincidental,”⁵⁵ for here we see the central dramatic act of Christian worship and the primary way in which Christian worship can be understood as involving and creating a “festive” reality. In this context, Webber’s observations on the drama of the Eucharist in Christian worship bear extended consideration:

Here, as in Israel, the drama of redemption is acted out and symbolized in the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread and wine. ... it is not a casual drama to be taken lightly or not played well. Rather, it is a dramatic reenactment of the most important event in history, an event that marks the beginning of the steady march of creation.⁵⁶

It is in the “festal reality” of the Communion Table that the inherently dramatic character of Christian worship becomes fully manifest, for here worshippers participate in a form of dramatic dialogue, symbolic gesture and mimetic action that dramatically reenacts, expresses and participates in the story of God’s people. The Exodus story of God’s people, the Passover festival that dramatically reenacted it for Israel, the open table fellowship of Jesus’ ministry whereby he dramatically represented the reality that the Kingdom had drawn near, that sacred meal with the disciples on the night he was betrayed, the breaking of his body and pouring out of his blood on the cross, *and* the eschatological hope of his coming again (see 1 Cor 11:26) are all taken up and made visible in the “theatre” of this holy meal. While the trajectory of this study

⁵⁵ Webber, *Complete Library*, 658.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

may have landed us on ground much different from the pre-sermon “sketch” exemplified in the drama ministry of Willow Creek, it suggests that to have an understanding of the nature of drama *as worship* that is rooted both in Scripture and the historical experience of the Church, we must begin, not with presentational, anthropocentric plays that emerge out of our own experience and felt needs, but with that participatory, theocentric “play” God has given us to perform, which we hear in the ministry of the Word and is made visible for us in the ministry of the Table. For it is here, in hearing the word, seeing the bread broken and the wine poured, handling, smelling and tasting the elements—in what Max Harris calls the “sensual constituents of the Supper”—that drama gesture finds its legitimate place as an act of Christian worship: “Here, as with Old Testament Israel and, centrally, in the Incarnation, the Christian God may be understood to have declared his commitment to a fully theatrical and not merely verbal mode of addressing his people.”⁵⁷

Practical Reflections on the Drama of Worship

As this study has suggested, Christian worship has a necessary dramatic element, one in which the festive and the theatrical play an important role in our response to God and our life together as his people. However, as we turn from this thesis to consider some of its practical implications for drama in worship, what it suggests first is that an authentic approach to a “drama ministry” in the church should begin with faithfully and thoughtfully exploring ways to allow the festive potential already latent in many traditional and contemporary acts of worship to breathe deep and come to full life. Among such efforts we must consider first our observance of the Lord’s Supper and how its inherent theatricality might be given more space in the worship service. This might include performing symbolic gestures with an appropriate sense of their

⁵⁷ Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation*, 12.

dramatic nature (blessing and breaking bread, pouring and lifting up the cup, etc.); it might include incorporating spoken exchanges when receiving the elements, (“The body of Christ given for you” / “Thanks be to God!”; or “Christ is present among us” / “Amen.”); it might include being thoughtful about the way we use the symbols of the meal to communicate the reality we are dramatizing (i.e. using a single loaf, intinction with a single cup, etc.); it might include more thoughtful use of Scripture and liturgical readings as the theocentric “script” of this powerful “play.” Of course, there are other inherently dramatic ceremonies that have historic roots in the Church’s worship—passing the peace, Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday ceremonies, seder meals and *agape* feasts and so on—that might be explored with a sensitivity to the “festive reality” they create, though this must be done with equal sensitivity to their appropriateness to the context into which they are being introduced.

That said, however, there are many less elaborate, more familiar worship practices with an inherently theatric nature that a more fully conceived sense of the drama of worship might draw out and bring to life. Max Harris, for instance, makes a compelling case for a “dramatized” reading of Scripture—what he calls a “theatrical hermeneutic”—in the worship service. It is worth noting in this regard that the drama ministry sessions for the 2008 Breakforth Conference all focus on the dramatization of Scripture readings, suggesting a shift away from the use of creative “sketches” in Church worship.⁵⁸ In a different vein, Madeleine Forell Marshall suggests ways in which worship leaders might respect and bring to life the inherent dramatic art of many hymns (singing hymns antiphonally, for instance, or dividing the congregation into singing parts that reflect the *dramatis personae* of the hymn).⁵⁹ Even something as simple as pastoral

⁵⁸ See Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation*, 6-13. The Breakforth 2008 promotional material advertises sessions like: “*Unleashing the Power of Scripture*: Learn the dramatic telling of God’s word”; and “*Eating the Book*: A practical guide to the art of dynamic reading of scripture.”

⁵⁹ Madeleine Forell Marshall, “The Dramatic Art of Hymnody,” in *The Hymn* 42.4 (October 1991): 14-19.

leadership regarding various postures for prayer in public worship (kneeling, lifted hands, etc.) might be included under efforts to give space for the drama of Christian worship to come more fully to life.

While it does suggest that we neglect the vital, biblical way our worship should involve the dramatic when we conceive of a drama ministry in terms of the presentational “sketch” on Sunday morning, the thrust of this study is not to exclude the drama as “play” from the worship service altogether. Indeed, the notion of the “festive reality” discussed above and the historical use of public theatre in life of the church both suggest that in particular festive contexts—nativity pageants at Christmas or Passion plays at Easter for instance—the use of such drama has an appropriate historical precedence and legitimate theological ground. Even here, however, our creative efforts must be guided by the fact that biblically and historically, the use of drama in Christian worship has been highly participatory and closely centered around the story of God’s saving acts in the history of his people.

Bibliography

- Brown, John Russell, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1973.
- Burns, Elizabeth and Tom, eds. *Sociology of Literature and Drama*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1973.
- Chauvet, Louis-Marie. *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Experience*. Translated by Patrick Madigan, S. J. and Madeline Beaumont. Collegville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1995.
- Craigie, Peter C. *Psalms 1-50*. Word Biblical Commentary 19. Waco, TX: Word, 1983
- Dillistone, Frederick W. "Inter-Play Between the Religious and the Dramatic." *Theology Today* 31.2 (July 1974): 125-31.
- Friesen, Lauren. "Theatre and Religion." *The Conrad Grebel Review* 7.1 (Winter 1989): 11-24.
- Garrett, Duane and Paul R. House. *Song of Songs / Lamentations*. Word Biblical Commentary 23a. Waco, TX: Word, 2004.
- Hallstrom, Camille. "Theatre as Incarnation: Toward a Vision for Redemption of Dramatic Art." *Presbyterion* 27.2 (Fall 2001): 132-46.
- Harris, Max. *Theatre and Incarnation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- John Hartley. *Leviticus*. Word Biblical Commentary 4. Waco, TX: Word, 1992.
- Kelley, Henry Ansgar. *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology and Drama*. London: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Marshall, Madeleine Forell. "The Dramatic Art of Hymnody." *The Hymn* 42.4 (October 1991): 14-19.
- Pederson, Steve. *Drama Ministry: Practical Help for Making Drama a Vital Part of Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999.
- Pieper, Josef. *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*. Translated by Lothar Krauth. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988.
- Van der Leeuw, Gerardus. *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*. Translated by David E. Green. New York: Abingdon, 1963.

Webber, Robert E., ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship: Volume 4, Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*. Book 2. Nashville, TE: Starsong, 1994.

Weins, Esther. "The Uses of Drama." *Direction* 16.1 (Spring 1987): 64-7.

Wilks, John G. F. "The Prophet as Incompetent Dramatist." *Vestus Testamentum* 43.4 (2003): 530-543.