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BACK TO (THEO-DRAMA) SCHOOL: THE PLACE OF CATECHESIS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH¹

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PROLOGUE: IMPROVISING SHAKESPEARE IN CHICAGO

Every Friday night at Chicago's iO, the resident theatre company performs two ninety-minute Shakespeare plays with one striking difference from the RSC: the complete absence of a script. The show begins with the cast of the Improvised Shakespeare Company asking the audience for a title on which they improvise a play replete with iambic pentameter, rhyming couplets, and authentically Shakespearian vocabulary, character development, and plot. Each show is unrehearsed and unrepeatable.²

However, to speak of an absent script is to overstate. Whilst the show is improvised, it comes from the players' deep knowledge of the Bard of Avon's plays. When an actor joins the company, they sign up not only to perform, but also to a rigorous regime of study. The first lesson is the correct use of Elizabethan pronouns, then, every month, the company gathers for a graduate seminar-style discussion of a Shakespeare play. They are given vocabulary pop-quizzes, and engage in detailed study of Shakespearian character development, plot, and themes. To gain a deeper understanding of the doctrines that shaped the political and philosophical milieu of Elizabethan England, they also study texts such as Plato's *Republic*.

The purpose is not simply the pleasure of knowledge: the goal is performance. Without performance there would be no theatre; but without detailed, attentive study, the performances would be at best inauthentic, halting, and thin. To perform a Shakespearian improvisation something

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at the Society for the Advancement of Ecclesial Theology Second Fellowship Symposium, Oak Park, IL, 7 June 2011. I am grateful to my SAET colleagues, and especially to Kevin Vanhoozer, for their stimulating interaction.

² For more information see <<http://www.improvisedshakespeare.com>> (last accessed May 16, 2011) and especially the various reviews and articles linked there.

more than native talent is required. The performers need a deep immersion in the canonical scripts, in Shakespearian doctrines.

The Improvised Shakespeare Company thus provide a vivid illustration of the value of Kevin Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic conceptualization of Christian doctrine.³ Substitute the church for the company of improvisers, the watching world (and God himself) for the audience, the Scriptures for the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, and a life of discipleship for a couple of Friday night performances, and there are clear and precise parallels. The question then arises: where in the life of the church should one look for the seminars that inform the performance? Vanhoozer's answer in *The Drama of Doctrine* is found, centrally, in preaching. In this article, I shall argue that Vanhoozer's view of doctrine also requires a recovery of catechesis in the local church. As I use the term, catechesis refers broadly to the Christian instruction of adults and children, new and seasoned Christians. Good catechesis will recognize the different stages and needs of, say, an adult convert or enquirer from an unchurched background, a seven year old Christian child, and a mature believer of many years standing. Nevertheless, the same basic principles apply in each case: the goal of instruction is performance; the taproot of good performance is deep familiarity with the script.

SETTING THE SCENE: TOO COOL FOR (SUNDAY) SCHOOL?

In his preface, Vanhoozer cites Alan Wolfe⁴ to the effect that 'doctrine no longer plays any meaningful role in the life and thought of ordinary Christians' (xi). David Wells has also examined at length this 'strange disappearance of doctrine in the church'.⁵ In addition to Wells and Wolfe's

³ K. J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005). Throughout this essay, all page numbers in the body of the text refer to this volume.

⁴ *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

⁵ *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993); *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in the World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). John Frame has criticized Wells for overstating his criticisms, for harshness of tone, and for what Frame perceives as methodological inconsistency ('In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on *Sola Scriptura* and History in Theological Method', *WTJ*, 59 (1997), 269-91; 'Reply to Richard Muller and David Wells', *WTJ*, 59 (1997), 311-18; nevertheless, his main thesis appears sound.

analyses, one piece of evidence for this absence of doctrine is the neglect of serious catechesis in evangelical churches. In an article comparing early church catechesis with contemporary evangelical new Christians' classes, Clinton Arnold states that his experience of teaching one such class left him convicted of the superficiality of what they were doing, not least in comparison with the 'rigorous plan and commitment by church leaders in the first four centuries to ground new believers in their Christian lives'.⁶ In their recent book on catechesis, J. I. Packer and Garry Parrett also decry the lack of serious teaching in the contemporary western church.⁷ They claim that the rise of the Sunday School movement in the 1800s, 'effectively replaced pastor-catechists with relatively untrained lay workers and substituted an instilling of familiarity...with Bible stories for any form of grounding in the basic beliefs, practices, and ethics of the faith'.⁸

FLASHBACK: TOO (OLD-)SCHOOL FOR COOL

In contrast, the patristic and Reformation periods were both marked by deep catechetical seriousness.⁹ In the early church, enquirers into the faith

⁶ C. E. Arnold, 'Early Church Catechesis and New Christians' Classes in Contemporary Evangelicalism', *JETS*, 47 (2004), 39-54, p. 39.

⁷ J. I. Packer, and G. A. Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2010).

⁸ Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, p. 24.

⁹ There is a growing literature exploring catechetical practices in both eras. For an historical overview, see Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, chap. 3; J. H. Westerhoff, III, and O. C. Edwards, eds., *A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003). For the patristic period, see *inter alia*, Arnold, 'Early Church Catechesis'; T. M. Finn, 'It happened One Saturday Night: Ritual and Conversion in Augustine's North Africa', *JAAR*, 58 (1990), 589-616; W. J. Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995); *idem*, 'Catechesis, Catechumenate' in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by A. D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 145-49; L. G. Jones, 'Baptism: A Dramatic Journey into God's Dazzling Light: Baptismal Catechesis and the Shaping of Christian Practical Wisdom', in *Knowing the Triune God*, ed. by J. J. Buckley and D. S. Yeago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp.147-77. For the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, see, e.g., L. D. Bierma, *et al*, *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); D. B. Calhoun, 'Loving the Westminster Confession and Catechisms', *Presbyterion*, 32/2 (2006), 65-72; I. Green, *The Christian's ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England, c. 1530-1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); G. A. Jensen, 'Shap-

received months, often years, of instruction in the catechumenate prior to baptism. Following the Reformation, according to George Lindbeck, Luther's Small and Large Catechisms had 'semi-canonical status' among Lutherans, due to their inclusion in the Book of Concord, and because 'most Lutherans for hundreds of years memorized the Small Catechism as part of their confirmation instruction'.¹⁰ The Reformed were similar, with the Heidelberg Catechism achieving confessional status among the continental Reformed, and the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms among Presbyterians. Indeed, the Reformation and post-Reformation periods saw an explosion of catechism writing. The patristic catechumenate and the Reformation catechism are not the only way of grounding believers in the faith; nevertheless these doctrinally and biblically rich models stand in striking contrast to the relative lack of doctrinal teaching in the contemporary evangelical church.

Equally striking is the devotion of many of the church's greatest theologians to the task of catechesis. Arnold notes that it was a priority for what he calls the 'top Christian scholars' of the early church, citing Origen (Alexandria; 185-254), Clement (Alexandria; 150-215), Tertullian (North Africa; c. 160-c.220), Hippolytus (Rome; 170-236), Ambrose (Italy; 339-97); Cyprian (North Africa; d. 258), Gregory of Nyssa (Asia Minor; 330-395), John Chrysostom (Byzantium; 347-407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (Asia Minor; 350-428), Cyril of Jerusalem (Palestine; b. 349), 'and many others'.¹¹ To these we should add Augustine (North Africa; 354-430). A similar inventory of sixteenth and seventeenth century theologians could be made, including Luther, Calvin, Ursinus, the Westminster Divines, Richard Baxter, and John Owen. Arnold contrasts this with today's theologians, asking, 'How many seminary professors are teaching in the functional equivalent of a catechumenate?'

This article brings the wisdom of previous generations of theologians into conversation with *The Drama of Doctrine* to explore the shape of a theo-dramatic catechesis for the twenty-first century church. The genius of this catechesis is both its rootedness in the covenantal drama of Scripture, acknowledging its authority as the 'supreme norm for Christian

ing Piety Through Catechetical Structures: the Importance of Order', *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, 10 (2008), 223-246; W. D. Persaud, 'Luther's Small and Large Catechisms: Defining and Confessing the Christian Faith from the Centre in a Religiously Plural World', *Dialog*, 46 (2007), 355-62; T. J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

¹⁰ Quoted in Persaud, 'Luther's Small and Large Catechisms', p. 356.

¹¹ Arnold, 'Early Church Catechesis', p. 45.

doctrine' and catechesis (113),¹² and its goal of performance. The aim of catechetical study is action: 'fitting participation in the ongoing drama of redemption (112).'¹³ We shall also consider how this kind of catechesis might be reborn, arguing that, although scholars may play a part, the most fitting directors for theo-drama school are pastor-theologians. In this way, under the supreme direction of the Holy Spirit, formed by the Scriptures, 'informed by great performances from the past and from other parts of the world, guided by confessional dramaturgical¹⁴ traditions', we can once again hope that the contemporary church might be transformed into a 'localized instance of God's masterpiece theater' (457).

ACT ONE. IN WHICH WE DISCOVER A TRADITION OF CATECHETICAL SAPIENTIA WITH WISE PERFORMANCE AS THE GOAL

Scene I. Doctrine 1.0: Catechesis as Downloading Knowledge?

In *The Drama of Doctrine*, Vanhoozer repeatedly and rightly distances himself from a purely propositional view of doctrine. He seeks a holistic approach: 'what doctrine communicates...involves the whole person: cognition, affection, and volition alike.' (100) Doctrine is not simply a summary of biblical propositions, systematically ordered with their interconnectedness more or less tightly displayed. 'The ultimate aim of doctrine is, as Calvin knew, pastoral: not simply to picture or conceptualize the divine drama but to *perform* it.' (103) Doctrine is direction for participating 'more deeply, passionately, and truthfully in the drama of redemption.' (107) Thus, 'Doctrinal direction has a properly catechetical function.' (103) However, to be truthful, this performance must also be *fitting*. Just as dialogue and action from *Madmen* would be out of place in a Shakespearian improvisation, jarring and disrupting the action, so demons participate in the theo-drama, but 'as opponents who block the way to life and truth.' (108) Language shapes us, but 'Some shapes accord to reality better than others.' Therefore, it is important that our performances are shaped by the canonical Script, but also that our performances then fit with the new situations in which we find ourselves; there must be contextual as well as exegetical fit. Catechesis should serve this end. 'The criterion for correct [catechesis]¹⁵ is not simply logical but *dra-*

¹² In Vanhoozer's terminology, we can refer to this as the *scientia* of catechesis.

¹³ The *sapientia* of catechesis.

¹⁴ On 'dramaturgy', see below.

¹⁵ The original here reads 'doctrine'.

matic consistency'. It should 'help us discern what, in light of the drama of redemption, is fitting language and action for Christian disciples',¹⁶ (109)

However, for many, catechesis, and in particular catechisms, have precisely the connotations of mere doctrinal propositionalism. On this understanding, to learn a catechism is simply to absorb by rote a set of propositions drawn from Scripture with no obvious practical outcome. Yet this was never the goal of historic catechesis. Following Vanhoozer's courtroom metaphor (234), where the theologians of the past function as expert witnesses (Scripture alone being the judge in theological controversy), the catechetical defence calls Zacharius Ursinus.

Scene II. Catechetical Preparation for Understanding the Script?

Ursinus (1534-1583) was the principal writer of the Heidelberg Catechism.¹⁷ He can thus claim to be one of the most enduring catechetical influences on the Protestant churches. In his lectures on the Catechism, he offers a three-fold typology of the theological disciplines: catechesis, commonplaces, and the reading of Holy Scripture.¹⁸ Catechism ('a brief summary and simple exposition of the principal doctrines of the Christian religion') is the most basic of the three and is necessary for all believers. Common places are lengthier explanations of each doctrinal point, loosely identifiable with what we would call systematic theology. This is appropriate for theological schools. However, for Ursinus these first two methods are preparatory for the third: 'careful and diligent reading of the Scriptures...is the highest method in the study of the doctrine of the church.' The goal of catechesis is right hearing of Scripture.

Scene III. Catechetical Training for Performance

Ursinus's typology is good as far as it goes, and in its coherence, order, integration, and the supreme place it gives to Holy Scripture, a great improvement on the contemporary fragmentation of the theological sub-disciplines. Nevertheless, it is incomplete. A canonical-linguistic approach would add a fourth term, for the goal is not simply to *hear* the

¹⁶ Again, in the original, Vanhoozer is speaking of doctrines rather than catechesis, but the point is essentially the same.

¹⁷ The catechism was produced by a committee, but Ursinus was probably the principal writer. For a summary of older and more recent scholarship on the roles of Ursinus and Casper Olevianus and conclusions favouring Ursinus as the primary author of the catechism, see L. D. Bierma, 'The Purpose and Authorship of the Heidelberg Catechism', in Bierma, *et al*, *Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism*, pp. 49-74.

¹⁸ *The Commentary of Zacharius Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. by G. W. Willard (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1985), pp. 9-10.

script. The goal is performance. The fruit of the theo-drama school's seminar room can only be seen when the curtain is raised, the Improvised Gospel Company steps onto the stage, and the performance begins.

In fact, although Ursinus does not emphasize this in his typology, simply *hearing* Scripture is not his ultimate goal. As John Webster notes, for Ursinus learning Scripture has a practical goal: the promotion of godliness and the establishing of Christ's kingdom.¹⁹ 'The end of theology is practical knowledge of God, that is, knowledge which aims at the furtherance of the life of the Christian community, the salvation of humankind, and godly discipline.'²⁰ This much is obvious from the Heidelberg Catechism itself. From its beautiful opening, the Catechism is concerned with piety, with comfort in life and death, with discipleship, and above all with our relationship to Christ. In following the standard elements of teaching on the Creed, the sacraments, the Decalogue, and the Lord's Prayer, the Catechism gives plenty of attention to life. It is clear that Ursinus intends to inculcate a certain form of life, a certain type of performance, one shaped by grief, grace, and gratitude. In this, it corresponds to Vanhoozer's conception of doctrine as a prompt that 'fosters a certain *ethos*, or sense of the overall shape that one's life must take in order to realize the true, the good, and the beautiful.' (105)

Scene IV. The Greatest Love Story Ever Staged

Another way of stating this, following Augustine, is to speak in terms of love.²¹ *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*²² is the first patristic catechetical manual we have.²³ It is Augustine's response to Deogratias, a deacon of the church in Carthage who had requested the bishop's help in fulfilling his duty of catechizing enquirers seeking the rudiments of the faith. The work contains instructions in the aims of catechesis, considerations of how to catechize various types of beginner, wise pastoral counsel help

¹⁹ J. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 115. Webster is commenting on Ursinus's inaugural address at the Elisabeth-Schuler in Breslau (1558), but in that lecture Ursinus also employs the formulation we are discussing.

²⁰ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 116.

²¹ On Augustine's catechesis, see Finn, 'It Happened'; Harmless, 'Catechesis, Catechumenate'; idem, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*; Jones, 'Baptism: A Dramatic Journey'; B. Ramsey, 'Catechizandis Rudibus, De', in *Augustine Through the Ages*, pp. 144-45;

²² *De Catechizandis Rudibus*. The work was probably written sometime between 399-405. In this article I quote from the translation by S. D. F. Salmond, NPNF, First Series, Vol. 3, pp. 277-314.

²³ Ramsey, 'Catechizandis Rudibus', p. 144.

Deogratias overcome his diffidence regarding his catechetical abilities, and two model addresses, a longer and a shorter. We shall return to Augustine's method below, for now we simply note his aim. Consistent with the overarching theme of his entire corpus, his aim in catechesis was to cultivate a twofold love—of God and neighbour—for this is why Christ came,

to wit, that man might learn how much God loves him; and that he might learn this, to the intent that he might be kindled to the love of Him by whom he was first loved, and might also love his neighbor, in that He loved man when, instead of being a neighbor to Him, he was sojourning far apart.²⁴

Deogratias is to make this his goal, and to refer all that he says to it, so that 'he to whom you are discoursing on hearing may believe, on believing may hope, on hoping may love'.²⁵ Thus, for Augustine, the drama of Scripture is a romance, the story of God's great love for us in Christ; the purpose of rehearsing this script is to evoke a fitting performance, a corresponding love in the hearer.

Augustine is aware, however, that love for God and neighbour is formed in competition with many competing loves. There are strong and persuasive cultural scripts competing with the divine script; the backdrop and scenery for the play, as well as many of the cast, are more appropriate for a different kind of production entirely. And so, in his model lectures, he addresses the need for catechumens to be furnished against enemies of the faith; he offers a very specific list of sins they should avoid; and he warns of the particular danger of being seduced into sin by the wickedness of some inside the church.²⁶

In other words, this is a profoundly wise *sapiential* catechesis that is acutely aware of its context in late fourth century North Africa, and of the competing plotlines that threaten to corrupt the company of players, derail the action, and turn a romantic comedy²⁷ into a tragedy of lusts and concupiscence. Indeed, one of the marks of patristic catechesis in general was an emphasis on spiritual and moral formation that offered clear teaching on renouncing sinful behaviours and cultivating the virtues.²⁸

However, if this goal of wise and fitting performance is to be reached, what should be our method?

²⁴ *De Cat.*, 4.8.

²⁵ *De Cat.*, 4.8.

²⁶ *De cat.*, 25.48.

²⁷ Comedy in the original, Aristotelian sense.

²⁸ Arnold, 'Early Church Catechesis', pp. 49-51.

ACT TWO. IN WHICH WE SURVEY CATECHETICAL *SCIENTIA* AND
OUTLINE A METHOD OF CORPORATE STUDY AND PERFORMANCE
OF SCRIPTURE*Scene I. Studying the Script*

Good improvisation is not accidental. The Improvised Shakespeare Company's performances grow from deep knowledge of the scripts of the Shakespearean canon. If the play were to begin not with a title from the audience, but with volunteers taking the stage, the performance would be at best halting, at worst a catastrophe.

If, in the thick of the action, we are to exercise wise judgments, and so put on fitting performances—performances that *fit* with who we are in Christ—the church needs a deep knowledge of her canonical Script(ures). 'Good theological judgment is largely, though not exclusively, a matter of being apprenticed to the canon: of having one's capacity for judging (a capacity that involves imagination, reason, emotion, and volition alike) formed and transformed by the ensemble of canonical practices that constitute Scripture.' (331) In Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic terminology, this knowledge is *scientia*, 'the approach by which theology derives direction from the script.' (265)

If, for Vanhoozer, *sapientia* is a practical wisdom fitting to the present context, this wisdom is formed by exegetical *scientia*, 'the attempt to hear what the Spirit of Christ says through the word of Christ to the body of Christ.' (265). I shall argue, with the aid once more of the expert testimony of Augustine, that this therefore shapes the catechist's role. Like the theologian, the catechist's task is 'to study the playscript and prepare it for performances that truthfully realize its truth' (247).

In *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, Augustine advocates a salvation-historical approach. He gives a Christ-centred, typological reading of Scripture that traces God's dealings with his creatures through creation, fall, and the history of Israel (particularly Exodus and Exile), climaxing in the events of Christ's incarnation, sufferings, death, and resurrection, and continuing to the present day in the church. In other words, Augustine follows a theo-dramatic approach. Whilst it was common in the early church to present the case for Christianity via the 'sweep of salvation history',²⁹ Boniface Ramsey suggests that Augustine does so here because this address was for enquirers into the faith who had not yet joined the

²⁹ Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, p. 127.

catechumenate. For such hearers, the historical approach would be easier to follow than a more strictly dogmatic one.³⁰

There may be some truth in this. For those admitted to the catechumenate, Scripture remained the 'textbook': 'It structured everything: whether individual sermons or a whole sequence'. But now, Augustine favoured depth to breadth, focusing on 'small fragments—single verses, even single words'.³¹ However, we should note that Augustine was not beyond using a narrative approach in his more detailed dogmatic treatises.³² Even were this not the case, a theo-dramatic approach is arguably faithful to the shape of the Script and to the performance tradition of catechesis. The basic content of catechesis, particularly in the era of the Reformation has consistently included, albeit in a variety of orders, the Apostles' Creed, the Sacraments, the Decalogue, and the Lord's Prayer. The Creed outlines the theo-drama (from Creation, through the drama of the Gospels in summary form to consummation, before locating the church within that drama), and introduces the *theo-dramatis personae* (God the Father Almighty, Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, the Holy Spirit, one holy catholic church). Similarly, God did not give the Decalogue in abstraction, but at a particular turning point in the unfolding covenantal drama of history.

Augustine argues that this method suits his goal of love for God and neighbour. We learn this love by witnessing the dramatic unfolding of God's dealings with us. We learn our role in the drama from the God who, in Christ, first loved us and gave us the instruction and the example to love our neighbour. This revelation of love is the main purpose of Christ's advent, but is also revealed in the OT Scriptures that 'presignify' Christ. Thus, Augustine's method is to teach the Old and New Testaments, because in the Old there is a veiling of the New, and in the New a revealing of the Old.³³

Catechetical *scientia* should therefore include teaching on the broad sweep of the theo-drama's unfolding plot, and the identities of the major

³⁰ Ramsey, p. 144. Note also the significance of the *narratio* as one stage of six within a well-established classical tradition of the judicial speech with which Augustine, the former teacher of rhetoric, would have been intimately familiar: in using this form, he is making a case for Christianity (Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, pp. 123-30; see also the chart on p. 155).

³¹ Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, p. 236.

³² Witness Edmund Hill's comments on that most taxing of dogmatic treatises, the *De Trinitate*. ('Introduction', in Augustine, *On the Trinity*, trans. by E. Hill [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991], pp. 18-19). Although he doesn't use the term, according to Hill, Augustine was a theo-dramatic theologian.

³³ Augustine, *De cat.*, 4.8.

players (Father, Son, Holy Spirit, church). However, another strength of Vanhoozer's approach is his recognition that Scripture contains diversity within its unity. The basic plotline of Scripture can be summarized in a coherent way. Nevertheless,

The canon is a *complex simplex*—a chorus of diverse voices that nevertheless all testify to the same multifaceted reality: God's word-act in Jesus Christ. The theo-dramatic script is a rich dialogue between various genres that sometimes complement, sometimes contrast with one another, rather than a stable and static monologue that endorses a single system of propositions. Each biblical word view [*sic*] opens a different window on the canonical landscape.' (287).

This suggests that thorough catechesis, perhaps particularly as we progress in the faith, will move from summary outlines to a rich and varied 'apprenticeship' to the text, one that takes into account the variety of literary genres and thus imaginative worlds contained within the text (285). Ongoing catechesis therefore requires 'the hard formation of following Scripture so that literary forms merge into forms of life' (285). To return one last time to the Improvised Shakespeare Company, in one interview the actors relate how intensive study of *Macbeth* transformed their next performance: it was darker, weirder, and more full of the supernatural than before.³⁴ What, then, should happen to Christians as they study a particular part of Scripture? How might their performances change as a result of deep familiarity with *Ecclesiastes*? What shape of performance would be accomplished by three months studying *Leviticus*, in contrast to three months studying *Philippians*? Recognition of the pluriform human authorship and range of literary genres in Scripture, and therefore the pluriform performance possibilities flowing out of these scripts, should shape not simply a church's preaching ministry, but also its catechesis.

Scene II. Performance Practice (A Company of Players Performing...)

In considering catechetical *scientia*, we have focused primarily on the content of catechesis. However, a comprehensive description of performance-oriented theo-dramatic catechesis would also account for the various contexts in which this study is set. Briefly: the central setting is the company of players, the church. The performances in view are not one-

³⁴ K. Pang, 'Improvised Shakespeare Takes Time to Perfect: There's Rhyme, Reason, and a Method Used by Mad-About-Bard Improvisers,' *Chicago Tribune*, March 30, 2009; available online at <<http://www.improvisedshakespeare.com/press/writeup/li/PRESS-3-30-2009/>> (last accessed May 16, 2011).

man shows, but ensemble pieces, therefore consideration of the role of Christian community is important. This is true not only of performance, but also of learning. Douglas Knight offers a rich account of Christian *paidea*, illustrating it using the analogy of learning tennis. You do not learn to play tennis sitting in a classroom learning the size of the court, the scoring system, the theory of how to hold a racket to impart topspin to the ball. Rather, you learn by playing. Within the context of the game you receive instruction in correct posture and foot-movement, how to score, which strokes to employ when. Commentary serves performance of the game, but performance also improves the player's physique, muscle memory, and the formation of the mind of a tennis player.

All this happens in relationship, with the goal of spending convivial time together.³⁵ Augustine's catechumenate took this into account by assigning to each catechumen a sponsor who would model the Christian life ('Christ announced through Christian friends.')³⁶ The catechumenate was an apprenticeship in Christian living, and part of that was imitation of more experienced actors. Entwined with the instruction was a 'gradual inclusion in the Christian community'.³⁷ The heavily ritualized final weeks of the catechumenate in Lent, leading up to baptism in the Easter Vigil also show his concern that performances be shaped not just by ideas, but also by practice.³⁸

...for a Twofold Audience)

The audiences for the Improvised Gospel Company's performances are God and the watching world. Thus for a comprehensive account of catechesis, attention to the settings of worship and mission would also be necessary. The process is not linear: first, catechesis, then, and only when the script is mastered, performance. Rather, as with all great performers, mastery of the script comes, in part, through performance. A string quartet who have performed together for 20 years have learned much, not just in the practice room, but also in the act of performance. Knowledge of one another, the ability to flex and adapt a performance in the moment by sensing a cue from one of their number, insights into the meaning of a Bartok Quartet, have come as much through repeated concert performances as they have in private study of the score and hours in rehearsal. With regard to mission, to use Knight's second metaphor, Christian

³⁵ D. Knight, *The Eschatological Economy: Time and the Hospitality of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 36-8.

³⁶ Jones, 'Baptism: A Dramatic Journey', p. 155.

³⁷ Jones, 'Baptism: A Dramatic Journey', p. 154.

³⁸ See especially Finn, 'It Happened'.

paidea is like building a house together with a gang of delinquent children:

Whatever the children built or destroyed in the course of a day, the builder would have to integrate into the construction of a house. The builder must make good a building that does not suffer from the deficiencies of the efforts of children, or even the willful deconstruction caused by disaffected delinquents. It is not that the upbringing and education of the children is an interim goal, and the building of the house an ultimate goal. Neither goal can be subordinated to the other. The house must have the objective reality of a building; it must become the place in which they can live. It must also however, be the wherewithal by which they grow to be adults and are provided with support that increases and decreases at every stage as appropriate to each learner.³⁹

With regard to worship, Augustine's catechumenate was also a place of liturgical formation. Most teaching took place in the context of public worship, drawing the catechumens into fitting performance through the drama of the liturgy.⁴⁰ Harmless describes Augustine's method with a dramatic metaphor. Noting that the classroom was Augustine's basilica, and so the context for his catechesis was liturgical and ecclesial and 'the rhythms of education moved to the rhythms of the liturgy itself', he says that the setting for the teaching 'offered entertainment as well as instruction, theatrics as well as worship: its drama was salvation history; its script was the Scriptures; and its actors included everyone.'⁴¹

In my pastoral setting, in a small Anglican church on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, our catechesis (called 'Discipleship Academy') seeks to account for each of the aforementioned elements. We also take into account our very busy and fairly transient congregation, which matches the busy transience of our location. We have developed a yearlong programme of five six-week modules. Mindful of Ursinus's model, we begin with a study of the Apostles' Creed, and include teaching on the Lord's Prayer and a Bible overview, before concluding with detailed exegetical study of Mark 1-8; ideally, we shall also add teaching on the Decalogue. These cognitive elements take place in the context of community: we teach cohorts of twelve members at a time; we ask each member to

³⁹ Knight, *Eschatological Economy*, pp. 38-9.

⁴⁰ On the liturgy as 'a condensed and compelling ritual version of the drama of redemption', see *Drama of Doctrine*, 409-410. On liturgical formation more generally, see J. K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

⁴¹ Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, p. 235.

commit to regular attendance for the entire year; and we share breakfast together before studying the day's topic. We also prioritise corporate worship: each week we pray Morning Prayer together before the lesson starts, and each member of Discipleship Academy is expected to attend Sunday worship faithfully. In this way, we aim for biblical and theological rigour in the context of community and liturgical formation.

Thus far, I have argued that a theo-dramatic catechesis will aim at *sapientia*: faithful, rich, contextually sensitive performances that advance the divine drama. A rigorous exegetical *scientia* in the context of ongoing performance is required, so that the church does not inadvertently play from the wrong script, and so that our improvisations are as rich and many-textured as the canonical script(s) from which we play.

This leaves a final question: who teaches us to move from script to performance? In the context of catechesis, who directs the theo-drama school?

ACT THREE. IN WHICH WE IDENTIFY WISE AND LEARNED CATECHISTS TO DIRECT THE THEO-DRAMA SCHOOL

Vanhoozer argues that the role of director belongs properly to the Holy Spirit (244). Nevertheless, the pastor is an assistant director, guiding (though not micromanaging!) the church's performance from the canonical script. According to Vanhoozer, he does this primarily, though not exclusively, by preaching, 'an obedient "listening to the text on behalf of the church."' (448-9).⁴² The theologian plays the role of dramaturge, whose job is to study the play and give exegetical and performance advice to the assistant director and the company (244-6).

However, in discussing catechesis, the training of the players, we are asking not simply who directs the performance, but who directs the drama school? The students/players? The director? The dramaturge? Or some combination of the three? I shall argue that, under the supreme direction of the Spirit and heeding advice from the dramaturge, the answer is, primarily, though not exclusively, the pastor-director. Best of all is when a director-dramaturge can take the lead.

As we saw, Packer and Parrett tied the decline of catechesis in the eighteenth century to the rise of the lay-led Sunday school, with teachers whose lack of theological training led to less competent study and teaching of the script. We can trace the same pattern for adults with the rise of the lay-led small group. This too involved a move away from the catechetical practices of Augustine, who preached four sermons a week of up to an

⁴² Quoting William Willimon.

hour in length, or Calvin, with the daily sermon in Geneva, or Richard Baxter, with his house-to-house style of family catechizing. Instead of serious teaching from a pastor steeped in the Scriptures, the typical evangelical home group features an inductive Bible study led by a lay-leader from pre-packaged material. Sometimes these are well led and edifying. However, even at their best, the relative lack of training and knowledge of the script has deleterious effects on the study and therefore performance of the script.

The patristic and reformational history is one of rich, theologically informed catechesis, led by some of the greatest theologians in the church's history. We saw that Arnold, having listed many of the 'top Christian scholars' in the early church as catechists,⁴³ asked 'How many seminary professors are teaching in the functional equivalent of a catechumenate?'

The question is well taken; it would be healthy, not least for seminarians, if their professors were engaged in teaching the faith to new believers. However, what is striking from Arnold's list is *not* that these men were scholars in the modern sense of the term, but that they were *pastors*. They were not simply dramaturges; they were director-dramaturges. It was the greatest pastor-theologians of the church's history who were supremely committed to catechesis. Webster comments on Ursinus:

Because the end of doctrine is nurture, there is for Ursinus no distance between the theological teacher and the church: called by God, the teacher's self-understanding is derived from his place in the community as Christ's kingdom, and the teacher's activity directed solely to its flourishing.⁴⁴

If we follow a theo-dramatic model for doctrine, a directorial model for the pastor, and a dramaturgical model for the theologian, the principal catechists in the local church should be dramaturge-directors. It is striking that in seeking advice on catechizing the uninstructed, Deogratias turned to the Bishop of Hippo. We know Augustine as the writer of such profound and difficult texts as *De Trinitate*, but to his contemporaries he was known equally as a pastor, preacher, and catechist. The church's greatest theologian was also the most obvious adviser on instructing those with least knowledge of the faith.

All of this fits with Paul's blueprint for the church's growth to maturity. In Ephesians 4:11-16, the goal is undeniably practical and involves every member of the body of Christ being active in service, but the driving force is the ascended Christ's gift of ministers of his word (4:11).

⁴³ As we noted, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were no different.

⁴⁴ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 112.

Although the office of teacher appears to be distinguishable from that of pastor, the pastor is here viewed not least as a catechist.⁴⁵ Similarly, in the Pastoral Epistles, Timothy and Titus must ensure healthy doctrine to prevent the subversion of the divine drama, and ensure compelling performances of the gospel. They must therefore teach true doctrine themselves, and appoint elders whose own performances are fitting but who are also equipped to direct the performance by teaching healthy doctrine.⁴⁶ Packer and Parrett list Paul's exhortations to Timothy and Titus to exercise ministries in which teaching was central, and to set aside others to do the same (1 Tim. 1:3f; 4:6,11, 13, 16; 6:2-4, 20; 2 Tim. 1:13f; 2:2, 14-15, 24-25; 4:2f; Titus 2:1, 7-8, 15; 3:1; cf. 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9), asking, 'In light of this testimony from the pastoral epistles, what might Paul think of the state of affairs in too many of our churches today, with pastors who do not regard teaching as a central feature of their ministries[?]'⁴⁷

This does not mean that only pastors should teach within a congregation,⁴⁸ nor that preaching and catechism is the pastor's only role: the terms shepherd and overseer indicate wider responsibilities. Nor is it to denigrate the centrality of preaching in the pastor's ministry of the word. However, in a contemporary church marked by widescale ignorance of our script and surrounded by a clamour of competing cultural scripts, if the church is to mount healthy 'masterpiece theatre', a return to pastor-led catechesis involving deep study and learning of the script, with the goal of performance, seems vital. Pastor-theologians of past centuries did not think that preaching alone could accomplish this; the Lord Jesus' multi-faceted catechesis of his disciples also suggests otherwise. In the conclusion to *The Drama of Doctrine*, Vanhoozer calls for pastors to return to doctrine, specifically to creedal theology, in order to enrich their direction, helping each player to understand the play and 'to grow into his or her part' (449). I am arguing that one important expression of

⁴⁵ Reading pastors and teachers as two overlapping roles, perhaps with the second being a subset of the first, but certainly with most pastors being teachers but not all teachers being pastors. Cf. H. W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 543-5; A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC; Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), p. 250; Peter T. O'Brien, *Ephesians* (PNTC; Leicester: Apollos, 1999), pp. 300-1.

⁴⁶ As is often noted, the only qualification in the lists in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1 that is not a qualification of character, is ability to teach.

⁴⁷ Packer and Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel*, p. 48.

⁴⁸ For example, parents are to teach their children (Eph. 6:4); mature women are to teach younger women (Titus 2:3); all Christians are to teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16); there does appear to be a distinct office of teacher (Eph. 4:11; cf. 1 Cor. 12:28).

this performance-oriented return to doctrine in the local church should be a return to pastor-led catechesis. This is one of the lessons not only of our script, but also, as we have seen, of the great performances and the great directors of the past.

EPILOGUE: A CATECHETICAL PROMPT FROM WISDOM'S WINGS

Kevin Vanhoozer has served the contemporary church well by providing a vivid conceptualization of Scripture as authoritative Trinitarian theatrical discourse: a divine script performed supremely by Jesus Christ, and to be performed by the church in the ongoing drama of redemption. Within this, doctrine has a directive role, providing dramaturgical resources to assist the church's performance of the Script.

Heeding these prompts from a contemporary master dramaturge, it is time for director-dramaturges to begin the task of recovering catechesis. If the church really is to produce masterpiece theatre for the twenty-first century, not simply aping ancient performances, but improvising afresh in a fitting, compelling way before a watching world that is, by and large, bored of this particular brand of theatre, then a recovery of deep knowledge of the script and of past performance traditions is vital. This is a call for study not for its own sake, but for the sake of fitting performance, not for entertainment, but for the life of the world. Nevertheless, as with the Improvised Shakespeare Company, deep study is required so that the church knows her scripts and so can improvise faithfully, rather than taking cues from the debased cultural scripts around us. To step off the stage and leave the metaphor behind: the church needs a recovery of catechesis aiming at godly discipleship. Therefore, we need pastors, and especially pastor-theologians who understand themselves not simply as preachers, but also as catechists.