truth. The church is the "society of Jesus," engaged in resurrection play that results in local stagings of the kingdom of God. In a world that is passing away, the special vocation of the people of God is to live in such a way that shows they are in touch with reality, with the eschatological fullness of the real "in Christ." When engaged in the drama of doctrine, the church becomes a holy and vital theater that performs parables of the kingdom of God whenever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name.

Conclusion

Creeds, Confessions, and the Pastor/Director

Doctrine and Theology in the Theater of Congregational Action

Christians, and local congregations in particular, cannot interpret and embody scripture as if they were the first and only Christians ever to do so.[1]

"The church is. The church does what it is. The church organizes what it does."[2] The church *is* a company of amateurs who gather together to *do* holy and vital theater: of the gospel; of word and sacrament; of martyrdom; of reconciliation; of holy folly. How on earth does one *organize* such a production? We conclude this study with a brief reflection on what a pastor does for the congregation and what theology can do for the congregation and pastor. Our aim is to reestablish a sense of priority and urgency in the church concerning the demise of doctrine in North American Christianity.

Along with Alan Wolfe's reasons (e.g., individualism, pragmatism) for the disappearance of doctrine mentioned at the outset of our study is the factor of multiple theological systems. In a postmodern climate, it is more difficult than ever to pretend that one's preferred formulation of Christian faith is immune to cultural conditioning. This awareness contributes, at least indirectly, to an ethos of

1. Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 205.
2. Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 37.

congregational consumerism and ultimately to the devaluation of doctrine.[3] It is only fitting, then, that we conclude our apology for Christian doctrine by addressing the problem of doctrinal pluralism—*which system? whose confession?*—and its effect on the life of the church.

To invoke creeds and confessions is to raise once more the question of tradition, only this time not as a rival authority to the church's script but as a help in directing the church's scripted performance. Robert Schreiter, building on Noam Chomsky's theory of language, likens tradition to the grammatical rules that describe how well-formed sentences ("performance") are generated from our innate linguistic ability ("competence").[4] Before Chomsky, most linguists assumed that grammar was prior to performance; "competence" was overlooked. Chomsky claims that competence is innate, and that grammatical rules are descriptive rather than normative.[5] Competence comes first, then performance, and finally the grammatical rules that describe "normal" or "proper" usage. In Schreiter's view, faith is analogous to linguistic competence, church tradition is analogous to linguistic performance, and the criteria of orthodoxy—Scripture, creeds, confessions—are analogous to a grammar. Interestingly enough, Schreiter's use of Chomsky accords well with Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach.

The *canonical-linguistic* approach defended here would parse Chomsky somewhat differently. Competence is indeed the starting point, but it is a mistake to equate competence with faith. Faith is not an innate competence, much less an incorrigible one.[6] Better to speak of *canonical* competence, *ecclesial* performance, and *doctrinal* direction. Yet what of tradition, and normativity? *Whose directions* should the church follow, and does any one set of directions provide reliable guidance for the church in each and every cultural situation? To pose these questions is to press home the issue that drove Karl Barth back to church dogmatics, namely, what should the pastor say and do? And what should the church say and do today to correspond to what God has spoken to us by his Son (Heb. 1:2)?

3. See Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

4. See Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 113–16. For a brief overview of Chomsky's position, see Maria-Luisa Rivero, "Noam Chomsky," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 271–73.

5. This is the so-called innateness hypothesis.

6. Schreiter's analogy makes orthodoxy (including Scripture) dependent on faith and its works (performances). Hence "the loci of orthodoxy, like grammar, undergo transformation as performance texts (local-theology texts) change. Thus condemnations of heresy can be lifted or forgotten when circumstances have changed" (*Constructing Local Theologies*, 116). On my view, an innate faith with no normative formulation is too vague to be the source of theological competence. If Christian performance/practice can transform grammar (since the latter is only descriptive), then Scripture and the creeds could both be revised in light of contemporary performance. Schreiter wrongly assigns authority to Performance II interpretation, rather than to the Trinitarian performance realized definitively in Christ and canon.

DIRECTING THE COMPANY: PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Not all performances are equal—hence the need for critics, and directors.[7] The apostle Paul criticized the way in which the church at Corinth observed the Lord's Supper, declaring it "unworthy" (1 Cor. 11:27) and going so far as to suggest that the Corinthians were not rendering the gospel but some other scene: "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper" (1 Cor. 11:20). Alas, churches can and do sometimes go out of order. Some so-called independent churches (and not only the independent) deny the principle of catholicity by going their own way, for example, by rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity as part of the dross of human tradition. Such churches err in thinking that they can simply choose for themselves, much like heretics, what to believe and how to live. Such undisciplined churches become easy prey to the counterfeit scripts and ideological wolves of the day.

Little has been said to this point about how the church organizes what it does and who should lead the organization. Are pastors media entertainers, therapists, political activists, or managers?[8] The prior question, of course, concerns what kind of organization the church is and what the church wants to accomplish. The church, we have argued, is a company of the gospel that gathers together to celebrate and anticipate the theo-drama and its end, to worship the divine *dramatis personae*, and to perform the script that sets forth God's self-communication. While every believer is a player in the company, the company of the gospel needs discipline and direction in order faithfully to perform the Scriptures and render the kingdom of God. To be sure, doctrine gives direction, but who instructs the church in doctrine? The church needs leaders who exercise a ministry of oversight; it is the role of the elders and overseers, pastors and bishops, to ensure the integrity of the church's gospel witness.[9]

Many pastors (and congregations) can probably identify with the experience of Richard Lischer, a newly crowned Ph.D. in theology whose first church happened to be in the economically depressed town of New Cana in southern Illinois, a location that proved to be a major disappointment: "Of course I knew Christendom needed unstrategic little churches like this one, but I bitterly resented the bureaucrats who had misfiled my gifts."[10] It soon became apparent that the theology he learned in seminary was of little help to his work as a pastor: "From

7. According to Francis Hodge, the director is the primary critic in the theater: "The function of criticism is to interpret and illuminate a work—a perfect description of the director's job" (*Play Directing: Analysis, Communication, and Style* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971], 285).

8. This list of images comes from William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 56–69.

9. The terms for bishop (*episkopos*) and elder (*presbyteros*) are used interchangeably in the New Testament (cf. Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5–7). Whatever we call them, the church should acknowledge the role of its servant-leaders to direct the congregation in its performances of love and truth.

10. Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey through a Country Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 11.

the Bible we deduced dogmatic axioms in Latin. We might as well have netted the Almighty and pinned his wings for display. Our taxonomy of faith included the attributes of God, the algebra of the Trinity, several species of sin, the two natures of Christ, the three modes of his presence, and many other formulas."[11] How one gets from that kind of theology to knowing how to transform a motley company of feuding, gossiping, and otherwise flawed oddballs into a parable of the kingdom is hardly self-evident.

The canonical-linguistic theology advocated in these pages aims at producing concrete direction, not abstract formulas. Doctrine is a condensed form of Christian wisdom, rooted in the Scriptures and accumulated over the centuries, about how rightly to participate in the drama of redemption, which is to say, in the life of the triune God. To recapitulate: the Father is the playwright and producer of the action; the Son is the climax and summation of the action. The Spirit, as the one who unites us to Christ, is the dresser who clothes us with Christ's righteousness, the prompter who helps us remember our biblical lines, and the prop master who gives gifts (accessories) to each church member, equipping us to play our parts.

While the Holy Spirit is the primary director who oversees the global production, it is the pastor who bears the primary responsibility for overseeing local performances. The pastor is an assistant director at best, assisted in turn by the theologian as dramaturge. Ideally, the pastor is also a theologian. In any event, the pastor is also a player in the drama who directs as much by example as by precept. The director is the mediator between the script and the actors: "Performance requires that he come up with a unified vision embracing both the drama (with the author's entire creative contribution) and the art of the actors (with their very different creative abilities)."[12] The first commandment of the director is obedience to the text; hence the significance of the dramaturge: "Play analysis is of first importance in the directing process."[13] The director's work is primarily that of communication: to the actors about the meaning of the script and then, indirectly through the actors, to the audience about the meaning of the play. *The church communicates the meaning of the play through its bodily action.*

The director is also responsible for training the actors, and for getting the actors to work with one another. Catechism and Bible studies can be effective means for understanding the basic theo-dramatic action. Information and knowledge, however, take a congregation only so far. What the pastor/director really needs to do is take the congregation's imagination captive to the Scriptures so that the theo-drama becomes the governing framework of the community's speech and action (2 Cor. 10:5). The pastor/director needs to instill confidence in a congregation that playing *this* script is the way to truth and abundant life. Such direction is communicated largely through preaching, an obedient "listening to the text on behalf of the church."[14] Herman Melville's image of the pulpit as a ship's prow that leads the way through uncharted waters is strikingly apt: "[T]he pulpit leads the world."[15]

Directing is not dictating. Directors should not manipulate or micromanage the actions of their players ("repeat after me . . ."; "stand there; no, more to the right . . ."). On the contrary, the primary task of the director, after helping people to understand the play, is to help each player grow into his or her part. This is largely a matter of enabling the players to see their identity as "in Christ," and perhaps of criticizing mechanical acting. The pastor helps the congregation become better actors by helping them learn the script and understand how it should be performed in the present cultural scene.

MASTERPIECE THEATER: CREEDAL THEOLOGY

What can theology do for the pastor/director? Far from being an obstacle to pastoral ministry (as per the common misconception), theology is in fact its servant. While the pastor's task is indeed intimidating, to have recourse to theology means that one need not begin from scratch. There is a prior performance history, indeed, a history of "great performances." Sadly, too many contemporary Christians know neither the script nor these great performances. William Willimon predicts: "Because so many of our people have not been well formed in the faith, pastors must now stress doctrine, the classical texts of our faith. . . . The culture is no longer a prop for the church. If we are going to make Christians, we must have a new determination to inculcate the faith."[16] What would happen in the church if more pastors took creedal theology seriously? The short answer is that *amateur theater might become masterpiece theater.*

Can doctrine really help pastors to direct persons toward "the good" as opposed to culturally conditioned, and hence partial, pictures of the good? Have not the postmoderns taught us that all perceptions and interpretations are only fragmentary at best? Can the church ever get beyond "local" (*viz.*, partial, socially determined) knowledge, or is doctrine always and only an aspect of *tribal* theology? It is just here that creedal theology affords pastors the means to obtain much more than local knowledge.

A creed is an abbreviated, authorized, and adequate summary of both the biblical witness and the preaching and teaching of the universal church. As such, a creed is "a guide to correct reading of Scripture and an adequate expression of belief and identity."[17] As we have seen, the main thrust of the early creeds was to

11. Ibid., 26.

12. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama,* vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 298.

13. Hodge, *Play Directing,* 8.

14. Willimon, *Pastor,* 146.

15. From *Moby Dick,* cited in ibid., 148.

16. Ibid., 71. Willimon goes on to compare our time to that of the Reformation, where the church was also faced "with a vast undereducated, uninformed, unformed laity and clergy" (71).

17. Philip Turner, "Introduction," in Christopher R. Seitz, ed., *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 11.

identify the divine *dramatis personae*. Only by rightly relating the God of Israel to the Father of Jesus Christ, and by rightly relating the Father, Son, and Spirit, could the church affirm the unity of the Scriptures and account for the intelligibility of the theo-dramatic action.

There is an important difference between a "creed" and a "confession." The creeds are associated with the seven ecumenical councils of the ancient church. The beliefs set forth in those creeds were "officially adopted to be binding on the universal church rather than merely on a local or a regional church."[18] Jaroslav Pelikan comments that the overwhelming impression that any new reader will carry away from reviewing the creedal texts "must surely be their sheer repetitiveness."[19] The point is not that the creeds are directions for deadly theater but that they sought above all to provide a binding and unifying indication of the gospel. Creedal theology is thus catholic ("catholic" = *kata* + *holos*, "in respect of the whole"): a confession of the *whole* church.

The pastor/director becomes an apprentice to the theological equivalent of masterpiece theater by becoming an apprentice to creedal theology and to its product, orthodox doctrine. Orthodoxy is a crystallization of the church's universal and unified knowledge of God and the gospel: "that which is believed everywhere, by everyone, at all times."[20] To subscribe to orthodox doctrine is to engraft the local church into the life of the church universal. *The purpose of creedal theology, then, is to direct the local church into the way of the Scriptures and to relate the local church to previous great performances.* Creedal theology mediates local and universal knowledge and thus serves as a bridge between the local and catholic church.

No travel is as instructive as travel into other realms, including the past. To engage the drama of doctrine is to become an "itinerant" minister, a pilgrim and participant in the "Great Tradition" of theology.[21] The study of historical theology, especially the great performances of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Barth, among others, is an excellent tonic for doctrinal parochialism. Creedal theology so summarizes the teaching of Scripture "that both an oppressive narrowness and a shapeless plurality are obviated."[22] One's local church is not the first group to seek to give faithful yet creative performances of its holy script. *To participate in the drama of doctrine is to engage a centuries-long debate about the meaning of Scripture and how best to embody it.* Creedal theology gives "catholic direction": direction for understanding and participating in the theo-drama that the "whole" church accepts.

18. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 9.

19. Ibid., 7.

20. This phrase, known as the Vincentian Canon, is taken from chap. 4 of Vincent's *Commonitorium*.

21. See Alister McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition," in John G. Stackhouse Jr., ed., *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 139–59.

22. Colin Gunton, "Dogma, the Church, and the Task of Theology," in Victor Pfitzner and Hilary Regan, eds., *The Task of Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 14.

REGIONAL THEATER: CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGY

There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism—one apostolic creed, yet many confessions and even more denominations. To participate in the drama of doctrine is, alas, to get caught in the crossfire of *conflicting* directions. With this thought, we return to the objection that doctrine is intrinsically divisive, and hence inimical to the unity of the church. It has recently been argued that no less than William Shakespeare, living as he did in the thick of Protestant/Roman Catholic conflict, purposely downplayed the role of regional and doctrinal differences for the sake of Christian unity. Should the pastor do no less?

The question of Shakespeare's Christian convictions is a well-known literary conundrum. How, given the prevalence of religious wars and controversies in Shakespeare's time, could he have kept his own religious views out of sight, and why? One scholar has recently suggested that Shakespeare's reluctance to preach Christian doctrine stems not from his secularism, as is often thought, but rather from his concern to avoid potential divisiveness.[23] While many English Renaissance plays were overtly nationalist, Shakespeare's plays suggest that Christian identity transcends parochial and even national boundaries. A number of his history plays, for example, associate a separate England with the havoc of war.[24]

Shakespeare appeared to believe, centuries before Peter Brook, that the theater could forge a kind of "congregational" fellowship by encouraging the imaginative participation of the audience.[25] The theater can be a powerful means of linking an audience, at least for a time, by providing a shared imaginative experience: "Just as he aimed to represent the true Christian faith as larger than any one sect, so Shakespeare strove to dramatize the true Christian fellowship as larger than any one nation."[26] Shakespeare "professed" his religion, then, precisely by refusing to profess it outright. He believed in moderation and accordingly had a high regard "for charity and fellowship over doctrinal precision."[27]

Many contemporary pastors/directors will no doubt identify with Shakespeare's plight. Better to avoid talk of doctrine for the sake of Christian fellowship than to take sides and divide. Better yet to avoid having to choose between truth and love! Shakespeare was right in wanting to emphasize the transnational character of Christian fellowship, right about the unifying effects of the audience's imaginative participation in the drama, but wrong in thinking that doctrine works against these two desiderata. Moderation in all things is good advice for drink, but not necessarily for doctrine. Moderation plays better to mass audiences,

23. Jeffrey Knapp, *Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theatre in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 51.

24. Knapp notes that Shakespeare's histories often uncover a kind of internationality within the English isle, for example, the French blood of England's kings (ibid., 17).

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 55.

27. Ibid., 171.

but martyrdom—bearing suffering witness to doctrinal truth—is the better part of our Christian inheritance.

The only thing that doctrine should divide is truth from falsehood, the way of wisdom that leads to Christ from the way of foolishness that leads elsewhere. The church's doctrines *ought* to distinguish it from the world, as should its life. With regard to the church/world relationship, then, doctrine should not only divide but make clear the *antithesis* between Christian faith and other faiths, be they religious or nonreligious. *Within* the church, however, doctrine must not divide, if division means being unable to worship and enjoy table fellowship together. Division among Christians contradicts the superobjective of the theo-drama, the movement of divine love toward union and communion with *one* people from every nation (Acts 2:5; Rev. 5:9). *Within* the church, doctrine should not be used for divisive purposes, nor should it be used for the purposes of racism, nationalism, or any other ideology, including denominationalism.[28]

To return to our question: How can confessional theology help the pastor? Precisely by *mediating* between the universal (catholic) and particular (local). Pelikan notes that the confession "as a distinct theological and literary form came into its own, as distinct from creed, with the Reformation in the sixteenth century."[29] Why? Because there was at that time a lack of consensus about how to resolve theological debates. Unlike the ecumenical councils of the ancient church, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant and Roman Catholic councils failed to secure the consensus of the whole church; hence they lacked authority. It is significant that many of the confessions of the sixteenth century bear national or regional titles.[30] This is because they addressed problems that affected their time and space—hence the analogy between confessional theology and *regional* theater.

To be sure, there is a sense in which confessional theology can be *too* local, too rooted to one time and place, one chronotope. Horatio Bonar complained that some of the seventeenth-century Protestant confessions, "in giving a lawyer-like precision to each statement, have imparted a local and temporary aspect to the new which did not belong to the more ancient standards."[31] At their best, however, confessions are more than ephemeral performances, more even than "a series of local theologies."[32] Confessional theologies are rather "great performances"—responses to their own historical context that contain lessons for the rest of the church as well.

Both creeds and confessions are binding indications of the church's commitment to the gospel. Both are means of doctrinal stability, though confessions are

28. Cf. John Webster's remark: "It is not the task of dogmatics to underwrite the practices of the church but to submit them to judgment" in "The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2001): 71.

29. Pelikan, *Credo*, 458.

30. For example: *The Bohemian Confession* (1535); *The First Helvetic Confession* (1536); *The Scots Confession* (1560); *The Belgic Confession* (1561); and, of course, *The Westminster Confession* (1647).

31. Cited in Pelikan, *Credo*, 481.

32. So Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 93. For Schreiter, church tradition is simply a series of *local* performances.

somewhat less catholic than the creeds. This is why the best analog to confessional theology is not masterpiece but regional theater. The confessional traditions are performance traditions, bearers of theo-dramatic rationality that combine elements of stabilization with elements of innovation. While they invariably affirm the ancient creeds, they also respond to further complications and questions concerning the best way to understand the theo-drama in specific cultural and intellectual contexts. Perhaps it is best to think of confessional theology as local performances with staying power, and *thus of more than local interest only.*

No one denomination, no one confession, no one way of embodying the gospel is exhaustive of the truth and the life. Confessional theologies, no matter how committed they are to the Scriptures, inevitably display the signs of the times in which they were framed. At worst, they can become frozen idiolects that render it difficult for one denomination to talk with another. Perhaps the best way to view confessional theologies is as dramaturgical traditions that preserve precious insights into the canonical script, traditions that have directed generations of regional theater. The church needs a variety of regional theaters in order to form the most adequate conception of the whole: "[I]t can be argued that there is an overall gain in richness from the formulating of confessions to meet particular historical circumstances and demands."[33] Such ecclesial unity-in-diversity is not a weakness but a strength, not only because it is the condition of theology's being able to address different kinds of situations but also because it is the enabling condition of creative theological understanding.[34]

LOCAL THEATER: CONGREGATIONAL THEOLOGY

To be a congregation is to come together with others to engage "in a quest to see our world in a special way from the perspective of God."[35] The local church congregates "to discern what is happening to them and to the world today, and to listen for where God is leading them."[36] Theology is not only helpful but necessary as congregations seek to understand themselves and to determine what they should be doing for God, for one another, and for the world. It falls particularly to the pastor to instruct the congregation in the ways of theo-drama, and to remind the congregation "that they are not the whole of those who believe in

33. Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 16.

34. It need not follow from this that members of a particular confessional tradition should be any less committed to it. It is possible passionately to subscribe to Reformed theology, for example, because one is convinced that the voice of this tradition needs to be heard and says something of distinct importance for the catholic church, yet at the same time to acknowledge that one's Reformed theology is a confession, not a possession, of the truth of Jesus Christ. I owe this clarification to a question posed by my colleague Doug Sweeney.

35. Robert J. Schreiter, "Theology in the Congregation: Discovering and Doing," in Nancy T. Ammerman et al., eds., *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 23.

36. Ibid.

God, that they are part of something larger."[37] To be precise, local churches are part of the same performance tradition inaugurated by the first-century church in Jerusalem: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).[38]

Some may object that the local church has in Scripture and the Spirit all that it needs to be the church and to accomplish its mission. Tradition is only human, and carries no divine authority. While it is true that the local church is fully the church, the local church is also part of a larger whole. Moreover, the gifts of the Spirit are given to the church universal, not necessarily to each and every church. As we saw in part 2 and again in this conclusion, interpretative traditions (e.g., Lutheranism, Wesleyanism) may indeed enjoy a *ministerial* authority. Nevertheless, *each concrete local church bears the responsibility of representing in its space and time the church as a whole.* Indeed, the local church is perhaps best viewed as a contextualized performance of the catholic church: the universal church made particular, visible, and concrete.

The catholic church is not some "general" church in the sense of a nondescript, generic group but the "whole" and "complete" church as it is extended through time and space and distributed across cultures. In contrast, the local church is a distinct cultural-linguistic entity. Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist, does not believe that the "essence" of a society can be discovered in any single locality. The variation of cultural forms provides anthropology both with its greatest resource and with its besetting theoretical dilemma: "[H]ow is such variation to be squared with the biological unity of the human species?"[39] Ecclesiologies face a similar question: *How is such variation between churches to be squared with the christological unity of the people of God?* What is a dilemma for the anthropologist, however, is old hat for Christian theology, for the relationship between the local and universal church has been the subject of centuries of Christian reflection.

Just as in exegesis it is important to relate "local" passages to the canonical whole, so it is important to relate what the local church says and does to the ecclesial whole. *Canonical-linguistic theology employs the canonical and catholic principles as twin checks on local performances.* Pastors/directors are responsible for ensuring a conversation of sorts between one's particular local church, the regional church, and the church catholic. There is a kind of "hermeneutical circle" between the whole (*viz.*, the catholic church) conceived through the parts (*viz.*, local churches) that actualize it, and the parts conceived through the wholes—both the smaller "regional" confessional wholes and the larger catholic whole—that guide them.

Pastors who neglect Scripture become disoriented and lose the way of the gospel. Pastors who neglect creedal and confessional theology disinherit and dispossess themselves and their congregations of the accumulated dramaturgical wealth of church. David F. Wright is right to worry about the debilitating effects that accompany the "deeply non-confessional ethos of much contemporary church life."[40] Being nonconfessional usually means being nondoctrinal, and when doctrine is at a discount, "the very identity of the church, of Christianity itself, is at hazard."[41] Without some such allegiance to confessional or creedal theology, the local church will struggle to participate fittingly in the theo-drama and will find itself speaking and acting like the other institutions (e.g., social clubs, political organizations, entertainment centers, and business conglomerates) that now hold cultural center stage.

37. Ibid., 30.

38. Pelikan comments that the list in Acts 2:42 covers the four criteria of the church's "apostolicity" (see Pelikan, *Credo*, 102).

39. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 22.

Because there is no other gospel, however, local churches must be radically committed to the doctrines that lie at the center of the theo-drama, all the while remaining charitable with regard to doctrines that lie at the periphery. Of course, one person's center is another's margin. But this is precisely why all local productions should be in touch with both the regional theater of one's confessing church and the masterpiece theater of the catholic church. In Shakespeare's plays, both establishment prelates and sectarian Puritans are typically divisive figures who encourage factionalism and get involved in political machinations. Doctrine is indeed divisive when it becomes a pawn in political struggles and holy wars. Yet Shakespeare portrays lowly friars in a more favorable light; it is "their *itinerancy*, which, Shakespeare appears to believe, helps free them from parochialism."[42] The pastor, likewise, must be an itinerant preacher, able to move back and forth between the local, the regional, and the universal (catholic).

Local churches can aspire to masterpiece theater when they participate in theology that is at once evangelical and catholic. We need to see our churches (and our theologies) as local instantiations or contextualizations among other local instantiations of the biblical gospel and of catholic orthodoxy. One of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Sir John Harrington, put it this way: "Christian is my name, Catholic my surname"[43]; and we can add, "Canonical is my middle name!" Harrington also called for an end to sectarian thinking: "Let not every man imagine he sees all, but that another perhaps hath found somewhat that he had not heard of."[44] A canonical-linguistic theology endorses this sentiment not as a prescription for relativism, much less as an excuse for indifference, but rather as a call for an enriched and enriching (i.e., creative) theological understanding.

Local theology can, indeed must, be simultaneously creative and creedal/confessional. For the pastor/director needs to help the company understand both the theo-dramatic script and the new cultural scenes in which the action is now being played out. Congregational performances, like theology, should be prosaic,

40. David F. Wright, "Preface," in Lynn Quigley, ed., *Reformed Theology in Contemporary Perspective: Westminster—Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow?* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2005).

41. Ibid.

42. Knapp, *Shakespeare's Tribe*, 53, emphasis mine.

43. Cited in ibid., 52.

44. Ibid.

phronetic, and prophetic. Being so involves understanding broad cultural trends and new ideologies as well as attending to issues and problems of more local significance. Note well: such trends and concerns are only the background scenery, not the heart of the action. The script has not changed, only the setting in which it is played out. Nevertheless, in order to perform the theo-drama compellingly, the pastor/director will need from time to time to help the company learn to continue the same action—sharing the love of God—*differently*. Instructed by previous great performances in which the church demonstrated creative understanding, the pastor/director improvises with a script, "always making up spontaneously what seems appropriate and honest in a given circumstance."[45] Local theology is a matter of congregational improvisation, in which the people of God act "naturally," as befits citizens of the city of God as they play out new scenes of the one, continuing theo-drama.

The sermon, not some leadership philosophy or management scheme, remains the prime means of pastoral direction and hence the pastor's paramount responsibility. The good sermon contains both script analysis and situation analysis. It is in the sermon that the pastor weaves together theo-dramatic truth and local knowledge. The sermon is the best frontal assault on imaginations held captive by secular stories that promise other ways to the good life. Most important, the sermon envisions ways for the local congregation to become a parable of the kingdom of God. *It is the pastor's/director's vocation to help congregations hear (understand) and do (perform) God's word in and for the present.*

Doctrine provides direction for what is ultimately a *pastoral* project, namely, that of helping congregations to create cruciform shapes of community life that can be practicably led in particular contexts. Doctrinal theology serves the ministry of the Word—the preaching, the performance—by providing the pastor with "program notes" for understanding the playscript, the *dramatis personae*, the through line of action, and the play's superobjective. In soliciting the church's participation in the theo-drama, the pastor translates and extends canonical practices into congregational practices. It is not that theology begins as local knowledge, but in order to produce lived biblical wisdom, it *strives to become* a type of local knowledge: "a practice or skill to be learned by those who seek to live well."[46]

Local performances in the drama of redemption aspire both to regional adequacy (i.e., relevance to the particular problems of one's time and place) and catholic fidelity (i.e., faithfulness to the biblical script). Today's local performance can become tomorrow's masterpiece theater. To speak in terms of "masterpiece" is not to sneak in professionalism through the stage door, however. The power of the church's performance has nothing to do with achieving technically sophisticated productions. Indeed, these tend to be "theatrical" in the worst sense: showy,

45. Hodge, *Play Directing*, 10.

46. Richard Hays, "Wisdom according to Paul" in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 111.

artificial, affected—the stuff of ecclesiologies of glory rather than the cross. Neither the props nor the special effects should distract the audience from the evangelical action. The local church will become masterpiece theater only to the extent that its focus is on living out the drama of redemption and on rehearsing the kingdom of God that is its raison d'être. The church is a showcase neither for moralism nor for civic religion, much less for technology or for individual personalities, but a theater of the strange new world of the gospel—a theater not of ethics or entertainment but of edification and eschatology.

A masterpiece is "an outstanding piece of artistry or workmanship; a person's best work." The church is the best work of *three* persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. It is a triune masterpiece, an outstanding piece of creative artistry: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10). Pastors need not worry about bringing the drama to its conclusion, only about their performances in the penultimate act. The drama of redemption ends, as comedies are wont to do, with everyone on stage at a wedding banquet (Rev. 19:7; 21:2). The last theo-dramatic word is *fullness* and *fulfillment*. The fullness of God and the fulfillment of all things will be found in Christ (Col. 1:19). Christ, in turn, fills the church, and the church communicates this fullness to the rest of the world: to the nations, to the academies, to diverse societies and cultures.

Until that end time, the pastor/director works to keep the vision vibrant. Formed by word and Spirit into a localized instance of God's masterpiece theater, informed by great performances from the past and from other parts of the world, guided by confessional dramaturgical traditions, the local church engages the drama of doctrine in order to become a vital, holy theater of the gospel. The local church is that interactive theater where a distinct view of the world—as created for fellowship with the triune God—is remembered, studied, cultivated, and celebrated in corporate performance. It is the pastor's role to oversee, through wise doctrinal direction, these dramatic local productions. I can imagine no more exciting or urgent challenge than that.