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# Shameless Torchbearer

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# A Shameless Torchbearer

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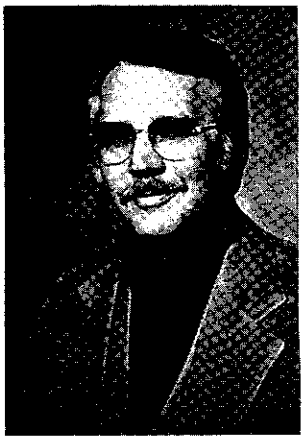

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In William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice,* Lorenzo elopes with Shylock's daughter, Jessica. As she descends to the courtyard from her room where Shylock has her locked up, Lorenzo gives Jessica a torch to carry. "Descend," he says, "for you must be my torchbearer." Embarrassed because she is in the disguise of a boy, Jessica responds: "What! must I hold a candle to my shame?"

The Reformed Calvinistic community is fond of talking about using the light of Scripture to inform and direct its activity. Perhaps the most common place to hear reference to the light of Scripture is in the academic community as that phrase applies to the various disciplines. The Bible is not a textbook on biology, or history, for

example, but it is quite appropriate to speak of the Bible as the source for directing the biologist and historian. No one disputes that. The Bible itself confirms this metaphor of "light" when it speaks of itself as a "lamp to our feet and a light upon our pathway." John Calvin, probably more than anyone else, established the use of this metaphor in applying it to what has become known as a "world and life view." The Reformed Calvinistic community shamelessly appropriates this idea of the light of Scripture to almost every area of life.

The same community, however, does not readily make a similar application to theatre. Relatively little has been done in the Reformed Calvinistic community to bring the witness of Jesus Christ to one of the oldest art forms. Drama and theatre* remain pretty much outside the interest of Calvinistic communities, except for token allowances in high school and college performances. Christian day schools generally offer no theatrical experiences whatsoever. Creative dramatics in these schools is receiving only incidental attention, and that by interested, individual teachers. I know of no Christian day school which has given theatre or creative dramatics a formal place in the curriculum. At Dordt College, recent productions of two very important dramatic scripts have met with very mixed reaction. *J.B.,* by Archibald MacLeish, and *The Lady's Not for Burning,* by Christopher Fry, probably raised more questions than any other recent productions, questions which stem from the discomfort, even distress, some feel when a Christian college gets involved with theatre.

So intense is some of the reaction to theatre performed within the Christian community that one wonders if the light of Scripture can, indeed, inform and direct the activity of the Christian theatre artist and scholar. "What," one might respond with Jessica, "must I hold a candle to my shame?" Or may one shamelessly be the torchbearer for the Lord in theatre arts?

It is my belief that the Reformed Calvinistic community has a God-given responsibility to direct the light of Scripture upon drama and theatre. This means the following: 1) the theatre artist and scholar will together search the Scriptures in such a way that its light will shine more brightly on the art of theatre, for the sake of Jesus Christ and to bear Him witness; 2) the scholar will trace the history and development of theatre from the point of view of Scripture furnished by its light; and 3) the theatre artist will bring to production the same light of Scripture so as to light the way to theatrical interpretation. And, in all of this, it is my belief that such work by scholar and artist deserve the support of the Christian community which is being served.

**Searching Scripture**

Scripture has nothing to say about drama in particular, but it provides everything anyone needs to know in order to be responsible with it. There are no references to drama as such, or to theatre, in the Bible. And, in my opinion, exegetical work done to show, for example, that David's pretended madness is Scriptural proof for theatre is poor use of Scripture and bad defense of theatre. Rather, the existence of the theatrical art form is Scripturally related to God's having

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* References to "drama" will mean the scripted or improvised story line of a "play"; "theatre" will mean the total effect of production.

made all things in the beginning, including that dimension of man which we call the aesthetic. As God made man perfect, in His own image, He created him to be creative and to respond to that which is creative. Does anyone deny the creative character of drama and theatre? Hardly. From the first ordering principle of the playwright to the last directive given by the technical director, the process is characterized by shaping and forming through characterization, dialogue, and movement within an enrivonment designed for the enactment.

Furthermore, Scripture clearly demonstrates how the perfect order of things was disrupted by man's willful disobedience. At a certain time and in a place called Eden, a woman and a man took to themselves the prerogative to be God. Across the heart of man, across the creation generally, and across the future possibility of theatrical arts there was inflicted a mortal wound. This wound, now a scar, healed by Christ's covenanting atonement, is still visible in all its ugliness. And either to the wounding or to the healing, a man's heart inclines. Either he loves God, or he lives in radical disobedience. This line of separation is called the antithesis, and, lest the Christian be proud, the man or woman redeemed in the Lord is by no means perfect, for the scar still shows across his or her own heart and life.

Creation, sin, redemption, and the antithesis are principles to be reckoned with in the study of drama and the production of theatre. A dramatic work will be born out of a love of God and his kingdom, or it will be born out of a hatred or disregard for Him. Likewise, a theatrical production will be born out of love or hate. In a real sense, in some final proof not seen by human eyes, there are only two ways to write a play and only two ways to produce a play.

Having made such a confession, we are offered by Scripture no release from our responsibility, even in drama and theatre. "Go into all the world," says Scripture, "and bear witness of my sacrifice." "Be my witnesses," Scripture says again. The mandate is clear. Once touched by the healing power of the Holy Spirit, our calling and election become sure by working out our salvation and life's task in fear and trembling, that is, with diligence, selflessness, and imagination. To all aspects of our lives, then, economic, recreational, political, as well as aesthetic, the mandate is made—a rededication to the mandate of Genesis—to till the garden. In spite of thistles and thorns, the garden of theatrical aesthetics must still be penned and produced.

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Finally, in connection with the Scriptural admonitions to be culturally busy, there is the warning not to get in the way of such dedication, not to obstruct such a calling. The call is urgent and should depend on faith alone, taking no thought for tomorrow. Seek first the kingdom of God, says Scripture, be busy in your profession, work without being overly concerned about food and clothing. Such is the nature of the call to be busy in the dramatic arts and theatre, a task left idle by Christians for centuries. And the

work is only begun; its development is infantile. What, then, of those who offend such work, such a calling? For them the Scriptures have a terrible warning: it were better that they were drowned in the sea, or that they had never been born!

There is another aspect to the Biblical idea of offending. Differences of opinion in the Christian community must be dealt with communally, and, where new Christians are involved, Paul admonishes that it might be better not to eat meat for a season. Where the church of Jesus Christ has firm roots, however, the season for abstinence should be over. Moralistic outrage, watchtower piety, closed minds, distrust among members of the body of Christ, and indirect assault have no Scriptural endorsement.

**Biblical Scholarship**

Thus far, the Scriptural attitude towards drama and theatre has been discussed with a view toward the kingdom goal of bringing the witness of Jesus Christ to this aesthetic aspect of life. It is time now to examine how the Christian scholar goes about doing his job in theatre arts, or, to put it differently, how the light of Scripture is brought to bear on the history and development of theatre.

Every secular scholar of drama and theatre will say, or imply, that the Greeks invented this art form as part of their worship ceremonies. The roots of drama, they say, are in Greek ritual. True, says the teaching witness of Christ, we have evidence that the Greeks developed the dramatic form. The roots of theatre, however, are not Greek. Rather, the roots of the dramatic art form lie in the word of God which He spoke into place along with everything else in creation. God made it possible to be and to respond aesthetically. And that makes theatre possible! Any other view is man-centered and antithetically wrong. It is important for the Christian scholar to begin in the right place and with a Scriptural precedent.

From his very first critique of theatre history, the Christ-witnessing scholar-teacher will evaluate the findings of secular man, pointing out that the dramatic art form has been misused again and again throughout the history of Western civilization. He will show, for example, that the Roman civilization used theatre to ridicule what was sacred, to sensationalize sexuality, and to gratify a lust for blood and combat. He will evaluate the norms of the art form as exhibited in the theatre buildings of Shakespeare's day and show how a secular interest in profit, at the expense of the art form itself, invented the individualistic star system and the reciding stage apron which separated the audience from the art work. This witness of Christ in the classroom will also trace the convoluted self-interest of the theatre early in the 20th century, when drama was written for drama's sake and theatre became its own metaphor. The witnessing teacher will end his work with a study of his own contemporaries, showing that drama, the stage, and theatrical productions have presumed to awaken an indifferent and insensitive public with shocking themes, abrasive language, and electronically amplified sound and effects, shouting itself independent of God and presuming to be a redemptive voice in a cultural wasteland.

Happily, however, it is never necessary to condemn theatre entirely. To do so would be to deny what was emphatically stated from the beginning, namely, that God, not the Greeks, made aesthetics and theatre possible. This is a crucial point, for it is just here that Christians have so often been wrong. To condemn theatre wholesale, rather than

its misuse, is to deny a foundational tenet of the Christian faith. The Maker must always be praised for his creation, in spite of poor human workmanship or man's abuses of a beautiful human function. One does not junk a new car because the starter fails, or condemn sexuality because there are prostitutes. The teaching witness must constantly call attention to the abundant evidence in history that badly motivated playwrights have used the art form well.

Another observation is necessary. As there is no mistaking the car as a car, or sex as sex, so there is no mistaking theatre as theatre. The theatre, from the writing of a play to its final curtain call, is a complex business, but never disorderly or so abnormal that it will be mistaken for a parade, for example. What makes that art form so complex, but orderly, is precisely what makes it theatre. The vast majority of people do not know what the complexities of theatre are, just as I am woefully ignorant about the complexities of a car. As for sexuality, even the most industrious of bio-psychologists has only an inkling of what sexuality is all about. Yet, theatre, as with the car and with sex, does not leave us confused as to which is which, or to what we are doing when. The Christian scholar stands amazed and filled with praise to God in the presence of the staggering truth of His creation, known to us now only as through a glass darkly. And the wonder of wonders is that no matter how badly the secular man uses theatre, even when the very form of it is distorted, it does yet, in its complex beauty, praise the Creator.

The Christian scholar must never lose sight of that wonder in theatre, while he may never let up on his critique and evaluation of man's sinful use of the art form. The Christian institution which appoints a scholar to this task has a twofold responsibility, similar to the responsibilities of the person appointed. The institution must, if it is to be faithful to its Biblical purpose, insist: 1) that critical evaluations are, indeed, going on in the classroom and in rehearsals, and 2) that praise is given to the Creator through artistic production of theatre. Like the scholar, the institution must be concerned with both the analysis and the art. In fact, the supporting audience, as well as the scholar and institution, share these same objectives: to analyze and judge the work of man, but to praise the handiwork of God.

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Institutional authorities are skiddish about inviting theatre productions on campus because constituents may be offended. Scholarship and artistry among the professionals in the field fail to work out their tasks in the light of Scripture. Audiences can be fickle, indifferent, or unjustly critical of Scripturally sound scholarship and production. Germane, and possibly fundamental, to the controversies which prevent the Reformed Calvinistic community from developing common

understandings about theatre, is the historical dichotomy of Rationalism and Moralism.

This history is rooted, not in the Creation or the Greeks, but in 17th and 18th century European philosophy. It was the time of rising belief in the reasonableness of man. "Common sense" was the watchword. The man of common sense, presumably, could make sound judgments by application of his better instinct. His instinct was a combination of animal sense and reason. Instinct and common sense were fundamental to the arguments of such men as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Thomas Payne, and Thomas Jefferson. The assumption was abroad that man was brought into the world unspoiled, and, given proper example, would retain some of that natural goodness. Playwrights such as John Dryden, Richard Steele, and Joseph Addison wrote from this perspective. They argued that if more and more people could be given good examples to live by, they would, as a society, reach a highly civilized, if not a utopian, state. Their plays were formal and offered themes of love and honor.

In that context there were Fundamentalists who maintained a different attitude. The Fundamentalists applied the letter of the Biblical decalogue. The Scripture became for them a book of recipes for moral conduct. Where the rationalist looked to man himself for guidelines, the fundamentalist looked only to the do's and dont's of Scripture. And, sprinkled through these viewpoints was a strong sentiment being espoused by the Anabaptists, ie., that the best response to the world was to flee it. The Fundamentalists, including the Anabaptists, wrote pamphlets and sermons, but no plays.

The Rationalist and the Fundamentalist, the one providing the leadership in theatre, the other leadership in attacking theatre, developed two opposing views: 1) the secular view, and 2) the moral view. This division was so strong that by 1869 Matthew Arnold could acceptably say about the history of the Western world that two impulses are always in rivalry, sometimes one in power, at other times the other. These two views he called the Hebraic impulse (Biblical-moral) and the Helenistic impulse (pagan-cultural).

An interesting, but very wrong, concept about theatre arose from this dichotomy. Drama was written and theatrically produced for two purposes, and these two purposes were always in rivalry: to instruct and to delight. Interpreted into today's language, a play was to be entertaining and was to have a moral. I need not show how history is replete with examples of plays which "got by" with immoral material because they were entertaining, so long as they ended by giving a moral lesson. Part of such a play satisfied the man of common sense, the other the Fundamentalist critic.

This dichotomy continues to survive, unchallenged, among Christians. Needless to say, it still causes tensions between the person who enjoys the art of theatre, and the person who looks for a moral message. It creates two camps of enemies who tolerate each other at best. If they traced the roots of theatre to God the Creator, however, they would find that they can be friends and a supportive community for Christian theatre artists. They would find that art is organically whole and religiously motivated either by a heart that wishes to praise God or a heart that is man-centered. Together they would condemn a wrong motivation, but rejoice in the handiwork of the art. A theatrical work can be enjoyed and judged wrong at the same time, and both responses can come from the

same viewer. Ideally, both responses would be shared by the entire audience if they started from a common Biblical point of view.

For the moment, however, two separate attitudes prevail, and these attitudes are deep-seated, ingrained in the very fabric of our lives, with history to support either attitude. These attitudes ignore the true nature of theatre. Theatre is not first of all a vehicle for moralizing or sermonizing; neither is theatre creationally intended to be a vehicle for a cheap thrill. The best theatre is imaginative and challenging story-telling with appeal made to all the senses. To say either that it entertains or that it has a moral is to diminish its very nature. Both expectations are, in themselves, and as opposites, wrong.

**Biblical Interpretations in Production**

After discussing a Scriptural basis for aesthetics, drama, and theatre, and the call to be witnesses in this area, we discussed the role of the Christian scholar. It remains now to focus on theatre and the way a Christian theatre artist can bring the witness of Christ to production through interpretation.

Bringing the witness of Christ to drama can be accomplished only in part by a classroom analysis. The reading of drama is a modern result of publishing; there was a time when theatre was known only as an acted-out art form. The true home for drama is the stage, not the classroom. One can only know so much about a play be reading it and talking about it; its real test comes in production, when a drama is translated into theatre. Under the light of Scripture and the direction of Christian artists, Christ can truly have His say, and that publically. This needs further discussion, as will follow, using the example of Archibald MacLeish's drama, *J.B.*

*J.B.* is the story of a modern businesman and his wife Sarah, who suffer all of the losses suffered by the Biblical model, Job. Zuss and Nickles, two broken-down old actors, begin the action by walking onto a bare stage and deciding to do the story of Job. Zuss takes the position of testing J.B., while Nickles determines to win his gambit: "He (J.B.) will curse God to his face." Zuss and Nickles parallel, if they do not represent, God and Satan. The oldest son of J.B. and Sarah is killed in war, ironically, after the truce is declared. Two children are killed in a car wreck. And the youngest is raped and found murdered. Then an explosion rocks the town, J.B.'s bank is smashed, and his wife is carried in unconscious. Sarah is convinced that God is doing all this without reason, but J.B. continues to plead, "Show me my guilt, Oh God!" As Sarah leaves, three Comforters come in, one a tough Marxist, the second a social-psychologist, and the third a preacher. Each gives his view of J.B.'s suffering, but it is the view of the preacher that most angers J.B. The preacher claims that we are all guilty, collectively, and each man must repent of mankind's collective sins. In the end, J.B., after suffering an attack of boils, declares his independence of Nickles who advises him to commit suicide and of Zuss who has never answered J.B.'s questions. Through all his suffering, J.B. insists he will *know* why he has had to suffer so, but in the end he declares to Sarah who has come back out of love for her husband, "We will never know." He ends with these words: "The candles in the churches are out. The lights have gone out in the sky." The play ends, allowing only a glimmering hope that the love of J.B. and Sarah will somehow flame up to light the world. Hopeless, really. A modern parable.

The dramatic text is so dense that

one reading does not suffice if one wants really to give the play either a fair hearing or a solid evaluation. Not even a three-class-period discussion of the play allows ample time for saturation or for critique. True, it would be possible to say that the play ends without hope in Christ, and that would be a small beginning towards a Christian witness in the process of classroom discussion and lecture. Unfortunately, however, such an observation is so easy to make, so obvious, that it is almost not worth saying.

On the stage, however, *J.B.* takes on a different character. What was once dense poetry now becomes visually clear. What was once a recitation of the suffering of J.B. becomes a vivid, visual demonstration of his suffering. What was once a colorless antagonism between Zuss and Nickles becomes brilliantly and bitterly brittle, where every crack and flaw shows up magnified. The Comforters speak a language which when read leaves one bewildered—a swirl of words—until they speak their lines in performance. On stage, their hatred of each other, their empty comfort, and their own philosophies of life, become as tangible to sight and sound as a sneeze at high noon.

Only theatrical performance can provide such explicit encounter, and only through extended, intense, and exhaustive work with the play. When performed, the leading actors will have spent almost fifty hours in rehearsal, besides the time spent memorizing lines. And every rehearsal gives occasion for innumerable pauses for reevaluating a line, for inflecting a word differently, for more dynamic movement, and for changes in blocking to make clearer the identity of character or a relationship of ideas. Many pauses are extended because new insights are discovered which add to the meaning of a line, the substance of a character, or the philosophical understanding of the play. Ultimately the director takes responsibility for the interpretation of what is said and how it is said, of what the scene designer creates to marshal the central concept, of the effects of sound and light, and of costuming. And through it all, the understanding of the unity of the production exceeds by far what might be gained by reading a script.

Bringing the torch of a Christ-witness to production in theatre means not only knowing inside out just what makes a play tick, but it also means supplying a perspective and sub-text which become apparent in production. Most secular dramatic scripts are vulnerable just where their religious assumptions become most apparent. One place where *J.B.* is vulnerable is in its use of an arbitrary stage effect to collapse the stage setting, a circus tent in the original production. A director who is alert to such vulnerability in a play will see this as an opportunity to strengthen his own interpretation of the play. In a Dordt production, for example, the scene designer connected the "earth" platform to the "heaven" platform by cables. This connection suggested that the earth is in God's providential rule and that man has been created in His likeness. Whereas a stage effect in the original production collapsed the independent supports (ten ropes), in the Dordt production J.B. is shown snapping the cables which join heaven and earth. This action suggested that man is responsible for breaking his covenant relationship with God.

Another vulnerable point in *J.B.* is its ending. The original production shows J.B. and Sarah leaving the stage together, hand in hand, bearing a stump of a candle by which they will presumably light the world. Such action and presumption is sheer sentimentality,

and vulnerable. A Christian director should take advantage of this opportunity. In the Dordt production, for example, J.B. left the stage first, leaving Sarah standing alone. They are then separated, the only logical conclusion to a world separated from God. In this way the antithesis is placed in full relief. Furthermore, to reinforce this sub-text interpretation, Nickles, in the Dordt production, stepped out of the shadows in the last moment of the play. Thus Sarah and Nickles (Satan) are on stage together in a final tableau reminiscent of the fall in the garden of Eden.

These kinds of artistically directed interpretations provide the Christian theatre artist with ample opportunity to bear witness even in the way a secular play is designed and acted.

Another alternative is also available to the Christian theatre artist. Instead of supplying a perspective and sub-text for the vulnerable points in the secular lay, the Christian director might choose to leave the vulnerable points of the play intact, but exaggerate them. In *J.B.,* for example, the separation of heaven and earth might be made very pronounced in the design, calling attention to the religious assumption in the play, *viz.,* that God has little if anything to do with man's existence. Also, the sentimentality of the closing scene might be made into a miniature soap opera. Choosing this alternative, however, has at least three dangers which I will mention but not elaborate on, since this debate is not central to this essay. The dangers of the exaggeration approach are: 1) it honors too much the idea that a director has to be "faithful" to the "intentions" of the work; 2) it depends too much on the audience to critique the work's religious bias; and 3) it lends itself too much to the sentimentalism that very often characterizes audiences in a Christian community. The Christian director has to know not only the play he plans to produce, but also the audience, before deciding which approach to use. The perspective-and-sub-text approach is more radical and insures better that what the audience sees is the perspective of the director; the approach which exaggerates principal weaknesses of the primary script stands a chance of giving an audience basically what it wants.

To focus as I have in the last paragraphs on interpretive techniques available to a Christian theatre artist might seem to minimize the aesthetic-artistic value of the secular play. Such minimizing must not be allowed. If a play is indeed a play, it has already been conditioned by the Creator's Word for aesthetics. Furthermore, a Christian director is not intent on making every artistic decision an obvious religious statement. Many creative decisions are made on the basis of the unity of the production and its central artistic motivation. For example, there need not be a religious value connected with placing the scene for *J.B.* as was the case in the Dordt production, in the year 2050, or to work from the premise of inter-stellar space. Such a concept seemed appropriate in 1978, and interesting, apart from any religious-philosophical consideration, and provided an artistic point of departure. It is imperative that the Christian theatre artist function *as an artist.* Then, given an aesthetically solid script and supporting artists, the secular play may be artistically produced while being Christianly critiqued—by the witness of Christ through the light of Scripture, by the critique of Christian scholarship, and under the torch of theatrical interpretation.

Such being the case, it becomes the responsibility of the Christian community to support and encourage that work.