

PUTTING ON CHRIST: SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND THE DRAMA OF DISCIPLESHIP



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Abstract. C. S. Lewis called for spiritual formation long before the term became popular: “Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else” (*Mere Christianity*, 171). Lewis’s call to become little Christs recalls Paul’s exhortation to “put off” the old self and “put on” Christ. This paper explores what this change of costume involves from the perspective of what a “theodramatic” approach to theology that I have developed in *The Drama of Doctrine and Faith Speaking Understanding*. I there argue that the role of doctrine is to (1) indicate what is in Christ and (2) direct those in Christ to participate in Christ by playing their parts in the drama of redemption. This theatrical model raises an important issue concerning the disciple’s self-understanding: Is it healthy for Christians to think in terms of “acting out” what is “in Christ” (their new identities as Christ’s disciples) or does this encourage a false sense of self – a “put on”? I respond to this question in four steps where I (1) present a theodramatic anthropology, (2) describe discipleship as the project of growing into/putting on Christ, (3) consider three objections to my previous work about the relationship between persons/roles and role-playing, and (4) respond to the objections by offering a dogmatic description of putting on Christ (i.e., spiritual formation) in soteriological, pneumatological, and eschatological terms.

INTRODUCTION: “*BUT WE HAVE THE MIND OF CHRIST*” (1 COR. 2:16)

“We have *the mind of Christ*.” This is an extraordinary declaration, whether one reads it as making a theological or a psychological claim (I think it is both). The apostle Paul is not simply saying that we have the same beliefs, much less the same brainwaves, as the historical Jesus. Disciples are neither carbon nor cerebral copies of Christ. In context, Paul is ex-

plaining to the Corinthians why the wise men of this age do not understand the wisdom of God: they cannot accept, or even comprehend, the thoughts of God, much less the wisdom of the cross, because they do not have the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11). Conversely, truly spiritual people – those who have the Spirit – understand how God is reconciling all things to himself through the cross. They have the mind of Christ, at least as concerns the plan of salvation. In a different context, however, Paul issues not a declaration but an exhortation: “Have this mind [of Christ]” (Phil. 2:5).¹ Does the Spirit give us access to Christ’s mind or not?²

A preliminary question is how people who are not Jesus Christ can have his mind. Is Paul encouraging us to be schizophrenic or, worse, inadvertently giving us a recipe for hypocrisy? On the contrary: what is ultimately at stake in claiming to have the mind of Christ is our understanding of how we come to be in our own right minds, and how we come increasingly to share in Christ’s life. The question of how disciples progressively come to embody the mind of Christ is therefore an appropriate ground on which to negotiate the way forward in the discussion between theology, Christian psychology, and pastoral care, especially if the pastor’s prime imperative is to grow mature persons whose maturity is measured by “the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).³ This process of maturation – the post-conversion process of becoming more like Christ, of “growing up...into him” (Eph. 4:15) – is what I mean by *drama of discipleship*.⁴

Discipleship is dramatic because it involves both call (“Follow me”) and response. Discipleship is dramatic because it is possible to deny one’s calling, at least on certain occasions (Peter did it three times). Drama means *doing*, and the assumption is that the disciple is somehow active in his or her becoming like Christ. How much drama is there in the life of an ordinary disciple? According to Paul, quite a bit, for those who have been raised

¹ All Scripture taken from ESV unless otherwise noted.

² In the context of 1 Corinthians 2 Paul is arguing against those who claim to be spiritual, and thus in a position to judge him, yet regard the cross as foolishness. The truly spiritual person is the one who discerns the wisdom of God in the cross of Christ through the Spirit, who knows and reveals the mind of God. In the context of Philippians 2, by way of contrast, Paul is addressing those who intellectually understand the cross but need to display the same humility in their corporate life as Christ did in becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross. To have Christ’s mind in this context is to have the same dispositions. As we shall see, having the mind of Christ is tied to having the Spirit, and this in turn explains the already/not-yet character of the Christian life: the Spirit is an eschatological reality.

³ See James G. Samra, *Being Conformed to Christ in Community: A Study of Maturity, Maturation and the Local Church in the Undisputed Pauline Letters* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

⁴ See also “The Drama of Discipleship: A Vocation of Spiritual Formation,” in my *Pictures at a Biblical Exhibition: Theological Scenes of the Church’s Worship, Witness, and Wisdom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

with Christ have put to death (put off) the old self and “have put on the new self” (Col. 3:10). What is the nature of the change Paul has in mind in speaking of putting off/putting on? How are we to understand the relationship between having the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 12:16) and being directed to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5)? In particular, to what extent can people change and what contribution, if any, can people make to their own transformation? Pastors and counselors are particularly interested in changes that encourage proper functioning, which is another way of saying, changes that make disciples more like Jesus Christ, the exemplar of true humanity. Our question is not, “What must I do to be saved?” but rather, “What must I do to be sanctified?” What must I *do* to have the mind of Christ? How does character formation – in this case, coming to have the mind of Christ – actually happen?

In the sixteenth century Anabaptists agreed with Luther that Christ, the righteous one, is a *donum*, a gift to the believer. But they went on, beyond Luther, to say that Christ was also an *exemplum*, an example to follow. In response, Lutherans called the idea that a true Christian must follow in Christ’s steps “the first article of the Anabaptist heresy,”⁵ thereby bequeathing to disciples striving to conform to Christ not one but two theological H-bombs to worry about: heresy and hypocrisy. The latter is a danger when a person’s external action (behavior) fails to coincide with a person’s internal disposition (heart).

To avoid confusion, we need first to distinguish converting from sanctifying grace. While in one sense conversion is a lifelong process, the grace that transfers sinners from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light marks a definitive break: only God can make the blind see; only God can make dead hearts beat anew. My immediate concern is with counseling Christians, that is, those who have experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and have responded in faith to the gospel word about Jesus Christ. To be sure, born-again Christians too can suffer from various psychological disorders. Yet even persons who receive a clean bill of psychological health may display a conspicuous lack of conformity to Christ: to be in one’s normal mind is not yet to have the mind of Christ.

My primary interest in this paper is not with people who have certifiable mental illnesses but with everyday Christians who seem to be functioning normally yet are nevertheless dysfunctional insofar as they lack conformity to Christ. How can dysfunctional disciples become people who have the mind (which as we shall see includes the heart) of Christ? From a theological point of view, all of us have sinned (Rom. 3:23) and fallen short of psychological health due to the noetic effects of sin, in particular our tendency to suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18–21). To the extent that we fail to coincide with our true selves, then, all people, Christians

⁵ Cited in Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 13.

included, need therapy. Discipleship itself is, I submit, a kind of therapy for rightly ordering lives that are still disordered, even after conversion. Stated differently: the drama of discipleship is another way of addressing the dynamics of spiritual formation.

This essay examines the “turn to drama” in theology and argues that it yields helpful insights into the process of Christian maturation. But first: What is theodramatic anthropology, and how can it help?

I. HOW I CAME TO A THEODRAMATIC MODEL (AND WHAT IT HAS TO DO WITH ANTHROPOLOGY AND DISCIPLESHIP)

1. *From Speech Acts to Theater Acts*

I took one small step (or was it a great leap?) towards viewing Christian life and theology in theodramatic terms when, in thinking about what it means to be biblical, in the context of hermeneutics, I discovered speech acts. The basic idea is that speakers and authors do not merely state facts but use words to *do* other things as well – acts like promising, warning, consoling, insulting, and so forth.⁶ It was Paul Ricoeur who first taught me that the language of the Bible owes much more to *parole* (dynamic discourse) than *langue* (static structure). Considered as a closed system, “[l]anguage no longer appears as a mediation between minds and things. It constitutes a world of its own.”⁷ The Bible is not a closed book of signs, sealed off in a world of its own, but discourse: *what someone says to someone else about something in some way at some time for some purpose*. In the case of the Bible, the “someone” is a prophet or apostle (and ultimately God, the divine author), the “to someone” is Israel, early Christians (and ultimately readers today), the “about something” is the good news about the life of God made available to all in the risen Jesus Christ, and the “for some purpose” is salvation, present and future. “Discourse” therefore reminds us that we fail to do justice to the Bible if we focus only on what it says (semantics) to the exclusion of what it does (pragmatics).

Speech act theorists (often philosophers of ordinary language) distinguish between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts (i.e., the distinction between saying something, doing something besides speaking *in* speaking, and bringing something about *by* speaking).⁸ The triune God

⁶ The seminal text of speech act philosophy is J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 6.

⁸ Austin may have written the key seminal work, but the most important systematic treatment is probably John Searle’s *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). For an application of speech act theory to biblical interpretation see Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

does many things with biblical words, including narrating, promising, commending, etc., but Paul tells us that what the Bible is particularly good for is “training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). What the triune God does in, with, and through the Bible is cultivate mature disciples who come to resemble Jesus Christ. In a word: what God does with the Bible is *make disciples*. And this relates to another aspect of speech acts: the *interlocutionary* act, the idea that discourse is addressed *to someone*.⁹ It takes two to interlocate.

Speech acts therefore bring us to the threshold of theater in two ways. First, speech act theory reminds us that language is not merely descriptive but also *performative*. Speakers and authors *do* things with words. This is the thrust of the concept *illocution*: what we do in saying something (e.g., promise). Second, the interlocutionary act is the essence of theater: one person presenting herself to another, communicating something via speech acts and acts that speak a thousand words. Theater is not about physical events (things colliding) but *interpersonal interaction* (people communicating). In retrospect, it seems a fairly straight line from speech acts to the theater: “It is quite correct that the particular vocation of theatre is to explore the consequences of this intuition that ‘to say is to do’ and ‘to do is to say.’”¹⁰

2. *Theodramatic Anthropology*

During the same period I was working on biblical hermeneutics, I was also asked to write an essay on theological anthropology. The timing was providential. I was aware of John Macmurray’s argument in *The Self as Agent* that we are better off understanding human persons not with Descartes’s “I think” (rationality) but rather with “I do” (agency).¹¹ In *thinking*, the mind alone is active, but *doing* engages mind and body. What most intrigued me, however, was the notion of the self as *speech* agent.¹² The idea of speech agency allowed me to view the person in relational terms without collapsing personhood into relations. God, of course, is the primary and paradigmatic speech agent, but – and this is absolutely central to my account – God addresses human creatures who, being in his image, can cry out, or talk back, to God.

Theodramatic anthropology thus begins with the insight that to be a person in God’s image is to be a communicative agent in various kinds of

⁹ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 14–15.

¹⁰ Ross Chambers, “Le Masque et le miroir: Vers une théorie relationnelle du théâtre,” *Etudes littéraires* 13 (1980): 402.

¹¹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957).

¹² Vanhoozer, “Human Being, Individual and Social,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158–88.

communicative relationships with others. Indeed, it is in the process of being dialogically addressed, called by *others*, that the self comes into its *own*. First and foremost, God calls us into being: to be a human person is to be evoked, addressed, and summoned by God.¹³ God's address to various individuals (e.g., Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets) is often a key development in the drama of redemption (cf. Gen. 22:1, 46:2; Exod. 3:4-7; 1 Sam. 3:6). But others – parents, children, neighbors, friends, etc. – call us too. If persons are answerable agents, then one's particular personal *identity* is largely a function of the pattern our responses take to the calls of these others. If our word is our bond, then perhaps we can view persons as communicative agents in various kinds of covenantal relationships. For example, the identity of characters in the Bible, as well as the nation of Israel as a whole, is largely a function of their settled pattern of response to various summons by the word of God.

3. *Theodramatic Theology*

The next step in my thinking was the realization that Christianity itself is essentially dramatic. The entire story of the Bible concerns God's own self-presentation on the world-stage to address his human creatures. If drama involves interpersonal interaction, then the Bible is *theodramatic* insofar as it concerns the relationship between God in three persons and the world of human persons. In particular, the Bible tells the story of how God creates humanity in his image in order to dwell and have fellowship with them, sharing his light and life in love.¹⁴ The story gets underway with a divine promise – “And you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Jer. 30:22; cf. Gen. 12:2; Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:21) – and continues with repeated demonstrations of God's covenant faithfulness and steadfast love (Exod. 34:6-7). The meaning of human life is to glorify God (by imaging him) and enjoy him forever (by living in his light and love). Human beings are communicative agents in order to dwell in communion with God and with one another.

¹³ See Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Interestingly, Eugene Peterson suggests that the drama could be construed as centered on spiritual formation. The Spirit forms creation (Gen. 1:1-3), descends on Jesus at his baptism thus anointing him Messiah (Mark 1:9-11), and descends again on his disciples who had gathered according to his instructions in the upper room (Acts 2:1-4). The Spirit is thus involved in creation, salvation, and community building and therefore “is not marginal to the main action, but *is* the main action” [Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., “Spirituality/Spiritual Formation,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 767].

The biblical drama of redemption is all about how God makes good on his promise to Adam, Abraham, and others to defeat Satan and reclaim the world as his kingdom and temple. The Bible ultimately treats the wonderful way in which God fulfills his promise and completes his purpose for humanity in and through Jesus Christ. The gospel is the good news that communion with God and one another has been established through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and begun to be realized through the Holy Spirit in the church. Indeed, the church is the temple – the special dwelling place of God – and is therefore an ingredient in the climax of the drama.

My book, *The Drama of Doctrine*, argues that the point of theology is to help disciples understand the theodrama in ways that are not merely theoretical but also theatrical.¹⁵ The point is not simply to theorize about the drama, but to participate in it. The important point is that doctrine helps to build up the church by offering *direction* for participating in the drama, for living out the way, truth, and life of Jesus Christ. Obviously the most important speaking and acting part belongs to the triune God: the whole play turns on what God the Father is doing in God the Son through God the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, members of the church have something to do as well. The task of the disciple is to demonstrate his or her understanding of the drama of redemption by joining in, and to do so in the right heart and spirit. Doctrine thus serves the purpose of helping disciples demonstrate their understanding in practice. Theology here takes on the character of *performance* knowledge.

To speak of performance raises the specter that doctrine directs Christians merely to “play-act” or “role-play” the faith: “To *be* or merely to *pretend* to be: that is the question, for the actor as well as for the would-be disciple,” I said.¹⁶ The goal, of course, is to become an integral self, with no gap between the inner and outer person. I acknowledged the danger of hypocrisy but argued that the way forward is not to abandon the theatrical metaphor but to take it with the utmost seriousness. I then suggested, drawing on the actor and director Constantine Stanislavsky, that the good actor *becomes the role he plays*.¹⁷ The idea is that actors must not simply go through the external motions, but actually experience the emotions or inner state of their character. As we shall see, this claim has provoked, maybe not a storm but at least a tidal spout of criticism (see below).

Doctrine resembles cognitive therapy to the extent that it encourages certain ways of thinking about God, the world, and ourselves. Ultimately, however, doctrine addresses the heart, the seat of our desires and dispositions. It is largely for this reason that I want to include the imagination under “cognitive”: the imagination is the kind of thinking that fits parts into

¹⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

¹⁶ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 365.

¹⁷ Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 366.

larger wholes and discerns meaningful patterns and is in turn grasped (i.e., delighted) by the beauty of the whole. Doctrinal theology helps Christians to acquire theodramatic habits of thought whereby we understand persons and events in relation to the broader theodrama of which everything on heaven and on earth is a part: the story of the Father renewing creation in Christ through the Spirit. The drama of doctrine is ultimately a matter of the Christian's most important habits: Will we adopt ways of seeing, judging, and acting that form a pattern of right response to God's word and fitting participation in the drama of redemption?¹⁸

4. *The Drama of Discipleship*

The role Christians are called to play in the theodrama is that of disciples of Jesus Christ: persons who have the mind of Christ and who know how to embody it at all times and places to everyone. This is the drama of discipleship: discerning and then doing the way of Jesus Christ in particular situations. There is another aspect to the drama of discipleship, namely, the question of how we become the kind of people who not only know what to say and do to embody the mind of Christ, but the kind of people for whom all this comes *naturally*? In *The Drama of Doctrine* I argued that doctrine itself is a means of character and spiritual formation insofar as it strips up our false masks (our *persona*) and discloses our true faces: faces that reflect the glory of God; faces that "speak" Christ.

Theodramatic anthropology depicts Christian identity as both gift and task. Gift: God has given Christ to us and us to Christ. This is the gift of the doctrine of union with Christ, which spells out what it means to be in Christ and to partake of all the spiritual blessings that appertain thereunto. Task: Christ calls us to follow him, to become increasingly *more* like him. C. S. Lewis says, "Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else."¹⁹ Lewis here echoes Paul's exhortation to "put on" Christ (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27). With this we return to my key question: Is putting on Christ a matter of external appearances only? How should disciples "act out" their role as "little Christs"? Does counseling people in our care to think of themselves in theodramatic terms (i.e., as actors in the drama of redemption) exacerbate or resolve the problem of the false self?

Though I talk about disciples in *Drama of Doctrine*, there are no index entries for "disciple" or "discipleship." My main focus there was to describe nature of Christian doctrine, not to prescribe procedures for making

¹⁸ Insofar as doctrine is concerned with making disciples, it might also be seen as a form of psychodynamic therapy to the extent that it encourages disciples to internalize dispositions and habits of the heart that lead to right participation in the theodrama (a point I owe to Steve Porter).

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 171.

Christian disciples. The situation is altogether different in *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*, where there are some sixty index entries under “disciples,” including “church as company of,” “location in Christ of,” and “improvisers of mind of Christ.”²⁰ I there describe discipleship as the project of having the mind of, growing into, or putting on Christ. To have the mind of Christ, I submit, is ultimately a matter of the Spirit illumining renewed minds (Rom. 12:2) and cultivating patterns of embodied wisdom – lived knowledge – hence the drama (embodied action) of discipleship.

II. PERSON, ROLE, AND IDENTITY: THREE OBJECTIONS TO THE MODEL OF SELF AS ACTOR

With this background knowledge in hand, we can now return to the main question of the present essay: How might a theodramatic model contribute to our understanding of how sinners with God-denying habits change into persons who respond obediently, like Jesus Christ, to God’s call on their lives? According to Cedric Johnson, “Theology speaks of the process of conversion, and psychotherapy deals with how people change.”²¹ I want to argue, on the contrary, that a theodramatic theology has something to contribute both to our understanding of the process by which a person changes, or rather, matures into Christ, and the process itself. Specifically, my claim is that spiritual formation prepares disciples to play their roles in the drama of redemption, and that doctrinal theology has a role to play in what we could call the *theodramatic formation* of disciples.²²

But how does *saying*, “[P]ut on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14), and explaining this putting on with doctrines like justification by faith, actually help a person change? Is performing doctrine (acting out *what is* “in Christ”) a matter of *acting oneself into new ways of thinking* or of *thinking oneself into new ways of acting*?²³ And, regardless of how we answer, does not an emphasis on the drama of discipleship reduce the Christian life to an unhealthy moral activism? This question leads straight to the first of three objections I now want to consider.

²⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

²¹ Cedric B. Johnson, “The Process of Change: Sacred and Secular,” *The Journal of Psychology and Theology* 5.2 (1997): 103.

²² Wesley Vander Lugt makes a similar point in the context of his treatment of Christian ethics: “Theatrical formation refers to the preparation, development, and growth of actors toward excellence and a readiness for particular roles and performances” [*Living Theodrama: Reimagining Theological Ethics* (Burlington, VT and Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 29].

²³ I owe this alternative to E. Stanley Jones, as cited in O. H. Mowrer, “The Role of the Concept of Sin in Psychotherapy,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 7 (1960): 185–201.

1. The “Moralistic” Objection to Putting on Christ (John Coe)

The first objection is one that Reformation Protestants rightly raise. We can state it in the form of a question: Does not an emphasis on *performance* lead to precisely the kind of works righteousness that Paul contrasts to the righteousness of God that comes, in Christ, “from faith to faith” (Rom. 1:17)? Or: Does not an emphasis on the disciple’s *doing* amount in the end to a kind of moral activism?

I readily grant that moralism is an ever-present danger. If pride is the besetting temptation of saints and sinners alike, we ought to be cautious about commending a course of action that adds fuel to the fire of our fallen inclination toward self-reliance. John Coe defines the temptation to moralism as the mindset behind “the attempt to deal with out spiritual failure, guilt and shame by means of spiritual efforts, by attempting to perfect one’s self in the power of the self.”²⁴ On this view, “moralism” is not a good but a bad thing, insofar as it refers to the attempt to make oneself a spiritual person – an actor prepared to walk the way of Jesus Christ – through what ultimately amounts to no more than self-help. Moralism is the illusion that disciples can make do with God’s grace. It is the attempt to become good without God. On a strong anti-moralist position, the attempt to imitate Christ is particularly dangerous to the extent that it insinuates human works (moral effort) in the last place it belongs. We cannot put on Christ by our own unaided moral strivings.²⁵

The kind of acting I have in mind, however, is more than moral striving. Theodrama is not a technique or a program for self-improvement but a way of conceiving, concentrating on, and participating in what God is doing for us (theodrama = God doing). It involves our doing too, yes, but a doing of a very particular kind: a participation in the doing (and the done) of Jesus Christ. C. S. Lewis comes close to what I have in mind when he asks what we think we are doing when we utter the first two words of the Lord’s Prayer: “our Father.” In a chapter from *Mere Christianity* entitled “Let’s Pretend,” Lewis says that what we are doing is “*dressing up as Christ*.”²⁶ His claim that this is an example of “good pretending” leads to the second objection to my theodramatic proposal I want now to consider.

²⁴ John Coe, “Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation: Opening to *Spiritual Formation in the Cross and the Spirit*,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1.1 (2008): 55.

²⁵ Coe identifies moralism with legalism, and suggests that Paul’s concern with the Galatians is not they were relying on works in order to be saved (i.e., justified) but that they were relying on their own works to achieve their sanctification, in “Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation,” 58–9.

²⁶ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 163 (emphasis original).

2. The “Mere Semblance of Virtue” Objection to Putting on Christ (Jennifer Herdt)

How else can we become virtuous *except* by acting the part? Jennifer Herdt criticizes those who worry overmuch about moral activism. The principal concern is that acting virtuously to become virtuous leads either to hypocrisy (the mere semblance of virtue) or pride – a “fruitless assertion of human moral agency.”²⁷ In Herdt’s words: “Hypocrisy is not a virtue. But is ‘putting on virtue,’ acting the part of virtue, always a vice?”²⁸ Aaron Preston makes a similar point in criticism of John Coe, noting that it is a mistake to equate all moral effort with “moralism,” the sinful strategy of relying on one’s good works instead of God.²⁹ Dallas Willard is even more succinct: “God is not opposed to effort but to *earning*.”³⁰

Herdt examines the Protestant idea, represented by Luther, that we should “abandon our own efforts and rely wholly on God’s grace to transform us from within”³¹ and finds it wanting. For Luther, it seems, “The natural life and the graced life are utterly discontinuous, and the natural aspiration to virtue thus blocks, rather than advances, true Christian righteousness.”³² Herdt thinks Protestants like Luther (and me) betray an exaggerated anxiety over the idea of acquired virtue under the mistaken assumption that we cannot put on virtue, or become the role we play (i.e., disciple of Christ), unless and until God by grace creates a new heart and makes us new creatures. From this Protestant perspective, Herdt contends, to “put on” is to act out what is ultimately nothing more than a sham: external practices cannot transform the inner person; pretending is inauthentic.

Herdt’s basic problem with this standard Protestant position is that it seems to prescribe “pure passivity in which human agency is wholly abandoned.”³³ Herdt has a healthy respect for Aristotle’s view that we acquire virtues “largely by habituation, that is, by acting as if we already possess them.”³⁴ In Herdt’s view, “putting on Christ” is best understood “as an imitation of Christ’s example through which we are brought into participa-

²⁷ Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

²⁸ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 1.

²⁹ Aaron Preston, “Redeeming Moral Formation: The Unity of Spiritual and Moral Formation in Willardian Thought,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 3.2 (2010): 206–29.

³⁰ Jan Johnson, Keith J. Matthews, and Dallas Willard, *Dallas Willard’s Study Guide to The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 107.

³¹ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 1.

³² Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 15.

³³ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 15.

³⁴ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 23.

tion in Christ's virtue."³⁵ The grace of moral transformation works through nature, namely, the ordinary process of learning by imitating. It is as if those who act according to their *better* natures get the grace to go on. What begins as pretending ("dressing up") ends up becoming genuine Christlikeness.

Herdt approves of Erasmus's "performance conception" of virtue, according to which "we develop the virtues only by enacting them, and so transforming being through doing."³⁶ Grace works *through* nature to improve it, not *on* nature to transform it. Stated differently: instead of a nature/grace dichotomy Herdt assumes that all forms of human agency are always/already grace-enabled; even people who do not confess Christ can imitate him so long as they are striving to act virtuously. For Herdt, then, putting on Christ is a matter of people acting like Christ, not of ceding moral agency to Christ (as she thinks Luther has done). For Herdt, then, we could be said to have the mind of Christ when we imitate his acts (with or without converting grace).

3. The "Not Becoming the Role" Objection to Theatrically Putting on Christ (Natalie Carnes)

Whereas Herdt complains that I, like other Protestants, too anxiously *distinguish* person and role in order to acknowledge the ever-present threat of hypocrisy, my second critic, Natalie Carnes, attacks from the other direction and complains that I too complacently *conflate* actor and character.

Carnes appeals to one of Gregory of Nyssa's pastoral strategies for helping his congregation interpret Jesus's first beatitude ("Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," Matt. 5:3). Gregory encouraged his wealthy and powerful congregants to perform their real-world roles of social prestige as actors perform parts, "knowing that they will eventually hang up their costumes and give up their personas."³⁷ The antidote to hypocrisy in such social performances is to remember not to confuse who one truly is (a mere mortal) with the role one temporarily plays here on earth: "The man who plays king does not take his symbols of power to say something about who he is as a person."³⁸ A king who understands the accident of his birth (he might have been born into the house of a commoner), and the inevitability of his own death can play his royal role "resistantly" (i.e., under protest of its ultimate unreality).

³⁵ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 2.

³⁶ Herdt, *Putting on Virtue*, 128.

³⁷ Natalie Carnes, "The Mysteries of our Existence: Estrangement and Theatricality," *Modern Theology* 28.3 (2012): 402.

³⁸ Carnes, "The Mysteries of our Existence," 414.

Carnes worries that “recent theater theologians collapse important distinctions between persons and their roles, which is seen particularly in their insistence that actors become their characters.”³⁹ It is true that in *Drama of Doctrine* I urge disciples to become the role they play in order to avoid hypocrisy. Putting on Christ, I argued, is a means of spiritual formation. Carnes, however, sees this as a problematic move that erases the space between actor and role, thereby canceling out the very thing that makes theatrical performance *theatrical*.⁴⁰ *Becoming* the role “is precisely what the actor does *not* do.”⁴¹ At the end of a performance of *Hamlet*, she reminds us, Kenneth Branagh is not dead. Actors remain distinct from the characters they embody. The *becoming* is only *metaphorical*, for “it is precisely the *not* becoming that distinguishes theatrical performance from other kinds of performance.”⁴² Hence the way a Christian becomes Christ-like in the performance of doctrine “cannot be the way Kenneth Branagh ‘becomes’ Hamlet in his performance of that character.”⁴³

While “putting on Christ” may indeed be a type of performance, Carnes insists that it is not theatrical.⁴⁴ For in the context of the theater, the actor and the character the actor puts on are two different persons, not the inside and outside of a single person. In contrast, what is unique about putting on Christ is that “it turns on the performance of a role that discloses and realizes one’s personhood.”⁴⁵ I think Carnes is right in what she affirms but wrong in what she denies. But I am grateful to both Herdt and Carnes for pushing me to think harder about what Paul means by “putting on Christ.”

III. THEODRAMATIC “PUTTING ON”: DOCTRINE AS COGNITIVE-AFFECTIVE THERAPY FOR ACTING OUT WHAT IS IN CHRIST

I want now to respond to my critics by taking my cue from Dorothy Sayers’s adage, “The dogma is the drama.”⁴⁶ In particular, I want to offer a *dogmatic* description of putting on Christ, by which I mean an account that takes as its overarching framework the triune economy of God’s works. To do so, however, I need to respond to a last objection.

³⁹ Carnes, “The Mysteries of our Existence,” 404.

⁴⁰ “Yet it is precisely that gap between actor and role that defines *theatrical* performance” (Carnes, “The Mysteries of our Existence,” 405).

⁴¹ Carnes, “The Mysteries of our Existence,” 405.

⁴² Carnes, “The Mysteries of our Existence,” 405.

⁴³ Carnes, “The Mysteries of our Existence,” 405.

⁴⁴ Carnes, “The Mysteries of our Existence,” 409.

⁴⁵ Carnes, “The Mysteries of our Existence,” 410.

⁴⁶ Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949), 3.

1. *The Drama of Discipleship: Towards a Dogmatic Account*

When Paul commands his Roman readers to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14), he is asking them to do more than merely go through the dominical motions. When Paul exhorts his readers, “Have this [Christ’s] mind,” he is urging them to adopt in their inner being (“spirit”) Christ’s habitual attitude of humility, his disposition to look to the interests of others before his own (Phil. 2:3–4). Paul asks his readers to put on Christ only because he views them as those who have already been baptized into Christ. Indeed, what was issued as an imperatival command in Romans 13:14 is now stated as indicative fact: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). It appears, then, that baptism has something to do with putting on Christ, but what? The short answer is that water baptism is a sign and sacrament of the believer’s baptism with the Holy Spirit, a dramatic elemental representation of our participation, through faith, in Jesus’s death and resurrection, and thus of our being born again, made new.

Baptism is a graphic representation of our dying and rising with Christ. It is a moment of high drama in the church, an act fairly dripping with meaning and significance. It is also a clue to what it means to put on Christ. However, some people object that baptism does not represent anything. It is simply something humans do to signal our allegiance to Christ. Indeed, some wonder whether the theodrama as a whole represents something; if it does not, it is not strictly speaking *theatrical*. This is similar to Carnes’s criticism, though now transposed from the level of actors and their roles to that of God and his work. No doubt Carnes would protest the idea that the history of redemption is “theatrical.” To be sure, God acts, but this in itself does not make God an actor.⁴⁷ If God is an actor, what role is he playing? More pointedly, if God is an actor, who is God representing?

It is an excellent question. My answer: when God acts in time he represents *himself*. The drama of redemption dramatically represents, in the form of the space-time missions of Son and Spirit, the eternal life of the triune God. What God does in time (the “economic” Trinity) corresponds to the way he is in eternity (the “immanent” Trinity). This directly bears on our topic, because the new humanity created in Jesus Christ also corresponds to what God in eternity determined (elected) his human creatures to be: what disciples perform is no socially constructed role but a role for which they were chosen “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4; cf. Rev. 13:8).

We understand the drama of discipleship, and theodrama in general, only when we see that the divine drama refers to the economy of redemp-

⁴⁷ Michael Pakaluk is willing to speak of God as acting, but not of God as an actor [“The Play’s Not the Thing,” *Edification: The Transdisciplinary Journal of Christian Psychology* 4 (2010): 29].

tion. Theodrama is not simply a pedagogical tool, much less a colorful way of speaking, but rather a way of giving a properly economic account – what I am referring to as a dogmatic description – of putting on Christ. Putting on Christ is not an exercise in moral striving, something we do, but something made possible only by a prior work of the triune God. Baptism is thus a key scene in the drama of discipleship: on the one hand, only God can bring about our participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; on the other hand, we participate in our incorporation into Christ precisely by acting out, with water, what God has accomplished through faith, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism dramatically represents our union with Christ, just as God’s works in history dramatically represent his eternal plan of salvation.

The Spirit’s role in the drama of redemption is essential. As Calvin says, “[A]s long as Christ remains outside of us ... all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless.”⁴⁸ The Spirit is the “giver of life” because he unites us to Christ. It is thanks to the Spirit that the life of Christ is formed within us. The Spirit is the theatrical “dresser” who clothes disciples with the righteousness of Christ (Eph. 4:24; cf. Isa. 61:10), the one who assists disciples with putting on Christ and maintains costume quality throughout the performance.⁴⁹ For those who by faith through the Spirit have been united to Christ, putting on Christ is not a fiction (*what if*) but a reality (*what is*). Contra Herdt, disciples do not act like Christ in order to approximate an exemplar *outside* them. Rather, disciples put on Christ *from the inside out*.

At the heart of the drama (economy) of redemption is the mission of the Son: Christ’s death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly session. Disciples can act out Christ only if Christ is first in them, and getting disciples into Christ, and Christ into disciples, is arguably the whole point of the Spirit’s mission, as well as the climactic Pentecostal scene where God creates a new people. The Holy Spirit is set apart to minister Christ: to witness to Christ; to illumine our minds to receive the knowledge of Christ; to renew our nations to form Christ in us. To be in Christ through the Spirit is to have been transferred into his kingdom (Col. 1:13) and thus to enjoy citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20). This change in citizenship may not be empirically verifiable, but it is neither fantasy nor pretense. On the contrary, doctrine is simply the attempt to spell out (indicate) *what is* “in Christ.”

Is, the operative term, carries an eschatological charge. To say what is in Christ is to describe what is “already” and “not yet.” To put on Christ is therefore to begin to act out *now* our participation in the age *to come*. It is the eschatological qualification what *is* in Christ that gives me the resources to respond to Carnes’s objection that I lose what makes a performance theatrical when I say the actor “becomes” the part she plays. Contra Carnes,

⁴⁸ *Institutes* III.1.1.

⁴⁹ I shall say more of the Spirit’s role in spiritual formation below.

the theatrical element in the theodrama is not the gap between actor and role but rather the *present representation in earthly, bodily form of what is eternally true in heaven: what is "in Christ."*

In acting out the life of Christ, disciples are neither relying on their moral efforts nor pretending to be something that are not; they are rather participating in what is eschatologically the case, namely, that disciples "are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10). As Herman Ridderbos rightly observes, the change of costume – the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new – is not something we do (a step in our personal *ordo salutis*) but something the triune God has accomplished (an event in the *historia salutis*): "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). What is in Christ – our new humanity – is meant "not first of all in a personal and ethical sense, but in a redemptive-historical, eschatological sense."⁵⁰

What, however, does it mean to participate in what is eschatologically the case? After all, the costume with which we are clothed – Christ's righteousness – is invisible, as is the Spirit himself. Is participating in what is eschatologically the case a kind of supercharged cognitive therapy, whereby if we simply believe hard enough, we can convince ourselves of a thing's truth? The short answer is that faith is a gift of the Spirit that allows us to apprehend reality. The reality is that, thanks to the Spirit, those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord really do have a share in his life, and this includes his sense of sonship, desire to do God's will, and compassion for others (i.e., his "mind"). Through faith we come not only to believe but also to *experience* the reality of we in Christ and Christ in us. The Spirit ministers the biblical word in so renews our imagination, our ability to both *taste* and *see* the glory and excellence of the unfolding theodrama in which we have been caught up.

To put on the new self, then, is *not* to pretend to be something that we are not; rather, it is to participate in the new humanity that *is* – in Christ. It is through faith, which includes the eschatological imagination – the ability to taste and see the invisible things of God – that people view and experience themselves as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. To put on Christ is to "taste and see" (Ps. 34:8) that one is *already* living in the kingdom of God, which is "the realm of God's action."⁵¹ In putting on Christ, then, disciples enter into a new state of affairs: what eschatologically *is*.

To be in Christ is to be in the process of being restored to true humanity, a process that requires our active involvement. To put on Christ entails acting him out: otherwise, our *doing* would fail to correspond to our *being*.

⁵⁰ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 63.

⁵¹ Dallas Willard, "The Gospel of the Kingdom and Spiritual Formation," in Alan Andrews, *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 29.

To act out what is in Christ is to be an answerable self who can respond to God's call like Samuel ("Here I am," 1 Sam. 3:4) and Mary ("Let it be with me according to your word," Luke 1:38). It takes an eschatologically charged imagination to participate in reality, to taste and see what is already but not yet in Christ.⁵² The drama of discipleship is all about acting out – dramatically representing in earthbound bodies and everyday practices – the new humanity that is in heaven, which is to say, in Christ. Let me now call upon two witnesses to help further clarify my case.

2. N. T. Wright: *Forming Christian Character*

Christians have been cast, called, and clothed "in Christ" by the triune God to be actors in the drama of redemption. That they are part of the play, the divine comedy of the Christ, is by grace alone. However, precisely because they have been cast, disciples have a role to play. Paul says they have put Christ on, and yet he also directs them to put on Christ. It remains to be seen whether what actors have to do – to become the role they have been assigned by acting out – involves a kind of moral effort. Stated differently: Is spiritual formation simply a matter of character (moral, virtue) formation, as we saw Herdt earlier maintain? This is a subtle query, because people are always in the process of some kind of spiritual formation in the sense that the things we typically do shape our character and eventually form our heart. How is acting in the theodrama any different?

N. T. Wright has written a book from the perspectives of New Testament studies on how Christians become virtuous: *After you Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. The central thing that is supposed to happen "after you believe" is the transformation of character.⁵³ Character is transformed by having a goal, deciding what steps to take to attain the goal, and then making sure those steps become habitual, a way of walking (Wright says "second nature"⁵⁴). So far, so Aristotle. If this were all Wright had to say, he would be in Herdt's camp, an advocate of the idea that virtue comes to those who work hardest at it. But it is not all he has to say.

The drama of discipleship concerns a very particular kind of spiritual formation, namely, the Holy Spirit's formation of Christ's life in disciples.⁵⁵

⁵² "Imagination is the aspect of human nature or identity that enables us to envisage the eschatological future that God has promised" [Alison Searle, "Performance, Incarnation, Conversion: Theology and the Future of Imagination," in *Theology and the Future: Evangelical Assertions and Explorations*, ed. Trevor Cairney and David Starling (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 208].

⁵³ Wright, *After you Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 26.

⁵⁴ Wright, *After you Believe*, 29.

⁵⁵ Preston helpfully summarizes Willard's threefold distinction of the meaning of spiritual formation ("Redeeming Moral Formation," 212).

Central to Wright's account is his insistence that Jesus came not simply to provide an example but to inaugurate God's new creation (i.e., new humanity). The "new humanity" (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) has already begun in Jesus's resurrection. For lack of a better term, we could perhaps refer to the distinctive virtues of Jesus – the habits of mind that comprise Christlikeness – as *kingdom virtues*. Virtues such as humility and compassion are hyper-ethical, going beyond earthly systems of morality. Kingdom virtues are the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the first fruit of the saints' eternal life. To put on Christ is to embody the mind of Christ and practice the kingdom virtues. Such a life is shaped "*by God's promised future*" and lived "*within the ongoing story of God's people*."⁵⁶ This, after all, is God's missionary purpose, the point of the whole drama: to bring heaven – the place where God's will is freely and joyfully done – down to earth. Christian living in the present "consists of anticipating this ultimate reality through the Spirit-led, habit-forming, truly human practice of faith, hope, and love."⁵⁷ To put on virtue is to live in ways that anticipate the life in the age to come. In my terms: to put on Christ is to act Christ out in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wright invokes the concept of "eschatological authenticity," which is a matter of practicing now what we will have fully only in the future, "a God-given 'second nature': The authenticity that really matters is living in accordance with the genuine human being God is calling you to become."⁵⁸ Christian character formation – putting on the kingdom virtues – is a matter of progressively becoming on earth what one already is in heaven (in Christ). Christian doctrine helps disciples to perceive what is (eschatologically) the case. This is perhaps what Paul means by speaking of transformation through the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2). Such transformation involves letting the word of Christ dwell richly in us (Col. 3:16) so that we can imaginatively indwell the drama of redemption. In addition to dressing us in Christ, the Holy Spirit also illumines our minds, lighting the stage of our inner being, so that we can apprehend through faith the contours of the true story of the world, a drama in which we have lines to say and things to do. The renewal of our minds means cultivating habits of good theodramatic judgment – becoming actors who know what to say and do to be like Christ.

Wright argues that Paul has thoroughly Christianized the ancient pagan (Aristotle's) theory of virtue, not just because it features humility but also because it locates us in the story of Jesus Christ: "To be formed by this capital-S Story is to be formed as a Christian."⁵⁹ To put on Christ is thus to inhabit his story (cf. Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me," Gal. 2:20). Doctrine, in

⁵⁶ Wright, *After you Believe*, 57 (emphasis original).

⁵⁷ Wright, *After you Believe*, 67.

⁵⁸ Wright, *After you Believe*, 108.

⁵⁹ Wright, *After you Believe*, 261.

deepening our understanding of the story – the identity of its protagonists, the meaning of its most important events – helps disciples better understand what God is doing in Christ so that they can act out their new humanity as it were by second nature.⁶⁰

3. Robert Roberts: Practicing Pauline Psychotherapy

My second ally, Robert Roberts, articulates a Christian psychology via Pauline theology without explicit reference to secular psychology – or theater, for that matter.⁶¹ His essay nevertheless converges with the main thrust of what I am calling the drama of discipleship, not least because Roberts too focuses on “acting out” what is in Christ. In particular, Roberts focuses on the role of the disciple in acting out the new personality – a new disposition; a new pattern of response to the call of God and others – they have been given in Christ (Eph. 2:15, 4:24; Col. 3:10): “The effort to live the new and healthy life is reframed as yielding oneself to what one already is in Christ.”⁶² It is one thing for the paralytic to believe he has been healed, quite another to get up and walk. In getting up and walking, he is not *pretending* to be whole; on the contrary, he is acting out the gift of his new Christ-given capacities. Similarly, disciples must take up their behavioral beds and *walk* (John 5:8). To walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4) “is just to start performing the kind of actions ... that are characteristic of the new self.”⁶³ It is no good having legs (or spirits) made new unless one puts them into action.

Roberts notes that the clothing metaphor (“put on ... compassionate hearts, kindness, etc.,” Col. 3:12–14) suggests “that Pauline therapeutic action is best thought of not as aspiring after an ideal, but as exploiting a perfection already present.”⁶⁴ *The theatrical is the therapeutic* – but only if the disciple is “in Christ” by grace through faith. Roberts’s key insight is “that psychological dysfunction corresponds to a failure to put on one’s new self as created in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁵ This is a failure of what we might

⁶⁰ Loyal readers of this journal may be wondering if theodramatic therapy ever gets beyond the V or Willard’s V-I-M framework for spiritual formation: vision – intention – means [see Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), ch. 5]. The short answer is that theodrama is more than vision because it involves a way of relating to others in the world. I address the question of intention and means in the Conclusion in connection with the heart.

⁶¹ Robert C. Roberts, “Outline of Pauline Psychotherapy,” in *Care for the Soul: Exploring the Intersection of Psychology and Theology*, ed. Mark McMinn and T. R. Phillips (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 134–63.

⁶² Roberts, “Outline of Pauline Psychotherapy,” 140.

⁶³ Roberts, “Outline of Pauline Psychotherapy,” 141–42.

⁶⁴ Roberts, “Outline of Pauline Psychotherapy,” 142.

⁶⁵ Roberts, “Outline of Pauline Psychotherapy,” 149.

call the cognitive-affective-eschatological imagination. Central to Pauline psychotherapy “will be teaching clients that they have been re-created in Jesus Christ.”⁶⁶ Yes! And this is precisely the task of Christian doctrine: to say *what is in Christ*. Roberts is not discounting secular psychotherapies all together, only trying “to see how far we can go without major importations from outside our tradition.”⁶⁷ In my terms, he is offering a properly dogmatic account of how people become more like Christ.

In Roberts’s view, the church should be the primary place where disciples learn to put on Christ. Wright agrees: it is in community that we learn, from diverse examples – the great cloud of witnesses – what discipleship looks like in particular situations, and it is in community that we practice virtue. The theatrical – in this case, acting out what is in Christ in company with other disciples – is indeed the therapeutic. Doing church means participating in corporate communicative activities – praying, fellowship, hearing the word of God, celebrating the Lord’s Supper – that train disciples in right covenantal relationships. Merely pretending to be virtuous is not the same as putting on Christ: “Pretending is a way of not working at it. And working at it is what counts.”⁶⁸ This thought returns us to Paul: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you” (Phil. 2:12–13). Disciples become their true selves when they act *from the inside out*, conforming to what God has already done to transform them. Disciples do not dissemble but rather bear witness to the truth when they bring their existential reality into correspondence with their eschatological reality “in Christ.”

CONCLUSION: “BUT WE HAVE THE MIND OF CHRIST”

The challenge of pastoral counseling is to help disciples grow into their new selves as communicative agents in new covenantal relationship, not simply to believe that they are “in Christ” but actually to act out the life of Christ in them. Doctrine plays a therapeutic role in the process of sanctification in setting forth in speech *what is in Christ*: the truth of our new identity. Yet this doctrinal renewing of the mind also requires a robust eschatological imagination (i.e., faith) that enables disciples not only to perceive but also to feel the truth of their *already/not yet* union with Christ.

Imitating Christ is not a matter of pretending or play-acting but of participating in something real: the theodrama or, as Dallas Willard calls it, the kingdom of God becoming present on earth as it is in heaven. The disciple is an actor in God’s drama of redemption, a person who exhibits

⁶⁶ Roberts, “Outline of Pauline Psychotherapy,” 149.

⁶⁷ Roberts, “Outline of Pauline Psychotherapy,” 161.

⁶⁸ Wright, *After You Believe*, 275.

his or her knowledge of God through a living interaction with God and others.⁶⁹ What distinguishes putting on Christ from the practice of other moral virtues is the unique inner preparation of the disciple-actor. To act from the inside out means that spiritual formation is first and foremost a matter of the heart. The Holy Spirit creates a “clean heart” and illumines our minds to understand the word of God, but it falls to the disciple to trust the word of Christ by stepping out and putting it into practice. This too is a demonstration of the reality that is in Christ. Whenever two or more disciples are gathered to “do Christ,” they become living parables of the kingdom of God.

1. “Sense of the Heart”

Many psychological problems stem from a denial of reality. For example, various status anxieties (i.e., the feeling that one is never good enough or has not yet done enough) stem from the failure to appreciate one’s status in Christ. People who put on Christ put off their false selves and develop their true selves. Is it enough, however, simply to be told about our new humanity? In the final analysis, is Christian doctrine simply a variation on the theme of cognitive therapy? Is information alone sufficient unto sanctification? I have argued that because the dogma is the drama, the theatrical is the therapeutic: in directing us to what is in Christ, Christian doctrine not only tells but shows, and in showing addresses not only the mind but also the imagination and the heart – what Jonathan Edwards calls the affections, the deep springs of all human action.

What is in Christ has both cognitive and affective content, and the Holy Spirit ministers understanding of this reality by giving disciples the eschatological imagination to grasp the biblical words that bear witness to it. Does such an imaginative appropriation of an eschatological truth count as an instance of what C. S. Lewis calls a “good pretending”? We need to proceed cautiously here: that believers have a share in Christ’s life is no mere pretense. I submit that what Lewis calls “good pretending” is a case of seeing and tasting the “not yet” in terms of the “already.” In keeping with my theatrical model, perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of good *presenting*. When disciples act out Christ they display their performance knowledge inasmuch as they are living out on an earthly stage the truth of the heavenly blessings they have in Christ (Eph. 1:3).

Putting on Christ requires what Jonathan Edwards calls spiritual perception: a perception not only of the truth but also of the goodness and beauty of what is in Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us a “new sense of the heart” (Edwards) that enables us not only to see but also to taste and

⁶⁹ Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ’s Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 9–22.

experience the goodness of the gospel, thus arousing our holy affections and producing new habits of holy practices.⁷⁰ The drama of discipleship is ultimately the story of how the Spirit engrafts us into the new humanity in Christ and thus draws us into the very life and kingdom of God. What Edwards calls spiritual perception I am calling the eschatological imagination: the ability to see (think) and taste (feel) our individual lives as caught up in the triune drama of the Christ.

The goal of this doctrinal therapy is to saturate disciples in the knowledge and understanding of what God is doing in Christ through the Spirit to the point that they can demonstrate their understanding by freely embodying the mind of Christ everywhere, at all times, and to everyone as it were by second nature. To put on Christ is ultimately a form of performance knowledge. The prerequisite for right performance is the indwelling word and Spirit of Christ. This is the primary work of converting grace: the donation of a new disposition, a new orientation of the heart.⁷¹ Pastors and counselors serve as secondary means of grace by practicing cognitive-affective therapy, helping disciples to see, feel, judge, and act theodramatically. Though the terminology of theodrama may be new, the insight that doctrine serves a pastoral purpose is not.⁷² Christian doctrine, when deployed wisely, is itself a kind of cognitive-affective-eschatological therapy that renews the mind by directing the eyes of our hearts to perceive and appreciate what is in Christ and then to act out what we have come to see and love.

2. Intent of the Heart

To put on Christ involves more (but not less) than changing external behavior. Most radically, it involves a transformation at the source of behavior: the heart. Here, too, the notion of theodrama can help. Most people think about themselves as the heroes of their own stories. If they are Christian, they may allow God into their lives. To say “what is in Christ” is to reverse this way of looking at things. My life is not my own, nor is my story: rather, as a follower of Jesus Christ I have been cast as a supporting player in God’s story, a story made flesh each time two or three disciples manifest the kingdom of God in what they do and say. Spiritual formation and discipleship are about people coming to see the world, and themselves, in theodramatic terms, and to be so ravished by this vision that their

⁷⁰ See Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 316.

⁷¹ See further Sean Michael Lucas, *God’s Grand Design: The Theological Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), chap 8.

⁷² See, for example, Ashish J. Naidu, *Transformed in Christ: Christology and the Christian Life in John Chrysostom* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

heartfelt desire and intent is to live for Christ and his kingdom rather than for oneself and one's fiefdom.⁷³

3. *Habits of the Heart*

Let me conclude by suggesting three practical means of theodramatic therapy, three tried and true means of grace: reading Scripture, prayer, and corporate worship.

Reading Scripture

The drama of discipleship is a matter of acting out what is in Christ. This means acting out what is inside us: the word and Spirit of Christ. Paul exhorts the church at Colossae, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16). When the Spirit impresses the words of Scripture on our hearts, we have a better grasp of who we are in Christ. Hence, one of the most important habits for disciples to cultivate is reading and studying the Bible: "the more you do it the more it will form the habits of mind and heart, soul and body, which will slowly but surely form your character into the likeness of Christ Jesus."⁷⁴ The Spirit renews our minds by rehearsing what has happened in the theodrama and enabling us to see and savor its beauty or "excellency."⁷⁵ The drama of discipleship concerns the way in which biblical words make our hearts willing captives to the living Word, Jesus Christ.⁷⁶

Prayer

Prayer is the second means of theodramatic therapy, and this for several reasons. First, it is the quintessential theological act. To pray is to enter into theodrama by speaking lines to God. Second, unlike doctrine, which can be spoken in the third person, prayer is a second-person (singular or plural) address to God, and thus insinuates a person more fully into the drama of

⁷³ For a reflection on the role of the heart in spiritual formation (and a reference to the "inner preparation" of actors in their craft), see Bill Hull, "Spiritual Formation from the Inside Out," in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 107–38.

⁷⁴ Wright, *After You Believe*, 262.

⁷⁵ McClymond and McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 378.

⁷⁶ Edwards thought that reading Scripture can be an occasion of divine illumination: "[T]he Spirit uses the Word to stir the holy affections of God's people" (Lucas, *God's Grand Design*, 143).

discipleship. Third, when disciples pray the way Jesus taught them (“Our father...”), petitioning God for the coming of his kingdom, they not only repeat Jesus’s words but also speak Christ’s mind. Fourth, prayer is a tonic of reality: there is no better way to reset one’s priorities and to see ourselves as we are before God.⁷⁷ Finally, prayer is perhaps the best means for the inner preparation of the disciple/actor: it was through prayer, fellowship with God, that Jesus readied himself for the role he had been called to play: “Not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

Corporate Worship

The third and final means of theodramatic therapy is shared worship.⁷⁸ Scripture may be the soul of theology, but doxology is the soul’s embodiment: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). There is perhaps no more theatrical (or therapeutic) theodramatic act than sharing the Lord’s Supper. The central action – breaking and taking the bread; pouring and passing the wine – not only recapitulates what Christ has done but also, in the doing in remembrance of him, *performs* it. Communicants enact the communion they have with one another in Christ: “Such worship is the central performance that trains and rehearses us for the rest of our lives.”⁷⁹ Even Carnes grants the formative power of worship, though she would deny that what we do in worship is theatrical: “But seen both as participating in eschatological reality and as disclosing who we are, worship breaks the person-role distinction that characterizes theatrical performance.”⁸⁰ By way of contrast, I see the Lord’s Supper as an eminently theatrical act that performs on earth the new creation as it is in heaven.

In conclusion: while Scripture and doctrine provide the script and the direction for understanding the truth, goodness, and beauty of the drama of the Christ, prayer and worship are ways personally to participate in it. While theology sets forth in speech the truth of Christ, corporate worship displays in living color, not only when the church is at table but whenever two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, acting out the new humanity that is ours in Christ – performing interactive parables of the kingdom. Each day affords disciples opportunities to act out what is in Christ by presenting their bodies as living sacrifices. Through reading Scripture, learn-

⁷⁷ Cf. C. S. Lewis: “Now the moment of prayer is for me ... the awareness, the re-awakened awareness, that this ‘real world’ and ‘real self’ are very far from being rock-bottom realities” [*Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 81].

⁷⁸ Wright, *After You Believe*, 278–80.

⁷⁹ Shannon Craigo-Snell, *The Empty Church: Theater, Theology, and Bodily Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

⁸⁰ Carnes, “The Mysteries of our Existence,” 408.

ing doctrine, praying, and doing church, disciples sharpen their spiritual perception and strengthen godly habits, thereby disposing themselves to embody the mind of Christ as it were by second (spiritual) nature. These are but some of the forms of cognitive-affective therapy that open the eyes of our hearts to the eschatological *is*, the new humanity in Jesus Christ that is already ours: “But *we have* the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16).⁸¹

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