'Sound Words': Evaluating a Postconservative Proposal by the Apostolic Standard for Doctrine

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Christian ministry entails "rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15 ESV) and "entrust[ing it] to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).[1] Contemporary discussion regarding doctrinal formulation has introduced the possibility of transcending the conservative-liberal gulf of modern theology, provoking at least two significant questions. *First*, how should pastors and teachers respond to such theories? Do they suggest possibilities for faithful formulation and communication of doctrine, or should they be rejected as attacks on the Faith? *Second*, what norm(s) should factor decisively in charting a way forward? What role does Scripture play in a discussion regarding doctrine?

This paper suggests that these questions are interrelated and should be answered by giving priority to Scripture. If confidence in *sola Scriptura* regulates particular doctrines such as the deity of Christ, Scripture must also serve as the normative source for the nature of doctrine itself. If God's canonical Word is sufficient, contemporary theology must accept its authority and emulate its doctrinal transmission. Explicitly theological methods and presuppositions begin with receptive ears to the Bible itself—"theology done by God's authorized theologians for God's people."[2] Scripture functions as doctrine's *norming norm* as one generation passes down truth to the next.[3]

Though all of God's Word should inform theological decisions, some portions of Scripture are uniquely furnished to address certain questions. As the only letters from an apostle to gospel ministers on the brink of ministering in a postapostolic era, the Pastoral Epistles pass on an apostolic standard for doctrine. They are neither the sum of doctrinal content nor the only inspired words that

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[1] All Scripture citations are taken from the English Standard Version (2016).

[2] A. B. Caneday, "Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional? Postconservatism's Use of Language Games and Speech-Act Theory," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 158.

[3] The phrase *norming norm* recognizes that one's historical perspective, theological tradition, and cultural setting influence the formation and communication of doctrine. Nevertheless, the determinative voice in theological discussion is God's, a viewpoint that Protestants commonly designate *sola Scriptura*. Anthony Lane writes, "But for the Reformation and for evangelical theology Scripture remains the final authority, to which one can appeal against all ecclesiastical authority. This was and remains the heart of the meaning of *sola Scriptura*." "*Sola Scriptura*? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan," in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 327. See also Brian C. Collins, *Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Theology: Evaluating Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Greenville: Exegesis & Theology, 2012), 47-132.

contribute to a theology of authoritative teaching. Yet they are a divinely authored benchmark, particularly for ministerial leaders, to evaluate the emphases and purposes of theology so that the church preserves the identity, propagates the message, and exhibits the effects of the scripturally shaped gospel.[4]

The Pastoral Epistles: Apostolic Standard for Doctrine

This paper will briefly delineate from Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus an apostolic standard for doctrine with a view toward evaluating a prominent postconservative proposal: Kevin Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic theory of doctrine. God through His Word communicates sufficiently so that His people, particularly ministers of the gospel, "may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). This canonical touchstone can be discerned through the letters' historical situation, scriptural matrix, prominent feature, and pastoral directives.[5]

Historical Situation

Paul's final canonical letters are Spirit-breathed directions penned to trusted delegates whose pastoral example and instruction concerning doctrinal and ethical fidelity were crucial for Christian congregations being infiltrated with error (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:3-7). The immutability of the Christian message provides stability when heresy or changes in leadership provoke uncertainty (2 Tim. 4:3-6). Paul charged Timothy and Titus to continue proclaiming the authentic gospel and its necessary implications, providing a bridge directly from the apostolic to the postapostolic church.

Scriptural Matrix

Apostolic teaching that correctly interprets and applies Scripture serves as the touchstone for doctrine in Paul's response to false teaching and errant practice in Ephesus and Crete. Paul speaks of "*the* teaching," "*the* faith," "*the* truth," and "*the* gospel" without qualification. This message is identifiable and demarcating.[6] Paul's persistent delineation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in

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[4] Brevard Childs, a leading proponent of canonical theology, concludes, "The shaping of the Pastorals lay in assigning the letters of Paul a normative role as a truthful model by which to measure the church's sound doctrine in the coming postapostolic age." *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 254. Though Childs's conclusion is similar to this study's, he errantly disavows Paul's authorship of the Pastoral Epistles and founds Pauline authority on the church's shaping of the canon instead of on scriptural testimony.

[5] For a full study of the doctrinal touchstone in the Pastoral Epistles, see Eric D. Newton, "'Sound Words': Recognizing Paul's Letters to Timothy and Titus as the Standard for Doctrine in a Postconservative Era" (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2010), 29-197.

[6] "Christian truth," William Mounce explains, "is not a collection of multiple ideas; it is a body of truth against which the error of the opponents can be measured and declared wrong." *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46 of Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2000), 42. Philip Towner states, "'The sound teaching,' always singular, is a technical term in these letters for the authoritative apostolic doctrine. Its singularity stands in intentional contrast with the substandard

these letters reveals that not every interpretation of Scripture is equally accurate or fruitful.[7] In addition, Paul's intentional use of Scripture and his teaching about it confirm that all God's words, not merely central ideas or human interpretations of them, serve as doctrine's normative standard.[8]

Heretics dabble in interpretation of certain portions of Scripture, playing games with words while refusing to submit to the gospel's power to transform sinners and its authority to demand holy living (2 Tim. 3:5). In contrast, a faithful pastor relies on the sufficiency of the entirety of God-breathed Scripture and proclaims its message regardless of the circumstances (2 Tim. 3:14-4:5). He is not waylaid because his calling entails the unpopular declaration of singular truth that distinguishes between correct and dangerously errant views. Sound apostolic teaching heralds the centrality of the gospel but also submits to the authority of specific passages. In order to perpetuate orthodoxy, ministers must acknowledge and submit to the normative authority of God's written Word, entrusting it to men who will then teach others (2 Tim. 2:2).

Prominent Feature

A striking feature of these three letters is Paul's concern for apostolic doctrine to persist and bear fruit in truth-centered living. What is true about God and His redemptive work through Christ serves as the basis for the conduct of His people, while their conduct reciprocally bears witness to the reality of God's salvation. Paul's way of relating evangelical doctrine and ethical practice in the Pastoral Epistles yields some important conclusions.

First, although both doctrine and ethics matter, there is a crucial order. The truth, as expressed in apostolic doctrine, dictates how one should view and live in the world (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:4-5). Doctrinal truth is not a function but rather the touchstone of ethics. The inscripturated apostolic faith serves as a standard for practice, irrespective of the church's success in living according to it. Though Paul frequently discusses deviation from the truth (1 Tim. 1:6, 19; 4:1; 5:15; 6:21; 2 Tim. 2:18; 4:4), he nowhere indicates that the truth has collapsed as a result.[9] Second, orthodoxy aims at orthopraxy. The Pastorals offer no endorsement of empty credence because a true knowledge of God

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plurality of the opponents' 'teachings' (4:1)." *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 130.

[7] In fact, the existence of the NT testifies to the early church's recognition of a crucial dividing line between truth and error. This is not to say that the church created or decided on a canon in response to an error, such as Marcion's teaching or Montanism in the second century. Following Herman Ridderbos, David Dunbar clarifies, "Rather, both of these challenges only served to awaken the church's self-consciousness of its true origins." "The Biblical Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 354.

[8] The gospel unity of Scripture is not a substitute for its divinely authored unity, as Francis Watson seems to suggest in his otherwise helpful article, "Gospel and Scripture: Rethinking Canonical Unity," *Tyndale Bulletin* 52, no. 1 (2001): 161-82.

[9] The dissolution of the truth would contradict Paul's affirmation of God's ability to guard the gospel deposit (2 Tim. 1:12) and Christ's immutable faithfulness, even in the face of human faithlessness (2 Tim. 2:12).

necessarily leads to godliness (Titus 1:1). Therefore, the church's confession and its way of life cannot be divorced (1 Tim. 3:15-16). It is the church's testimony that bears witness to saving truth (1 Tim. 2:8-15) and often provides a context for proclaiming the gospel (1 Tim. 6:1; Titus 2:5, 8, 10). Third, steadfast adherence to orthodoxy is a non-negotiable aspect of orthopraxy (1 Tim. 4:11-16). Right belief is essential to right behavior. As Martin Downes has pinpointed, orthopraxy depends on orthodoxy.[10] Salvation in Christ according to the apostolically proclaimed gospel is the fundamental reality that determines the church's life and mission, directs the believer's lifestyle, and sustains a pastor's enduring testimony.

Pastoral Directives

At the end of his ministry journey, Paul exhorts Timothy, "Follow the pattern [ὑποτύπωσιν] of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13). The apostle's message—the gospel and complementary teaching (1 Tim. 4:6)—is the divine paradigm for doctrine. Among his directions, four significant themes emerge. First, pastors must uphold the authority of "all Scripture" (2 Tim. 3:16). Second, they must preserve the truth by refutation and proclamation (2 Tim. 4:2). Third, they must rightly relate faith and practice, anchoring each in the gospel (Titus 1:1; 2:1-10). Fourth, they must persevere as faithful examples of truth-based living (1 Tim. 4:12; 6:11-12).[11] This apostolic standard for transmitting doctrine is crucial because the discipleship of every believer depends on doctrine (Rom. 6:17-18). Paul's sound teaching, ministered according to Paul's sound example, provides a pattern for postapostolic pastors and holds implications for contemporary doctrinal models.

Implications of the Apostolic Standard for the Canonical-Linguistic Model of Kevin Vanhoozer

The variety of dogmas, confessions, and practices among Christian denominations and traditions highlights the reality that not all doctrine is created equal. Postliberals and postconservatives hold in common the belief that at least part of the resolution to the standoff between theological liberals and conservatives lies in a culturally embedded view of language.

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[10] Downes writes, "What has been neglected, in my estimation, is the stress on orthopraxy at the very point where it connects to orthodoxy. This is the kind of orthopraxy that values guarding the good deposit, of being found trustworthy with the mysteries of God, of rightly handling the word of truth, of keeping the faith, of holding firm to the trustworthy Word as taught. These things are also included in biblical orthopraxy—so much so that a failure here may have eternal consequences for preacher and listener alike. Such a failure is exacerbated when those guilty of it continue to exhibit this kind of ungodliness. [Refusing] to be corrected and [embracing] views that deviate from the gospel is itself a form of immorality and ungodliness. If we do not hold firmly to the gospel, then we will have a chronically misshaped orthopraxy at a vital point." "Entrapment: The Emerging Church Conversation and the Cultural Captivity of the Gospel," in *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church,* ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 244.

[11] Being a minister to whom the truth can be "entrusted" and "who will be able teach others also" requires full-orbed faithfulness—personal, active trust in the gospel of Christ; unwavering devotion to God and His truth; character that displays grace-empowered integrity; and reliability in fulfilling God's commission.

Postliberalism concludes that the way forward is to view doctrine as rules for functioning as an ecclesial community. In this view, doctrine coherently expresses church practices but does not necessarily correspond to extralinguistic (i.e., metaphysical and historical) realities.[12] Some postconservatives such as Roger Olson and Stanley Grenz have embraced the postliberal critique that modern theology wrongly viewed doctrine in strictly propositional terms instead of accounting for its practical function in ecclesiological contexts.[13] Others, particularly Kevin Vanhoozer, affirm the insight of the cultural-linguistic analysis but insist that theology in the postmodern era must not relinquish the authority of the canonical texts.[14] In fact, the overarching goal of Vanhoozer's theological study has been to identify and recover what it means "to be biblical."[15]

Vanhoozer uses the metaphor of drama to depict the interrelationships of God, Scripture, pastor-teachers, tradition, theology, and Christian practice. *Drama* describes God's redemptive communication in the biblical text and the church's contemporary performance of the text. God has communicated in the canonical script what He has accomplished in redemptive history. Believers live biblically by performing this script under the direction of the Holy Spirit and pastors and in accordance with doctrinal program notes, which guide faithful improvisation of the original "theo-dramatic" performance. This improvisation requires not only observance but ongoing participation in the drama of God's redemptive work.[16] The drama does not continue because Christ's atoning work was unsatisfactory or repeatable. Rather, contemporary players must recognize the "plot" of the

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[12] See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984). Gary Dorrien rightly observes that postliberalism bears marked resemblance to its theological predecessor, neo-orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy previously attempted to forge a mediating position between conservatism and liberalism. "A Third Way in Theology? – Postliberal Theology," *Christian Century* 118 (July 4, 2001): 16.

[13] For an early description of postconservatives, see Roger E. Olson, "Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age," *Christian Century* 112 (May 3, 1995): 480-83. See also Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). Grenz refined Lindbeck's proposal by establishing eschatological reality as the validating criterion for the doctrinal grammar of present ecclesial cultures. For an overview of postliberal and postconservative models of doctrine, see Newton, "'Sound Words,'" 198-217.

[14] See Chauncey Everett Berry, "Revising Evangelical Theological Method in the Postmodern Context: Stanley J. Grenz and Kevin J. Vanhoozer as Test Cases" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003). Kevin Vanhoozer serves as research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He has also taught at Wheaton College and Graduate School and at New College, University of Edinburgh.

[15] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 9. The quest to be biblical, Vanhoozer insists, is not as simple as appealing to the text's literal meaning since it is necessary to distinguish between a text's meaning and a "reader's interpretation of the text." *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 61. In his introduction Vanhoozer states, "The present book sets forth a postconservative, canonical-linguistic theology and a directive theory of doctrine that roots theology more firmly in Scripture while preserving [George] Lindbeck's emphasis on practice." Ibid., xiii.

[16] *Drama of Doctrine*, 17, 79. Vanhoozer states, "Theater is an apt image not only for a passive beholding but for an active imaginative dwelling in worlds that are not normally our own." Ibid., 79.

gospel and then speak and act in ways that "correspond to the truth of the gospel."[17] Accordingly, he defines doctrine as "direction for the church's fitting participation in the ongoing drama of redemption as normatively specified in Scripture."[18] Those who follow doctrine's direction make everyday judgments that "display the mind of Christ."[19]

The canonical-linguistic view exhibits commendable qualities. Vanhoozer rightly emphasizes that God's communicative action precedes the church's interpretation. It is not an ecclesial community's use of biblical words but God's use that fundamentally matters. Vanhoozer helpfully connects confession and practice by suggesting that theology is not only theory but also wisdom that leads to good judgments in everyday living. Doctrine is "reality indicating" direction for a biblically faithful way of life. A true follower hears *and* obeys God's words (James 1:22).[20]

Is the canonical-linguistic model, therefore, the methodological way forward? Appreciation notwithstanding, what refinement or revision might the Pastorals suggest for the best of postconservative views? As Vanhoozer himself has pointed out, "The apostolic discourse, received in faith, is normative for theological understanding."[21] When tested by Paul's canonical touchstone, the canonical-linguistic approach to doctrine falls short in four areas: its interlacing of confession and practice, its use of speech-act theory, its hermeneutical understanding of redemptive history and literary genres, and its appreciation of a plurality of theological traditions.

Doctrine and the Relation of Confession and Practice

The strength of the canonical-linguistic model lies in its insistence that belief and lifestyle are integrally connected. In his words, the dichotomy between theory and practice is "debilitating."[22] Vanhoozer grounds his proposal in the conviction that Christian doctrine is both propositional and performative. Doctrine states what is true and provides a pattern of what to do. Through this

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[17] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Imprisoned or Free: Text, Status, and Theological Interpretation in the Master/Slave Discourse of Philemon," in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Theological Hermeneutic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 77.

[18] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea of a Theological System," in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. A. T. B. McGowan (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 173.

[19] *Drama of Doctrine*, 2.

[20] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 208. "It is one thing to assent to the truth, another to be transformed by it." Ibid.

[21] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Apostolic Discourse and Its Development," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 206.

[22] *Drama of Doctrine*, 3. Vanhoozer attributes this bifurcation at least in part to seminary education. *Hearers and Doers*, 145; Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 5-7.

"directive" theory of doctrine that regulates not just action but also thinking, he seeks to rehabilitate theology's everyday significance.[23]

Whereas many theologians think of doctrine as coterminous with propositions that the church confesses, Vanhoozer attempts to integrate the ideas of apostolic indicative and imperative. His proposal helpfully casts doctrine in a dual role that echoes the twofold purpose of Scripture delineated by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:14-17: (1) revelation of God and His redemptive plan and (2) direction for living as God's redeemed people. However, Vanhoozer sometimes introduces confusing dichotomies.

> The purpose of doctrine is not to give us the answers (i.e., how the universal principles apply) but to shape our habits of thinking and imagining so that we become people who habitually make good theo-dramatic judgments . . . as to who God is, what God is doing, and what we must do in response.[24]

Contrary to Vanhoozer's formulation, doctrine that does not "give us the answers" is inadequate to "shape our habits of thinking."

By emphasizing direction and participation, Vanhoozer risks drowning out the truth-bearing declarations of doctrine with the dramatic implications of doctrine. Granted, by faith Christians participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:4), but Vanhoozer tests the limits of this metaphor by speaking of "performing [the] atonement."[25] Although both elements—propositional and performative—are present, he hits the former note too softly. How Christians live is undeniably important, but a way of life is not the good news—the person and work of Jesus is.[26] The canonical-linguistic theory is a viable perspective on doctrine only if the propositional underpinnings remain foundational and prominent. As Paul demonstrates in his Pastoral Epistles, belief must inform, regulate, and inspire practice. Though the two are intricately interrelated, they must not be conflated or reversed.

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[23] *Drama of Doctrine*, 104-5.

[24] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model: Always Performing?" in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 178. Randal Rouser deems Vanhoozer's understanding of doctrine to be anti-realist and pragmatist. *Theology in Search of Foundations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 256-64. Although Rouser seems to discount the "chastened" foundationalist and propositional components of Vanhoozer's proposal, his critique bears testimony to Vanhoozer's tendency to elevate performance above propositions.

[25] Ibid., 426. Even more of a stretch is Vanhoozer's suggestion that "we participate in Christ's incarnation when we affirm God's creation as good." Ibid., 433.

[26] Vanhoozer has acknowledged this point, qualifying, "Strictly speaking, we don't 'do' the gospel but proclaim it." *Hearers and Doers*, 52. See also the distinction between pastoral theology in the indicative and imperative moods in *The Pastor as Public Theologian*, 108-25.

Scripture and the Use of Speech-Act Theory

Scripture bears testimony that the Lord acts by speaking. He has revealed Himself in words to convict and redeem and teach and transform sinners (John 8:32; Rom. 12:2; 2 Tim. 3:16). The divinely intended fruit of truth is not merely theoretical knowledge but practical knowledge that evidences both trusting commitment and reverential devotion (Titus 1:1). God has indeed communicated purposefully.

The canonical-linguistic proposal avoids some serious errors that have been committed in the theological use of speech-act theory. First, unlike Stanley Grenz, Vanhoozer insists that perlocutions (intended effects) are tied to the other elements of speech acts, locutions (verbal content) and illocutions (verbal actions). To dissociate what the Spirit spoke originally and how the Spirit speaks presently is to controvert authorial meaning and the normative authority of God's words. It is to capsize the Bible's ontological nature with the waves of its functional use.[27] Second, unlike Nicholas Wolterstorff, who suggests that Scripture is "double-agency discourse" that demands a double hermeneutic, Vanhoozer remains committed to inspiration, refusing to countenance the possibility that the Bible's divine and human illocutions of a particular locution could be different.[28] He suggests that while a prophet may have spoken better than he knew and that God may have revealed the ultimate referent of a prophecy at a later point in the canon, God's linguistic intentions do not

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[27] See "On the Very Idea of a Theological System," 145-47.

[28] Vanhoozer alludes to Wolterstorff's suggestion of the possibility of divergence between divine and human illocutions as a "wax nose." "Into the Great 'Beyond,'" in *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 92. Nonetheless, at times Vanhoozer suggests the possible divergence between human and divine discourse without alerting the reader to Wolterstorff's problems. For instance, he states, "The fundamental principle in reading Scripture to hear the word of God is to assume that the human discourse is the divinely authorized and appropriated discourse *unless there is good reason to do otherwise*." "Word of God," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005): 853, emphasis added. Also, see *Drama of Doctrine*, 178 n. 122. Compare Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 183-222. Vanhoozer has noted other weaknesses in Wolterstorff's argument. "Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks," in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009), 45-49.

Another troubling feature of Wolterstorff's proposal is his usage of the term *revelation*. Although Vanhoozer recognizes that theologians typically use *revelation* more broadly, he appreciates Wolterstorff's insistence that God's Word is more "than the transfer of information." *Drama of Doctrine*, 277 n. 37. Acknowledgment of the typical theological use of the term *revelation* notwithstanding, Vanhoozer's comments concerning Wolterstorff's concept of *discourse* lack any reference to Scripture's identity as God's Word spoken to fallen, depraved, and darkened mankind. The discussion regarding *communicative action* and *divine discourse* and *revelation* must include a theological awareness that God communicates "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:10, citing Isa. 64:4). Some, such as Wolterstorff, insist that only some of Scripture is an unveiling of the otherwise unknown. David's psalms and Luke's history, for example, do not qualify as revelation. For Wolterstorff, the category of *revelation* does not explicitly account for the finite and fallen condition of the recipient. This is not to say that his entire proposal is wrongheaded. His conception of divine discourse rightly exploits weaknesses in both Karl Barth's bibliology and Hans Frei's narrative theology. See *Divine Discourse*, 63-74, 230-36.

contradict the human author's.[29] These commitments to the original textual meaning and the unified divine-human authorship of Scripture set Vanhoozer apart from others who appropriate speech-act theory. Nevertheless, his use of speech-act theory lends itself to other dangers.

Inerrancy: The Truth Question Is Not Secondary

The truth question is not a modernist epistemological convention. The human authors of Scripture understood they were writing truth.[30] Granted, the truth question is not the only question, and the Bible is more than an encyclopedia of statements eliciting assent. Interpreting Scripture grammatically, historically, literarily, and canonically, according to the Spirit's stated guidance in Scripture itself is crucial. However, accurate interpretation, not to mention believing confidence, is hopeless if Scripture's truthfulness is negotiable. The truthfulness of God lies at the heart of an orthodox doctrine of Scripture. Biblical discourse conveys many communicative actions, such as commanding, warning, promising, worshiping, and refuting. Nonetheless, God's speech acts to reveal and assert and affirm truth is pivotal because fundamentally He must be believed. Since the Fall, man has expressed his rebellion against God in unbelief, which began with the diabolical insinuation that what God has said might not be trustworthy (Gen. 3:1-5).

In light of the high view of Scripture exemplified in the Pastoral Epistles, Vanhoozer's commitment to inerrancy is less than satisfying. Vanhoozer often situates his position as distinct from the approach of conservatives whose reputedly modernistic ideas he wants to move beyond.[31] He espouses inerrancy but aims to avoid poor construal of the doctrine and views it as "expedient"

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[29] Vanhoozer states, "The divine intention does not contravene the intention of the human author but rather supervenes on it." *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 265. To compare the use of speech-act theory by Wolterstorff, Grenz, and Vanhoozer, see Everett Berry, "Speech-Act Theory as a Corollary for Describing the Dynamics of Biblical Revelation: Some Recommendations and Reservations" (paper presented at the 51st annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, November 2007).

[30] Brevard Childs concludes: "The nature of the New Testament literature is such that to evaluate it as a good example of literary fiction tries in vain to suppress the truth question that was uppermost in the intention of its authors and readers." *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul*, 257.

[31] In his response to Vanhoozer's essay on inerrancy, Albert Mohler similarly observes, "He strongly affirms inerrancy. But his essay reveals more of a concern with misconstruals of inerrancy than with the very real concessions made by so many who claim to be evangelicals while not just misconstruing inerrancy but outright rejecting it. After reading his essay, it appears to me that Vanhoozer is far more concerned to prevent evangelicals from claiming too much than claiming too little about the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the Bible." R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Response to Kevin J. Vanhoozer," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, ed. James R. A. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 237.

Vanhoozer does identify theological missteps. For example, he speaks of Kenton Sparks's unhelpful idea that God "has intentionally adopted errant human viewpoints" as "mov[ing] too fast, however, from human finitude to human fallenness." Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 249, cited in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse (Part 2)," 69 n. 80.

rather than "essential."[32] In reflection on the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) Vanhoozer suggests the following definition: "the authors speak the truth in all things they affirm (when they make affirmations), and will eventually be seen to have spoken truly (when right readers read rightly)." In other words, to articulate inerrancy rightly is to discern with genre sensitivity what the biblical authors affirm on the level of *discourse*.[33]

Speech-act theory, when understood correctly, usefully accentuates the communicative intentionality of all language. It is problematic, however, when linguistic performance receives so much attention that propositional content seems trivial. It introduces false dilemmas such as Vanhoozer's conclusion regarding Joshua 6: "Indeed, reading Joshua simply to discover 'what actually happens' is to miss the main point of the discourse, which is to communicate a theological interpretation of what happened (that is, God gave Israel the land) and to call for right participation in the covenant."[34] It is not without reason that Vern Poythress remarks, "I also wonder whether speech-act theory is going to be treated by some people as if it were an *alternative* rather than an added dimension that would supplement a focus on propositional truth."[35] Affirming Scripture's authority as God's unerring, fully trustworthy verbal communication accurately conveys the testimony of Scripture about itself and adjudicates the fundamental question of truth.

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[32] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Augustinian Inerrancy: Literary Meaning, Literal Truth, and Literate Interpretation in the Economy of Biblical Discourse," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, 204.

[33] Ibid., 207, 222.

[34] Ibid., 228. For an early examination of Vanhoozer's views on inerrancy and infallibility, see Gregg Allison, "Speech Act Theory and Its Implications for the Doctrine of the Inerrancy/Infallibility of Scripture," *Philosophia Christi* 18 (Spring 1995): 1-23. Allison convincingly argues that Vanhoozer's conception underestimates the necessity of retaining the symbiotic relationship of the locutionary and illocutionary aspects of speech acts. With very few exceptions, according to Allison, speech acts "refer" to some reality and, therefore, are "assessable" according to their verity or falsity. Regardless of the literary genre, the locution either truthfully or errantly corresponds to metaphysical and historical reality. Consequently, scriptural language is uniformly inerrant in its propositional content and infallible in its illocutionary force. Ibid., 11-16, 22-23.

[35] Vern Poythress, "Canon and Speech Act: Limitations in Speech-Act Theory, with Implications for a Putative Theory of Canonical Speech Acts," *WTJ* 70, no. 2 (2008): 354. Poythress also warns that context, the strength of speech-act theory, "is also its weakness. Sentence-level utterances occur in the context of larger discourses. Discourse takes place in the context of human action. Human purposeful action takes place within the context of culture, and culture in the context of cultures, in the plural. And cultures occur in a context of a world and a world history whose interpretation differs from culture to culture. And that, as the postmodern relativists have seen, can lead to an ultimate relativism in the whole human project. In the end, such relativism at a high level, relativism generated by multiple cultures, injects relativism back down into the meaning of any speech act—unless there is a transcendent adjudication of truth." Ibid.

Mediating Barth: What Has Basel to Do with Deerfield?

Since the publication in 1919 of his commentary on Romans, Karl Barth has wielded considerable theological influence among many evangelicals.[36] Evangelicals who engage Barth believe his prowess cannot be ignored, though some also clarify that uncritical adoption of his theology is dangerous.[37] Vanhoozer also judges Barth deficient in crucial areas but wants to salvage the latter's contribution to the doctrine of revelation by pinpointing why many evangelicals, such as Carl Henry, disagree with Barth. Vanhoozer says, "Above all, [speech-act theory] allows us to transcend the debilitating dichotomy between revelation as 'God saying' and as 'God doing.'"[38]

It is doubtful, however, whether this mediation is successful or even desirable. Henry affirms that God has revealed Himself through action in history. Henry's point is not that God speaks rather than acts, but that God has communicated His self-revelation by inerrant words that humans have penned. If conservatives like Henry rightly emphasize what has been spoken and why God spoke it, their understanding of divine discourse is essentially correct. Henry did not dispute the necessity of spiritual illumination but rather Barth's identification of God's Word only with the Spirit's use of Scripture instead of with Scripture itself.[39] Barth's refusal to identify Scripture as revelation and Barth's assertion that written Scripture contains human error are unorthodox.[40] Therefore,

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[36] Carl Trueman attributes the recent renaissance of evangelical interest in Barth to at least four fashionable ideas. First, Barth advocates a "dynamic view of Scripture" that diminishes the significance of thorny historical matters. Second, Barth conveys a "provisionality" that suits the postmodern penchant for local rather than universal truth. Third, some evangelicals belittle language's "extratextual referentiality," a suspicion that accords with Barth's differentiation between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. Fourth, Barth's theology has helped engender contemporary theology's preference for story and narrative over epistolary argument. Carl R. Trueman, "Foreword," in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 14-15. In his introduction to TIS, Daniel Treier explains Barth's formative influence on those who are championing theological hermeneutics. *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Rediscovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 14-20. Also, see John Webster, "Karl Barth," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 82-84.

[37] Gibson and Strange state, "Where Barth is wrong, the consequences may be extremely serious for a variety of theological and pastoral issues, and these concerns need to be highlighted. An evangelicalism that appropriates aspects of Barth's theology without substantial criticism will be *an evangelicalism that is impoverished in central aspects of its witness and confession of the gospel*." "Introduction," in *Engaging with Barth*, 19, emphasis added. Michael Horton concludes his essay similarly: "Confessional Reformed Christians can learn a lot from Barth and his heirs. However, I remain convinced that *where these roads diverge*, the latter represents a declension rather than a renewal of the great Reformation legacy." "A Stony Jar: The Legacy of Karl Barth for Evangelical Theology," in *Engaging with Barth*, 380-81.

[38] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech Acts," in *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 130.

[39] Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 4 (1976; reprint, Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 272-95.

[40] Ibid., 196-200. Greg Beale has put together an appendix listing statements in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* concerning the nature of Scripture. See G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 281-83. As Mark Thompson indicates, a primary source of Barth's problematic bibliology was the higher criticism that Barth retained from the liberal tradition he was taught by Wilhelm Hermann. "Witness to the Word: On Barth's Doctrine of Scripture," in *Engaging with Barth*, 197. For a sympathetic evangelical reading of Barth's doctrine of Scripture, see Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture

Vanhoozer is mistaken to suggest, "The differences between Barth and evangelicals on the matter of the Bible being the Word of God stem from mutual misunderstandings that can be accounted for in terms of speech-act theory."[41] Henry affirms what Barth emphasizes, the need for dynamic spiritual illumination. On the other hand, Barth denies what Henry propounds, that the words of Scripture can be identified ontologically as God's self-revelation.

In addition, even if speech-act theory could diagnose the disagreement between Barth and evangelicals on the doctrine of Scripture, Barth's fundamental problems would not evaporate. Vanhoozer acknowledges that Barth "deverbalizes" Scripture and that Barth's desire to protect divine freedom actually captivates it by restricting God from revealing himself truly in human words.[42] Consequently, Vanhoozer's desire to mediate Barth's doctrine of Scripture fails the test of preserving truth by exposing and refuting error. Doctrine that leaves the church "impoverished in central aspects of its witness and confession of the gospel" must be avoided, not mediated (1 Tim. 6:20).

Biblical Interpretation: The Drama Is in the Details

Biblical interpretation requires both general and special hermeneutical assumptions. A determinative presupposition for interpretation is whether a text's meaning lies in what the author said or in what the reader perceives.[43] In *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* Vanhoozer labors thoroughly and effectively to rehabilitate authorial intention in the face of problematic postmodern strategies. He demonstrates the importance of answering theories such as deconstructionism and pragmatism because meaning is ultimately theological. Without authorial intention, belief in a God who verbalizes revelation is irrelevant. Furthermore, the Bible's divine authorship necessitates reading Scripture unlike any other book, in other words, employing a special hermeneutic—what has become known as *the theological interpretation of Scripture*.[44]

Is in Becoming," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, ed. Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguelez, and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 56-75.

[41] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Person of the Book?" in *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 57. Rodney Decker understandably wonders whether Vanhoozer has understood Henry. "May Evangelicals Dispense with Propositional Revelation? Challenges to a Traditional Evangelical Doctrine" (paper presented at the 53rd annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Colorado Springs, CO, November 14, 2001), 32-34.

[42] For example, see Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech Acts," 150-51. Barth spent much of his theological career identifying and attempting to correct problems in the German liberal tradition he had been taught. The point is not that Barth failed the test of orthodoxy on every count but that he failed in fundamental areas, including the doctrine of Scripture.

[43] Darrell Bock states, "The beginning and most fundamental point for exegesis is a serious and careful consideration of the text and what the author sought to communicate through it." "Opening Questions: Definition and Philosophy of Exegesis," in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 28.

[44] Vanhoozer mentions that he now realizes that his argument for a "theological general hermeneutic" in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* does not give enough weight to the need for special hermeneutics in biblical

With theo-dramatic imagery Vanhoozer gives prominence to the redemptive-historical thread that ties Scripture together. God speaks through many authors in perfect harmony to unveil His glory through salvation in Christ. Because God's Word is unified in message and progressive in revelation, each text must be interpreted as part of God's unfolding self-revelation from Creation till Consummation.[45] However, appreciating the macro-perspective as a framework must not blind an interpreter to the significance of individual texts. If God breathed out every word of Scripture, each part of the discourse is important, whether it easily fits into the drama or not. Scripture is redemptive history, but not *only* redemptive history.[46]

Vanhoozer's model risks overlooking the authoritative details of particular passages in two ways. First, in attempting to improve on the traditional way of doing theology, he diminishes the extratextual reality to which Scripture attests. He states, "The method of proving doctrines by adducing multiple proof-texts leaves much to be desired. One typically begins with a doctrinal confession and then sets off trawling through the Scriptures. One's exegetical 'catch' is then dumped indiscriminately into parentheses."[47] Proof-texts and contexts certainly must not be torn asunder. Theological emphases need to arise from Scripture's own categories and not from prefabricated categories imposed on the text. Yet the persistence with which Vanhoozer proposes moving "beyond" conservative methodology seems to sacrifice the truth taught in individual texts in order to highlight the redemptive unity on a canonical level.[48] There is a vast difference between (1) ignoring

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interpretation. "Imprisoned or Free? Text, Status, and Theological Interpretation in the Master/Slave Discourse of Philemon," in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 60.

[45] See also Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 259-89.

[46] John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, vol. 1 of *A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987), 209-10. Vanhoozer agrees with Frame that Scripture is not exclusively history. He also affirms that Scripture is divinely exhaled and therefore normative for belief and practice. However, what Frame makes clear but Vanhoozer does not is that narrating redemptive history is only one aspect of what God does in His written, verbal communication. Herman Ridderbos, certainly an enthusiast of redemptive history, cautions, "The authority of the New Testament is therefore, not only related to the one thing it proclaims, but it is also related to the many things that it teaches." *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*, trans. H. De Jongste (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963), 76.

Tracing the movement of God's eternally wise plans from Creation to Fall to Redemption to the Consummation is very important. However, the redemptive drama is not the only unifying aspect of Scripture. Fundamentally, God has spoken, a fact that authorizes tracing themes throughout Scripture, encapsulating the messages of individual books, and searching the sufficient Scriptures to find answers to the question, "What is true about God?" Vanhoozer would not disagree with this point in theory, but his written emphases unnecessarily mute it (see below).

[47] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From Canon to Concept: 'Same' and 'Other' in the Relation Between Biblical and Systematic Theology," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12, no. 2 (1994): 104.

[48] For example, Vanhoozer writes, "To speak of 'real' values is to invite the postmodern suspicion that we are attempting to foist our cultural values on everyone else by calling them 'natural' or 'real.' Nevertheless, Christian theologians must make claims about the nature of reality in order to make good their proclamation of the gospel. The ensuing realism, however, is less metaphysical than confessional." *Drama of Doctrine*, 335 n. 87. Vanhoozer's

strands of biblical revelation in order to protect a preferred interpretation and (2) examining and interpreting in grammatical-historical-canonical context all relevant biblical passages in order to arrive at a theological decision. To gloss over this distinction is to confuse eisegesis with the analogy of Scripture.[49] Furthermore, as 2 Timothy 3:14-17 exhibits, both the OT and NT witness to their own twofold purpose: (1) to reveal the true God and His redemptive work and (2) to specify by directives, explanations, and examples how to live in faithful obedience to this God.[50] Redemptive drama serves as a useful framework, but it must not overshadow specific ethical teaching.

Second, Vanhoozer also diminishes the authority of particular biblical teachings by viewing individual passages as divinely authoritative examples of pastoral wisdom. He recognizes that the first- and twenty-first century churches, despite the historical and cultural distance between them, have in common three crucial contexts: spiritual, redemptive-historical, and literary.[51] These shared contexts, however, do not alleviate the difficulties of the historical and cultural distances. Therefore, he distinguishes between the verbal and conceptual authority of specific biblical passages and the authority of "judgments" that the passages render, stating, "What ought to govern the play of theology in other times and places are the cultural-linguistic patterns of Scripture itself, *not* because those ancient cultures are authoritative but because the judgments that come to specific cultural-linguistic expression in them are."[52]

Vanhoozer wants to avoid the wooden literalism that reads, for example, a Pentateuchal prescription and transfers its requirement directly to a contemporary situation. However, the generalization of his proposal that "Scripture governs theology . . . by embodying truths of transcultural significance in particular contexts" conflates the variety of contexts from which God speaks authoritatively.[53] Conservative hermeneutics already entail precautions against viewing in the same way the authority of Mosaic ceremonial regulations (e.g., "Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me," Exod. 23:14), epistolary directives (e.g., "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man," 1 Tim. 2:12), and obviously situational instructions (e.g., "Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas," 2 Tim. 4:13). Vanhoozer's hermeneutic seems to invest

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predilection for "confessional" realism verges on restricting the Bible's claims to the church. Such statements seem to be unnecessary concessions to the intratextual, communal, and non-correspondence emphases of postliberals and progressive postconservatives.

[49] See Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991), 11.

[50] Paul reminds Timothy that the OT and, by extension, the NT "make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15) and profit the man of God so that he is "equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

[51] *Drama of Doctrine*, 331. The term *spiritual* is a summation of Vanhoozer's point that Christians of all centuries are indwelt by the same Spirit.

[52] Ibid., 348. In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, both Mark Strauss and Al Wolters, who contribute additional reflections on the four views, remark that Vanhoozer's proposal for moving from Scripture to theology is vague. *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, 285, 316.

[53] *Drama of Doctrine*, 348.

authority in the interpretation of how biblical texts render judgments instead of in the texts themselves. Hermeneutical practices must sufficiently account for redemptive and historical contexts but not in a way that deemphasizes the hortatory meaning of specific Bible passages (1 Cor. 10:11).

Biblical Boundaries and the Plurality of Theological Traditions

Because doctrinal discussion and transmission often lacks humility and charity, Vanhoozer promotes listening to the emphases and insights of other interpretive traditions—what he calls a "Pentecostal plurality"[54]—in order to gain pastoral wisdom. He finds canonical warrant for such dialogue because the human authors of Scripture voice God's unified truth from a variety of vantage points: "Just as it takes four Gospels to tell the story of Jesus Christ, so it takes many interpretative communities and traditions fully to understand the Gospels (and the rest of Scripture)."[55] No theological tradition in its authoritative teaching can exhaust revealed truth, not to mention apprehend "the secret things [that] belong to the Lord our God" (Deut. 29:29). Consequently, interpretative schemes become more robust when their representatives acknowledge the fruitful exegesis and synthesis of competing schemes. God's truth is not the sole possession of any single schema; Scripture, not a system, is the ultimate authority. Confessional statements have their place, but fastidious allegiance to them breeds theological pride and disrupts unity. Yet, the canonical-linguistic model's openness raises several issues.

The Table of Truth Is a Closed Communion

The desire to understand Scripture's multifaceted truth by listening to fellow Christian interpreters is noble and necessary. However, any tradition that errs on fundamental doctrine forfeits its place at the table. Vanhoozer notes the crucial difference between godly and ungodly unity[56] and cautions, "Unity is not to be pursued at the expense of doctrinal truth but precisely because of it."[57] Yet he also suggests, "The church would be a poorer place if there were no Mennonite or Lutheran or Greek Orthodox voices in it."[58] He uses these traditions merely as examples, but their diversity shows the openness of his interpretational table.[59] He advocates "a *catholic* Protestantism" and

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[54] See *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 418-21.

[55] "On the Very Idea of a Theological System," 180.

[56] *Biblical Authority After Babel*, 186-87.

[57] Ibid., 422.

[58] *Drama of Doctrine*, 275. On some fundamental doctrines, such as the normative authority of Scripture and justification by faith in Christ alone, the Eastern Orthodox voice characteristically will conflict with Scripture. See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 195-207, 231-37.

[59] Vanhoozer advocates what he calls "mere Protestant Christianity." See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the* Solas *in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016). The phrase "mere Protestant Christianity" traces its history back through C. S. Lewis to Richard Baxter. *Mere*

disputes Rome's view of interpretive authority.[60] But he does not convincingly address the fundamental problems in Catholic theology.[61]

Furthermore, by appealing to canonical example, Vanhoozer introduces confusion into his explanation of the pastoral usefulness of varying traditions. He suggests that Paul's and James's perspectives on justification demonstrate the "pastoral advantage . . . [of] diverse theological voices." Consequently, "some congregations need to hear the reassuring Pauline message concerning justification; others need the challenge of James's call to prove faith by works."[62] There are certainly times to emphasize the assurance of justification and times to declare the necessity of fruit from spiritual regeneration, but both doctrines are inspired and necessary for all Christians, individually and corporately.

Confessional Clarity Is Progress

In addition to giving too little attention to the boundaries that doctrine identifies, the canonical-linguistic proposal seems to freeze the church's doctrinal strength in the era of ecumenical creeds. Vanhoozer suggests that by doctrine the church translates the authority of canonical judgments into the particularity of contemporary contexts. He differentiates between creeds and confessions, with preference for the "catholicity" of the former. Protestant confessions do not articulate universal truth but are "responses to their own historical context that contain lessons for the rest of the church as well."[63]

Vanhoozer's suggestion to hold confessions loosely is understandable. His proposal encourages humility and promotes unity across traditional and denominational boundaries. It renders doctrine a servant to God's Word. After all, even orthodox teaching does not possess the same characteristics as Scripture. God's providential guidance of church history has not ensured the same inerrant verbal expression as God's inspiration of the biblical texts. Although important and useful, creeds and confessions are fallible and do not address questions that have not yet arisen.

At the same time, Vanhoozer limits the authority of Protestant confessions by categorizing them as local judgments based on Scripture rather than universal expressions of biblical truths. Consequently, his appreciation for the plurality of theological traditions undervalues the possibility that some doctrinal formulations more accurately correspond to God's words and therefore expose

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Christianity (New York: Scribner, 1952), vi. For an evaluation of "mere Christianity," see Timothy E. Miller, "Mere Christianity: An Examination of the Concept in Richard Baxter and C. S. Lewis," *DBSJ* 20 (2015): 65-88.

[60] *Biblical Authority After Babel*, 15, 227-28.

[61] See "Drama-of-Redemption Model," 186-91. Also, see "Do Whatever He Tells You: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith and Life," A Statement of Evangelicals and Catholics Together, http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/10/do-whatever-he-tells-you-the-blessed-virgin-mary-in-christian-faith-and-life (accessed January 3, 2010). Vanhoozer is one of thirteen evangelical signatories.

[62] *Drama of Doctrine*, 275.

[63] Ibid., 449-50, 452.

the limitations or errors of other perspectives. The canonical-linguistic outlook on confessions mistakenly softens the refinement in biblical understanding gained by spiritual illumination and articulated in Reformation and post-Reformation doctrine. Lack of specificity is not a theological virtue. J. Gresham Machen asserts, "All doctrinal advance proceeds in the direction of greater precision and fulness of doctrinal statement."[64]

Preserving the Truth Is "Pastoral"

For a book of significant proportions (457 pp.), the treatment of heresy and separation in *The Drama of Doctrine* is conspicuously brief (pp. 421-26). Probably part of the reason that progressive postconservatives such as Roger Olson view Vanhoozer as a sometimes ally is the latter's preference for theology's constructive task rather than its discriminating function.[65] In mediating perspectives, Vanhoozer tends toward more, not less. However, at some point what is added mitigates what is already present.[66]

Orthodoxy provides theological boundaries. Though not every divergent interpretation warrants the label *heresy*, teaching truth entails exposing error. Doctrine inherently distinguishes. It is not pastoral, therefore, to approve of or promote doctrinal dialogue with those whose fundamental teachings fail to correspond to biblical truth to the point that their doctrine renders them outside the household of faith. Daniel Treier suggests, "Doctrinal division must be another aspect of the church's remaining need for redemption."[67] Such a statement is mistaken since the Pastoral Epistles repeatedly point to clear lines of demarcation between truth and error. Paul warns his delegates not to countenance false teachers and schismatics. He reminds them of the eternally monumental ramifications of errant doctrine. Guarding the gospel deposit is not supposed to earn a minister the reputation of an amiable interlocutor, so it is not pastoral to invite to the interpretational table traditions that have led many astray through central ideas that amount to damnable doctrine.

In addition, Vanhoozer's explanation of separation and sectarianism is not well nuanced. He argues against divisiveness and targets ideologies such as racism and denominationalism. He defines

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[64] "Creeds and Doctrinal Advance," *Reformed Perspectives Magazine* 9, no. 42 (1949; reprint, October 2007), http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/gre_machen/gre_machen.creeds.doctrinaladvance.html (accessed July 25, 2009).

[65] See Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology, ed. Craig A. Evans and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 118-19.

[66] Paul's pastoral directions on doctrine necessitate that theologians not only mention such problems but also warn of the dangers of such errors. By his own admission Vanhoozer has typically written with a broad audience in view and has wanted to communicate evangelical positions so that nonevangelicals could not easily dismiss them. Kevin Vanhoozer, interview by author, digital recording, Libertyville, IL, 2 July 2009.

[67] Daniel J. Trier, "Canonical Unity and Commensurable Language: On Divine Action and Doctrine," in *Evangelicals & Scripture*, 224 n. 37. Treier and Vanhoozer have collaborated frequently. For example, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015).

division as inability "to worship and enjoy table fellowship."[68] He fails, however, to distinguish between divisions based on truth and sectarianism based on bias. Table fellowship lay at the root of the temporary division between the apostles Peter and Paul, both of whom esteemed doctrine to be a dividing line *within* the church (Gal. 2:11-15). The apostolic standard discerned in this study indicates that sound doctrine does not arbitrarily cause divisions but rather delineates distinctions and clarifies truth amid controversy. To ignore these differences is to relativize the meaning of Scripture as merely functional.[69] The church should not desire to engender strife, but its preservation of truth demands identification and refutation of error.

Conclusion

Biblical Christianity is godliness springing from truth.[70] In order for biblical doctrine to bear fruit in distinctive living, the church must treasure the truth and entrust it to the next generation (2 Tim. 2:2). In the contemporary evangelical milieu, Kevin Vanhoozer speaks winsomely for rehabilitating the significance of doctrine for the vitality of the church. At his best Vanhoozer exemplifies a multilayered approach to theology that interweaves the centrality of Christ for all of life, sustained attention to the sweep of redemptive drama, and the implications of God's Word for contemporary philosophies, all for the purpose of driving doctrine toward faithful living. He thoroughly answers the communitarian concerns of postliberals whose theories undermine the authority of Scripture. Yet when judged by the canonical touchstone of the Pastoral Epistles, the canonical-linguistic proposal for doctrine reveals flaws that could direct pastors away from "guard[ing] the good deposit" (2 Tim. 1:14) into an ecumenical version of evangelical theology.

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[68] *Drama of Doctrine*, 452.

[69] Machen remarks, "You cannot set forth clearly what a thing is without placing it in contrast with what it is not. All definition proceeds by way of exclusion." "Creeds and Doctrinal Advance."

[70] "Right thinking about the gospel produces right living in the gospel. It is truth, not activity, which makes Christianity distinct. We cannot ignore the link between gospel doctrine and gospel duty if we hope to approach genuine Christian life and successful Christian living. Contrary to some notions in modern fundamental and evangelical Christianity, doctrine does not destroy life: it defines it." Michael P. V. Barrett, *Complete in Him: A Guide to Understanding and Enjoying the Gospel* (Greenville: Ambassador-Emerald, 2000), 3.