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Authority and Meaning in a Brave New World: Postconservative Evangelical theological Method After the Cultural-Linguistic Turn

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AUTHORITY AND MEANING IN A BRAVE NEW WORLD:

POSTCONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL METHOD

AFTER THE CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC TURN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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BY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation fills a gap in the current scholarship by describing Stanley Grenz's and Kevin Vanhoozer's postconservative evangelical understandings of authority, meaning, and truth as they are related to Scripture and the community of faith. Acknowledging the postliberal influence of George Lindbeck, scholarship is further needed to describe whether theological authority ultimately rests in Scripture or the community of faith. Furthermore, scholarship needs to address the manner in which we seek, participate in, or determine meaning and truth within postconservative evangelical theological method. This dissertation provides this scholarship for Grenz's and Vanhoozer's thought while also providing a more extensive description of Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic method and its relationship to the questions of authority, meaning and truth than is available elsewhere in a single work.

This dissertation argues that Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic turn in theology helped pave the way for current postconservative evangelical theological methods. Grenz follows Lindbeck in placing authority squarely with the community of faith. The church, in part, determines meaning and truth through her use of Scripture in particular cultural and linguistic contexts. Through his novel use of speech-act theory, Grenz locates the Spirit's illocutions apart from the actual illocutions of Scripture. He is therefore unable to adequately answer how Scripture's actual content is related to the Spirit's accomplishing his perlocutionary effect of world-formation. In stark contrast, Vanhoozer places authority in the biblical canon as Spirit-inspired text. He argues that meaning is to be found within the text through the illocutionary acts of the biblical authors. Vanhoozer

understands the entire canon to be God's communicative act which carries meaning potential for truthful community performance.

This work contends that Christian theology should embrace a robust understanding of accepting Scripture as the norming norm and fundamental authoritative source for the task of theology. It further argues that there must be an understanding of the biblical text as a world-forming narrative from which and in which we participate in the theological task. While the primacy of narrative should be accepted when engaging biblical revelation, we must acknowledge truth in propositional form within the narrative. In contrast to Scripture's magisterial authority, this dissertation describes the church as a community of faith that has ministerial authority for making theological statements and living out theology in communal praxis. Christian theology should assert that truth determines the community of faith and that the community of faith interprets, but does not determine truth. This work furthermore argues that the church's theological truth claims should both cohere internally and correspond to what in fact is.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Need for This Study

The Henry-Frei Exchange Considered Once Again

In November 1985, Carl F.H. Henry presented a series of three lectures at Yale University. One of those lectures provided his evangelical appraisal of what he termed "narrative theology."[1] Within this lecture, Henry voiced his concerns over many points of "narrative theology," especially those that were related to the nature and use of the biblical text. He took particular aim at the thought of Hans Frei, a key figure of the Yale School "narrative theology." This lecture was met by a written reply from Frei who sought to correct what he perceived were misperceptions and misrepresentations on the part of Henry.[2] My contention here is that many of the concerns voiced within this brief exchange shed light on the nature of the current ongoing division between traditional conservative evangelicals and postconservative evangelicals. Therefore, a brief look at this exchange will help set the framework for the work that follows.

In his insightful essay that considers the significance of the Henry-Frei exchange, George Hunsinger correctly points out that "Henry sees himself as differing from Frei on four main questions: the unity of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, the factuality of

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[1] Carl F. H. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *Trinity Journal* 8 (NS 1987): 3-19.

[2] Hans W. Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" In Hans W. Frei, George Hunsinger, and William C. Placher, eds. *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 207-212. Reprinted from *Trinity Journal* 8 (NS 1987): 21-24

Scripture and the truth of Scripture."[3] Henry argues that the category of narrative is

insufficient to account for the unity of Scripture, especially given that there is much of

the Bible that is not narrative at all.[4] Hunsinger contends that this "thinness of the

narrative account of scriptural unity seems to suggest a larger problem in postliberal

theology as a whole."[5] The problem is that for all of the talk about postliberal theology

and all of the work that has been accomplished with regard to theological method, there

has been far less work that engages actual doctrinal substance. This leads Henry to

conclude, fairly or not, that Frei "diverts attention from revelation."[6] Henry distinguishes

Frei's thought from that of Gabriel Fackre. Henry approvingly states that Fackre "holds

that scriptural centrality is grounded in and warranted by a doctrine of revelation that

entails biblical inspiration and consequently the trustworthiness of prophetic-apostolic

testimony." He further declares that "Scriptural trustworthiness attaches to the authorial

intention of the biblical texts and implies a unity of Scripture that invites use of the

analogy of faith in its interpretation."[7] Interestingly, some of these very thoughts are the

same concerns being addressed in the evangelical divide between conservative and

postconservative theologians.

Perhaps Henry's second concern that deals directly with the question of the

authority of Scripture is the most pressing in the current evangelical debate. He writes,

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[3] George Hunsinger, "What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Learn from Each Other? The Carl Henry/Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 137.

[4] Henry, "Narrative Theology," 9-10.

[5] Hunsinger, "What Can Evangelicals," 137.

[6] Henry, "Narrative Theology," 15.

[7] Henry, "Narrative Theology," 15.

"Evangelical theology roots the authority of Scripture in its divine inspiration and holds that the Bible is inerrant because it is divinely inspired." His pressing follow-up question is a primary question that will also be asked of postconservative evangelicals. He asks, "Does narrative theology understand by inspiration not the objective inspiredness of the canonical text, but rather only its 'inspiringness', that is, its capacity to stimulate a faith-commitment in the reader?"[8] Henry ties this question of inspiration to the question of whether, ultimately, the Scripture or the community of faith has primary authority in theological method. While some nuances of the question have changed, the central concern addressed by the question has not. What, in the end, has fundamental authority in producing and providing meaning for theological claims?

Henry's third question with regard to Frei's approach to theology is also found within the evangelical identity discussion today. Are the biblical accounts factual or are they only history-like, as Henry understands Frei to argue? While it is not my purpose to engage this discourse fully here, it is important to note that Henry makes clear that "evangelical belief in the divine redemptive acts does not depend on verification by historical criticism but rests on scriptural attestation."[9] On this he and Frei agree. Yet Henry seems to reverse his thought when he stresses that "Unless the historical data are assimilated not only to faith but also to the very history that historians probe, the narrative exerts no claim to historical factuality."[10] Henry wishes to use historical verifiability as a means by which we can accomplish two things. First, the method can show that events which are depicted within biblical narratives have not been

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[8] Henry, "Narrative Theology," 14.

[9] Henry, "Narrative Theology," 8.

[10] Henry, "Narrative Theology," 11.

disconfirmed. Second, the historical-critical method can make a positive case for the historical factuality of those events which are depicted within biblical narratives.

Frei, for his part, looks for only two minimal assurances. First, we want assurance that Christ's resurrection has not been historically disconfirmed. Secondly, we want assurance "that a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God's nearness, did exist and was finally executed."[11] He refused to give more credence to historical-critical method than that because he found it to be in conflict with his stated position of the sufficiency of Scripture. Furthermore, Frei contends that belief in the resurrection is a matter of faith and not a result of arguments from historical evidence.[12] Frei contends that we are bound to the linguistic patterns of Scripture. Hence, "We start from the text: that is the language pattern, the meaning-and-reference pattern to which we are bound, and which is sufficient for us."[13] This concept of intratexuality is a concern that is raised within the ongoing discussion between conservative and postconservative evangelicals, as we shall soon see.

Finally, there are those sticky issues of truth and meaning. Henry argues that "Scripture…conveys propositional truths about God and his purposes and gives the meaning of divine redemptive acts."[14] It seems throughout much of Henry's discussion that he contends that truth demands our intellectual assent while meaning demands our

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[11] Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 151.

[12] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus*, 152.

[13] Frei, "Response," 209.

[14] Henry, "Narrative Theology," 3.

commitment.[15] Henry seems to be looking for disinterested, objective, cognitive truth about objective realities. Furthermore, he contends that our language refers properly to those objective realities. For this reason, Frei along with many others propose that Henry is too reliant on the philosophical assumptions of modernity. Furthermore, Frei argues that "using the term 'God' Christianly is in some sense referential…It is also true in some sense other than a referential one: It is true by being true to the way it works in one's life, and by holding the world, including the political, economic and social world, to account by the gauge of its truthfulness."[16] Thus, Frei contends, "the word 'God' is used both descriptively and cognitively, but also obediently or trustingly, and it is very difficult to make one a function of the other."[17] For Frei, truth is something that is performed and not simply known. As we shall see, the manner in which this performative understanding of truth is to be parsed is a central concern for postconservative theologians who engage the postliberal trajectory of thought.

To be sure, the Henry-Frei exchange provides a framework for understanding the key issues that need to be addressed in this dissertation. Authority, meaning, and truth as they relate to the Scriptures and the community of faith are central concerns teased out of this brief exchange that spill over into the larger conversation of postliberal thought as well as evangelical advancement and engagement with that thought.

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[15] This very thought is also shared by Hunsinger, "What Can Evangelicals," 140.

[16] Frei, "Response," 210.

[17] Frei, "Response," 210.

The Current Divide in Evangelical Theology

Ten years after the Henry-Frei exchange, a significant gathering at the 1995 Wheaton Theology Conference brought together key postliberal and evangelical theologians. This conference provided dialogue between the groups and encouraged further theological engagement. Interestingly, after the final panel discussion had addressed questions from the floor, George Lindbeck offered a final comment that bears significance for our study. He concluded, "I will also say that if the sort of research program represented by postliberalism has a real future as a communal enterprise of the church, it's more likely to be carried on by evangelicals than anyone else."[18] This postliberal research program has since indeed been carried on by evangelical scholars with varying amounts of acceptance and success. Stanley Grenz and Kevin Vanhoozer, the two respected evangelical theologians that serve as interlocutors within this dissertation, represent a larger group of evangelicals who are, in one way or another, responding to postliberal challenges by accepting the good and challenging those portions they see as unhelpful or wrongheaded.

The acceptance and advancement of some postliberal theological insights within the work of some evangelical scholars has been seen as one of the major causes of the rift between traditional, conservative evangelicals and reformist, postconservative evangelicals. As late as 2013, contemporary divisions within evangelicalism were traced back, in part, to the postliberal thought of Lindbeck and Frei making its way into the

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[18] Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Pr, 1996), 252-253.

evangelical discussion of theological method.[19] While some "evangelical theologians cheer postliberals' emphasis on the distinctiveness of Christianity, Scripture as the supreme source of ideas and values, the centrality of Jesus Christ, and its stress on Christian community," other evangelicals worry that postliberalism "tends to reduce truth to a matter of internal consistency" while also remaining "unclear on the nature of revelation" as inspiration is collapsed into illumination.[20] Gerald McDermott concludes that "This debate over postliberalism has played a key role in the evangelical divide."[21]

In light of this evangelical divide between conservatives and postconservatives, in part caused by the methodological concerns raised by postliberalism, it is imperative to better understand the central issues and insights of postconservative evangelical theological method as well as how these insights have been shaped by or serve as a response to postliberal thought, especially as put forward in George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of theology. It is essential for both the church and the academy that evangelicals correctly understand the influence of postliberalism upon postconservative evangelical treatments of authority, meaning, and truth as they are related to Scripture and the community of faith. This work will help the Christian community to both better understand these important issues as well as consider how we might possibly move forward in our theological task in a meaningful way that pleases God.

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[19] Gerald R. McDermott, "The Emerging Divide in Evangelicalism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56 no 2 (June 2013): 355-377.

[20] McDermott, "The Emerging Divide," 362. See also Russell D. Moore, "Leftward to Scofield: The Eclipse of the Kingdom in Post-Conservative Evangelical Theology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 no 3 (Sept 2004): 438. Here he contends that "the current debates threatening to split the evangelical theological consensus have to do with the locus of biblical authority and the nature of truth (in the debate over postmodern and communitarian evangelicalism)."

[21] McDermott, "The Emerging Divide," 362.

Some scholarly work has been done to interact with the concerns mentioned above in a limited way. Scholars have engaged various aspects of postconservative evangelical thought to date. Some works seek to address the postconservative position on the authority of the Bible.[22] Others have sought to describe a postconservative movement that shows a growing relationship between theology and the significant authority of the community of faith.[23] Furthermore, traditional conservative evangelicals have described many concerns over postconservative evangelical theological method and have expressed

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[22] For instance, Vincent Bacote and Laura C. Miguelez and Dennis Okholm, eds*., Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); R. Douglas Geivett, "Is God a Story? Postmodernity and the Task of Theology," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 37-52; Garrett Green and Hans W. Frei*, Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation,* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); I. Howard Marshall, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Stanley E. Porter, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology, (Grand Rapids, MI:Baker Academic; Milton Keynes, Bucks, UK: Paternoster, 2004); Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism," In *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics,* Vincent Bacote and Laura C. Miguelez and Dennis Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 55-75; John Sykes, "Narrative accounts of biblical authority: the need for a doctrine of revelation," *Modern Theology* 5 (Jul 1989): 327-342; David Tracy, "On Reading the Scriptures Theologically," In *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck,* Bruce D. Marshall, ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 35-68; Daniel J. Treier, "Canonical Unity and Commensurable Language: On Divine Action and Doctrine," In *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics,* Vincent Bacote and Laura C. Miguelez and Dennis Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 211-228; Roger E. Olson*, Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); John Gordon Stackhouse*, Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000); Paul Wells, "The Doctrine of Scripture: Only a Human Problem," In *Reforming or Conforming?: Post Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, Gary L.W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 27-61; Jonathan R. Wilson, "Toward a New Evangelical Paradigm of Biblical Authority," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 151-161; Douglas Moo, ed. *Biblical Authority and Conservative Perspectives: Viewpoints from Trinity Journal*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997); etc.

[23] For instance, Bruce D. Marshall, "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," In *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck,* Bruce D. Marshall, ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 69-102; John D. Morrison, "Trinity and Church: An Examination of Theological Methodology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 no 3 (S 1997): 445-54; Craig Ott, Harold Netland, Wilbert R. Shenk, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity,* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); R. Scott Smith, "Postmodernism and the Priority of the Language-World Relation," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 173-186; Archie J. Spencer, "Culture, Community and Commitments: Stanley J Grenz on Theological Method," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 no 3 (2004): 338-60; etc.

particular concern that these scholars have forsaken some basic evangelical faith commitments.[24] While many scholars have engaged the thought of Lindbeck, Grenz and Vanhoozer on a variety of concerns, there is no current scholarship that extensively engages all three authors on the questions of authority, truth, and meaning in relationship to their understanding and treatment of Scripture and the community of faith.

The Reason for and Purpose of this Study

The Underlying Reason

I am a pastor. More specifically, I am an evangelical Baptist pastor who has been greatly influenced by my Reformed heritage. I grieve over the gap that exists between the academy and the church and between biblical theology and systematic theology. It seems that a wholistic, churchly theology is needed today as much as ever before. I would argue that the best theology has always been the work of the community of faith as she seeks to rightly read and interpret Scripture while also seeking to provide wisdom as to how the church should speak and live in light of this revelation within our contemporary situation. This current exercise is, in part, a pastoral journey to become better equipped to minister to the church in just such a theologically informed way. The questions of particular local churches and particular believers press upon me as I

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[24] For example, Donald A. Carson, "Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Stanley J Grenz's Renewing the Center," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 no 4 (Wint 2002): 82-97; Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997); Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998); Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004); R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church,* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005); R. Scott Smith, "Christian Postmodernism and the Linguistic Turn," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 53-70; Gary L.W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason, eds., *Reforming or Conforming?: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008); etc.

undertake the responsibility of writing this dissertation. It is my hope that the exposition and critique of both postliberal and postconservative evangelical theological method contained herein may clarify some adequate guidelines for the continued theological task of the church as we better understand the issues of authority, truth, and meaning as they are intricately related to Scripture and the community of faith. Perhaps I might even better understand my own theological self along the way.

The Purpose of this Study

This dissertation will seek to fill a gap in the current scholarship by addressing a postconservative evangelical treatment of the topics of authority, truth, and meaning as they are linked to an interrelationship between Scripture and the community of faith through an extensive study of the writings of Lindbeck, Grenz and Vanhoozer. How do these two areas provide authority for making theological truth statements? How do they provide meaning for those theological statements? How are Scripture and the community of faith interrelated within the current postconservative evangelical theological context? To whom or what are we to appeal for authority in making theological truth claims? To whom or what do we appeal in order to provide meaning for theological truth claims? These central questions alert us to what is at stake in the current postconservative evangelical climate.

There are fundamental issues at stake in considering authority, truth, and meaning as they pertain to Holy Scripture. How should scriptural authority be understood as it applies to theological method? What is the role of theology in fostering the believer's embracing the centrality and authority of Scripture? How are postconservative

evangelicals to understand what *sola scriptura* means in relationship to theological method? In what sense is the Bible the forming source for our theological construction? These are the questions of biblical authority that all theological scholars must address.

There also exist questions of meaning in relationship to Scripture. What is the relation between the contemporary theological meaning of Scripture and the biblical text itself? How are we to understand the relationship between God's revelation and Scripture? Are these one and the same? What are the implications for theological method if they are or are not one and the same? What is the theological import of saying that the Spirit speaks to us through Scripture? To what extent does speech-act theory help us in our theological constructs in moving from biblical text to theology? How are we to understand the relationship between narrative and propositionalist readings and renderings of the biblical text? In what way may we say that the biblical narrative is a world-forming narrative that impacts our theological method?

A heightened awareness of the significance of the community of faith as it pertains to authority, truth, and meaning is a central tenet of postconservative evangelical scholarship. Many key issues are at stake in considering the church's role in the task of theological methodology and construction. What significance is there in identity formation within a community of faith and our understanding of theological method? Does the community of faith determine truth? Does truth determine the community of faith? Should the two previous questions be understood as mutually exclusive? How is the church to be understood as an interpretive community? Pertaining to meaning, is doctrine only a second-order self-description of the church and its religious language? How is the community of faith to be understood as its own culture with its own language

constructs and rituals? Do the church's theological truth claims need only to cohere?

May they also correspond? Are these thoughts mutually exclusive?

By answering the questions above through an extensive engagement with the

thought of Lindbeck, Grenz, and Vanhoozer, this dissertation will seek to fill a gap in the

current scholarship by addressing a postconservative evangelical treatment of the topics

of authority, meaning, and truth as they are linked to an interrelationship between

Scripture and the community of faith.

The Thesis

This dissertation seeks to both describe and evaluate the most significant

trajectories of postconservative theological method exhibited by Stanley Grenz and Kevin

Vanhoozer. This work will show that the postliberal, cultural-linguistic turn in theology

and theological method helped shape the conversation of the current postconservative

evangelical engagement with Scripture and the community of faith. This work will

further show that, at the heart of the postconservative evangelical discussion rests the

convergence, divergence, and emergence of the roles and authority of Scripture and the

community of faith in our receiving, understanding and determining the meaning of

theological truth claims.

This dissertation will contend that Christian theology should embrace a robust

understanding of accepting Scripture as the norming norm and fundamental authoritative

source for the task of theology. It will further argue that there must be an understanding

of the biblical text as a world-forming narrative from which and in which we participate

in the theological task. While the primacy of narrative should be accepted when

engaging biblical revelation, we must acknowledge truth in propositional form within the narrative. In contrast to Scripture's magisterial authority, this dissertation will describe the church as a community of faith that has ministerial authority for making theological statements and living out theology in communal praxis. Christian theology should assert that truth determines the community of faith and that the community of faith interprets but does not determine truth. Along with this, the church's theological truth claims should both cohere internally and correspond to what in fact is. While addressing these thoughts from both postliberal and postconservative writings, it is important to note the limited scope of this dissertation.

The Scope of this Study

The concepts of authority, truth, and meaning within theology could each demand multiple dissertations of their own. This dissertation will limit its scope of consideration of these topics to the extent that they relate to Scripture and the community of faith. We may deal with some general treatment of these topics, but only when it is necessary to better understand them in relation to Scripture and the community of faith. Thus, the reader will find very little engagement with arguments from natural reason or general revelation since this is beyond the scope of this work.[25]

Postliberalism and postconservative evangelicalism each have multiple voices within them that differ, to some extent, from one another. There is no concise "Yale

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[25] For a work that deals very well with the issues of natural reason and general revelation within evangelical theology, see John Bolt, "*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Theological Method?," In *Reforming or Conforming?: Post Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, Gary L.W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 62-92. While Bolt is dealing with more than these issues, his central point is that we need such metaphysics in evangelical theology in order to effectively do meaningful theology for our time and place.

school" postliberalism. Neither is there a concise or fully agreed upon postconservative

evangelical theology. Since this is the case, we must consider the most influential voices

within these movements. Hans Frei and George Lindbeck are generally recognized as the

founding fathers of postliberal thought and method. We will mostly limit the scope of

our postliberal study to Lindbeck since it is his cultural-linguistic model of theology that

has had such an influence upon evangelical theology. Other postliberal theologians will

be engaged as needed to fill out some theological insights and perspectives. Those

postconservative theologians upon whom postliberal thought has had an impact are

numerous. We will limit our discussion to two prominent evangelical scholars. The late

Stanley Grenz was a champion of postconservative evangelical theological thought up to

the time of his death. His extensive works have served as the fertile ground from which

much of the harvest of postconservative evangelicalism has been produced. Secondly,

we will consider one of the most respected evangelical theologians of our day, Kevin

Vanhoozer. Vanhoozer is another self-proclaimed postconservative evangelical who sets

a very different path for postconservative evangelical theology than that of Grenz. Thus,

this dissertation limits the scope of the conversation to the thought of these representative

theologians since they serve as the authoritative voices of their prominent theological

positions.

This dissertation limits the scope of the discussion to mostly these three

representatives because of their meaningful scholarship as well as their genuine love for

Christ and his church. I have had opportunities to talk with both Grenz and Vanhoozer

and have always appreciated their concern for the well-being of Christ's church as they

engage the task of theology. While never having spoken to Lindbeck, I hear a similar

theme from those who knew him and throughout his writings. All three seem to share a similar concern that theology must rightly engage authority, truth, and meaning in relation to Scripture and the community of faith. These scholars are worthy dialogue partners from whom we all can learn.

Clarification of Terms

Certain theological and philosophical terms can be notoriously difficult to define, especially when they are terms used to identify broad positions, moods, or conditions. While each author is allowed to define their use of these terms throughout this dissertation, it is yet beneficial for some working definitions to be given that may help to clarify the general thought behind the use of these terms. The terms to be clarified are postmodern, postliberal, postconservative, and evangelical.

Attempting to define postmodernism is much like trying to catch a greased pig. Scholars look at it from different perspectives and include some elements that others do not. For our purposes, Grenz provides a helpful analysis when he describes the postmodern situation as a chastened rationality that provides legitimization of local narratives rather than universal narratives.[26] Vanhoozer speaks of postmodernity as a series of turns, such as the "arts and humanities" turn, the "culture and society" turn, and the "philosophical and theoretical" turn.[27] Each of these turns is given deeper

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[26] Stanley J. Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism," In *Evangelical Futures*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 107-109. For a much fuller treatment see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996).

[27] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)," In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-25.

consideration in the Vanhoozer chapter of this dissertation. For our present purposes,

Richard Davis provides an important analysis of what is generally rejected by

postmodernism as a means to clarify the postmodern condition. He asserts that

postmodern theology rejects the following: "(a) the correspondence theory of truth; (b)

the referential use of language; and (c) a person's ability to access reality directly,

unmediated by conceptual or linguistic schemes."[28] This working clarification is

consistent with the use of the term in this work. It is therefore important to note a

difference between a postmodern theology and a theology that attempts to speak

meaningfully within the cultural postmodern condition.

Postliberalism is also difficult to define. For our present purposes, we will not

attempt to give a broad definition to this rather "loose coalition of interests, united more

by what it opposes or envisions than by any common theological program."[29] Instead,

this dissertation, while touching on the thought of Frei and others, seeks to mostly

delineate the thought of postliberalism as argued by George Lindbeck with his cultural-

linguistic theory. Hunsinger calls this theory "three theories in one: a theory of religion,

a theory of doctrine, and a theory of truth. The theory of religion is 'cultural'; the theory

of doctrine, 'regulative,' and the theory of truth, 'pragmatist.'"[30] Since greater clarity of

the term within Lindbeck's thought is an important piece of the exposition offered in

chapter 2 of this dissertation, this working clarification will suffice for now.

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[28] Richard B. Davis, "Can There Be an 'Orthodox' Postmodern Theology?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 no 1 (Mar 2002): 111.

[29] George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin Vanhoozer, ed., (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42.

[30] Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," 44.

Much like postliberalism, postconservativism is a slippery word with multiple meanings. Roger Olson affirms that "Its adherents share a few common concerns, not a tight agenda."[31] It is fair to say that this term is at least an acknowledgment that the theologians within this description have moved beyond classical foundationalism. Furthermore, there is an agreement that those who call themselves postconservative have moved beyond propositional revelation. This is to say that postconservative theology "understands language as other than primarily referential and theology as other than merely propositional."[32] The term is still being defined and, if anything, is broadening in its scope of inclusion rather than becoming a clearer descriptor of theologians or theologies. This dissertation seeks only to determine the manner in which Grenz and Vanhoozer approach their self-proclaimed postconservative theological projects. Their understandings of postconservativism will become clear in chapters three and four of this dissertation.

Clarification of the term evangelical is as difficult as the previous three. Evangelicalism is a broad umbrella under which many differing thoughts, denominations and practices can exist. However, there are some generally accepted attributes which mark one as an evangelical. The British historian, D.W. Bebbington, defined evangelicalism by delineating its four key characteristics: "*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the

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[31] Roger E. Olson, "Postconservative evangelicals greet the postmodern age," *Christian Century* 112 (May 3, 1995): 480.

[32] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 278.

sacrifice of Christ on the cross."[33] Timothy Larsen's expansion of these features also

serves to identify the use of the term evangelical within this work. He asserts that an

evangelical is:

1. an orthodox Protestant
2. who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield;
3. who has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matter of faith and practice;
4. who stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross;
5. and who stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people.[34]

This definition further helps one to understand the reason for the broadening divide

within evangelicalism. One of the chief questions to be asked is: How far may one stray

from one or more of these distinguishing marks and still be considered an evangelical?

With these brief clarifications in mind, I now turn to describe the method of this present

study.

The Method of this Study

This dissertation consists of both exposition and critique of the thought of

postliberalism as represented by George Lindbeck, as well as postconservative

evangelical theology represented separately by Stanley Grenz and Kevin Vanhoozer. In

the second, third and fourth chapters, this work will address the central themes of

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[33] D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 3.

[34] Timothy Larsen, "Defining and locating evangelicalism," In *The Cambridge Companion To Evangelical Theology*, Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

Scripture and the community of faith. Specifically, those chapters will engage the

concepts of authority, truth, and meaning as they relate to Scripture and the community of

faith. The vast majority of the work in these chapters will be descriptive, that is, an

explanation of the individual scholar's view understood within the context of their own

writing. Thus, readers will find only brief criticism, arguments for or against, or

developments of the scholars' thoughts within those chapters. Brief chapter summaries

and conclusions are provided where some evaluation, both positive and negative, is

provided in order to point toward the larger critique which is presented in the fifth

chapter.

Chapters two, three and four follow a similar, though not exact, outline. Each of

these chapters will begin with a brief synopsis of the theological-philosophical context

within which each author is writing or against which each author is writing. Following

that contextual insight, each of these chapters will then engage the relationship of

Scripture and theology. The discussion follows many of the central themes of each

individual scholar in order to make clear just how their understanding of authority, truth,

and meaning are intricately related to the biblical text. Upon completing the task of

making known the relationship between Scripture and theology, each of these central

chapters will then engage the relationship of the community of faith to theology. Once

again, each author's thought will be delineated in accord with their own presentation

while addressing the intimate relationship between the community of faith and those

concepts of authority, truth, and meaning. A brief chapter summary and conclusion will

follow. It is important to note that more space will be given to consider Vanhoozer's

theological project than those of Lindbeck and Grenz because he has written more

material dealing with the central issues of authority, meaning and truth. He furthermore provides a more promising trajectory for theological method than the other theologians.

Following the larger expository chapters, the fifth chapter is designed to provide a critique of the thoughts presented in the central chapters while also providing some proposals for how to move forward in evangelical theology. While a brief word is given about the importance of the theological-philosophical context in which these scholars write, the main focus follows the same pattern as the three chapters listed above. Thus, this dissertation will conclude by discussing those themes of how Scripture is related to the concepts of authority, truth, and meaning as we engage the task of theology. Secondly, we will consider those important aspects of how the community of faith is related to the concepts of authority, truth, and meaning as we "do theology" within the context of the church.

Some positive insights from each of these authors may enhance our engagement in evangelical theology. However, there are certainly some concepts where evangelicals should respond with extreme caution if not outright disapproval. As stated earlier, it is my hope that the exposition and critique of both postliberal and postconservative evangelical theological method contained herein may clarify some adequate guidelines for the continued theological task of the church as we better understand the issues of authority, truth, and meaning as they are intricately related to Scripture and the community of faith. This dissertation will help the Christian community to both better understand these important issues as well as consider how we might possibly move forward in our theological task in a meaningful way that pleases God.

CHAPTER 2

GEORGE A. LINDBECK: POSTLIBERAL THEOLOGICAL METHOD

SETTING THE STAGE

Theological and Philosophical Currents

Postliberalism made a powerful entrance onto the theological landscape in the 1980s. Popularly known as "Yale School" and "narrative" theology, the central proponents of this theological experiment sought to restore the significance of Scripture's grand narrative in the life and teaching of the church. There existed a collective concern that the Christological center and unity of the biblical narrative had been lost, which resulted in the community of the church being shaped by changing cultural ideas and attitudes rather than by Scripture's grand narrative. Following the voice of Karl Barth, Hans Frei wrote the seminal work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*,[1] to describe how the Bible is to be read in the life of the church. His colleague, George Lindbeck, followed this writing with his notable work, *The Nature of Doctrine*,[2] which extended Frei's thought into a cultural-linguistic view of religion and a grammatical-rule theory of doctrine. The continued work in this type of narrative theology is found within the writings of other "first-generation Yale School" theologians such as David Kelsey[3] and

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[1] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

[2] George A. Lindbeck. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984).

[3] David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); David H. Kelsey, "Church Discourse and the Public Realm," In *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck,* Bruce D. Marshall, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 7-33; David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

Paul Holmer,[4] along with the writings of the students of these first-generation scholars

such as George Hunsinger[5], William Placher,[6] Stanley Hauerwas,[7] Kathryn Tanner,[8]

Bruce Marshall[9] and others. As helpful as these additional writings are, I will focus most

of my attention on Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* in order to better understand the

theological method of this narrative theology. I will specifically be articulating the

implications of Lindbeck's view of intratextuality on the interpretation and practice of

Scripture, especially as it involves truth and meaning for the community of faith. I will

further consider Lindbeck's understanding of the community of faith and its authority to

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[4] Paul Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

[5] George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin Vanhoozer, ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42-57; George Hunsinger, "What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Learn from Each Other? The Carl Henry/Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 134-150; George Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving: Barth and Lindbeck on the Cognitive and Performative Aspects of Truth in Theological Discourse," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol LXI no 1 (1993): 41-56; George Hunsinger, "Hans Frei as Theologian: the quest for a generous orthodoxy." *Modern Theology* 8 (Apr 1992): 103-128.

[6] William C. Placher, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); William C. Placher, ed., *Essentials of Christian Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); William C. Placher, "Paul Ricoeur and postliberal theology: a conflict of interpretations," *Modern Theology* 4 no 1 (Oct 1987): 35-52; William C. Placher, "Scripture as realistic narrative: some preliminary questions." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 5 (Spring 1978): 32-41.

[7] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ Her Lord; Or, In a World Without Foundations: All We Have is the Church," In *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, Mark Nation, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 143-162; Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[8] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

[9] Bruce D. Marshall, "Lindbeck Abroad," *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XV no 2 (2006): 223-241; Bruce D. Marshall, "Lindbeck on What Theology Is," *Dialog* 31 (1992): 44-47; Bruce D. Marshall, ed., *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck,* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); Bruce D. Marshall, "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," In *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck,* Bruce D. Marshall, ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 69-102; Bruce D. Marshall, "Aquinas as Postliberal Theologian," *The Thomist* 53 (1989): 353-402.

provide meaningful, performative answers to the questions of meaning and religious truth claims. In order to best understand this overarching thought, it is wise to consider a bit of the context from which this trajectory of thought came forth.

The Ecumenical Quest

From Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* to George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*, this postliberal school of thought desired to see the fragmented Christian community unified through returning to the centrality of Christ within the grand biblical narrative. George Lindbeck stands as the key figure in this ecumenical desire to work for Christian unity across denominational and traditional barriers. Lindbeck's colleague Hans Frei clearly states that the argument of Lindbeck's book cannot be understood apart from understanding this ecumenical agenda. Frei writes, "Without the absolute priority of that Christian—ecumenical reality, without its reality, forget the 'rule' or regulative approach, forget the cultural-linguistic theory—forget the book."[10] The first chapter of Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine* puts forward the ecumenical context from which his thought comes forth and to which his proposal seeks to move forward.[11] It is important to note the ecumenical motives for his work in order to understand his desire to allow for doctrinal differences within Christianity while maintaining the needed unity of the larger Church across denominational lines.[12] Marshall concisely describes

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[10] Hans W. Frei, "Epilogue: George Lindbeck and *The Nature of Doctrine*." In *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck,* Bruce D. Marshall, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 278.

[11] Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 1-11. See also the many Lutheran-Catholic dialogues in which Lindbeck has been an active participant mentioned in *Nature of Doctrine*, chapter one footnotes 1 and 2.

[12] For another good treatment of Lindbeck's thought here, see John Wright, ed. *Postliberal Theology and the Church Catholic: Conversations with George Lindbeck, David Burrell, and Stanley Hauerwas*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 55-75.

this significance when he points out that the heart of Lindbeck's book, as seen within its

ecumenical purpose, consists of Lindbeck's argument that "the rule theory of doctrine

makes good sense not only of the way doctrine actually functions in religious

communities but especially of the results of ecumenical dialogue." Marshall clarifies his

thought when he contends,

> What long looked like irresolvable "fundamental differences" between divided
> churches can be, and often are, different but compatible ways of following the
> same rule—of adhering to the same doctrine. Ecumenical claims of doctrinal
> agreement need not come at the cost of one side's capitulation (as
> "propositionalists" fear), nor need they evacuate church doctrines of any cognitive
> content or community-forming power (which "experiential expressivism" lacks
> the resources to prevent).[13]

This understanding of Lindbeck's ecumenical agenda sheds light on the payoff

the theologian enjoys from using the later linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein

as well as the cultural anthropological insights of Clifford Geertz. While there is still a

need for scholars to more deeply consider Lindbeck's thought in light of his ecumenical

purposes, that is beyond the scope of this work. Lindbeck certainly expects that others

will use his work for more than the ecumenical purposes for which it was written. With

this in mind, I now consider the theological context from which Lindbeck's thought

derives.

Modernity as Background

Interestingly, one of the best, brief contextual treatments of the move from

liberalism to postliberalism in the twentieth century comes from the subject of my study

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[13] Bruce D. Marshall, "Introduction: The Nature of Doctrine *after 25 Years*," In George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th Anniversary Edition, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2009), xxiii.

in the following chapter, Stanley J. Grenz.[14] In his brief work, Grenz summarizes what

other scholars address as the important backdrop of postliberal theology. After the

Enlightenment, classical Protestant liberalism built their theology from what they

perceived to be universal religious experience. Grenz contends that "the task of theology,

therefore, was to separate the essence of Christianity from the disposable husk. In their

estimation, the pristine gospel lay in the practical or ethical teaching of the great religious

leaders, especially Jesus."[15] In order to adapt the Christian faith to the surrounding

modern scientific and philosophical context, liberalism rejected traditional religious

authorities and placed the individual self as the authority and arbiter of truth. As a result,

the role and significance of Scripture was significantly downplayed.

Karl Barth stepped into this theological context in the early twentieth century. He

sought, in part, to restore the Bible to its primary place in the theological task. Barth

understood Scripture to be the "divinely inspired witness to, interpreter of, and

proclaimer of God's saving event in Christ."[16] While Barth's theology of the Word

primarily involves the Person and work of Jesus Christ, it secondarily refers to the Bible

as Scripture which testifies to Christ, and then finally it refers to the Church's ongoing

proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Both the Bible's attestation and the Church's

proclamation are subordinate to the actual person and work of Christ, although they have

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[14] Stanley J. Grenz, "From Liberalism to Postliberalism: Theology in the 20th Century," *Review and Expositor* 96 no 3 (Summer 1999): 385-410.

[15] Grenz, "From Liberalism to Postliberalism," 386.

[16] Grenz, "From Liberalism to Postliberalism," 388.

authority as a result of their central message which is Christ.[17] Barth's call to return to

the Bible in order to properly engage the task of theology for the Church echoes through

the postliberal writings of Frei and Lindbeck.[18] Many scholars note that while H. Richard

Niebuhr is certainly in the background of the postliberal presentation of Frei and

Lindbeck, it is Barth that casts his shadow across much of the postliberal writings. As

David Tracy points out, "Lindbeck's substantive position is a methodologically

sophisticated version of Barthian confessionalism. The hands may be the hands of

Wittgenstein and Geertz but the voice is the voice of Karl Barth."[19]

The liberal theological project persisted in various forms even after Barth's work.

Liberal theologians did not waver in their commitment to find universal experiences,

principles, or structures, whether it came through the classic liberal position represented

by Schleiermacher, the method of correlation espoused by Paul Tillich,[20] process

theology through the works of Alfred Whitehead and John Cobb, or any number of other

theological projects. Lindbeck understands the motive behind the liberal theologies to

communicate the gospel and theology in such a way that it can be understood in and by a

world where the gospel seems foreign. However, he is concerned over any theologian's

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[17] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, Part 1, trans. G.W. Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 124ff.

[18] George Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving: Barth and Lindbeck on the Cognitive and Performative Aspects of Truth in Theological Discourse," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol LXI no 1 (1993): 41-56. Hunsinger shows Lindbeck's dependence upon Barth as well as distinctions between their thought and method.

[19] David Tracy, "Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: A Reflection," *The Thomist* 49 (1985): 465. It is also important to note some significant differences within Lindbeck's program and Barth's theology which can be seen in George Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving: Barth and Lindbeck on the Cognitive and Performative Aspects of Truth in Theological Discourse," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol LXI no 1 (1993): 41-56.

[20] Tillich utilized his well-known method of correlation, which "explains the content of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence."Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 60.

use of philosophical and existential categories that come from the contemporary world rather than the world of the text of Scripture. Furthermore, Lindbeck shows his departure from foundationalism with its insatiable desire for universal principles grounded in the shared experience or concerns of all humans. More precisely, he is against "the liberal commitment to the foundational enterprise of uncovering universal principles or structures—if not metaphysical, then existential, phenomenological, or hermeneutical."[21] Thus, Lindbeck, Frei, and other postliberals are responding, at least in some sense, to the varied liberal projects of the method of correlation, process theology, political theology, feminist theology, and other theological projects. It is within this context that Lindbeck puts forward his three theories of the nature of doctrine.

Additional insight is needed as to Lindbeck's critique of two theories of the nature of doctrine which he is against, namely the experiential-expressive and the cognitive-propositionalist models, in order to better understand his positively putting forward the cultural-linguistic model which will be the main topic of our discussion throughout the remainder of this chapter. Early on, Lindbeck wishes to ensure his readers that "Whatever else may be said about it, the recommended mode is clearly in conflict both with traditionalist propositional orthodoxy and with currently regnant forms of liberalism."[22]

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[21] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 129. The entire context of pp. 128-135 is helpful here.

[22] Lindbeck*, Nature of Doctrine*, 10.

The Cognitive-Propositionalist Model

Lindbeck asserts that the cognitive-propositionalist model "emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion and stresses the ways in which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities."[23] He goes on to contend that since fewer people are part of a particular religious community in these days, these people will find it difficult "to receive or experience religion in cognitivist fashion as the acceptance of sets of objectively and immutably true propositions."[24] Alister McGrath recognizes that Lindbeck's critique here is in part, whether intended or not, a critique on evangelicalism, especially the trajectory of thought which moves from Carl F. H. Henry.[25] It seems that Lindbeck's chief concern with a theologian like Henry is that Henry is convinced that biblical metaphors and narratives carry meaning as religious truths only as they are restated in propositional form. Thus, Lindbeck perceives that the actual biblical narrative becomes less important than the doctrines that the biblical narrative may contain. Both Frei and Lindbeck wish to counter this claim by affirming that while theological redescriptions of narratives are important in the task of theology, they are not the primary basis of theology. The biblical narrative itself serves as the primary basis of theology.

Lindbeck employs the use of typology to correct what he views as the propositionalist position of viewing the biblical text primarily as "an object of study

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[23] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 16.

[24] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 21.

[25] Alister E. McGrath, "An Evangelical Evaluation of Postliberalism," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 29.

whose religiously significant or literal meaning was located outside itself."[26] In contrast, Lindbeck wishes to make clear that, "Typology does not make scriptural contents into metaphors from extrascriptural realities, but the other way around."[27] He further explains that "it is the religion instantiated in Scripture which defines being, truth, goodness, and beauty, and the nonscriptural exemplifications of these realities need to be transformed into figures (or types or antitypes) of the scriptural ones."[28] Lindbeck's central concern is that the cognitive-propositionalist position moves away from intratextuality, that is in his view, allowing Scripture to function as the lens through which theologians view their world. The theologian writes, "The meaning must not be esoteric: not something behind, beneath, or in front of the text; not something that the text reveals, discloses, implies, or suggests to those with extraneous metaphysical, historical, or experiential interests."[29]

Lindbeck asserts that his cultural-linguistic model of doctrine does have at least some resemblance to cognitivist theories. He writes, "In thus inverting the relation of the internal and external dimensions of religion, linguistic and cultural approaches resemble cognitivist theories for which external (i.e., propositionally statable) beliefs are primary, but without the intellectualism of the latter."[30]   Lindbeck goes on to clarify, "A comprehensive scheme or story used to structure all dimensions of existence is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but is rather the medium in which one

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[26] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 119.

[27] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

[28] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

[29] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 120.

[30] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 35.

moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one's life."[31] Anne Inman points out that

"Lindbeck does not deny altogether that the truth claims or doctrines of religious faith

can supply objective knowledge about God: rather, he insists that it is not their primary

function to do so."[32] However, Lindbeck is careful to distinguish his position from the

cognitivist position where he believes "it is chiefly technical theology and doctrine which

are propositional."[33] In contrast, the cultural-linguistic model would contend that

objective knowledge derives from a manner of life that corresponds to the ultimately real.

Lindbeck asserts, "Propositional truth and falsity characterize ordinary religious language

when it is used to mold lives through prayer, praise, preaching, and exhortation. It is only

on this level that human beings linguistically exhibit their truth or falsity, their

correspondence or lack of correspondence to the Ultimate Mystery."[34] These weighty

issues of truth and correspondence will be taken up with greater clarity and detail later in

this chapter.

The Experiential-Expressive Model

Lindbeck argues that Immanuel Kant stands behind much of this model's thought

and practice. He argues that Kant's "reduction of God to a transcendental condition of

morality" left religion intolerably impoverished.[35] Lindbeck continues "The breach was

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[31] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 35.

[32] Anne E. Inman, *Evidence and Transcendence: Religious Epistemology and the God-World Relationship*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 39.

[33] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 69.

[34] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 69.

[35] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 21.

filled, beginning with Schleiermacher, with what I have called "experiential-expressivism."[36]

The thinkers of this experiential-expressivism "all locate ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the prereflective experiential depths of the self and regard the public or outer features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience."[37] From Lindbeck's perspective then, the doctrines within this model function as expressive symbols which both express and evoke the primary experience. Furthermore, religion has become a privatized and individualistic matter since "Kant's revolutionary Copernican 'turn to the subject'."[38] It is interesting to note that Lindbeck places some theological conservatives into this same camp because of the stress placed on their personal conversion experiences where they first meet God in the depths of their souls and then, if they have a personal interest or see personal benefit, they might engage a religious tradition or join a church. It is within this context that religions "are seen as multiple suppliers of different forms of a single commodity needed for transcendent self-expression and self-realization."[39]

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[36] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 21.

[37] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 21.

[38] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 21.

[39] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 22.

Lindbeck presents Bernard Lonergan as a prime example of this experiential-expressive model. Lindbeck states that four of Lonergan's six theses in his *Method in Theology*[40] are characteristic of experiential-expressivism in general:

> 1-Different religions are diverse expressions or objectifications of a common core experience. It is this experience which identifies them as religions. 2-The experience, while conscious, may be unknown on the level of self-conscious reflection. 3-It is present in all human beings. 4-In most religions, the experience is the source and norm of objectifications: it is by reference to the experience that their adequacy or lack of adequacy is to be judged.[41]

Lindbeck provides a few responses to Lonergan's theses throughout his work, but his central point is that because "this core experience is said to be common to a wide diversity of religions, it is difficult or impossible to specify its distinctive features, and yet unless this is done, the assertion of commonality becomes logically and empirically vacuous."[42] He is confident that the cultural-linguistic model cares for these and other inherent problems found within the experiential-expressivism model.

The Cultural-Linguistic Model

Lindbeck asserted that there needed to be a third and better way of understanding the nature of doctrine which would draw important thought from the discipline of cultural anthropology, especially through Clifford Geertz[43], and from the linguistic philosophy of

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[40] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1972).

[41] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 31.

[42] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 32.

[43] Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1983); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," In *The Religious Situation*, D.R. Cutler, ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 639-688.

Ludwig Wittgenstein.[44] Lindbeck compares religions with languages and contends that

religious doctrines function as grammatical rules for the community of that religion. His

central idea is captured when he writes,

> A religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or
> medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. It functions somewhat like a
> Kantian *a priori,* although in this case the *a priori* is a set of acquired skills that
> could be different. It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the
> good (though it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes,
> feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an
> idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs,
> and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or
> language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of
> individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It
> comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a
> distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be
> meaningfully deployed. Lastly, just as a language (or "language game," to use
> Wittgenstein's phrase) is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has
> both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, so it is also in the case of a religious
> tradition. Its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are
> integrally related to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it
> evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops. All
> this is involved in comparing a religion to a cultural-linguistic system.[45]

The remainder of Lindbeck's treatment of the cultural-linguistic model of religious

doctrine is an unpacking of the diverse thought that is contained in the paragraph above.

Like any other grammar, Christian theology is shaped by its own text and by rules for

reading that text, namely Scripture. The rules for reading the biblical text belong to and

are exclusively determined by the text itself. As Michael Horton points out, "The

specific doctrines that seek to interpret that text faithfully are the grammar's 'rules.'"[46]

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[44] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1953).

[45] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

[46] Michael Scott Horton, "Yale Postliberalism: Back to the Bible?" In *A Confessing Theology for Postmodern Times*, Michael S. Horton, ed., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 188.

Hans Frei extends this thought when he states:

> [T]heology becomes an aspect of the self-description of Christianity as a religion, rather than an instance in a general class. It is an inquiry into the internal logic of the Christian community's language—the rules, largely implicit rather than explicit, that are exhibited in its use in worship and Christian life, as well as in the confessions of Christian belief. Theology, in other words, is the grammar of the religion, understood as a faith and as an ordered community life.[47]

From here, Frei argues that there exist three aspects to Christian theology. First-order theology includes "specific beliefs (for example, the creeds) that seem on the face of them to be talking about acknowledging a state of affairs that holds true whether one believes it or not." Second-order theology is that logic or grammar of the faith which he has described above as the self-description of Christianity as a religion. This second aspect "may well have bearing on the first-order statements" as they seek to "bring out the rules implicit in first-order statements." Frei contends that within third-order discourse "there is a kind of quasi-philosophical or philosophical activity involved even in this kind of theologizing, which consists of trying to tell others, perhaps outsiders, how these rules compare and contrast with their kinds of ruled discourse."[48] Thus doctrine functions as a second-order language which governs the church's first-order language (such as its language in worship).[49] So it is, according to Frei, that we live and theologize within a particular cultural-linguistic community with its own unique community life and rules while at the same time making truth claims that we perceive to be universal.

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[47] Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 20.

[48] Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 20-21.

[49] Philip D. Kenneson, "The Alleged Incorrigibility of Postliberal Theology." In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 94.

Horton correctly asserts that "For Frei, the Bible, the sacraments, the creeds, and the life-patterns are not significations of a larger something called religion, but are themselves the constitutive parts of that particular religion called Christianity."[50] The consistent argument within the cultural-linguistic model is that "religions are thought of primarily as different idioms for construing reality, expressing experience, and ordering life."[51] By viewing the Christian faith as a comprehensive story for "construing reality" and "ordering" all of life, postliberalism is clearly asserting that Christianity is not primarily either a set of propositions to be believed (the cognitivist-propositionalist approach) or a set of inner experiences to be expressed (the experiential-expressivist approach).[52] Within the cultural-linguistic model, religion as an idiom for expressing experience does not correlate with the "set of inner experiences" to be expressed in the experiential-expressivist approach. Rather, Lindbeck states that experience in the Christian faith is understood as "the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one's life."[53]

Many questions stem from this brief explanation of the cultural-linguistic model for understanding Christian theology. How does this Christian idiom come into being? Where do Christian doctrines come from? How may Christian doctrines be evaluated by those inside and outside of that particular faith system? Is there any extralinguistic reality

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[50] Horton, "Yale Postliberalism," 188.

[51] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 47-48.

[52] Kenneson also points this out in Kenneson, "Alleged Incorrigibility of Postliberal Theology," 94.

[53] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 35.

that Christian language is attempting to describe?[54] Many of these questions hit squarely

at the nature of postliberal, narrative theology and how we are to understand the

relationship between both Scripture and the community of faith with regard to truth,

meaning, and authority. It is to these questions that I now turn.

<div align="center">Scripture and Theology</div>

Primacy of Narrative

Why the Narrative Turn?

Two additional questions surface when asking "Why the turn to narrative?" First,

what do we mean when we use the term narrative? Secondly, from what did we turn in

order to get to narrative? While I have attempted to answer some of the second question

above, I will give further answer to it momentarily. With regard to the first question,

there is a great deal of material written about how we are to understand or not understand

"narrative." Stanley Hauerwas offers a helpful estimation as he contends that narrative

theology is really a network of views that give "categorical preference for story over

explanation as a vehicle of understanding."[55] But even with this description, there are

many divergent views within narrative schools of thought.

Two prominent schools of thought may be seen within the larger pool of narrative

theologies vying for attention. The first school has been referred to as the "Chicago

school" revisionists led by Paul Ricoeur and David Tracy. The second school, whose

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[54] See these and other questions in McGrath, "Evangelical Evaluation," 34-35.

[55] Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 34.

thought I am specifically taking up in this chapter, is the postliberal "Yale school" made up of those who wish to elucidate the Christian story on its own terms without forcing that story to conform to the categories of modernism. David Clark refers to these scholars as "pure" narrativists.[56] Gary Comstock further describes this "Yale school" as "Pure narrative theologians" who are "antifoundational, cultural-linguistic, Wittgensteinian-inspired descriptivists."[57]

Postliberalism and those who embrace the hermeneutical and theological turn to narrative owe a significant debt of gratitude to Hans Frei for articulating the significance of narrative in reading, understanding and applying the biblical text. Green comments that the "single book most responsible for the new theological prominence of narrative is undoubtedly Hans Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*."[58] Here, Frei extended his thought that can be seen in earlier articles he wrote in a Presbyterian adult education magazine called *Crossroads* in 1967 which were later published in his book *The Identity*

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[56] Clark, "Relativism & the Promise of Postliberalism," 108.

[57] Comstock, Gary, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 no 4 (1987): 688. Comstock's overall description of these two schools of narrative thought is helpful. He describes the Yale School as antifoundational, cultural-linguistic, Wittgensteinian-inspired descriptivists. He describes the Chicago School as revisionist, hermeneutical, Gadamerian-inspired correlationists. While the Chicago School refuses to acknowledge narrative as either pure or autonomous, the Yale School makes its primary move in that direction.

[58] Garrett Green, "'The bible as…': fictional narrative and scriptural truth," In Garret Green, ed., *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Festschrift for Hans Frei), (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 79. George Lindbeck similarly voiced indebtedness to Frei at the 1995 Wheaton Conference where he said, "I happen to have introduced into the public domain the word, *postliberal*, though I didn't intend to name a research program or a movement. And I happen to be, I suppose, the senior living member of the group that is willing to call itself postliberal. But if you're going to talk about the decisive figure in this particular research program, it's clearly Hans Frei by a very large margin." [George Lindbeck, et al., "A Panel Discussion," in Phillips, Timothy R. and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Pr, 1996), 247.

of Jesus Christ.[59] Within these articles, Frei spoke of the need to consider and learn from the narrative character which made up the bulk of the biblical text. In *Identity of Jesus Christ* and *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Frei continued to tell his readers to look at the story as a story. Placher succinctly summarizes Frei's point when he writes that Frei called us to treat the biblical narrative "like a realistic novel: the meaning of such a text is neither a general moral lesson nor a historical reference. We understand it by knowing what the words mean and following the developing interaction of character and incident."[60]

It is important to note that postliberal theologians strive to describe the faith of the Christian community as internal history rather than external.[61] For Frei and other postliberal theologians, theology is, more than anything else, Christian self-description as the biblical world is seen as the "primary reality" into which our lives should be formed. Frei suggests that this was the way Christian reading of the biblical texts was done throughout the history of the church until Enlightenment foundationalism came into play in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He contends that the stories of our lives have meaning and experience reality only as we fit our stories into the framework established by the biblical stories.[62] At the center of all of this stands the story of the person and

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[59] Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

[60] Placher, "Paul Ricoeur and Postliberal Theology," 35-36.

[61] Certainly there is some borrowing of thought here from H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, (New York: MacMillan Co., 1941). Where Niebuhr concluded that there is both internal and external history and that observations from external history contribute to the internal histories of the church. Hence, revelation is historical. As I understand it, Niebuhr wishes to translate Christian narratives into religious languages external to the Christian faith.

[62] Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 1.

work of Jesus Christ. Frei delineates this as he responds to the criticism of Henry. Frei writes:

> The Bible has a very particular story to tell. That doesn't mean all elements in the Bible are narrative. It only means, so far as I can see, that something like John 1:14—"And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth"—is something that we don't understand except as a sequence enacted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Christian tradition by and large took verses like that to be the center of its story and took them to refer to the real world.[63]

Frei contends that the propositional statement is dependent upon the larger narrative and not the other way around. While "the Word was made flesh" is a propositional statement, it is not logically prior to the gospel story. In fact, it is the center of the gospel story and is a statement that cannot be rightly understood except through the biblical narrative accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

The postliberal, narrative theological proposal stems from a general dissatisfaction with the direction they perceived modern Christian theology had taken in surrendering its own unique story to other outside stories that were given authority over the world of the biblical text. Whether it be looking for historical reference or general human experience, Frei and others were convinced that attention had been diverted from the biblical text itself to external dimensions outside the text. Frei states "It is not an exaggeration to say that all across the theological spectrum the great reversal had taken place; interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with

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[63] Hans W. Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," In Hans W. Frei, George Hunsinger, and William C. Placher, eds., *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 208.

another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story."[64] Frei extends

his thought as he writes against the anthropological center of modern theology.

> The business of theology has therefore been that of pointing to the potentiality of
> human existence for Christocentric faith and for Christocentric
> interpretation…And it doesn't matter if human existence was conceived in
> rational-moral fashion, as in the Enlightenment; in aesthetic fashion, as by
> Schleiermacher; in phenomenological-ontological fashion, as by the
> contemporary hermeneutical school and its nineteenth-century forerunners; in
> existentialist-phenomenological fashion, as by Bultmann, Ogden, and Buri; in
> universal historical terms, as by Pannenberg; in dialectical-historical fashion, as
> by Moltmann; in various personalistic mixtures of these categories, as by Brunner
> and Althaus; or in a mixed historical, ontological, and evolutionary vision, as by
> Karl Rahner.[65]

Finding these trajectories of theological engagement unsatisfactory, Frei puts forward his

proposal that theologians take seriously the narrative nature of the biblical stories so that

we might come into contact with and understand the actual shape of reality.[66]

Frei wishes to cut to the essence of Christianity. But what might the method be

that would get us to this essence? That is an important question that Frei points to, but

never quite fully answers. He begins by suggesting that we go about this project in a

"nonperspectivist way if possible by looking at the synoptic Gospels as aesthetic or

quasi-aesthetic narrative texts."[67] Frei is convinced that reading the Gospel narratives as

aesthetic texts allows for the meaning of the text to remain the same regardless of

perspectives that various generations of interpreters may bring to the table. This is

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[64] Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 130.

[65] Hans W. Frei, "Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal," In *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 29-30.

[66] Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 27.

[67] Frei, "Remarks in Connection," 30-31.

because "the constancy of the meaning of the text is the text and not the similarity of its

effect on the life-perspectives of succeeding generations."[68] Frei goes on to argue that the

"valid interpretation does not depend on the difficult assumption of a necessary and

traceable connection between the text and the author's intention or will."[69] This is so

because "the formal structure of the narrative itself is the meaning, not the author's

intention nor an ontology of language nor yet the text's impact."[70] Frei thus claims that if

one begins with the synoptic Gospels as aesthetic narratives, and seeks to find meaning

within the narrative structure itself apart from any preunderstandings, then the interpreter

will find a "high Christology" which at least points us in the direction of answering our

question of the essence of Christianity.[71] The interpretive answer to the question of the

essence of Christianity does not depend on the situational context of the interpreter. It is

dependent on an honest reading of the biblical text as an aesthetic, narrative text which

shows the world as it is to be regardless of time and place.   A question remains as to

whether we are to understand these biblical narratives as real-historical or if they only

have a realistic quality to them and if the answer even matters for Christian theology.

A Realistic Narrative

Postliberals are opposed to viewing biblical narrative as historical document.

Rather the biblical narrative should be read as realistic narrative that is "history-like."[72]

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[68] Frei, "Remarks in Connection," 32.

[69] Frei, "Remarks in Connection," 33.

[70] Frei, "Remarks in Connection," 34.

[71] Frei, "Remarks in Connection," 32.

[72] While beyond the scope of this work, it is important to note the significance that Erich Auerbach had on the thought of Hans Frei, especially Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western*

Frei contends that this realistic reading of the biblical narrative had been the normal way

of reading the text before the dawn of modernity and the historical-critical method of

reading and interpretation was introduced in the eighteenth century. Frei asserts that

modern critical scholars were more interested in finding what lay "behind" the text than

they were to find what was "in" the text. Lindbeck articulates Frei's concern by stating

"Typological interpretation collapsed under the combined onslaughts of rationalistic,

pietistic, and historical-critical developments. Scripture ceased to function as the lens

through which theologians viewed the world and instead became primarily an object of

study whose religiously significant or literal meaning was located outside itself."[73]

Frei's description of the transition from the literal (realistic) reading and

understanding of the biblical narrative to the historical-critical reading or the biblical

theological reading[74] is quite extensive. From Baruch Spinoza to Friedrich

Schleiermacher, Frei's critical eye sees the increasing unwillingness of scholars to read

the biblical narrative on its own terms and sense the meaning from within its own

structure. Instead for those modern scholars, the historical referent or the universal

experience is the heart of what the text is saying or that to which it points. The meaning

of the narrative no longer remained within the narrative itself. Hence, "the realistic

narrative reading of biblical stories, the gospels in particular, went into eclipse throughout

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Literature, Trans. Willard R. Trask, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1953). William Placher writes of Auerbach's influence on Frei in his "Introduction," In *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3-25.

[73] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 119.

[74] Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 6-8. Here Frei states that the literal reading was replaced by two readings, one being historical-critical and the other, biblical theology.

the period."[75] Here again, Lindbeck states the concern clearly. "The meaning must not be esoteric: not something behind, beneath, or in front of the text; not something that the text reveals, discloses, implies, or suggests to those with extraneous metaphysical, historical, or experiential interests. It must rather be what the text says in terms of the communal language of which the text is an instantiation."[76] Our primary focus in reading the text then must coincide with the primary focus of the text itself, namely "on how life is to be lived and reality construed in the light of God's character as an agent as this is depicted in the stories of Israel and of Jesus."[77]

This aspect of postliberalism was perhaps the most troubling for Carl Henry as he offered his appraisal of Frei's narrative theology.[78] Henry presses to understand if Frei will clearly state whether the biblical narratives are indeed historically factual, that is they refer to actual historical occurrences, or if the historicity of such narratives is simply unnecessary to the interpretation of the text. Frei replies by stating "Of course I believe in the 'historical reality' of Christ's death and resurrection, if those are the categories which we employ."[79] He then expounds on his answer.

> If I am asked to use the language of factuality, then I would say, yes, in those terms, I have to speak of an empty tomb. In those terms I have to speak of the literal resurrection. But I think those terms are not privileged, theory-neutral,

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[75] Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 324.

[76] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 120.

[77] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 121.

[78] Carl F. H. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *Trinity Journal* 8 (NS 1987): 3-19.

[79] Hans W. Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," In Hans W. Frei, George Hunsinger, and William C. Placher, eds. *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 211. Reprinted from *Trinity Journal* 8 (NS 1987): 21-24.

trans-cultural, an ingredient in the structure of the human mind and of reality always and everywhere for me, as I think they are for Dr. Henry.[80]

The distinctions between Henry and Frei are quite obvious. For Henry "the subject matter of the texts that describe Jesus' resurrection and the reality to which they refer are to be taken equally literally."[81] Frei, on the other hand, contends that "text and reality are adequate, indeed, indispensable to each other but not identical."[82] Frei argues that looking for the historical referent, that is, looking for the meaning of the text in some historical occurrence that lies behind the text is simply another adventure in missing the point. For postliberals, the meaning is the narrative and to introduce any external categories of historicity is to miss the very intention of the text itself.

Lindbeck complicates this thought somewhat when he writes of this issue of realistic narrative.

> It must also be noted that intratextuality in a postcritical or postliberal mode is significantly different from traditional precritical varieties. We now can make a distinction (unavailable before the development of modern science and historical studies) between realistic narrative and historical or scientific descriptions. The Bible is often "history-like" even when it is not "likely history." It can therefore be taken seriously in the first respect as a delineator of the character of divine and human agents, even when its history or science is challenged.[83]

Lindbeck uses the parable of the prodigal son as an example here. He articulates that the rendering of God's character is not logically dependent upon the "facticity of the story."[84]

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[80] Frei, "Response," 211.

[81] Hans W. Frei, "Of the Resurrection of Christ," In *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 202.

[82] Hans W. Frei, "Of the Resurrection of Christ," In *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 203.

[83] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 122.

[84] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 122.

Horton clarifies Lindbeck's claim by arguing that "in point of fact, all that parable reminds us of is that *in parables* the rendering is not dependent on the facticity of the story."[85] Lindbeck's claim, once again, makes clear that he does not wish to introduce external categories of historicity to the text which seem to take away from the intent of the text itself, namely in this instance, to reveal the character of God.

Frei boils down his "realistic narrative" thought when he writes about the centrality of the passion and resurrection of Jesus. He contends that we must articulate that belief in Jesus' resurrection is akin to a belief in something like the "inspired quality of the accounts" rather than in the theory that "they reflect what 'actually took place.'"[86] Frei goes on to ask "To what historical or natural occurrence would we be able to compare the resurrection—the absolute unity of factuality and identity? None. There appears to be no argument from factual evidence or rational possibility to smooth the transition from literary to faith judgment."[87] According to Frei, since belief in the resurrection is consistent with the overall logic or coherency of the Christian faith, only two assurances are needed from modern historical criticism. First, from history it is enough to know "that a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God's nearness, did exist and was finally executed."[88] Secondly, we need to know that there exists no reliable historical evidence against the resurrection.[89] Gary Dorrien states Frei's

[85] Horton, "Yale Postliberalism," 204.

[86] Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 150.

[87] Frei, *Identity of Jesus*, 151.

[88] Frei, *Identity of Jesus*, 51.

[89] Frei, *Identity of Jesus*, 151.

concern well when he writes, "To say that the resurrection must be a 'fact' of 'history' is to make history contain something that obliterates its boundaries. If the resurrection actually occurred, it is an event without analogy. 'History' as a category is too impoverished to contain it, and the usual historiocritical questions…are rendered useless."[90]

Revelation and Narrative

Neither Frei nor Lindbeck set out to delineate a thorough account of revelation. They are both more concerned with the method of doing theology than they are with expounding the content of that theology. Still, their method does provide some understanding of the postliberal view of revelation in relation to narrative. Other postliberal theologians such as Ronald Thiemann[91], William Placher[92], and George Stroup[93] have taken up the task to explicate the nature of revelation with regard to narrative as expressed by Frei and Lindbeck. My treatment here will be brief as some of the finer elements of this thought will be discussed in more detail below in my discussion of intratextuality.

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[90] Gary Dorrien, "A Third Way in Theology? The Origins of Postliberalism," *Christian Century* 118 (2001): 21.

[91] Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); Ronald F. Thiemann, "Response to George Lindbeck," *Theology Today* (1986): 377-382.

[92] William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology and Scripture*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

[93] George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church*, (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981); George W. Stroup, "Revelation," *In Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds., Revised and enlarged ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 114-140.

First and foremost, postliberal theologians contend that narrative is the central form of revelation. Placher, following thought found within Barth and Frei, contends that revelation is an encounter with God where God, on the giving end of revelation, monopolizes the decision and method of revealing who he is while we, those on the receiving end of revelation, must adapt ourselves to the way of revelation in order to properly grasp it.[94] Postliberals agree that narrative is the best mode of conveying revelation. Herein lies the argument put forward in Frei's *Identity of Jesus Christ*. The narrative of Jesus Christ presents to us a world that is reality as it should be understood. Those biblical narratives provide a framework through which we, the receivers of such revelation, can view that real world as we adapt ourselves to it and are transformed by it. Ultimately, this real world of the biblical narratives is defined by its own central character, namely God.

Stroup continues this thought as he describes the doctrine of revelation within narrative theology. He writes, "In narrative theology, revelation refers to that process in which the personal identities of individuals are reinterpreted and transformed by means of the narratives which give the Christian community its distinctive identity."[95] Thus, revelation is not primarily wrapped up in propositional form. Rather revelation is an event process. An individual comes into contact with and interacts with the narrative of the community of faith (partly Word of God narrative and partly Christian community narrative) which, in turn, establishes or builds identity. Stroup's use of Word of God entails "those moments in which Christian narrative becomes disclosive, those moments

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[94] Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 186-187.

[95] Stroup, "Revelation," 135.

when Christian narrative ceases to be merely an object for historical curiosity, when its

horizon collides with that of the reader and hearer, when the process of understanding

commences, and acknowledgement, recognition, and confession become a possibility,

when the human words of Christian narrative witness to Jesus Christ."[96] As seen in this

quote, the Christian narrative includes both the witness and interpretation of Scripture

alongside the ongoing history of that interpretation among the community of faith.

Stroup thus asserts that "revelation is always revelation of God's Word" in the context of

Christian narrative.[97]

Perhaps Thiemann, more than other postliberal scholars, addresses the issue of

revelation within the context of narrative theology as a nonfoundationalist engagement.

While Thiemann agrees with Frei with regard to the realistic nature and role of narrative

in Christian theology, he advances his thought with regard to revelation especially as he

describes God's prevenience in the Gospel of Matthew. Thiemann offers a clearly

nonfoundationalist description of God's prevenience with three notable points to help us

along the way. First, he contends that Christian belief is justified specifically within the

Christian community. Secondly, he asserts that the non-Christian categories aid the

reflective second-order theology which defends, as well as criticizes, the "first order

practical language of the church." Finally, he concludes that nonfoundational

justification searches for the "relation between a disputed belief and the web of

interrelated beliefs within which it rests."[98] Thiemann holds that beliefs and practices

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[96]Stroup, *Promise of Narrative*, 241.

[97]Stroup, *Promise of Narrative*, 240.

[98] Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*, 72-76.

and their relation is specific to a community and that prevenience and promise are part of the web of beliefs that cohere within that community of faith.[99]

Each of these postliberal accounts of revelation is helpful for our understanding that narrative is indeed a central form of revelation. Another helpful point is that, within postliberal thought, the Bible is a good narrative that reveals life as it should be, although it seems that the biblical revelation is limited to the believing community and cannot be extended outward. What this might mean for the concept of truth as something more than a belief that coheres with other beliefs within the church's overall web of belief is something that I shall take up later in this chapter.

Ethics and Narrative

As we shall soon see, the postliberal project rises and falls on the church's performance of the biblical narratives. In part, that means that Christian morality is drawn from the context of Christian narratives. This is the basic contention of Hauerwas who is widely recognized as postliberalism's key moral theologian. He writes, "To be sure, Christians may have common moral convictions with non-Christians, but it seems unwise to separate a moral conviction from the story that forms its context of interpretation."[100] Consistent with other postliberal narrative theologians, Hauerwas is convinced that ethics are shaped by the community and the community story of which a person is a participant. Thus, Hauerwas denies the universal objectivity of moral

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[99] Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*, 81.

[100] Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," In *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology*, Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 159 n. 1.

principles since those principles would be based on general rationality apart from a person's or community's situated context and narrative.[101]

Hauerwas stresses the importance of moving from theory to the actual practice of the Christian narrative. He describes our character, which leads to practice, as never being a static reality. Rather, our character develops throughout our history. Grenz points out Hauerwas' use of three interrelated concepts to describe this process.[102] Hauerwas speaks of "character" (or virtue), "vision," and "narrative." Character refers to "our deliberate disposition to use a certain range of reasons for our actions rather than others."[103] What we are becoming, however, is the product of the manner in which we view the world and ourselves. This is understood as our vision. Our vision is our tendency to "see the world in a certain way and then to become what we see."[104] Yet this vision is not something we develop as isolated individuals. Our vision is formed by our narrative context. Our vision is shaped by "the stories through which we have learned to form the story of our lives."[105]

The church has this kind of vision-shaping narrative which should move the community of faith toward becoming a people of good character. For Hauerwas, the Church's most important social task is "nothing less than to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in the scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to

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[101] Hauerwas and Burrell, "From System to Story," 160.

[102] Stanley Grenz, "From Liberalism to Postliberalism: Theology in the 20th Century," *Review and Expositor* 96 no 3 (Summer 1999): 403.

[103] Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, (Notre Dame, IN: Fiddes Publishers, 1974), 59.

[104] Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 29, 36.

[105] Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 74.

that story."[106] The Church is to draw from its own narrative, especially as seen in the narratives of Israel and Jesus, which, in turn, shapes and molds the lives of Christians in accord with that biblical reality.[107] Fittingly with regard to this overall thought, "ethics does not follow after a systematic presentation of the Christian faith, as in most traditional presentations, but must come at the beginning of Christian theological reflection."[108]

The engagement above stressing the significance of narrative in the postliberal understandings of revelation, ethics, and the historicity of the biblical accounts has served as a foundation for what follows. As revelation is an event process whereby a person is shaped as a result of interacting with a community's narrative and as narrative ethics stresses our view of the world being shaped by a community's narrative, so the overarching concept of intratextuality will further explain postliberalism's understanding and use of the biblical narrative within the community of faith. Our understanding of intratextuality will, in turn, enable us to engage the postliberal concepts of authority, meaning and truth in relation to Scripture and the community of faith.

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[106] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 1.

[107] Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 95-96.

[108] Grenz, "From Liberalism to Postliberalism," 403.

Intratexuality: Primacy of a World-forming Narrative for a Christian Reading of the Bible

What Is Intratextuality?

Perhaps no thought is as important to understanding the cultural-linguistic approach to religion and doctrine as the concept of intratextuality. Frei and Lindbeck both speak of this concept as central to the entire postliberal project. This concept informs how the community of faith is to read Bible, how they are to view and understand their world, and how they are to speak of their faith, theologize, and ultimately live. Lindbeck explains that "Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text."[109] Lindbeck goes on to relate this thought to the work of Hans Frei who, in his estimation, had clearly shown how this intratextual reading of Scripture was the method used throughout the long history of the Church until the eighteenth century. Frei, in turn, presents a unified voice with his colleague on this issue when he contends, "The direction in the flow of intratextual interpretation is that of absorbing the extratextual universe into the text, rather than the reverse (extratextual) direction."[110]

Lindbeck's proposal of intratextual theology enhances our understanding of his stressing the need for a cultural-linguistic model of doctrine over either the experiential-expressivist model or the cognitive-propositional model. Lindbeck argues that the

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[109] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

[110] Hans W. Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?," In *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 147.

intratextual theology of the cultural-linguistic model is better than the cognitive-propositional model because it does not err in elevating doctrinal propositions above the words of the Bible. Rather, the cultural-linguistic model considers the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts within which propositions are formulated. Lindbeck also points out that the cultural-linguistic model is more "truthful" than the experiential-expressive model since religion as a culture is the very context in which experience is shaped and not the other way around.

It is important to understand the manner in which the cultural anthropology from Geertz and the social-linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein were appropriated for the postliberal treatment of intratexuality. Lindbeck's use of Wittgenstein has been briefly mentioned above and can be clearly seen in his *Nature of Doctrine*.[111] A lengthy description of the assimilation of these thoughts into Lindbeck's theological model is beyond the scope of this study. However, a brief word is in order here on Lindbeck's use of Geertz. For it is in his use of Geertz that Lindbeck's grounding of scriptural authority seems to be extrascriptural or outside of Scripture.[112] This is important especially if one agrees that the issues of prolegomena in theology are possible only as a part of theology itself.[113]

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[111] See again the use of Wittgenstein especially in Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model in his *Nature of Doctrine*, 32-41.

[112] McGrath makes this argument when he writes, "the prioritization of Scripture is not adequately grounded at the theological level. In effect, the priority of Scripture is defended on the grounds that appear to be cultural, historical, or contractual." See McGrath, "Evangelical Evaluation," 40.

[113] This thought is consistent with Barth's treatment of this very issue. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 42.

Geertz, from whom Lindbeck borrows many of his primary thoughts with regard to his cultural-linguistic model of doctrine, addresses the very issues of meaning and world-forming narratives that are the heart of a postliberal understanding of intratextuality. Geertz, supporting the thought of Lindbeck, states that religious symbols offer a "perspective," a "mode of seeing," a "framework of meaning," a "world" to live in.[114] Geertz also tempers this thought in a manner that Lindbeck does not seem to do. He writes, "But no one, not even a saint, lives in the world religious symbols formulate all the time, and the majority of men live in it only at moments. The everyday world of common-sense objects and practical acts is…the paramount reality in human existence— paramount in the sense that it is the world in which we are most solidly rooted."[115]

For Geertz then, a person lives in two worlds; first, their own complex enculturated world, and second, the world of religious symbols, or as Lindbeck would say, the world of the biblical text. This cannot be understood as simply living out an intratextual reality. Interestingly, Lindbeck does seem to faithfully follow Geertz' thought that change or transformation of perspective or framework moves only from the religious world (the world of the biblical text) to the common-sense world (the extratextual world). Miroslav Volf states that "we get no sense in Lindbeck that the intratextual and extratextual worlds crisscross and overlap in a believer or community, or

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[114] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 110, 119, 122. These thoughts are quoted in Miroslav Volf, "Theology, Meaning & Power: A Conversation with George Lindbeck on Theology & the Nature of Christian Difference," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 50.

[115] Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 119. Also used in Volf, "Theology, Meaning & Power," 50.

that the religious world is being shaped by the non-religious world as well as shaping it."[116] The transformation of vision moves only in one direction.

To sum up, the Bible provides a normative semiotic world on its pages. The theologian's task involves describing that world seen in the Scriptures. Lindbeck further clarifies by saying that one test of our faithfulness to our task as theologians "is the degree to which descriptions correspond to the semiotic universe paradigmatically encoded in holy writ."[117] Thus, theologians are to faithfully describe the biblical world for Christians in their community, and from this description Christians are to rightly observe and interpret their own world through the normative world of the Bible. Intratextuality requires that Christian readers live within the realistic world of the Bible.

While noting positive aspects of the postliberal treatment of intratexuality, some scholars also state a couple of concerns. McGrath is concerned that the authority of Scripture is not adequately grounded at the theological level so that it should enjoy this world-forming authority as a narrative of the community of faith. McGrath asks critical questions regarding the nature of the authority of the biblical text within this intratextual theological proposal. He asks, "Why does the Bible possess such authority? Why is it the narrative of Jesus Christ that exercises this controlling authority? Is the authority of Scripture something that has been imposed on the text by a community that is willing to submit itself to this authority but, in principle, would have been prepared to acknowledge

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[116] Volf, "Theology, Meaning & Power," 51.

[117] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 116.

additional or alternative authorities?"[118] These questions will be taken into consideration

later in this chapter.

Volf puts forward an additional concern that if Lindbeck consistently attempted

"to explicate 'religion from within' and then from that standpoint attempted to describe

'everything as inside, as interpreted by the religion,' he would fail."[119] He contends that

this is the case because postliberal intratextuality fails to acknowledge the significant

reality of extratextual influences on Christians as interpreters and those who are striving

to live out the reality of the biblical story. Volf explains this concern as he writes a

summary of his thought. He states,

> But awareness of the fact that we can never fully inhabit the biblical world guards
> the irreducible externality of the textual world. Because the textual world reveals
> God's new world (rather than merely redoubling our world), it always remains
> partly outside our own cultural and ecclesial setting, a strange word mapping a
> strange world, while we are inserted in the flux of history, struggling to live in
> and shape our cultures as we ourselves are shaped both by our religious texts and
> by our cultures.[120]

Volf here seems to be speaking toward one of the chief concerns that some theologians

have with the intratextual, cultural-linguistic system that postliberals espouse, namely the

difficulty in understanding or articulating a doctrine of revelation which would answer a

fundamental question. How did the Christian "language" or "idiom" come to be in the

first place? McGrath states his concern as he notes that throughout Lindbeck's analysis,

"there seems to be a studied evasion of the central question of revelation—in other

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[118] McGrath, "Evangelical Evaluation," 39-40.

[119] Volf, "Theology, Meaning & Power," 50. Volf is here employing Lindbeck's own wording from Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 114-115.

[120] Volf, "Theology, Meaning & Power," 52.

words, whether the Christian idiom, articulated in Scripture and hence in the Christian tradition, emerges from accumulated human insight or from the self-disclosure of God in the Christ-event."[121] As we shall see, this postliberal principle of intratextuality has significant consequences for how Christians interpret and live out Scripture as well as how Scripture is related to the questions of truth and meaning. To these topics I now turn.

Interpreting Scripture

David Kelsey's well-known work helps to determine just what is meant when many postliberals speak of Scripture.[122] Kelsey distinguishes between the Bible and Scripture when he proposes a "fluid" concept of Scripture. Kelsey makes a further distinction between a "theologian's 'working canon' and the 'Christian canon.'"[123] He describes the theologian's "working canon" (a variable set of texts) as the canon to which a theologian appeals when doing theology in the context of Christian community. He further describes the "Christian canon" (a sufficient set of texts) as that which refers to the historical Protestant or Catholic canon.

Kelsey contends that four provisions must be satisfied if one is to consider particular texts as Scripture. First, these texts must do something, that is, they must be used in the life of the community of faith in order to shape the community's identity. Secondly, scriptural texts must be recognized as authoritative for the life of the

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[121] McGrath, "Evangelical Evaluation," 34.

[122] David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). Reprint (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999). Lindbeck relates his dependence on Kelsey's work in his *Nature of Doctrine*, 137 n.11.

[123] Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 104.

community for both life and speech. Thirdly, these texts must be attributed "wholeness" through their use in describing the entire web of belief or pattern to the community. Lastly, scriptural texts must have recognized authority for their theological use that moves the community to act or live out theological proposals that are derived from those texts.[124]

Lindbeck speaks of the Bible with many of these provisions in mind. He addresses the hermeneutical question when he states, "The issue which concerns us is the extent to which the Bible can be profitably read in our day as a canonically and narrationally unified and internally glossed (that is, self-referential and self-interpreting) whole centered on Jesus Christ, and telling the story of the dealings of the Triune God with his people and his world in ways which are typologically…applicable to the present."[125] When the reading of Scripture is approached in this intratextual manner, Frei contends, the Scripture is a "normative" and pure "meaning" world of its own which "apart from its author's intention or its reader's reception, stands on its own with the authority of self-evident intelligibility."[126] For Frei and Lindbeck, the normative nature of Scripture is grounded in the realistic and intratextual world of Scripture. Given Scripture's normative nature, how then should we interpret the text or allow the text to interpret us?

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[124] Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 89-102.

[125] George A. Lindbeck, "Scripture, Consensus and Community," In *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, Richard John Neuhaus, ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 85.

[126] Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative," 140.

The postliberal answer to the question of how we are to read and interpret the biblical text has been, to some extent, addressed above. More precisely, postliberals like Frei and Lindbeck suggest that we are to interpret Scripture intratextually much like we would other classic literature.[127] Kathryn Tanner offers some clarity to this postliberal position of reading Scripture as a classic. She describes, "Texts that speak to every time and place are able to do so because of their indeterminacies, irreconciled pluralities, their ambiguities, and absences. They are able to speak to every age because they are capacious in their empty places, because they have room enough, gaps aplenty, for all to position themselves within them."[128] Tanner uses the term "timeliness of indeterminacy" to describe this approach. Scriptural texts, like other classics in literature, maintain and present their own textual worlds. Readers have access to those worlds as they learn to read in a manner that is particular to their own community. There is a great deal of freedom in interpretation since the scriptural texts may have different meanings depending on the particular circumstances and particular readings of the community.

Marshall extends Tanner's thought when he articulates his postliberal understanding of the "plain sense" of Scripture. He writes,

> By the "plain sense" I mean, borrowing Kathryn Tanner's definition, "what a participant in the community automatically or naturally takes a text to be saying on its face insofar as he or she has been socialized in a community's conventions for reading the text as Scripture." It is chiefly by appeal to the plain sense of

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[127] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 116.

[128] Kathryn E. Tanner, "Scripture as Popular Text," *Modern Theology* 14 (April 1998): 286.

Scripture that the Christian community tests and reforms its own current web of belief and practice.[129]

At first glance this may be read as saying that the centrality of the Bible in its plain sense is normative for Christian faith and practice. However, Gabriel Fackre and others instruct us to consider the significance of the first sentence of Marshall's quote. The "plain sense" of Scripture, for postliberals, is discernible "insofar as he or she has been socialized in a community's conventions for reading the text as Scripture."[130] Fackre notes that there is an interesting shift here from "why" Scripture is authoritative to "how" Scripture is authoritative.[131]

Marshall again clarifies,

Ascribing primacy to the plain sense of Scripture in the order of justification implies, more broadly, that beliefs and practices "internal" to Christianity are the primary criteria of truth. As I will use the term, a belief or practice is "internal" when the Christian community, in a given historical context, regards that belief or practice as (maximally) necessary or (minimally) beneficial in order for it to be faithful to its own identity. This will include chiefly, if not exclusively, what the community must say and do in order to identify and apply the plain sense of Scripture and in order to follow the communally normative rules which in certain respects help it identify and apply the plain sense (that is, its "doctrines" in Lindbeck's sense of the term).[132]

The "plain sense" of Scripture is normative for the beliefs of the community of faith. It further seems to be that, according to the postliberal thought above, the community of

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[129] Bruce D. Marshall, "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," In *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck,* Bruce D. Marshall, ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 72-73.

[130] Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative: Evangelical, Postliberal, Ecumenical," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation,* Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds.. (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1996), 129.

[131] Fackre, "Narrative," 129.

[132] Marshall, "Absorbing the World," 73-74.

faith is invested with the normative role of discerning this "plain sense" of Scripture.[133]

This is so because of the Holy Spirit's illumination of the community of faith as it reads

and interprets. Illumination of the community of faith and not inspiration of the biblical

text seems to be the central feature concerning the church's understanding of the "plain

sense" of Scripture. It is unclear whether the community of faith is truly accountable to

the authority of the biblical text for what it is or if the community of faith gives authority

to the "plain sense" of Scripture for what it does within the community.

Practicing Scripture

The concepts of intratextuality and the community of faith practicing or living out

Scripture enjoy an inseparable relationship within postliberalism. The postliberal

emphasis on "doing" is refreshing. The emphasis on the community of faith living in

conformity to the scriptural world is a welcome reminder of our calling as believers to

not simply know about the person and work of Jesus, but to be conformed to his image in

every aspect of our lives. On the other hand, this postliberal emphasis on performance

and use of the biblical text seems to confuse some of the relationship between "doing"

and "knowing."

Lindbeck makes the claim that premodern Christians engaged the interpretation of

Scripture in a manner that resembles his own postliberal presentation, namely,

"practicing" scriptural interpretation rather than "discussing" it.[134] He further argues that

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[133] Fackre reads Marshall in this way. See Fackre, "Narrative," 129-130.

[134] George A. Lindbeck, "Atonement & the Hermeneutics of Intratextual Social Embodiment," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 222.

this approach is better than the modern approach to interpretation which starts with the doctrines of inspiration and revelation and understands practice as the application of theory.[135] Put succinctly, Lindbeck states that modernity established theory as the rule for practice and practice was application of the theory. Doing (ethics) was an inference from knowing (epistemology).

Postliberalism makes the shift to ethics as first-theology. It is in "doing" the text that we come to "know." This certainly has implications for how we might understand biblical authority in relation to the practices of the community of faith. Jonathan Wilson, noting this shift, articulates that "a foundationalist approach to biblical authority often has the (unintended?) effect of postponing obedience until we are certain of the truth of Scripture."[136] In contrast, Wilson asserts that in the postliberal view "the first step toward biblical authority is not establishing an inerrant text which we then follow; rather, the first step is following the text."[137] The community of faith is to follow the pattern of the world of the biblical text. It is as we use the biblical text within the Spirit-illumined community of faith that we come to be who God desires for us to be. For postliberals, this certainly has far more to do with practice than theory.

Lindbeck argues, "the theory that is relevant to practice is not first learned and then applied, but rather is chiefly useful as part of an ongoing process of guarding against

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[135] Lindbeck, "Atonement & Hermeneutics," 222-223.

[136] Jonathan R. Wilson, "Toward a New Evangelical Paradigm of Biblical Authority," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 157.

[137] Wilson, "Toward a New Evangelical Paradigm," 157.

and correcting errors while we are engaged in practice."[138] His example, borrowed from

Karl Polanyi, of learning to ride a bike is illustrative here. He reasons, "If we first had to

learn what balancing skills are required for the physical action by mastering the complex

mathematical equations that most adequately (though still only very partially) represent

them, we would still be falling off our training bikes."[139] Again, intratextuality demands

action on the part of the faith community, namely the community's practice of the

biblical narrative through interpreting their own context through the framework of that

biblical narrative. Practicing Scripture necessitates that we be part of a believing

community where we have both the necessary context for understanding right practice

and an intratextual nurturing to grow in a better performance of the biblical narrative.

The community's "practice of intratextuality is only loosely related to explicit theory."[140]

This is why, Lindbeck argues, theologians from different backgrounds such as Thomas

Aquinas and Friedrich Schleiermacher were "more intratextual in their actual practice

than their theories would seem to allow." While their theories may have been weak, they

could still practice Scripture well because they were part of faith communities that

offered "a supportive environment, the tutelage of expert practitioners, and assiduous

practice in a complex set of unformalized skills that even the best theoretician cannot

adequately characterize."[141]

In this postliberal view, intratextual practice of the biblical text is a skill that one

learns through being a part of and participating in the faith community's shared life. A

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[138] Lindbeck, "Atonement & Hermeneutics," 225.

[139] Lindbeck, "Atonement & Hermeneutics," 225.

[140] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 123.

[141] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 123.

person learns the community's beliefs and practices in the same way that she or he learns a language. The longer this person is involved with the community and its practices, the more skilled they become in understanding/living a life that is consistent with the realistic, normative world of the Scriptures. Practice is both the means and the goal here. Practice informs right theory in light of practice or performance being equated with right understanding. This thought raises questions regarding the community of faith's use of Scripture and the relationship between that communal use and our understanding of meaning and truth. Does use determine meaning? How are we to understand the truth or truthfulness of our claims in relation to theory and performance? These are important questions that must be engaged.

The Questions of Truth and Meaning

The questions of truth and meaning are difficult to get at within the postliberal project. Marshall offers the most helpful, if not generous, description of Lindbeck's view of truth. He contends that Lindbeck speaks of truth in three different ways. There is "categorical" truth that "has to do with what analytic philosophy of language and epistemology thinks of as matters of meaning and reference." A second use of the term is "intrasystematic" truth which "has to do with warrant or justification—what we think entitles us to hold some beliefs and reject others." Finally, Marshall states that Lindbeck is also in favor of "ontological" truth which is how we would normally think of the term

in propositional form.[142] While this description is helpful, Lindbeck's postliberal treatment of truth is complicated and worrisome.

Lindbeck declares that "a comprehensive scheme or story used to structure all dimensions of existence is not primarily a set of propositions to be believed, but is rather the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one's life."[143] As we have observed previously, for Lindbeck, the priority of practice takes center stage in issues of meaning and truth. But does he allow for ontological truth or propositional truth claims within his system of thought? I think here the answer is yes, somewhat. Lindbeck argues "a religious utterance, one might say, acquires the propositional truth of ontological correspondence only insofar as it is a performance, an act or deed, which helps create that correspondence."[144] Volf points out a concern at this juncture with Lindbeck's use of the word only in the quote above.[145] Volf, along with many others, is concerned that this linking of ontological correspondence with performance implies the "propositionally or ontologically true claims (such as 'Christ is Lord') are *propositionally false* when they do not produce or are not accompanied by corresponding performance." He also notes that "propositionally vacuous claims (such as 'God is good,' according to

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[142] Bruce D. Marshall, "Lindbeck Abroad," *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XV no 2 (2006): 232. Lindbeck agreed with Marshall's assessment of his treatment of truth as seen in George A. Lindbeck, "Response to Bruce Marshall," *The Thomist* 53 (1989): 406.

[143] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 35.

[144] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 65.

[145] Volf, "Theology, Meaning & Power," 58.

Lindbeck) are *propositionally true* if through them we commit ourselves 'to thinking and acting as if God were good.'"[146]

Volf's comments above note the distinction that Lindbeck makes between the "intrasystematic" (read this as coherence) and "ontological" (read this as correspondence) status of a claim. In Lindbeck, "intrasystematic" truth occurs when a confessional utterance is made which coheres with the overall religion. He contends,

> Utterances are intrasystematically true when they cohere with the total relevant context, which, in the case of a religion when viewed in cultural-linguistic terms, is not only other utterances but also the correlative forms of life. Thus, for a Christian, "God is Three in One," or "Christ is Lord" are true only as parts of a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting. They are false when their use in any given instance is inconsistent with what the pattern as a whole affirms of God's being and will. The crusader's battle cry "*Christus est Dominus*," for example, is false when used to authorize cleaving the skull of the infidel (even though the same words in other contexts may be a true utterance). When thus employed, it contradicts the Christian understanding of Lordship as embodying, for example, suffering servanthood.[147]

Intrasystematic truth, according to Lindbeck, is constituted by coherence with the overall context. A statement, like that of the crusader above, when uttered out of context is incoherent and thus false. Lindbeck's thought here makes it extremely difficult to distinguish between meaning, truth, and use.[148] Jay Richards questions Lindbeck's suggestion that meaning, and it seems truth, is constituted by language rather than expressed by it. He writes,

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[146] Volf, "Theology, Meaning & Power," 58.

[147] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 64.

[148] I have found these treatments of Lindbeck's compacting truth and meaning together to be of significant value. David Fergusson, "Meaning, Truth, and Realism in Bultmann and Lindbeck," *Religious Studies* 26 (1990): 183-198; George Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving: Barth and Lindbeck on the Cognitive and Performative Aspects of Truth in Theological Discourse," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol LXI no 1 (1993): 41-56; Jay Wesley Richards, "Truth and Meaning in George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 33-53.

> Consider Lindbeck's claim that the crusader crying '*Christus est Dominus'* while 'cleaving the skull of an infidel' does not make the claim meaningless but *false*. This would seem to make it difficult for someone to be a hypocrite (at least for long), since this term usually designates someone who assents to the truth of a certain belief, but then contradicts that belief with some action. But if that action can itself *falsify* the truth of the claim which would inspire a certain action, one could deny the charge of hypocrisy, since 'Christ is Lord' is 'true only as [a part] of a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting.' Having violated this claim, one could then *deny* its truth, since one's action makes it false.[149]

Richards goes on to point out that there are better ways to negotiate the relationship of action and truth. He suggests, as one option, that what the crusader meant by his statement may be false since it claims something that is not true, "namely, that Christ is a 'Lord' in the same way Genghis Khan is 'Lord.'" Another option might be that the crusader's use of words "is true as a proper predication of the individual designated by Christ, but is inconsistent with the action of cleaving skulls for His glory." Richards again asserts that this would constitute the crusader being a hypocrite rather than making the statement itself false. He finds these alternatives more favorable than Lindbeck's proposal.[150]

Lindbeck seems to combine correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic theories of truth in such a manner that confuses truth and use along with meaning and use.[151] Ontological truth, for Lindbeck, attaches to religious utterances if and only if it belongs to

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[149] Richards, "Truth and Meaning," 43-44.

[150] Richards, "Truth and Meaning," 44. Fergusson affirms this thought he contends that "Lindbeck's Crusader who asserts '*Christus est Dominus'* may be making a true statement; the obscenity resides not in the fact that the statement is false but that its use is grotesque." Fergusson, "Meaning, Truth and Realism," 197.

[151] This is argued in Richards, "Truth and Meaning," 41. It is actually shown throughout the earlier portion of his work, especially pp. 36-40. It is also articulated in Kenneth Surin, "Many Religions and the One True Faith: An Examination of Lindbeck's Chapter Three," *Modern Theology* 4 no. 2 (Jan 1988): 187-209. This claim seems also to be consistent with the overall assessment in George Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving: Barth and Lindbeck on the Cognitive and Performative Aspects of Truth in Theological Discourse," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol LXI no 1 (1993): 41-56.

a "form of life, a way of being in the world, which itself corresponds to the Most

Important, the Ultimately Real."[152] Lindbeck also contends that the meaning of doctrines

is determined by "the acceptability or unacceptability of the consequences of these

[doctrinal] formulations in ordinary religious life and language."[153] While it does seem

that Lindbeck allows for some sense of correspondence (ontological truth), that

ontological truth is dependent upon coherence of all of the religious utterances to one

another and the performance of the community of faith. Thus, if ontological truth is ever

actually to be attained, it will not come through doctrinal formulation, but through the

religious life of the community of faith as one large proposition.

What, we may ask finally, is the relationship between the Bible and right meaning

or truth? Lindbeck argues,

> Meaning is more fully intratextual in semiotic systems (composed, as they
> entirely are, of interpretive and communicative signs, symbols, and actions) than
> in other forms of ruled human behavior such as carpentry or transportation
> systems; but among semiotic systems, intratextuality (though still in an extended
> sense) is greatest in natural languages, cultures, and religions which (unlike
> mathematics, for example) are potentially all-embracing and possess the property
> of reflexivity.[154]

The biblical narrative, Lindbeck contends, describes the real world that needs to absorb

our universe. The community of faith is to give itself to interpret the world and

circumstances in which they live in light of the world of the biblical text. Again,

Lindbeck says that "an intratextual reading tries to derive the interpretive framework that

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[152] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 65. Fergusson also makes this argument in his "Meaning, Truth and Realism," 196.

[153] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 100.

[154] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

designates the theologically controlling sense from the literary structure of the text itself."[155] But as Hunsinger points out, "In this conception [form of life correlative to the use of normative theological utterances] the relationship between the form of life and scripture, although described in dialectical terms, is made logically to depend in some strong sense on human use."[156] While Lindbeck asserts that the use of Scriptures shapes the form of the life of the community of faith, he also maintains that the form of life of the community of faith shapes the very use of Scripture. Hunsinger concludes from this that "it is finally the form of life as a whole rather than scripture as such which is thought to mediate the correspondence between a normative theological utterance as rightly used and the ultimate or divine reality."[157] With these thoughts in mind, I shall now consider the relationship between the life of the community of faith and theology as it relates to biblical authority, interpretation, meaning and truth.

<div align="center">The Community of Faith and Theology</div>

The Community and the Question of Biblical Authority

The Bible makes normative claims on the community of faith, the Church. Postliberals, as shown above, argue that the Bible is the source of God's grand story and the source of the central character, Jesus the Christ. On this point, postliberals and evangelicals agree. Postliberals, as has been shown, also contend that the biblical text is the "real" narrative that shows reality as it should be and provides the grid through which

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[155] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 120.

[156] Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving," 53.

[157] Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving," 53. His thought here is supported in Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 32-41, 64-65, 116-120.

every aspect of our lives is changed as the biblical world "absorbs the world."

Postliberals affirm the authority of Scripture. However, just what is meant by this

affirmation of biblical authority brings to light a significant difference between

postliberal and evangelical identity and claims.

Many scholars, evangelical and otherwise, assert that within Lindbeck's

postliberal thought, it is difficult to determine if the Bible stands above the church or if

the community of faith stands above the Scripture. Acknowledging that Lindbeck

affirms that the Bible has authority in the community of faith, we must ask why the

Scripture has this authority. The answer to this question shows a significant divergence

between postliberal thought, as found in Lindbeck, and traditional evangelicalism.

Most evangelicals would point to the doctrine of inspiration as the reason why the

Scripture is authoritative in the life of the church. They would contend that God is and

that God has spoken through his Living Word, Jesus the Christ, and through his written

Word, holy Scripture. As Fackre points out, just how this inspiration takes place is a

matter of significant debate. Yet within that debate, "What is not in dispute is that the

privileged place of the Bible is warranted by the noetic work of the Spirit."[158] The

evangelical consensus is that the Bible is authoritative because of what it is not simply

because of what it does.

Postliberalism allows a much broader role for the community of faith in

discerning or perhaps even determining biblical authority. Referring to Lindbeck's

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[158] Fackre, "Narrative," 128.

description of the cultural-linguistic model,[159] Hunsinger attempts to show the

relationship between Scripture and the form of life of the community of faith which sees

that Scripture as its central narrative. He writes, "Just as the use of scripture shapes the

form of life, so also does the form of life shape the use of scripture, yet it is finally the

form of life as a whole rather than scripture as such which is thought to mediate the

correspondence between a normative theological utterance as rightly used and the

ultimate or divine reality."[160] It seems here that the central question of biblical authority

has shifted from the question of why the biblical narrative is authoritative to how the

biblical narrative is authoritative.[161] More succinctly stated, the question of how the

biblical narrative is authoritative seems to have become the postliberal answer to the why

question.

Lindbeck indicates that the biblical narrative is authoritative in the life of the

community of faith because of the church's use or performance of those Scriptures. For

Lindbeck, the biblical narrative becomes authoritative and meaningful as it is embodied

in the practices of the church. In this sense, the community gives the Scripture, and

doctrines for that matter, their authority. Fackre, describing postliberal thought, puts it

this way: "'How is Scripture authoritative?' The answer is: according to socialization in

the community's conventions, which are subject to revision with continuing community

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[159] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 32-41, 116-120.

[160] Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving," 53.

[161] Fackre notes this shift in his "Narrative," 129. Wilson affirms and exhibits this shift in his engagement and extension of Lindbeck's thought in Jonothan R. Wilson, "Toward a New Evangelical Paradigm of Biblical Authority," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 158-161.

engagement."[162] Authority for Lindbeck is found in the performance of the biblical narrative within the life of the community of faith.[163] Doctrines, Lindbeck argues, are articulations of the meaning of Christian practices which are governed by those very practices rather than by any clearly defined understanding of divine revelation.

The Community and the Questions of Interpretation and Meaning

The questions of interpretation and meaning are notably difficult to get at within Lindbeck's postliberalism. While interpretation and meaning go hand in hand, we experience further difficulty given the linking of meaning and truth within Lindbeck's thought. To begin, postliberals are accurate in pointing out that, in some sense, we gain understanding through interpreting the biblical text and its world while also interpreting our extrascriptural world in which we live.

Lindbeck asserts that the Christian faith is its own language game which shapes the beliefs, experiences, attitudes, and values of its participants. This Christian faith community should seek, according to postliberal thought, to understand their faith in the "plain sense" terms of their central narrative, the biblical text. This meaning, once again, can be grasped insofar as the individual has been "socialized in a community's conventions for reading the text as Scripture."[164] Thus, meaning is learned by living one's life in terms of the religious community of which they are a part. Meaning of the biblical text becomes dependent upon, or indistinguishable from, its use by the

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[162] Fackre, "Narrative," 129.

[163] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 35, 64-65.

[164] Marshall, "Absorbing the World," 73.

community of faith.[165] Lindbeck contends that "what the Bible means does not necessarily correspond imitatively to what it meant; or to put this same point in uncompromisingly theological language, what God said in scripture is not necessarily what he now says." He goes on to state, "The proper theological interpretation is one that is intelligible, efficacious, and scripturally faithful, but the conditions for intelligibility and efficaciousness change, and faithfulness is not equivalent to reiteration."[166] It is not that Lindbeck is against biblical exegesis.[167] What he is concerned to point out, however, is that meaning is wrapped up in the contemporary use of the biblical text and the use of doctrine within the life of the church.

Scripture has meaning, it seems within this model, only when it is read by the particular faith community with its communal life and practices forming the interpretive grid through which this Scripture will be understood. If I understand the movement here correctly, the question of ontological truth cannot be asked until meaning has been established, and meaning is dependent upon use understood as community performance.[168]

A brief word on interpreting the world is in order here. Lindbeck claims that "Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. It is the text, so to speak, which

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[165] Fergusson, "Meaning, Truth and Realism," 195-197.

[166] George A. Lindbeck, "The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation," In *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, Garrett Green, ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 170.

[167] Lindbeck, "The Story-Shaped Church," 174. He grants that exegetical findings can block eisegesis and states that "the burden of proof is on those who think that what scripture meant is now inapplicable."

[168] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 64.

absorbs the world, rather than the world the text."[169] Not only is the community of faith

to interpret Scripture on its own terms, it is to interpret the world in which it lives in those

same terms. Jonathan Wilson, whose view is sympathetic with that of Lindbeck,

appropriately presents an account of the community's practice of interpreting the world.

He writes, "Through Scripture, God incorporates us into the work of redemption in Jesus

Christ. Redemption gathers us into the people of God and a particular form of life that

simply is participation in the reality of redemption. As a result, we are formed by a

cultural-linguistic "world" and taught a view of reality. Our way of life and our

language, then, interpret the world according to the gospel."[170] One can see how there

might exist varied interpretations of our world and how we should live within it in light

of varied interpretations and meanings of Scripture which is still dependent upon the

Church's use of the biblical text.

The Community and the Question of Religious Truth Claims

There is perhaps no greater area of concern for traditional evangelicals with

regard to postliberalism and Lindbeck's presentation of the cultural-linguistic model for

doctrine than the issue of truth. I have dealt with the issue of truth in relationship to

Scripture above, but will here briefly show the significance and priority Lindbeck gives

to the community of faith when it comes to the determination of truth within religious

doctrinal claims.

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[169] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

[170] Wilson, "Toward a New Evangelical Paradigm," 160.

Lindbeck uses two illustrations that are helpful for our understanding here. First, I return to the example of the crusader claiming "Christ is Lord." With this example, Lindbeck states that truth that coheres may be related to truth that corresponds to reality. He is careful to say that "Utterances are intrasystematically true when they cohere with the total relevant context…They are false when their use in any given instance is inconsistent with what the pattern as a whole affirms of God's being and will."[171] Ontological truth is possible, Lindbeck asserts, but it must be accompanied by intrasystematic truth that coheres "with the total relevant context." He writes "if the form of life and understanding of the world shaped by an authentic use of the Christian stories does in fact correspond to God's being and will, then the proper use of *Christus est Dominus* is not only intrasystematically but also ontologically true."[172] Thus, ontological truth may attach to religious language only insofar as it functions in "constituting a form of life, a way of being in the world, which itself corresponds to the Most Important, the Ultimately Real."[173] Truth or falsity for Lindbeck thus seems to be determined by use. Truth is determined by the faithful life and thought of the community (social embodiment) that is consistent with the character of God.

The second helpful historical example is found in Lindbeck's treatment of the creedal affirmations of Nicaea and Chalcedon.[174] It is important to remember that Lindbeck states early in his argument that "It seems odd to suggest that the Nicaenum in

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[171] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 64.

[172] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 65.

[173] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 65.

[174] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 92-96.

its role as a communal doctrine does not make first-order truth claims, and yet this is

what I shall contend. Doctrines regulate truth claims by excluding some and permitting

others, but the logic of their communally authoritative use hinders or prevents them from

specifying positively what is to be affirmed."[175] Utilizing the Trinity as an example,

Lindbeck claims that the *homoousion* does not ontologically refer to some external

reality. Rather, the term used in the creed regulates the church's language that concerns

both Christ and God.[176] In fact, Lindbeck argues that Athanasius himself understood the

creed's terminology to be a regulative rule of Christian speech about God rather than a

first-order proposition that had ontological reference.[177] He writes that for Athanasius,

"to accept the doctrine meant to agree to speak in a certain way."[178] Lindbeck relegates

any metaphysical import with regard to this doctrine to medieval scholasticism rather

than any of the Church Fathers.[179] For the theologian, the creedal statement regulates the

speech-performance of the community of faith without actually making an ontological

reference. Borrowing from J.L. Austin's notion of a performatory use of language,

Lindbeck affirms "a religious utterance, one might say, acquires the propositional truth of

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[175] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 19.

[176] This is the thought throughout Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 92-96. McGrath also addresses these themes in his "An Evangelical Evaluation," 37.

[177] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 94.

[178] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 94.

[179] Lindbeck's historical treatment of any ontological reference of the term *homoousion* starting with medieval scholasticism rather than in Athanasius seems misguided at best. There is nothing within Athanasius' writings that would lead the reader to think he is writing in a manner that rules out ontological reference. Note McGrath's good pushback against Lindbeck's historical treatment here in his "Evangelical Evaluation," 37-38.

ontological correspondence only insofar as it is a performance, an act or deed, which helps create that performance."[180]

Chapter Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I have attempted to place the postliberal theological movement within its larger context while subsequently unpacking key features of its thought with regard to the relationship between Scripture and theology as well as the community of faith and theology. Key concerns addressed were those of truth, meaning and authority as they relate to Scripture and the community of faith. I primarily sought to get at the thought of George Lindbeck as a representation of postliberalism, and secondarily Hans Frei and others, since it was those contributions that made the most significant impact on the movement of postliberal thought making its way into mainstream evangelicalism.

There exist many positive insights that postliberalism has brought forward in its proposal. Lindbeck's explanations and critiques of both the liberal experiential-expressivist model of doctrine and the conservative cognitive-propositionalist model of doctrine are enlightening and helpful. He explains how, for the liberal theologians, the public features of religion are expressive objectifications of a person's internal experience. Lindbeck shows how this thought diminishes the role of the biblical text in framing our thought and engagement in our world. His linking of some theological conservatives into this arena of thought alongside liberals is helpful in understanding the wide ranging impact this model of religious thought has had in our culture. Lindbeck's critique of the cognitive-propositionalist model was also helpful. He rightly expressed a

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[180] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 65.

concern over some conservatives who seem to place greater emphasis on their doctrines than they do upon the biblical text itself. Also enlightening was Frei's, as well as Lindbeck's, emphasis on the narrative of Scripture being the priority from which propositional statements receive their significance.

The cultural-linguistic model for understanding theology and doctrine through its turn to narrative and intratextuality is important for those who wish to move beyond a merely ahistorical, objectivist, propositional view of doctrine. The call to insist upon Scripture as the source of Christian ideas, attitudes, and life of the community of faith is warranted and shared by many evangelicals. Postliberals consistently call the church to inhabit the biblical world and to have the Bible function as our interpretive grid through which we engage our world.

Postliberals have illumined the church's understanding of the significance of the community of faith over against an autonomous, individualistic system of engaging biblical truth and church life. The postliberal emphasis on the reading, interpreting, understanding and practicing of Scripture within the larger community of faith serves as a healthy and encouraging reminder for theologians who wish to engage theology from within and on behalf of the church. It is certainly helpful for theologians to embrace the postliberal contention that theology is to be lived out by the community of faith rather than simply being a thought experiment or an experiential sensation.

Yet, given all of these positive aspects of postliberal thought, there are some concerns that exist. These concerns really boil down to the issues of authority, meaning and truth. The postliberal contention that the biblical text has authority whereby it

absorbs the extratextual universe and changes the community of faith as she finds her real

identity within the text of Scripture is indeed appealing. However, some fundamental

assumptions are being made here without a great deal of articulation as to why we should

accept those assumptions. McGrath asks critical questions regarding the nature of the

authority of the biblical text within this intratextual theological proposal. He asks, "Why

does the Bible possess such authority? Why is it the narrative of Jesus Christ that

exercises this controlling authority? Is the authority of Scripture something that has been

imposed on the text by a community that is willing to submit itself to this authority but, in

principle, would have been prepared to acknowledge additional or alternative

authorities?"[181] McGrath succinctly states the criticism that many evangelicals level

against postliberals with regard to intratextual theology of the biblical narrative. He

declares "the prioritization of Scripture is not adequately grounded at the theological

level. In effect, the priority of Scripture is defended on the grounds that appear to be

cultural, historical, or contractual."[182] McGrath indicates that it is actually the

community of faith that has ultimate authority here. Kevin Vanhoozer concurs as he

writes, "Though Lindbeck's postliberal proposal initially appears to swing the pendulum

of authority back to the biblical text, a closer inspection shows that he relocates authority

in the church, that singular 'culture' within which, and only within which, the Bible is

used to shape Christian identity."[183] While Lindbeck and other postliberals certainly

speak of the authority of the biblical text and the community of faith, it would be helpful

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[181] McGrath, "Evangelical Evaluation," 39-40.

[182] McGrath, "Evangelical Evaluation," 40.

[183] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 10. See also Vanhoozer's more in-depth analysis of this thought on pp. 95-99.

to see a more clear argument from postliberals for the grounding of the claim of biblical authority.

Lindbeck's description of the relationship between the meaning and truth of religious utterances and the use of those utterances within the community of faith is a difficult concept to grasp. He contends, "Utterances are intrasystematically true when they cohere with the total relevant context, which, in the case of a religion when viewed in cultural-linguistic terms, is not only other utterances but also the correlative forms of life."[184] He also argues that "a religious utterance, one might say, acquires the propositional truth of ontological correspondence only insofar as it is a performance, an act or deed, which helps create that correspondence."[185] David Fergusson argues that "Lindbeck's twinning of intrasystematic and ontological truth represents a confusion of use and truth."[186] Regarding coherence or consistency of an utterance with other utterances and an overall form of life, Richards contends that it is certainly the case that a set of beliefs can be perfectly coherent and self-consistent without being true.[187] Hunsinger furthermore suggests that the pragmatist claim that truth is that which is useful, even if it is useful within the community of faith, may or may not be helpful in

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[184] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 64.

[185] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 65.

[186] Fergusson, "Meaning, Truth and Realism," 197.

[187] Richards' illustration of "*The moon is made of green cheese*" argues this very point in his "Lindbeck on Truth and Meaning," 42.

our attempt to understand the relationship between the biblical text and truth.[188] There

exist many claims that can be useful, yet still be false.

As shown earlier, it seems that Lindbeck allows for some sense of correspondence

(ontological truth). That ontological truth, however, is dependent upon the coherence of

all the religious utterances to one another and the performance of the community of faith.

Fergusson argues that this does not seem to be the manner in which most people within

the community of faith would speak about the truth of or right use of a confessional

utterance. Fergusson contends, "a believer when asked why a confessional utterance is to

be used in a particular way will ultimately appeal to the way things are. It is the reality

that his or her utterances are struggling to reflect which licenses use and practice."[189] To

be sure, the person using the confessional language may need to learn about those terms

within the confessional statement from a life lived in the context of the community of

faith. But that must not take away from the fact that "what in the end makes the

statement true or false is not use but the way things are independently of the speaker."[190]

This same basic argument follows in Richards' treatment of Lindbeck's thought as it

would relate to the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Richards argues that the Creeds

are propositional attitude statements that "assert certain epistemic attitudes ('I think', 'I

believe', 'I know that…') with respect to certain propositions."[191] He contends that "no

one would say, *I believe that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, two natures in one*

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[188] Hunsinger's distinguishing between Barth's and Lindbeck's thought on this very point is helpful. See George Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving," 51-52.

[189] Fergusson, "Meaning, Truth and Realism," 197-198.

[190] Fergusson, "Meaning, Truth and Realism," 198.

[191] Richards, "Lindbeck on Truth and Meaning," 48-49.

person, but hesitate to assert the proposition expressed by *It is true that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, two natures in one person.*"[192]

It would benefit here to refer back to Lindbeck's treatment of the creedal affirmations of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Utilizing the Trinity as an example, Lindbeck would claim that the *homoousion* does not ontologically refer to some external reality. Instead, the term used in the creed regulates the church's language that concerns both Christ and God.[193] In fact, Lindbeck contends that this was the understanding of Athanasius himself.[194] McGrath argues that Lindbeck appears to "overlook the fact that Athanasius bases the regulative function of the *homoousion* on its substantive content."[195] This is to say that given the ontological reality of the relation of Father and Son, this grammatical regulation of language concerning Father and Son follows naturally and directly from that ontological reality. Indeed, these creedal statements are rules of discourse, that is, rules of how we can and cannot talk about God, but they are more than that. When a person says that they believe that "whatever is said of the Father is said of the Son, except that the Son is not the Father," it seems that they mean to assert that what is being conveyed is a reflection of the ontological reality of the relationship between Father and Son.

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[192] Richards, "Lindbeck on Truth and Meaning," 49. Richards' entire article is very helpful in assessing Lindbeck's view on the "truth," or "truthfulness" of community language rules that Lindbeck sees within the Creeds.

[193] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 92-96.

[194] Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 94.

[195] McGrath, "An Evangelical Evaluation," 37.

Many of the concerns mentioned above will be seen in my next chapter as I engage the theological proposal put forward by Stanley Grenz. Grenz remains the central evangelical theological figure who assimilated much of and adapted some of the central tenets of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic proposal. It is to this evangelical theological engagement that I now turn.

CHAPTER 3

STANLEY J. GRENZ: TOWARD A POSTCONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL

THEOLOGICAL METHOD AND POSTMODERN THEOLOGY

Introduction

The late Stanley Grenz, the former Pioneer McDonald Professor of Theology and

Ethics at Carey and Regent Colleges in Vancouver among other posts, was a self-

proclaimed "pietest with a Ph.D." Grenz's background as an evangelical Baptist minister

and educator played a significant role in his desire to be a theologian who could

adequately speak and write Christian theology within and for the Christian community of

faith in the larger context of a society that was growing increasingly postmodern. To this

end, Grenz wrote a number of books and articles that chiefly dealt with this topic of a

Christian theology for a postmodern age, or perhaps better stated, as a postmodern

Christian theology.[1] While these writings may touch on varied themes within theology,

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[1] Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century,* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993); Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2006); Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context,* 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman, 1994); Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 1996); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Named God and the Question of Being: A Trinitarian Theo-Ontology*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998); Stanley J. Grenz, "Nurturing the Soul, Informing the Mind: The Genesis of the Evangelical Scripture Principle," In *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics,* Vincent Bacote and Laura C. Miguelez and Dennis Okholm, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 21-41.; Stanley J. Grenz, "How Do We Know What to Believe?" In *Essentials of Christian Theology.* William C. Placher, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 11-33.; Stanley J. Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism," In *Evangelical Futures*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 107-136.; Stanley J. Grenz, "The Spirit and the Word: The World-Creating Function of the Text," *Theology Today* 57, no 3 (Oct 2000): 357-374.; Stanley J. Grenz, "Participating in what Frees: The Concept of Truth in the Postmodern Context," *Review and Expositor* 100 no 4 (Fall 2003): 687-693.; Stanley J. Grenz, "An Agenda for Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern Context," *Didaskalia* 9 no 2 (Spring 1998): 1-16.; Stanley J. Grenz, "Conversing in Christian Style: Toward a Baptist Theological Method for the Postmodern Context,"

there is a consistency of thought which is addressed in all of them. Grenz's consistent thought was that both evangelical theological method and some traditionally stated evangelical doctrines should be re-evaluated and restated and, in some instances, changed if they were to have any relevance within a postmodern culture. In order to better "do" theology in this culture, Grenz borrowed thought from a wide range of social and linguistic disciplines as well as some theological thought from coherentists, pragmatists, and postliberals.

Grenz may be seen as an evangelical theologian who considered himself to be engaging in a task similar to the task of George Lindbeck. While Lindbeck was describing a postliberal cultural-linguistic theological method opposed to the liberal Enlightenment, experiential-expressive model, Grenz was attempting to describe the need for a nuanced cultural-linguistic-communitarian theological method opposed to the conservative Enlightenment cognitive-propositional model.[2] Grenz respected Lindbeck's proposal and adopted some of Lindbeck's thought into his own proposal for theological methodology.

Baptist History and Heritage 35 no 1 (Winter 2000): 82-103.; Stanley J. Grenz, "Eshcatological Theology: Contours of a Postmodern Theology of Hope," *Review & Expositor* 97 no 3 (Summer 2000): 339-354.; Stanley J. Grenz, "*Die begrenzte Gemeinschaft* ('The Boundaried People') and the Character of Evangelical Theology." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 no 2 (June 2002): 301-316.; Stanley J. Grenz, "Jesus as the Imago Dei: Image-of-God Christology and the Non-Linear Linearity of Theology." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 no 4 (Dec 2004): 617-628.; Stanley J. Grenz, "What Does Hollywood Have to Do with Wheaton?: The Place of (Pop) Culture in Theological Reflection," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 no 2 (June 2000): 303-314.; Stanley J. Grenz, "Toward an Evangelical Theology of the Religions." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 31 no 1-2 (Winter-Spring 1994): 49-65.

[2] Grenz adopted the proposal set forth by Nancey Murphy that both liberals and conservatives were directed by Enlightenment rationalistic foundationalism although they went in different directions. The liberals found their foundation in human experience while conservatives found their foundation in an inerrant Bible. See Nancey C. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda*, (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996). You may see Grenz's endorsement of this thought in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context,* 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 28-37.

Grenz was concerned for the evangelical community and became increasingly convinced that traditional, conservative evangelical theology was in the position of losing any relevance within the postmodern culture for at least two reasons. First, Grenz was convinced that the methodology of conservative evangelical scholars was characterized by Enlightenment rationalism, classical foundationalism, and an epistemological arrogance that resulted from their quest for certain truth. Grenz was convinced that this type of methodology had been dismissed by the contemporary postmodern culture and hence needed to be changed. Secondly, Grenz was further convinced that this faulty, modernistic, rationalist method led conservative evangelical theologians, especially the Princetonians and their theological heirs, to develop faulty theological constructs and concepts. Thus, Grenz was convinced that both method and some doctrine needed to be changed to better fit the reality of the postmodern context. Both methodological changes and doctrinal changes are perhaps best seen in Grenz's engagement with the doctrines of Scripture and the Church.

Grenz has had a significant impact on the thought of some evangelicals who share his inclination on the nature of modernity and the need for a Christian postmodern theology.[3] Grenz has certainly found friends who continue to work in further developing his type of evangelical postconservatism.[4] He has, in turn, also received meaningful

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[3] Interestingly, Justin Taylor writes of the trajectory of evangelical postconservatism which Grenz represents as having key people with different roles in promoting this postconservative agenda. He writes of Olson and Webber as the publicists of the movement; Brian McLaren as the quintessential pastor of the movement; and Stan Grenz as the professor of the movement. See Justin Taylor, "An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of This Book," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 17-32.

[4] For example, see Roger E. Olson, *How to Be Evangelical Without Being Conservative*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2008); Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker

criticism from those who would be recognized as more traditional evangelicals. Many of

these scholars offer appreciation for parts of Grenz's theological thought while

questioning his method and postmodern commitments.[5] To be sure, Grenz's theological

proposal shakes up the evangelical theological landscape and warrants this discussion.

Academic, 2007);Roger E. Olson, "Postconservative evangelicals greet the postmodern age," *Christian Century* 112 (May 3, 1995): 480-483; Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003); Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002); Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999); Mark S. Medley, "An evangelical theology for a postmodern age: Stanley J. Grenz's current theological project," *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 30 no 1 (Spring 2003): 71-94; John Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); John Franke, "Christian Faith and Postmodern Theory: Theology and the Nonfoundationalist Turn," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 105-122; John Franke, "The Nature of Theology: Culture, Language, and Truth," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 201-214; John Franke, "Scripture, Tradition and Authority: Reconstructing the Evangelical Conception of Sola Scriptura," In *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics,* Vincent Bacote and Laura C. Miguelez and Dennis Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 192-210; Derek J. Tidball and Brian S. Harris and Jason S. Sexton, eds., *Revisioning, Renewing, Rediscovering the Triune Center: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. Grenz*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

[5] For example, see Donald A. Carson, "Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Stanley J Grenz's Renewing the Center," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 no 4 (Wint 2002): 82-97; Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998); Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997); Stephen J. Wellum, "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 161-198; Douglas Groothuis, "Truth Defined and Defended," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 59-80; J.P. Moreland, "Truth, Contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Turn," In *Whatever Happened to Truth*, Andreas Kostenberger, ed., (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 75-92; J.P. Moreland, and Garrett DeWeese, "The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 81-107; R. Scott Smith, "Christian Postmodernism and the LinguisticTurn," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 53-70; R. Scott Smith, "Postmodernism and the Priority of the Language-World Relation," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 173-186; R. Scott Smith, "Language, Theological Knowledge, and the Postmodern Paradigm," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 109-136; 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*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 137-160; A.J.

In what follows, I will show some of the more significant theological and philosophical currents that Grenz is swimming against and those currents within which he is joyously swimming. I will then show how these currents have shaped his methodology which, in turn, has reshaped some of his treatments of fundamental evangelical doctrines of Scripture and the Church. With a love for Christ and his Church, a love also evident in Grenz's life and work, I move forward in assessment and critique.

<center>Theological and Philosophical Currents</center>

Grenz's Attack on Perceived Epistemological Foundationalism of Conservative Evangelicals

Grenz's theological project begins by stating what he is reacting against.[6] In fact, the modernist concerns he argues against have important implications for the postmodern sensitivities which he believes will lead us to a better theological method. Strikingly, Grenz consistently speaks of evangelicals being in one of two groups. Evangelical theologians are either "evangelical modernists" or they are "postmodern evangelicals." Grenz sees the former as having hijacked Christian theology with Enlightenment assumptions. He views the latter as showing promise for a renewed communitarian Christian theology for our culture today. Before turning our attention to the postmodern

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Conyers, "Can Postmodernism Be Used as a Template for Christian Theology?," *Christian Scholar's Review* 33 no 3 (Spr 2004): 293-309; Robert C. Kurka, "Before "Foundationalism": A More Biblical Alternative to the Grenz/Franke Proposal for Doing Theology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 no 1 (Mr 2007): 145-65; C. Everett Berry, "Theological Vs. Methodological Postconservatism: Stanley Grenz and Kevin Vanhoozer as Test Cases," *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 no 1 (Spr 2007): 105-26; Archie J. Spencer, "Culture, Community and Commitments: Stanley J Grenz on Theological Method," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 no 3 (2004): 338-60.

[6] Most postconservative, postmodern evangelicals write a great deal about what they are against. There seems to be a consistent desire within this group of evangelical theologians and pastors to rid themselves of the whole enterprise of foundationalism, classical or otherwise although the majority seems to only acknowledge the existence of classical or thick foundationalsim which is where I find Grenz's view.

evangelicals, let me better describe what Grenz is reacting against as he considers the first group of evangelical theologians.

Grenz sees the first group of theological voices within evangelicalism basically stating that the cultural and intellectual changes taking place in our culture, understood as the postmodern condition, are largely negative for the task of Christian theology. He furthermore contends that some within this group are simply dismissive of the changes altogether. He consistently argues that these "evangelical modernists" advocate that "we continue to engage in theological reflection on the basis of the questions and assumptions that arose out of the Enlightenment."[7] What are these questions and assumptions which cause Grenz to move away from this type of theological endeavor?

Grenz is primarily against what he views as the heart of the Enlightenment outlook, namely the specific understanding of the nature of human knowledge known as classical foundationalism.[8] Grenz argues against Rene Descartes' epistemological program that "yields knowledge that is certain, culture-and tradition-free, universal, and reflective of a reality that exists outside the mind (this latter being a central feature of a position known as 'metaphysical realism' or simply 'realism')."[9] Grenz also argues against John Locke's concept that the foundation for human knowledge lies in our sense

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[7] Stanley J. Grenz, "An Agenda for Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern Context." *Didaskalia* 9 no 2 (Spring 1998): 1.

[8] Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context.* 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 29-32; Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era.* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 193-196; Stanley J. Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism." In *Evangelical Futures*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 109-112; Stanley J. Grenz, "Agenda for Evangelical Theology," 1-2.

[9] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalsim*, 31.

experience.[10] Whether through Cartesian rationalism or Lockeian empiricism, Grenz

contends that the Enlightenment project "assumed a realist metaphysic and evidenced a

strong preference for the correspondence theory of truth" that focused on both the truth

value of any given proposition and providing a means whereby one could engage the

objective world as it really is.[11] This Enlightenment project provided an understanding of

knowledge and truth that Grenz flatly rejects. Furthermore, Grenz is convinced that this

philosophical foundationalism brought about fundamental ideas for getting at the "truth,"

including theological truth, that led the task and method of doing theology during the

Modern Era down a wrong path.[12]

Grenz's Linking of Enlightenment Foundationalsim with Conservative Evangelicals

Grenz sees this philosophical foundationalism making its way over to Christian

theology and theological method via two familiar paths.[13] Friedrich Schleiermacher, and

liberals after him, sought to ground theological authority in the universal reality of human

religious experience.[14] This description falls in line with Lindbeck's experiential-

expressivist model considered in the previous chapter. More importantly for Grenz's

argument, he views conservative theologians as those who searched for a firm,

unquestionable foundation for theology. This perceived path resembles the cognitive-

propositionalist model against which Lindbeck also argued.

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[10] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 32.

[11] Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic," 111.

[12] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 32-33; Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 197-198.

[13] For a more broad assessment of this liberal-conservative movement, see Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism.* Grenz accepts Murphy's presentation.

[14] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 33; Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 197.

Grenz argues that these conservative theologians, embracing classical foundationalism in varying forms, found that this "invulnerable foundation lay in an error-free Bible, which they viewed as the storehouse for divine revelation."[15] This sure foundation, Grenz contends, gave these conservative theologians the means by which they thought their theological claims could enjoy epistemological certitude. Grenz argues that these conservatives would claim that they were simply restating the actual content of the Bible in a more systematic way rather than articulating their own opinions theologically. Following many postconservative evangelical thinkers, Grenz sees this theological and philosophical thought making its way into evangelicalism through the Princetonian theology of the nineteenth century.[16] Charles Hodge becomes the particular theologian to fall under the scrutinizing eye of Grenz, while the teachings of biblical inerrancy and inspiration espoused by Benjamin Warfield also come under attack.[17]

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[15] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 34.

[16] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 78-88. Many borrow from the proposal set forth in Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); also see the consistency of thought shared with George Marsden, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, Edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 239-247. These pages especially address the foundational thought of Charles Hodge bringing this philosophical foundationalism into the evangelical realm.; Also see Steven B. Sherman, *Revitalizing Theological Epistemology: Holistic Evangelical Approaches to the Knowledge of God,* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 85-108. While beyond the scope of this discussion, it is important to note that there are some who would call into question the larger assessment offered above. I have found some works by Helseth beneficial in assessing some of the validity of the postconservative's treatment of the "Old Princeton Theology" and theologians. See for example, Paul Kjoss Helseth, "'Re-Imagining' The Princeton Mind: Postconservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton, and the Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 no 3 (S 2002): 427-50; Paul Kjoss Helseth, "'Right Reason' and Theological Aesthetics at Old Princeton Seminary: The 'Mythical Magisterium' Reconsidered," In *Reforming or Conforming?: Post Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, Johnson, Gary L.W. and Ronald N. Gleason, eds. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 129-153, along with many others. For a more in-depth argument voicing disagreement with the Rogers-McKim proposal, see John D. Woodbridge, "Biblical Authority: Toward an Evaluation of the Rogers and McKim Proposal," In *Biblical Authority and Conservative Perspectives: Viewpoints from Trinity Journal*, Douglas Moo, ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), 9-64.

[17] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 80-85.

Grenz consistently wishes to stress that this theological claim of biblical inerrancy in particular was a capitulation to foundationalist epistemology which then produced a theological method built upon this sure foundation.

According to Grenz, the influence of this conservative, theological thought and method of the Old Princeton theologians was later broadened through its use in the fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century. Since fundamentalists argued that the "elevation of doctrine" was "the mark of authentic Christianity,"[18] they welcomed the Princetonians into their fold since the Princeton theologians "provided an intellectual framework for elaborating fundamentalism's felt loyalty to the Bible and their commitment to the Bible's complete trustworthiness."[19] This use of the Princeton theologians provided fundamentalists with the inerrant foundation for a theological method that could be the only sure antidote for liberal theology which was attacking the authority and integrity of the Bible.

Grenz rightly sees continuity between the fundamentalist movement of the early twentieth century and the neo-evangelical movement of the latter half of the twentieth century. While continuity and discontinuity[20] may be seen in various areas, Grenz's chief concern is to understand the continuity in the area of capitulation to foundationalist philosophy particularly found in the continuing claim of an authoritative, inerrant Bible which according to these conservative evangelicals, "is a compendium of truths unlocked

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[18] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 86.

[19] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 87.

[20] Some areas of discontinuity include some signs of anti-intellectualism, departmentalization of life, and social disconnect found within much of the older fundamentalist movement. For a part of this critique, consult Carl F.H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

through scientific induction."[21] Grenz claims that "Neo-evangelicals routinely assume that the task of the theologian is to apply the scientific method, assisted by the canons of logic, to the deposit of revelation found in Scripture in the quest to compile the one, complete, timeless body of right doctrines."[22]

Hence, Grenz perceives that the philosophical-theological heritage of the Princetonians was passed on to evangelicalism through fundamentalism. The neo-evangelicals such as Carl F.H. Henry and Harold Ockenga wished to stand between liberalism and fundamentalism. They were more open to dialogue with others than were the fundamentalists. They were also more socially engaged than were the fundamentalists. However, Grenz properly sees that the neo-evangelical movement maintained many of the theological commitments of the fundamentalists. Grenz argues that these evangelicals embraced fundamentalism's tendency to "reduce essential Christianity to adherence to basic doctrines" oriented to questions of propositional truth "in contrast to the issue of one's relationship with God characteristic of classical evangelicalism."[23] Grenz contends that this is especially seen in neo-evangelicalism's emphasis on biblical authority as he writes, "The fundamentalist acceptance of the Princeton understanding of inspiration, especially Warfield's formulation of inerrancy, gave a particular nineteenth-century cast to neo-evangelicalism's emphasis on biblical authority."[24] As a result, Grenz is convinced that a shift in understanding both the

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[21] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 85.

[22] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 85.

[23] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 91-92.

[24] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 91.

ministry of the Spirit through the Bible and the task of the theologian itself had been

changed. What was once a "gospel-focused endeavor" which engaged the biblical text as

the "vehicle of the Spirit's working" had now become a "Bible-focused task intent on

maintaining the gospel of biblical orthodoxy."[25]

While I am convinced that Grenz overstates the theological changes here, he

certainly makes the case for the fundamentalist's doctrine of biblical inspiration,

inerrancy, and authority making its way into the heart of the theological discussion of

neo-evangelicalism, particularly through Carl Henry.[26] He then states that this theological

heritage has been passed on to the traditional conservative evangelicals of today.

Conservative evangelicals would include such people as Millard Erickson, whom Grenz

sees as carrying on Henry's propositionalist theological method founded upon an inerrant

Bible.[27] Grenz concludes that Erickson,[28] along with Gordon Lewis and Bruce

Demarest,[29] Wayne Grudem,[30] and many others have embraced a theological method and

doctrines which are ultimately the direct result of submitting to the rationalism of

Modernity with its correspondence theory of truth, arrogant sense of individualistic

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[25] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 92.

[26] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 93-110; Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 61-62.

[27] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 134-142; Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 15, 156.

[28] See his prolegomena and understanding of the task of theology in Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983).

[29] Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*. 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); see also Lewis's discussion on propositional revelation in Gordon R. Lewis, "Is Propositional Revelation Essential to Evangelical Spiritual Formation?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46 no 2 (June 2003): 269-298.

[30] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

epistemological certitude and objectivity, and cognitive-propositionalist approach to both

the reading of Scripture and the doing of theology.

Grenz's Cautious Commitment to Postmodernism

Grenz openly shares his commitment to postmodern sensitivities throughout his

writings. In fact, he wrote *A Primer on Postmodernism* to both define the central tenets

of the movement as well as share how he believes that Christian theology should be

shaped by some of those commitments.[31] Grenz again tells of the many things that

postmodernism and postmodern philosophers and theologians are reacting against such as

knowledge being "certain and that the criterion for certainty rests with our human rational

capabilities."[32] In fact, Grenz states his postmodern disapproval of the certainty of

knowledge, the objectivity of knowledge, and the supposed inherent goodness of

knowledge.[33]

Participatory Truth

In place of these "Enlightenment assumptions," Grenz proposes that Christian

theology is better served through embracing postmodern sensitivities. He provides some

of the key components of these sensitivities in many of his works. In one brief article,

Grenz succinctly articulates his postmodern take on the concept of truth and meaning.[34]

According to Grenz, truth is to be participatory. We belong to a community before we

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[31] Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1996).

[32] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 165.

[33] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 165-167.

[34] Stanley J. Grenz, "Participating in what Frees: The Concept of Truth in the Postmodern Context." *Review and Expositor* 100 no 4 (Fall 2003): 687-693.

understand or believe. We belong and come to believe through participation in the

community's practices and lived out belief system. It seems that Grenz not only contends

that we have opportunity to participate in the truth, but that we furthermore participate in

constructing and determining truth and meaning as I will argue later when Grenz's view

of theology and the community of faith is discussed. It is difficult, just as we saw in

Lindbeck's proposal, to distinguish between meaning and use within Grenz's theological

method. This theme will be picked up once again when we consider the role of the

community of faith in relation to constructing meaning and truth.

Socially and Linguistically Constructed Truth

Grenz's next qualification in the same article is that truth is socially and

linguistically constructed. The dependence upon Lindbeck and his use of social theory

and linguistic philosophy here seems obvious. Grenz states that our words do not

describe true realities "out there." Rather, "our language consists of a set of social

conventions or agreed upon human conventions or agreed upon human constructs that

allow us to experience the world in a particular manner."[35] Grenz argues that meaning

and truth are socially constructed by borrowing from significant cultural anthropological

scholarship.[36] He further borrows thought from those who focus on the construction of

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[35] Grenz, "Participating in What Frees," 689.

[36] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969); Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, "Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge," *Sociology and Social Research* 47 (1963): 417-427; Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

truth and meaning from linguistic considerations.[37] Grenz's embracing of both the social

and linguistic construction of reality and understanding will come to the forefront when it

is shown how these considerations shape his view of meaning and understanding in

relationship with Scripture and the community of faith.

Narrative Truth

Grenz further contends that truth and meaning should be understood to be

narrative in nature.[38] Against what Grenz views as the simple illustrative nature of

narratives in modern epistemology, he states that "Truth is lived narrative." He further

contends that "the goal of storytelling is not simply to extract the truth that it supposedly

illustrates, but to 'inhabit' the story."[39] Truth and meaning are found by participating "in

the glorious narrative of God at work in Christ reconciling the world to himself."[40] Here,

Grenz follows the basic thought of Hans Frei and others who promote varying types of

narrative theology and "intratextuality."[41] It will be shown that this has a unique impact

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[37] While some of those scholars noted above for promoting the social construction of meaning and truth included some discussion of language within their writings, Grenz chiefly draws from the thought of Wittgenstein as seen through Lindbeck's eyes of understanding. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1953); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); George A. Lindbeck, "Confession and Community: An Israel-like View of the Church," *Christian Century*, 107/16 (May 1990): 492-496.

[38] Grenz, "Participating in What Frees," 690-692.

[39] Grenz, "Participating in What Frees," 691.

[40] Grenz, "Participating in What Frees," 692.

[41] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Hans W. Frei, George Hunsinger, and William C. Placher, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Hans W. Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?," In *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 36-77; George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); many others especially within the postliberal tradition.

on Grenz's view on the authority of Scripture as well as that of the faith community that does indeed move away from more traditional evangelicalism. It also shifts the focus of where we might discover or construct meaning.

Pragmatic Truth

The final commitment that Grenz describes in this brief article is that truth and meaning are pragmatic in nature. According to Grenz's communal understanding of truth, both truth and our understandings of it are a function of the social group. Thus, truth is "what fits within a specific community; truth consists in the ground-rules that facilitate the well being of a community."[42] Grenz here and throughout his many writings borrows from the thought of Charles Peirce, William James and others who stress the pragmatic nature of truth.[43] Truth accomplishes a goal. For Grenz, truth accomplishes the goal of coming to expression in the "relationships shared by the members of the group."[44] The goal, for Grenz, is community. The question of whether or not community should be the goal of truth or theology will be taken up later. For now, it is enough to recognize that Grenz is committed to the postmodern sensitivities of truth and meaning being participatory, socially and linguistically constructed, narrative in nature, and pragmatic. These commitments show up again in modified form as Grenz describes the nature of theology in some of his other works as well.

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[42] Grenz, "Participating in What Frees," 692.

[43] Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." In Charles S. Peirce, *Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)*, Edited by Philip P. Wiener. (New York: Dover Publications, 1958); William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Reprint, (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1928).

[44] Grenz, "Participating in What Frees," 693.

Grenz puts forward his "postmodern" philosophical commitments more fully in *Renewing the Center*.[45] Steven Sherman points out that Grenz promotes his overall view of a nonfoundationalist approach to epistemology and theology through communicating the following features of such an approach.

1. Movement toward belief systems and a communal view of truth
2. A Focus on "language-games" (i.e., the use of language within particular self-contained systems having unique rules)
3. Abandonment of a correspondence theory of truth
4. Meaning and truth not necessarily, directly, or primarily related to an external world of objective facts waiting to be discovered
5. Concentration on contextuality of meaning (i.e., sentences have as many meanings as contexts)
6. Utterances deemed true only within the context spoken
7. Language as a social phenomenon
8. Meaning and truth as internal functions of language[46]

These features become quite evident when Grenz begins describing the nature of truth, meaning and authority as they relate to Scripture and the community of faith. I will turn to this after one additional description of Grenz's postmodern commitments.

In his *Primer on Postmodernism*, Grenz contends that the Christian message, the Gospel, must be embodied in a manner that is "post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, and post-noeticentric."[47] While I will consider what Grenz means by each of these descriptors, I also wish to show his consistency of thought between these descriptors and his brief proposal on the concept of truth and meaning resulting from postmodern commitments previously mentioned.

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[45] Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006).

[46] Steven B. Sherman, *Revitalizing Theological Epistemology: Holistic Evangelical Approaches to the Knowledge of God*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 119. Here, Sherman summarizes the thought found in Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 198-219.

[47] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 167.

Post-Individualistic

Grenz is convinced that a post-individualistic gospel is one that rejects the modern paradigm of being able to have objective, dispassionate knowledge about anything especially through a "self-reflective, self-determining, autonomous subject who stands outside any tradition or community" and its shared cognitive framework. On the other hand, Grenz affirms that we must commit ourselves to a new alternative, namely the "individual-within-community."[48] Grenz says that while the individual is still important, it is the community that provides or mediates a cognitive framework for meaning and knowledge. He writes, "The community mediates to its members a transcendent story that includes traditions of virtue, common good, and ultimate meaning."[49] It is clear that this communitarian thought embraces truth and meaning as participatory practices of the community. It is furthermore clear that Grenz remains committed to his view that truth and meaning are socially and linguistically constructed. Grenz contends that this is just as true for the community of faith as it is for any other community or culture. Hence, our theological method must reflect these communitarian commitments.[50]

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[48] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 168.

[49] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 168. Here Grenz is drawing upon the thought put forward by George Lindbeck in many different writings, but especially put forward in George Lindbeck, "Confession and Community: An Israel-like View of the Church," *Christian Century*, 107/16 (May 1990): 492-496.

[50] A very interesting treatment of this thought is found in A.J. Conyers, "Can Postmodernism Be Used as a Template for Christian Theology?," *Christian Scholar's Review* 33 no 3 (Spr 2004): 303-309. Conyers convincingly argues that popular postmodernism is not actually a critique of modernity. In engaging Grenz's thoughts of a post-individualistic and post-rationalistic embodying of the gospel, Conyers states on p. 303 that "The heart of modernity is not individualism per se, but the individual without God—the autonomous individual. And it is not rationalism per se, but a rationalism that is capable of making human beings autonomous." He goes on to show that this is the wrongheaded type of individualism and rationalism that should be eschewed by evangelicals while still maintaining the dignity and significance of the individual as image bearer and the God-given rationality with which we were created. Conyers is convinced that Grenz, along with many others, gets his critique of modernity wrong and thus stands overly committed to postmodern tendencies.

Post-Rationalistic

In his *Primer*, Grenz also communicates that theology and the gospel must be post-rationalistic in nature.[51] Grenz again describes his disillusionment with his understanding of modernity and its faulty epistemology. Grenz wants for us to remain reasonable persons while acknowledging that the gospel cannot be limited to the intellectual aspect of a person. He encourages us to rethink the function of assertions of truth or propositions when he writes, "We must continue to acknowledge the fundamental importance of rational discourse, but our understanding of the faith must not remain fixated on the propositionalist approach that views Christian truth as nothing more than correct doctrine or doctrinal truth."[52] Instead, Grenz encourages us to take our cue from postmodern social theorists who replace this outdated propositionalist approach with "an understanding of knowledge and belief that views them as socially and linguistically constituted."[53] We need to take seriously, Grenz argues, a "dynamic understanding of the role of the intellectual dimension of human experience and our attempts to make sense of life."[54]

Post-Dualistic

Grenz further argues that theology and any articulation of the gospel in this postmodern period must rid itself of "modern dualism" and instead develop a "biblical

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[51] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodenrism*, 169-171.

[52] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 170.

[53] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 170.

[54] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 171.

wholism."[55] Grenz articulates that the Enlightenment and its conservative evangelical theological heirs consistently divide reality into "mind" and "matter." These conservatives furthermore articulate a dualistic gospel since they divide the human person into "soul," that part which God and we are concerned about being saved, and "body," where conservatives might show a secondary concern but do not believe that the physical dimension of a person has any real eternal significance. Against this view, Grenz rightly contends that theology should engage whole persons just as the living out of the gospel should involve whole persons, namely "the emotional-affective, as well as the bodily-sensual, with the intellectual-rational within the one human person."[56] Grenz further states that our theological work must also cease to focus on the individual in isolation. Rather, the greater focus should be on the person-in-relationships with God, one another, and God's created order since this is how we truly live our lives. To do otherwise is to fall back into the problem of subjectivism which "arises only when we mistakenly place the individual ahead of the community."[57]

Post-Noeticentric

The final description that Grenz provides for a right engagement of Christian theology and the gospel is that our efforts must exhibit a post-noeticentric stance. His basic contention here is that we must affirm and show "that the goal of our existence encompasses more than just the accumulation of knowledge."[58] Grenz is quick to point

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[55] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 171.

[56] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 171.

[57] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 68.

[58] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 172.

out that knowledge is good and that right beliefs and correct doctrines are vital to

Christian living. Yet it is this right living that is the goal, namely wisdom. He writes that

"knowledge is good only when it facilitates a good result—specifically when it fosters

wisdom (or spirituality) in the knower."[59] Grenz does not want Christian theology or our

treatment of the gospel to be about merely offering mental assent to orthodox

propositions, but to understand that every dimension of life is to be affected by the

transforming power of the Spirit. Here we see reflected a portion of Grenz's pragmatic

thought. He contends that "we should be concerned to gain knowledge and to hold

correct doctrine *in order* that we might attain wisdom for living so that we might please

God with our lives."[60] Correct beliefs are important, according to Grenz, because they

shape correct conduct. As Spencer points out, this is important because, "for the

postmodern, belief structures are either validated or invalidated by their congruency with

one's actions."[61]

Each of these descriptions of Grenz's view of a postmodern Christian theology

and treatment of the gospel, namely post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic,

and post-noeticentric, coincide with his overall assessment that truth and meaning are

participatory, socially and linguistically constructed, narrative and pragmatic. With

Grenz's philosophical commitments in view, I now turn to address the relationship of

authority and meaning to Holy Scripture within his theological model.

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[59] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 173.

[60] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 173.

[61] Archie J. Spencer, "Culture, Community and Commitments: Stanley J Grenz on Theological Method," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 no 3 (2004): 343.

Scripture and Theology

Grenz's fundamental proposal that evangelicals should develop a postmodern-sensitive theological method leads him to recast or revision the evangelical understanding of the nature of Scripture. This recasting has significant impact on how we are to understand authority and meaning in relationship to Holy Scripture.   In order to better understand Grenz's view of Scripture functioning as the "norming norm" of theology, we must remember that he is forming his bibliology both against modernist assumptions and in favor of the narrative, cultural-linguistic turn addressed above.

While many of these assumptions were briefly described earlier in this chapter, it is important to revisit some of the more salient features of Grenz's argument here. How is it that Grenz forms his bibliology? Everett Berry observes two basic factors that moved Grenz along his theological journey to promote a different understanding of authority and meaning in relation to Scripture. Berry notes these factors as:

> (1) [Grenz's] initial accusation that previous views of inspiration, inerrancy, and propositional revelation, which were defended by evangelical theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were supported unequivocally by modernist assumptions, and (2) his subsequent interrogation and repudiation of these former concepts in exchange for viable concepts in postmodern theories of epistemology and language.[62]

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[62] Everett Berry, "Theological Vs. Methodological Postconservatism: Stanley Grenz and Kevin Vanhoozer as Test Cases," *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 106. These factors mentioned by Berry are shown with some detail in Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1993), 61-72; Grenz, "Beyond Foundationalism: Is a Nonfoundationalist Evangelical Theology Possible?," *Christian Scholars Review* 30 (2000):57-66; Grenz, *Renewing the Center* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 184-190; and Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 28-37.

Grenz argues the first point above rather concisely in chapter two of *Renewing the Center*.[63] Grenz traces a line of thought from the Protestant scholastics to the conservative evangelical understanding of biblical authority today. He writes that "the character of the Scripture focus among many evangelicals today is also the product of the approach to bibliology devised by the Protestant scholastics, which transformed the doctrine of Scripture from an article of faith into the foundation for systematic theology."[64] Grenz perceives that this is where the classical foundationalism of modernity finds its foothold squarely within the conservative evangelical heritage. Grenz claims that this supposed scholastic idea of the Bible being the "foundation for systematic theology" was later "appropriated" by the nineteenth-century Princeton theologians in their "struggle against the emerging secular culture and a nascent theological liberalism."[65] From this point, Grenz argues, the turn-of-the-century fundamentalists "elevated doctrine as the mark of authentic Christianity," by transforming the Princeton doctrine of biblical inspiration into the "primary fundamental."[66] This entire program was passed on to the neo-evangelical movement who then passed this on to the traditional conservative evangelicals such as Lewis, Demarest, Erickson, Grudem and so on.

Grenz continues his critique with an assessment of the conservative theologians' contention that one can have objective, theological knowledge. His thought is both shared and advanced by his writing partner, John Franke, who argues that conservative

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[63] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 61-92.

[64] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 25.

[65] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 25. See also pages 78-88 where Grenz unpacks this thought in greater detail. This is also briefly treated in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 32-35.

[66] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 25. Also Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 37.

theologians remain arrogantly indifferent to the "hermeneutics of finitude."[67] The overall

critique offered by post-conservatives like Grenz, Franke, and Roger Olson may be

mostly summed up with the following type of argument. Conservative theologians who

claim to possess objective theological knowledge naively deny that the outlooks of

human beings "are always limited and shaped by the particular circumstances in which

they emerge."[68]   More importantly, post-conservatives contend, the conservative

evangelicals "arrogantly presume a kind of god-like omniscience by elevating themselves

'above the conditions of earthly mortality' and suggesting that their knowledge of God

and of theological truth is unbiased and comprehensive and thus essentially the same as

God's knowledge of himself and of his revelation."[69]

The critical claim above can be expressed by saying that traditional, conservative

evangelicals, according to Grenz, are really evangelical "modernists" because they

"advocate that we continue to engage in theological reflection on the basis of questions

and assumptions that arose out of the Enlightenment."[70] Yet some of this claim simply

does not consider all of the writings of many of these so-called evangelical modernists.

Kevin Vanhoozer states that even for Carl Henry, Grenz's poster child for evangelical

modernism, there is a distance between Enlightenment rationality and that espoused by

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[67] John Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2005), 27.

[68] Franke, *Character of Theology*, 28.

[69] Helseth, "Right Reason and Theological Aesthetics," 136. Here Helseth also clearly communicates how Roger Olson in his "Postconservative Evangelicalism" and other post-conservatives are not primarily interested in the qualitative difference between divine and human knowledge, but are far more concerned with the postmodern preoccupation with bias.

[70] Stanley J. Grenz, "An Agenda for Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern Context," *Didaskalia* 9 no 2 (Spring 1998): 1.

Henry. Vanhoozer declares, "Evangelicals such as Carl F. H. Henry base their trust in reason not on what Enlightenment philosophers say but rather on the basis of their understanding of the *imago Dei* and of the Spirit's sanctifying work that counteracts the noetic effects of sin."[71] Furthermore, there exists nuanced writings within the Reformers through the Princetonians and their conservative evangelical heirs, Henry notwithstanding, that espouse a doctrine of analogy that we know things truthfully, in part, as we listen to God's self-revelation as he graciously condescends to us as finite creatures so that we may know how things really are and how we can truly know them. Benjamin Warfield, one of the key Princetonians whose views are challenged by Grenz, points out that theologians have true but limited knowledge and have minds negatively affected by sin. He writes,

> Systematic theology is thus…an attempt to reflect in the mirror of the human consciousness the God who reveals Himself in His works and word, and as He has revealed Himself. It finds its whole substance in the revelation which we suppose God to have made of Himself; and as we differ as to the revelation which we suppose God to have made, so will our systematic theologies differ in their substance. Its form is given it by the greater or less perfection of the reflection of this revelation in our consciousness. It is not imagined, of course, that this reflection can be perfect in any individual consciousness. It is the people of God at large who are really the subject of that knowledge of God which systematic theology seeks to set forth. Nor is it imagined that even in the people of God at large, in their present imperfect condition, oppressed by the sin of the world of which they still form a part, the image of God can be reflected back to him in its perfection. Only the pure in heart can see God; and who, even of His redeemed saints, are in this life really pure in heart? Meanwhile God is framing the knowledge of Himself in the hearts of His people; and, as each one of them seeks to give expression in the forms best adapted to human consciousness, to the knowledge of God he has received, a better and fuller reflection of the revealed God is continually growing up. Systematic theology is therefore a progressive science. It will be perfected only in the minds and hearts of the perfected saints who at the end, being at last like God, shall see Him as He is. Then, the God who

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[71] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 87 n. 32.

has revealed Himself to His people shall be known by them in all the fullness of His revelation of Himself. Now we know in part; but when that which is perfect is come that which is in part shall be done away.[72]

It seems clear from this representative work that Warfield perceived that theological progress was both possible and necessary given the significance of the finitude and fallenness of human image bearers.

Many conservative theologians follow the thought of a central teaching of the Reformed faith, namely the distinction between *theologia archetypa* and *theologia ectypa*. *Theologia archetypa* is that "infinite knowledge of God known only to God himself, which is the archetype or ultimate pattern for all true theology."[73] *Theologia ectypa*, on the other hand, is "all true finite theology, defined as a reflection of the divine archetype. *Theologia ectypa* is, therefore, a broad category into which all knowledge of God available to finite minds is gathered, with the exception of false theology."[74] Many traditional conservative evangelicals, like the Protestant Scholastics long before them, would argue that true human theology is possible, but it should be recognized as "an ectype or reflection resting on but not commensurate with the divine self-knowledge."[75] This theological distinction is neither employed by Grenz, nor does he seem to recognize it within the works of many conservative theologians. Thus, Grenz argues against those

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[72] Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Task and Method of Systematic Theology," In *Studies in Theology*, vol. 9, *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield*, (1932; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 104-105.

[73] Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 299-300.

[74] Muller, *Dictionary*, 300.

[75] Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 1: *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 225.

theological and doctrinal statements that he perceives have been produced from the soil of modernist assumptions.

It is clear that Grenz repudiates the traditional, conservative evangelical views of biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and propositional revelation because he believes that these ideas are supported by modernist assumptions. Grenz's proposal seeks to exchange these traditional conservative evangelical ideas for more viable concepts in postmodern theories of epistemology and language.[76] In what follows, I will delineate Grenz's theological commitments and proposed theological project as it relates to the relationship between Scripture and authority, meaning, and truth.

Scripture as Norming Norm

Part II of Grenz and Franke's *Beyond Foundationalism* puts forward their sources for evangelical theology. These sources are Scripture, tradition, and culture. While I find it intriguing that these three sources have been placed together, my current purpose is to focus on the first source of Scripture. Chapter three of *Beyond Foundationalism* is entitled "Scripture: Theology's 'Norming Norm'."[77] What might Grenz mean with the use of this terminology?

At first glance, one might sense that when Grenz speaks of Scripture as being theology's norming norm, he is simply showing that he stands in line with what the majority of Protestants have affirmed, namely that all of human theology is to be judged

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[76] While all of Grenz's writings reflect this thought, he makes his project clear when he states that his proposed theological solutions stem from his commitment to being a "postmodern evangelical" in Grenz, "An Agenda for Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern Context," *Didaskalia* 9 (1998): 1-16.

[77] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 56-92.

by and corrected according to the Bible. In this view, the Church and theology stand

under the authority of the Bible as God's revelation to humans. However, it does not take

long to assess that this view is not at all what Grenz has in mind. In fact, Grenz refuses to

directly identify revelation with Scripture.[78] Thus, Scripture is not God's Word, Grenz

argues, rather it is "the foundational record of how the ancient faith community

responded in the context of a trajectory of historical situations to the awareness that God

has acted to constitute this people as a covenant community."[79] Furthermore, Grenz

declares, "the writings contained in the Bible represent the self-understanding of the

community in which it developed."[80]

It becomes difficult, within Grenz's writings, to see how Scripture maintains

authority over the community of faith and the broad cultural context in which it lives.

Grenz and Franke seem to indicate that it is the Church that is sovereign in determining to

give authority to the biblical text because of its use within the community of faith. In a

telling portion of his argument, Grenz asserts,

> In this conception, the authority of both scripture and tradition is ultimately an
> authority derived from the work of the Spirit. Each is part of an organic unity, so
> that even though scripture and tradition are distinguishable, they are
> fundamentally inseparable. In other words, neither scripture nor tradition is
> inherently authoritative in the foundationalist sense of providing self-evident,
> noninferential, incorrigible grounds for constructing theological assertions. The
> authority of each—tradition as well as scripture—is contingent on the work of the
> Spirit, and both scripture and tradition are fundamental components within an
> interrelated web of beliefs that constitutes the Christian faith. To misconstrue the
> shape of this relationship by setting scripture over against tradition or by elevating
> tradition above scripture is to fail to comprehend properly the work of the Spirit.[81]

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[78] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 76.

[79] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 76.

[80] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 121.

[81] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 117.

This language sounds a great deal like the Second Vatican Council. In the end, it is difficult to assess just what Grenz means when he says that Scripture is theology's "norming norm." In what follows, I seek to unpack Grenz's thought of the relationship between Scripture and authority, meaning and truth to determine if a clearer understanding may be found within his overall thought. This task begins with Grenz's unique discussion of the relationship between Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

Scripture and The Holy Spirit

Grenz wishes to speak for the authority of Scripture. He borrows thought from Bernard Ramm who writes, "The proper principle of authority within the Christian church must be…the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, which are the product of the Spirit's revelatory and inspiring actions."[82] Grenz also appeals to the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.10, to support his view of biblical authority. That section reads, "The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all creeds of counsels, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other than the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."[83] Grenz's inclusion of these statements seems to show his alliance with traditional views of biblical authority. However, his explanation of how we are to understand these statements leads us on a different trajectory of thought. It is here where Grenz's view of the link between Scripture and the Holy Spirit comes into clearer view.

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[82] Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 28. Grenz borrows this thought in *Beyond Foundationalism*, 64.

[83] The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.10, in *The Creeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 196. This is quoted in Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 65.

Grenz's proposal that explains how the Bible and the Holy Spirit are linked sheds light on his view of biblical authority for theology. He writes, "Bringing Scripture and Spirit together provides the foundation for understanding in what sense the Bible is to be read as text, while undercutting any notion of the Bible as being *inherently* authoritative."[84] For Grenz, the Bible is authoritative because it is the vehicle through which the Spirit speaks to the church in the present. He states "If the final authority in the church is the Holy Spirit speaking through scripture, then theology's norming norm is the message the Spirit declares through the text."[85] Grenz is here delineating an important thought of how biblical authority works within his theological method. It is not so much the text of Scripture itself that is authoritative, but the Spirit's use of that Scripture in the ongoing life of the community of faith. Grenz writes,

> Because the Spirit speaks to us through scripture—through the text itself—the ongoing task of the community of Christ is to ask continually, what is the Spirit saying to the church? (Rev. 2:11, etc.). We inquire at every juncture, What illocutionary act is the Spirit performing in our midst on the basis of the reading of this scripture text? What is the Spirit saying to us in appropriating this text? In short, we inquire, What is the biblical message?[86]

A.B. Caneday clarifies the point that for Grenz, "the theologian's hermeneutical work is not so much to hear what the text of Scripture says, but to hear what the Spirit has to say to the church by appropriating Scripture."[87] To be sure, Grenz briefly speaks of the

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[84] Stanley J. Grenz, "The Spirit and the Word: The World-Creating function of the Text," *Theology Today* 57, no 3 (Oct 2000): 358. Emphasis his.

[85] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 74.

[86] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 74.

[87] A.B. Caneday, "Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional?: Postconservative's Use of Language Games and Speech-Act Theory," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Eds. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Helseth, Justin Taylor, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 154.

ongoing importance of exegeting the biblical text in order to "understand its 'original meaning,' that is, to determine 'what the author said' (to cite Nicholas Wolterstorff's designation)."[88] Directly on the heels of this statement though, Grenz contends that "the Spirit's address is not bound up simply and totally with the text's supposed internal meaning." It is here that Grenz borrows thought from Paul Ricoeur. Grenz approaches the Bible as Ricoeur has approached other literary texts. That is to say that, while the author creates a literary piece, "once it has been written, it takes on a life of its own. The author's intention has been 'distanced' from the meanings of the work, although the ways in which the text is structured shape the meanings the reader discerns in the text."[89] Grenz argues that the "text has its own intention which has its genesis in the author's intention but is not exhausted by it."[90] Here Grenz attempts to move beyond what he perceives as a far too limited linking of Spirit and biblical text offered in the writings of traditional conservative evangelicals.

Grenz perceives that conservative evangelicals have limited the Spirit's role to the forming of the biblical text while not being open to hear what the Spirit uniquely has to say to the church in our present day context. Grenz considers the term *theopneustos* found in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 to be more about continuing illumination of the Spirit over against the biblical text-forming inspiration that most conservatives would have in view. He favorably follows Greek scholar Edward Goodrick when he writes "the text focuses

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[88] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 74. In this and other works such as "The Spirit and the Word," Grenz uses Wolterstorff's "double-agency discourse" from Divine Discourse. Grenz, however, finds fault with Wolterstorff's project since he seems to "remain too closely focused on the author who produced the text, rather than on the text itself being canon."

[89] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 74.

[90] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 74.

on the surpassing value of the Spirit-energized scriptures and not on some purported 'pristine character of the autographs.'"[91] Berry argues that Grenz perceives that there is problem with the overall conservative evangelical concept of revelation because of a "disjunction between the Holy Spirit's formation of Scripture in the past and his utilization of it in the present."[92]

In many of his writings, Grenz bemoans his perception of the conservative view that inspiration is a one-time act where the Holy Spirit, through the human authors, offered a completed deposit of truth which the theologian then searches for doctrinal content.[93] In fact, the author exerts great effort to argue against what he calls bibliology "from above." He writes,

> Classical evangelical prolegomena generally move in a set sequence: revelation, inspiration, biblical authority, illumination. Evangelical theologians begin with the affirmation that God has revealed himself. This self-disclosure has come through general revelation and more completely in special revelation. The Holy Spirit reserved some of this special revelation by inspiring biblical writers to inscripturate it. The Bible, therefore, is God's Word. Because the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it is dependable, even inerrant. Consequently, it is authoritative. Finally, the Spirit now illumines the believer to understand its content.[94]

Grenz stresses that the goal of this type of delineation of the doctrine of Scripture is the establishment of the divinity of the biblical writings as the Word of God. He claims that the conservative theologians do not articulate how the Bible is a human book. Instead the

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[91] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 65.

[92] Berry, "Theological Vs. Methodological Postconservativism," 109.

[93] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 32-38, 60-63; Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 109-125; Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 72-92; Grenz, "The Spirit and the Word," 358-360; etc. Cf. Berry, "Theological Vs. Methodological Postconservativism," 109.

[94] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 116.

traditional, conservative view defines inspiration in terms of the activity of the Holy

Spirit in superintending the authors of Scripture in their writing of the text in "an active

sense (the action of the Spirit), a passive sense (the effect of the Spirit's action on the

human author) and a terminal sense (the biblical writings as the deposit of what God

desired to have written)."[95] This doesn't hold much theological weight for Grenz

because, he argues, when the conservative evangelicals deemphasize human authorship

of the biblical text, they also deemphasize the Spirit's ongoing activity in speaking to the

Church through Scripture.

Grenz contends that conservative theologians often collapse the Spirit into the

Bible. This argument goes along these lines of thought. For the conservative

evangelical, the Holy Spirit has inspired the Word of God, the Bible. Inspiration has

been the Spirit's primary, historical task. Now, the Spirit engages his secondary task of

illumination. Illumination though is grounded in and comes from the inspired biblical

text. So, the Spirit now works to bring God's people into contact with the truth of God's

Word so they can engage the same truth from centuries before, yet do so in relation to

their given contemporary context. It is not that the Spirit is going to give a new message.

Rather, it is that the Holy Spirit is going to point us back to the old message, the inspired

biblical text, and will help us to understand and apply the truth of the Bible to our many

contemporary challenges.[96] This is precisely what Grenz is arguing against. He contends

that we are denigrating the authority of the Spirit if we think this way about biblical

authority in our understandings of inspiration and illumination. He succinctly contends

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[95] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 117.

[96] See Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Fransisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 13.

that "We exchange the dynamic of the ongoing movement of the Spirit speaking to the community of God's people through the pages of the Bible for the book we hold in our hands."[97]

Grenz argues that the conservative evangelical disjunction between the Spirit's inspiration of the text, where the Bible is a completed deposit of truth, and the Spirit's illumination of the text, a secondary work in which the Spirit points God's people back to the completed text of the Bible, has profoundly negative effects in theological method. Grenz contends that this disjunction between inspiration and illumination is, in large part, a modernist capitulation seeking to have an authoritative "foundation" for our religious beliefs found in a completed, inerrant and infallible text. Grenz asserts that conservatives view the Bible primarily as "propositional revelation from God."[98] Furthermore, Grenz contends that this focus on propositional revelation led conservatives to view the Bible as, fundamentally, a doctrinal resource. This, in turn, has led conservative evangelicals to utilize the Scripture in their theological method as a storehouse of theological truths waiting to be uncovered, systematized, and written down in a precise doctrinal treatise. Grenz writes "by bringing these biblical teachings together in a systematic whole, their [conservative evangelical scholars] goal became that of compiling the one, complete, timeless body of right doctrines, which they assume constituted 'all the counsel of God' (Acts 20:27, KJV)."[99]

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[97] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 117.

[98] This overarching thought is found most succinctly in Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 60-63.

[99] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationailsm*, 62.

Grenz contends that this conservative evangelical method is wrongheaded for the work of trained theologians. His greatest fear is that this "scholastic theological agenda" would make the voice of the Spirit mute as the reading of the Bible would become superfluous in the church since the doctrinal content that churchpersons seek is more "readily at hand in the latest systematic compilation offered by the skilled theologian."[100] He asks, "Why read, that is, for any reason except to determine for oneself that the theologian's conclusions are indeed biblical truth – that this theologian had captured the one, true biblical system of doctrine?"[101] This is an important question that one should be able to answer. If we are only concerned with getting our doctrinal ducks in a row, then why should we read Scripture if a skilled theologian has already lined up our row of ducks for us? This is Grenz's concern over what he perceives as a misguided understanding of biblical authority as seen in the conservative evangelical disjunction between the Spirit's inspiration and illumination of Scripture.

Grenz's motive for positing a fresh approach and understanding of biblical authority is rooted in his desire that theology would help to retrieve the biblical voice rather than silence it. He wishes to offer a renewed understanding of the role of Scripture in theology so that we would better listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. An important piece of this renewed understanding of biblical authority is Grenz's emphasis on a reciprocal interaction between inspiration and illumination.[102] He considers two broad approaches in relating the reciprocal interaction of the Spirit's work of inspiration and

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[100] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 63.

[101] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 63.

[102] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 64-75; Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 118-128; Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 380-388. Cf. Berry, "Theological Vs. Methodological Postconservativism," 109.

illumination. The first approach may be called the canonical approach espoused by

theologians such as Brevard Childs and James Sanders. Grenz affirms Childs' claim that

the Holy Spirit works through the "canonical context of the church."[103] This, Grenz

states, shows that the development of the concept of canon was not an arbitrary act since

the church "bore witness to the effect that certain writings had on its faith and life."[104]

Grenz sees the relationship as the past experience of illumination being intertwined with

the affirmation of inspiration. It was the effect of these particular Scriptures within the

community of faith that led to them being understood as inspired texts that would be a

part of the canon.

     Grenz borrows from authors such as James Barr, David Tracy, and David Kelsey

in order to substantiate his emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between the Spirit's

work of inspiration and illumination. These authors provide what may be described as a

functional approach. This approach is captured in the report to the 1971 Louvain meeting

of the World Conference on Faith and Order, titled "The Authority of Scripture." Grenz

employs the characterization of Avery Dulles with regard to this document where he says

"it establishes the authority of the Bible on the ground of its religious value for the

church, and then proceeds to postulate inspiration as the source of that authority."[105]

Grenz is pleased that this seems to break with the more conservative view which deduced

the authority of Scripture solely from its inspiration.

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[103] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 119. Cf. Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 104.

[104] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 119. Here he again borrows from Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 105.

[105] Avery Dulles, "Scripture: Recent Protestant and Catholic Views," in *The Authoritative Word*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 246. Quoted in Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 119.

While Grenz acknowledges that both the canonical approach and functional approach may have their problems, both rightly place inspiration and illumination close together. He also notes that both approaches "find the focus of the interrelation between the two aspects of the Spirit's work in connection with Scripture to rest with the believing community."[106] For Grenz, the church confesses the inspiration of Scripture because they have experienced the truth and power of the Holy Spirit through these writings. Again, he writes,

> Critical to and lying behind the production of the biblical documents and the coming together of the Bible into a single canon was the illuminating work of the Spirit. The community found these books to be the vehicle through which God addressed them. But his illuminating task continues beyond the closing of the canon. Even now the Spirit attunes contemporary believers within the context of the faith community to understand Scripture and apply it to their situations.[107]

But what exactly might this look like? Grenz recognizes that some may look at this proposal of the relationship between Scripture and the Holy Spirit and wonder if it doesn't leave itself open to subjectivism. He even muses, "Might it not tempt us to make the inspiration of the Bible dependent upon our hearing the voice of the Spirit in its pages?"[108] While this question remains to be answered in Grenz's discussion of the relationship of the community of faith with regard to authority and meaning, I turn now to other questions to which this relationship between biblical text and Holy Spirit has led us. What exactly does the Holy Spirit accomplish through Scripture which is his instrumentality? Or again, how do the Spirit-illumined Scriptures function within the

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[106] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 120.

[107] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 122-123.

[108] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 124.

community of faith? How are we to understand the relationship between the Spirit's

message to the church and the text of the Bible?

Scripture and the Message of the Text

Grenz makes clear that "it is not the Bible as a book that is authoritative, but the

Bible as the instrumentality of the Spirit; the biblical message spoken by the Spirit

through the text is theology's norming norm."[109] But how might this work? How are we

to understand the relationship between the "biblical message spoken by the Spirit" and

the actual text itself? To get at the answer, Grenz utilizes nuanced principles of speech-

act theory put forward by J. L. Austin[110] and also addressed by Nicholas Wolterstorff.

Austin's work notes three types of acts which are accomplished by speech. They are (1)

saying something with words and gestures (the locutionary act); (2) our intended use of

these words and gestures or what it is that we do when saying them such as encouraging,

promising, commanding (the illocutionary act); and (3) what we accomplish through our

speaking, that is the outcome or result upon the audience (the perlocutionary act).[111]

Grenz employs the use of speech-act theory to the act of textual communication,

specifically with regard to revelation and the Spirit's message through the biblical text.

Interestingly, Grenz moves in a different direction than many theologians who would use

speech-act theory at a hermeneutical level where the major concern would lie in the

interpretation of the biblical text.[112] Grenz moves beyond the scope of that which is

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[109] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 69.

[110] J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

[111] Austin, *How to Do Things*, 94-132.

[112] Caneday, "Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional," 153.

textually accessible, namely what Scripture says and means, to that which is textually inaccessible, namely God's acts and speech today to his church.[113]

To better understand this, it is helpful to see how Grenz employs the use of Wolterstorff's "appropriated discourse."[114] To be sure, Wolterstorff writes of "deputized discourse" where God enlists specific people to speak on his behalf in order to bring a message to the community. We might think of a prophet speaking as God's mouthpiece to the community for instance. More important for our discussion, Wolterstorff also writes about "appropriated discourse" where God "appropriates" the discourse of the biblical authors as his own, although he may not agree with them at every point.[115] A problem arises as to what criteria exist for determining what God agrees with and what he does not agree with in his appropriation of the biblical authors' discourse.[116] I am convinced that Grenz is ultimately left with this same difficulty.

There does exist an important difference between Wolterstorff's "appropriated discourse" and that of Grenz. Grenz is uncomfortable with Wolterstorff's emphasis on "authorial-discourse interpretation." In Wolterstorff's "authorial-discourse" view, God's

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[113] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 72-78.

[114] See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[115] Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 51-54, 186-189. Wellum also shows Grenz's use of Wolterstorff in Stephen J. Wellum, "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Eds. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Helseth, Justin Taylor, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 178-179.

[116] Perhaps the most helpful, succinct critique of Wolterstorff's treatment of "appropriated discourse" can be found in Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 156-164. Wellum raises this issue briefly in Stephen J. Wellum, "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology: A Critical Analysis," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Eds. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Helseth, Justin Taylor, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 179. Caneday hints at this problem in his "Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional?" 154-156.

speaking is tied to the text of scripture through the intention of the biblical authors.

Exegetes and theologians then are responsible to discover the meaning of the biblical text

by seeking to grasp the illocutionary acts of the biblical authors. Berry points out that

Grenz does not like the excessive attention that Wolterstorff's concept of appropriated

discourse gives to the biblical authors because "it does not clearly maintain a distinction

between the original derivation of Scripture and the ongoing use of it by the Spirit."[117]

Grenz argues that "in calling for authorial discourse interpretation, Wolterstorff remains

too closely focused on the author who produced the text, rather than on the text as itself

being canon."[118] Grenz prefers to argue that the meaning of the biblical text is found

within the text, yet that meaning is not necessarily directly attached to the author's

intended meaning. Grenz employs the thought of Paul Ricoeur here as he suggests the

way forward is to embrace a textual-sense interpretation of the text. Again, Grenz argues

that a text takes on a life of its own once it has been written. He writes, "the text has its

own intention, which has its genesis in the author's intention but is not exhausted by

it."[119] In order to clarify, Grenz writes, "Although the Spirit's illocutionary act is to

appropriate the text in its internal meaning (i.e., to appropriate what the author said), the

Spirit appropriates the text with the goal of communicating to us in *our* situation, which,

while perhaps paralleling in certain respects that of the ancient community, is

nevertheless unique."[120] Hence, the Spirit appropriates the biblical text in different ways

depending upon the particular historical and theological context at hand. The Spirit may

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[117] Berry, "Theological Vs. Methodological Postconservatism," 110. Grenz is clearly making this point in "The Spirit and the Word," 361.

[118] Grenz, "The Spirit and the Word," 361.

[119] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 74.

[120] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 74-75.

appropriate the biblical text to communicate new illocutionary meanings, that is new, unique, and perhaps different messages, to any given new community of believers who desire to hear the Spirit speak through Scripture. Simply put, the biblical message may, and probably will, change in various historical-cultural contexts.

Theology has a unique role within the community of faith in observing the locutions of Scripture and illocutionary acts of the Spirit through the appropriated text in order to discern just what the Spirit is saying to the community of faith today in our given historical-cultural context. Grenz observes, "In this process of listening to the Spirit speaking through the appropriated text, theology assists the community of faith both in discerning what the Spirit is saying and in fostering an appropriate obedient response to the Spirit's voice."[121] So, the Spirit appropriates the words of Scripture and conveys new illocutionary meanings to the believing community within their own unique historical and cultural context. These meanings may vary, it seems to me, from community to community and from cultural context to cultural context. Yet, for Grenz, the end goal of these speech acts of the Spirit remain the same. This goal is found in the perlocutionary act of the Spirit. Thus, having considered Grenz's view of the locutions, and illocutionary acts of the Spirit, I must now turn to the particular perlocutionary act that the Spirit performs.

Scripture's World-forming Authority

Grenz's novel use of speech-act theory is utilized in order to understand how the locutions of Scripture are used by the Spirit to convey specific illocutions to the

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[121] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 75.

community of faith. But to what end? Grenz states "As important as these dimensions are, however, they are only parts of a larger whole, namely, the *goal or product* of the Spirit's speaking. By appropriating the text, the Spirit seeks to perform a particular *perlocutionary* act. And the specific perlocutionary act the Spirit performs is the creation of 'world'."[122] Grenz borrows some key categories of thought here from sociologists such as Peter Berger and Clifford Geertz and postliberal theologians such as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.

Grenz writes with appreciation of Berger's basic thought that we live in a world of our own creation. Grenz agrees with Berger that our socially and linguistically constructed world attains for us the "character of objectivity."[123] Grenz follows Berger in contending that our world construction provides a meaningful order in which we can understand our various experiences. Grenz explains his understanding of Berger's argument when he writes, "The ordering of experience involves language and 'knowledge,' the latter of which Berger understands not as objective statements about the universe as it actually is, but the 'common order of interpretation' that a society imposes on experience."[124] Hence, we live in a socially constituted reality which we then assume provides "objective" knowledge about our world. This world construction thought holds primary significance for Grenz's view of religious knowledge and Berger's for that matter. Berger would attest that religious language loses its intellectual strength when a

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[122] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 215. Emphasis his. See also, Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 75.

[123] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 75. For a more complete understanding of Berger's thought, see Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969). Also Peter L. Berger, *Facing Up To Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

[124] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 76. See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 20.

strong social consensus makes the plausibility of certain religious beliefs seemingly impossible. This loss of intellectual strength leaves persons only able to speak of opinions or feelings rather than knowledge of God. People are left to speak of a "leap of faith" or "religious preference" rather than speaking of faith as a way of truly knowing.[125]

Grenz wishes to go beyond Berger as he appeals to Wesley Kort. Grenz writes approvingly of Kort contending that there are certain specific types of beliefs which are essential for "an adequate, workable world to appear."[126] These necessary beliefs include beliefs about other people, norms, values, temporality, and borders. Kort asserts that these types of beliefs are closely connected to languages and texts and, in fact, "can be textually identified because they and their relations to one another are borne by language."[127] Hence, Christian Scriptures are important because the Scriptures function by articulating the beliefs that go into the construction of a world.[128] Following Ricoeur, Grenz remarks "the meaning of a text always points beyond itself—it is 'not behind the text, but in front of it'—for it projects a way of being in the world, a mode of existence, a pattern of life, and it 'points toward a possible world.'"[129] Grenz asserts that the biblical text anticipates and summons realities beyond our current state of existence.

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[125] Berger, *Facing Up To Modernity*, 174.

[126] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 76.

[127] Wesley A. Kort, *Take, Read: Scripture, Textuality, and Cultural Practice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 14. Grenz's treatment of this thought may be found within Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundatioinalism*, 76.

[128] Kort, *Take, Read*, 10-14. See also Grenz and Franke*, Beyond Foundationalsim*, 76.

[129] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 76. See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 87.

If Grenz's thought about "world formation" ended here, then we would clearly see his dependence upon some postliberal ideas that stem from George Lindbeck and Hans Frei. Frei argues that the location of meaning is in the biblical narrative itself and not in an ancient historical event that lies behind the text.[130] He clearly asserts that the point of the biblical narrative is the biblical narrative itself. For theologians like Frei and Lindbeck, the "creation of world" which constitutes meaning for the contemporary believer comes from within the biblical narrative. Linbeck's cultural-linguistic model discussed in the previous chapter seems to deny that biblical extratextual referentiality is essential to faithful Christian existence. Lindbeck argues in *The Nature of Doctrine* that reality is what it is because of the rules and language we use to describe it. He writes, "To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms. A religion is above all an external word, a *verbum externum*, that molds and shapes the self and its world, rather than an expression or thematization of a preexisting self or preconceptual experience."[131] While many of these thoughts seem to shape Grenz's own view of the importance of Scripture in our world formation, I will show that he has moved in a different direction than postliberal thought in this very area.

Many postliberal thoughts regarding world formation from the text of scripture sound consistent with that of Grenz's view. Grenz states that "The Spirit's world-creating work occurs through the Word and in accordance with the Word. As the Spirit

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[130] Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

[131] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 34.

speaks to us through scripture, the Spirit forms our world."[132] To be clear though, Grenz

asserts that "this world construction does not lie in the text itself, even though it is closely

bound to the text."[133] This is a different understanding of how world formation takes

place than that of the postliberal theologians like Frei and Lindbeck. Caneday asks a

thoughtful question when he writes, "If, as [Grenz and Franke] claim to agree with Hans

Frei, the 'location of meaning' is in the biblical narrative, not residing in an event within

ancient history that lies behind the text, why do Grenz and Franke not focus upon the text

of Scripture as the location of the Spirit's speech-acts instead of locating meaning in the

Spirit's appropriation of Scripture for the contemporary community of believers?"[134]

Caneday's question is clearly attempting to make sense of where we might have access to

God's speech-acts. It seems that God's people clearly have access to his speech-acts

through the text of Scripture. So it is difficult to understand and follow Grenz's

appropriation of speech-act theory where he moves beyond what is textually accessible

(what Scripture says and means) to that which is textually inaccessible (God's acts and

speech today).[135]

To be sure, this Grenzian move for understanding speech-act theory is much

different than one might normally find. The Spirit's perlocutionary act of "world

construction does not lie in the text itself."[136] Instead, "The Spirit performs the

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[132] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 77.

[133] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 77.

[134] Caneday, "Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional?" 155.

[135] Caneday, "Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional?" 155.

[136] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 77.

perlocutionary act of creating a world through the illocutionary act of speaking, that is, of appropriating the biblical text as the instrumentality of the divine speaking."[137] It is difficult to see just how all this works since Grenz eschews the traditional evangelical view that the biblical text is the Holy Spirit's creative speech. As Caneday argues, this way of speaking about the perlocutionary act of the Spirit seems to indicate that "however closely linked the Spirit's present inaccessible speaking may be with Scripture, Grenz and Franke locate the Spirit's present speaking outside the canon."[138]

Scripture as Theological Text

Given Grenz's view of Scripture articulated above, in what manner then, according to Grenz, are we to read Scripture? Are there unique hermeneutics in play of which we should be aware? Grenz and Franke state their basic answer as "The Bible's pneumatical world-creative dimension implies that in the faith community the Bible functions as 'theological text.'"[139] Grenz wants to promote a "reciprocal relationship between scripture and the theological enterprise."[140] To be sure, he insists that "the central purpose of the Bible is not to provide raw materials for erecting a systematic theological edifice."[141] In fact, he states that his working presupposition is that "theology serves the reading of the text (rather than that the text exists primarily for the sake of

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[137] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 78.

[138] Caneday, "Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional?" 155.

[139] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 83.

[140] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 83.

[141] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 84.

theology)."[142] "Through the act of appropriating the biblical text", Grenz says, "the Spirit

creates the community that seeks to live the paradigmatic narrative of the Bible." Thus,

he continues, the community of faith is to read the various texts in light of the whole of

the biblical message that the Spirit has appropriated and the community is to give itself to

"listening for the Spirit's voice guiding us as we seek to be the Spirit-constructed

community of faith in the contemporary context."[143]

Grenz offers a number of themes that help us get at what he means by reading

Scripture "theologically." He first declares that this theological reading is a "reading for

the Spirit." Grenz articulates that this theological reading of the text "entails listening to

what the Spirit is saying through the text (exegesis) to us in our context (hermeneutics)."

Consequently, Grenz asserts, "the theological reading of the text always moves from, and

returns to, the contemporary situation in which the faith community is living."[144] Grenz's

appreciation of Tillich's method of correlation may be seen here.[145]

Grenz's second theme for reading the text theologically is that we come to it as

"other" to "other." This simply means that we must recognize that there is a distance

between our world and the world of the biblical text. As we acknowledge this twofold

distance, we recognize that "the goal of our theological reading is not to alter the text to

fit our world…neither should our intent be to alter ourselves to fit into the world of the

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[142] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 84.

[143] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 87.

[144] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 88.

[145] Grenz explicitly states his appreciation of this method of correlation in his *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 90-91.

text."[146] Instead, the Spirit fashions a new eschatological world of God's design in the reader's present life. Thus, to read the text theologically "is to invite the Spirit to engage in the divine work in the lives of the readers through the text, which is the Spirit's instrumentality."[147]

Next, the community of faith is encouraged to read the Bible "with the intent of seeing the patterns of convergence" within it.[148] Grenz contends that it is in "keeping with the premise that motivated the church in bringing these specific books together into the one canon" that we should view the various books of the Bible as comprising a whole. In this manner of reading the text, "the Bible becomes a single voice." Grenz is quick to point out, however, the singularity of voice does not rest in the texts themselves, nor is it dependent upon the church's decision to shape the canon. He proclaims that rather than either of these, "the singularity of voice we claim for scripture is ultimately the singularity of the Spirit who speaks through the text."[149] It is important to point out here that Grenz will go on to speak of the ongoing engagement that the biblical text, tradition and culture have with one another. It is interesting to note that Grenz argues that "culture and text do not comprise two different moments of communication; rather, they are but one speaking [of the Spirit]. And consequently we engage not in two different 'listenings,' but one."[150] Stephen Wellum articulates Grenz's view of the

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[146] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 89.

[147] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 89.

[148] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 89.

[149] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 90.

[150] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 163.

interplay between Scripture, tradition, and culture together quite well. He writes, "Since the Spirit speaks through all three, we carefully listen for the voice of the Spirit who speaks through Scripture, in light of his speaking through the tradition of the church, and within the particularity of culture."[151]

Some of the interplay between Scripture, tradition and the culture can be seen in Grenz's final description of what it means to read the text theologically. He declares that reading the text theologically entails reading the text "within community." Grenz finds that there will be protection from subjectivism as we read within community. As we read within community, we acknowledge the theological heritage of which we are a part. We also acknowledge that we are members of the contemporary church with a unique cultural and theological setting. "Being conscious that we are participants in the church today," Grenz contends, "means above all, however, reading the text within the local congregational setting."[152] Thus, we seek to hear the one voice of the Spirit speaking to a particular community of faith made up of particular believers who live and speak within a particular cultural context. Grenz concludes "It is in our participation in the gathered community that we are most clearly a 'people of the book.' And it is here that the Spirit's voice speaking through scripture can be most clearly discerned."[153] It is to the community of faith that I turn my attention after a brief critique on Grenz's description and use of Scripture.

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[151] Stephen J. Wellum, "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals for Re-Doing Evangelical Theology," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 182.

[152] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 92.

[153] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 92.

Promises and Problems: A Critique of Grenz's Description and Use of Scripture

Grenz's theological proposal presents some healthy considerations for theologians as they engage their task. First, Grenz's point that we must not understand theology as a proof-texting exercise is well argued. Vanhoozer voices agreement on this point when he writes that "proof-texting is a terrible example of how theology should treat the biblical text in order to do it justice," as it "assumes a uniform propositional revelation spread evenly throughout Scripture."[154] Theology is more than collecting and systematically arranging the texts of Scripture. Grenz's view may benefit, however, by clearly acknowledging that propositional revelation, while not *the* category of theological reflection with the biblical text, is *a* category of such reflection. As Vanhoozer suggests, "Doing justice to the biblical text ultimately requires…go[ing] beyond propositionalism without, however, leaving propositions behind."[155]

Grenz's intratextual approach to theology, mostly borrowed from postliberalism, may also be looked to as a necessary correction, albeit misapplied in his treatment, to theologians who bring to the biblical text various "outside" frameworks for reading and understanding the text rather than reading and applying Scripture in light of its own internal structure and categories. As shown above, Grenz's intratextual approach differs from the postliberal position in that, for Grenz, it is not simply the world of the biblical text from which we draw our framework for Christian speaking and living. Rather, it is the Spirit speaking through these texts to his people today, which may or may not coincide with what the text said, that forms and shapes our new eschatologically focused

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[154] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 271.

[155] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 266.

world. Grenz declares that through Scripture, understood as the Spirit's appropriated text for him, "the Spirit leads us to view ourselves and all reality in light of an unabashedly Christian and specifically biblical interpretive framework so that we might thereby understand and respond to the challenges of life in the present as the contemporary embodiment of a faith community that spans the ages."[156]

While Grenz surely wishes to promote the significance of Scripture for doing Christian theology, which he did in practice, he undermines the authority of that Scripture throughout his presentation. Grenz proclaims that the Scripture is theology's "norming norm," yet, as has been shown, this proclamation certainly does not mean what has historically been affirmed by traditional evangelicals. Grenz argues that it is not the text of Scripture but the Spirit's use of the Scripture in our context that becomes "authoritative." Grenz states, "In this process of listening to the Spirit speaking through the biblical text, theology assists the community of faith both in discerning what the Spirit is saying and in fostering an appropriate obedient response to the Spirit's voice."[157] It is clear throughout his proposal that Grenz, along with Franke, refuses to affirm that theology works from first-order language, namely Scripture, to second-order description, namely theological formulation. This takes place for at least two reasons. First, Grenz does not acknowledge that Scripture is the Spirit's creative speech-act. Secondly, Scripture is understood to be, for Grenz, "the primary voice in the theological conversation" alongside tradition and culture. Scripture itself, then, is not first-order

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[156] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 81.

[157] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 75.

language. Rather it is a part of the larger "Christian interpretive framework" that includes Scripture, experience and interpretation as second-order entities.

Deeply troubling is Grenz's view that Scripture is not inherently authoritative because of what it is. He contends that in 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul declared that "God breathes into the Scripture" in our contemporary setting which in turn makes it useful even while dismissing the Spirit's initial constituting of Scripture . This simply does not do justice to the text that declares that the Scriptures are "God-breathed." In Grenz's view, we are to exchange an ontological view of inspiration for a functional view.

It has been argued above that Grenz has a unique view of the relationship between inspiration and illumination. He sees the relationship as the past experience of illumination being intertwined with the affirmation of inspiration. It was, in other words, the effect of these particular Scriptures within the community of faith that led to them being understood as inspired texts that would be a part of the canon. In the end, the community of faith seems to have a great deal of power in allowing or enabling the biblical text to exercise authority over it. Biblical authority itself has become instrumental rather than intrinsic in this view. This will be taken up more substantially in the next section of this chapter.

One final comment regarding Grenz's description and use of Scripture has to do with pastoral theological concerns. Given what Grenz has communicated about authority for our belief and practice being found not in the biblical texts themselves but rather in the Spirit's current speaking through those texts, how is the community of faith to determine what precisely it is that the Spirit is saying to this particular local church in this

particular context? We may well want to say, let us look at the text and find out. But that is the thorny point. For Grenz, the Spirit's illocutions may be in relation to the actual illocutions of Scripture but they are still apart from them. How might we, as a community of faith, determine what the Spirit is saying when the Spirit speaks independently of the human author's illocutionary acts? Vanhoozer argues that "Grenz's account fails to explain how we can infer what illocutionary acts have been performed and to whom we should ascribe them. Consequently he leaves unanswered the fundamental question of how Scripture's actual *content* is related to the Spirit's accomplishing his further, perlocutionary, effects."[158] While it is true that the Spirit performs perlocutionary acts, traditional evangelicalism has consistently stated that he does so on the basis of the textual illocutions of Scripture. Without this grounding in Scripture, we seem to leave ourselves extremely vulnerable to theological subjectivism that will be a detriment to the thought, speech and practice of Christ's Church. The Church would do well to find meaning in its theological work through reaffirming the Spirit-Word relationship that Horton presents so well. Horton affirms that "apart from the Spirit's work, the Word remains the Word: its meaning is already determined. The Spirit's role is to give hearers the *res* through the *signum*—not to supplement the Word of God, but to render that Word effective."[159]

Grenz's description and use of Scripture has not simply presented a unique theological method. Rather, it has changed traditional evangelical assertions. Biblical inspiration and illumination have taken on new meanings as shown above. There has

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[158] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse & the Discourse of the Covenant," In *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 198.

[159] Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 211.

been a disjunction in the Spirit-Word relationship that is dangerous for theological

discernment. We are left to wonder just where and how meaning is to be found. This, in

turn, has led to a significant shift in understanding from where the grounding of authority

for our theological discourse is to come. In the end, it seems that Grenz places the

grounding authority with the community of faith and its use of Scripture. With these

thoughts in mind, I now turn to consider the relationship of the community of faith with

truth, meaning, and authority.

<div align="center">The Community of Faith and Theology</div>

The Community of Faith as a Culture

As we have already observed, Grenz places a great deal of weight on the social

sciences for his theological program. Truth and meaning, for Grenz, are socially and

linguistically constructed. In large part, meaning is determined by use within the

community of faith. This is so because the community of faith itself is one such world-

creating, meaning-constructing culture.

Grenz describes the community of faith as a culture by describing three particular

attributes that are observable within its collective life. First, he says that the church has a

"unit awareness," that is, the persons making up the community of faith consider

themselves a "distinct unity," between whom "there is interaction or communication in

the form of observable behavior, behavior that takes on significance in relation to

symbolic objects that carry meaning within the social setting."[160] Grenz wishes to stress

that this "unit awareness" is important because it causes those who make up the particular

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[160] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 163.

community of faith to share a set of values, beliefs and loyalties through their shared life.[161]

Secondly, Grenz contends that as this community of faith functions together, "the church forms a particular culture" because those participants share "a group of symbols that serve as both building blocks and conveyors of meaning."[162] Like any culture, disagreement may exist over the meaning of these symbols which is why "meaning making is an ongoing task in the church."[163]

Finally, Grenz points out that the community of faith is indeed a culture of its own because the participants "share a common sense of mission." While this would certainly include "worship, edification, and outreach," it finds its greatest fulfillment in being "truly human" as we are designed to be in relationship with God and others. Consequently, Grenz states, "in engaging in the cultural task of meaning making, throughout its history the church has readily appropriated elements from the social contexts—the cultures—in which it has found itself."[164] Christians participate in an ongoing conversation with all of those around them in just what its means to be human, albeit the Christian engages this conversation with a particular worldview that is developed within their language game.

Grenz specifies his thought as he describes particular communities of faith as communities and not just larger cultures or societies. He describes the nature of a

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[161] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 163-164.

[162] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 164.

[163] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 164.

[164] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 164.

community through listing various aspects that constitute a community. He states that a community consists of a group of people who are aware that they share a similar frame of reference. Furthermore, there is a group focus. Grenz describes this as a group that is socially interdependent, "who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices…that both define the community and are nurtured by it."[165] Thirdly, Grenz argues that a community balances its group orientation with a "person focus." His basic thought, following especially Peter Berger, is that the group is the crucial factor in forming the identity of its members.[166] The church, or a local church, functions in just these ways according to Grenz. In fact, he declares that not only is personal identity formed within this social structure, but the very process of knowing and even the process of experiencing the world "can occur only within a conceptual framework, a framework mediated by the social community in which we participate."[167]

As we have seen, Grenz describes the church as a culture and even further as a particular world-creating, meaning-determining community. I now move to unpack this thought as it pertains to theological method a bit further. In order to adequately address Grenz's priority of the Christian community as "basic" for theology, we must first understand the important relationship between language and the particular community of faith. It is here that Grenz is most dependent upon Lindbeck.

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[165] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 216-217.

[166] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 218-223.

[167] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 73-74.

The Community of Faith and Language

One of the central features of Grenz and Franke's proposed theological model is the tight relationship between language and world. They ask an important question that leads them into a deeper discussion of this relationship. They ask, "What would theology look like if it not only rejected the correspondence theory of truth, but sought to follow Wittgenstein and move beyond realism as well?"[168] It is to Wittgenstein's "language games" that they appeal although mostly through Lindbeck's use of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Grenz succinctly states his appreciation for Wittgenstein's thought in the following manner:

> In a sense, Wittgenstein completed the shift toward belief systems and the communal dimension of truth pioneered by the coherentists and the pragmatists…Wittgenstein came to realize that rather than having only a single purpose, to make assertions or state facts, language has many functions, e.g., to offer prayer, make requests, and convey ceremonial greetings. This discovery led to Wittgenstein's important concept of "language games." According to Wittgenstein, each use of language occurs within a separate and seemingly self-contained system complete with its own rules. Similar to playing a game, we require an awareness of the operative rules and significance of the terms within the context of the purpose for which we are using language. Each use comprises a separate "language game," and each "game" may have little to do with the other "language games"…According to Wittgenstein, meaning and truth are not related—at least not directly or primarily—to an external world of "facts" waiting to be apprehended. Instead, they are an internal function of language. Because the meaning of any statement is dependent on the context—that is, on the "language game"—in which it appears, any sentence has as many meanings as contexts in which it is used.[169]

Thus, even our religious utterances are only provisional and can only be deemed "true" within the religious context in which they are used. Doctrines can only be said to be true

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[168] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 45.

[169] Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 202-203.

as they cohere with the entire "web of belief" that is established within a particular community of faith. This has an overwhelming impact on our understanding of the theological task and Christian self-understanding even as we saw in the thought of George Lindbeck in the previous chapter.

R. Scott Smith helpfully points out what he views to be the presuppositions at work in Grenz's, and others', linguistic methodology. Smith argues that these presuppositions include: "(1) the internal relation of language and world; (2) the closely related presupposition that we are inside language and cannot get 'out' to know an extralinguistic, objective world; (3) language use within a way of life makes that community's world; (4) there is no essence to language, so there are only many languages; and (5) there are as many worlds as there are languages."[170] Each of these presuppositions has significance for the manner in which Grenz presents his theological proposal. He consistently argues that both our theology and all of our experiences are consistently filtered through an interpretive grid. Furthermore, this interpretive grid is primarily linguistic because "language—which we inherit from our social community— provides the conceptual tools through which we construct the world we inhabit, as well as the vehicles through which we communicate and thereby share meaning with others."[171]

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[170] R. Scott Smith, "Christian Postmodernism and the LinguisticTurn," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 67. While I do not accept Smith's complete argument within his essay, the particular features above are extremely helpful for illuminating the problematic trajectory of Grenz's thought here.

[171] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 53.

Thus, for Grenz, theology "explores the world-constructing, knowledge-forming, identity-forming 'language' of the Christian community."[172]

Grenz contends that our understanding of meaning and truth are wrapped up in our local community's use of language. Once again he affirms that "we live in a linguistic world of our own making." Our local community's use of language, that is our "language game," determines meaning and our use of language within the context of our community may determine truth within the context of our local community. This thought goes beyond an understanding of meaning being influenced by our cultural perspectives. For Grenz, like Lindbeck, doctrines are rules of discourse for the community of faith that are not really intended to assert truths. Within each faith community's "language game," doctrines are those rules of discourse that constitute the "belief mosaic" (read as coherence) of that community of faith. The community of faith then, as Scott argues, stays within language and cannot seem to get out of it. It seems that Grenz indicates that doctrines and the "belief mosaic" have no extratextual referentiality.[173] I should be quick to point out that to be inside language, as Grenz seems to indicate we are, is not to say that there is not a "real" world apart from our linguistic practices.[174] What Grenz, and others, are saying is that the only way that we come to know things is through our language use. Consistent with this thought is the complementary thought that we cannot

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[172] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 53.

[173] Smith, "Christian Postmodernism," 58-65. This thought is also clearly articulated in Carson, "Domesticating the Gospel," 48-49. Caneday wraps Grenz's thought up within the thought of Lindbeck in this area in his "Is Theological Truth Functional," 146-149.

[174] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 53. Here Grenz states that "there is, of course a certain undeniable givenness to the universe apart from the human linguistic-constructive task. Indeed, the universe predates the appearance of humans on the earth."

experience "reality" directly because all of our experience is socially and linguistically interpreted experience.

When Grenz does speak of objective reality, he speaks with a unique sense of eschatological realism.[175] While we cannot know the world-in-itself, Grenz argues that we can know the world as God wills it to be in the future. This is where Grenz's view of Scripture being the instrumentality of the Spirit comes into play. It is the means by which the Spirit creates a new social construction, a fully Spirit-formed community of persons. Grenz declares that the Spirit speaks through the text of Scripture where we are given a vision of a new creation "in which humans live in harmony with each other, with God, and with all creation." Thus, "in addition to connecting us with our narrative past…the Spirit constructs our communal identity by linking us to this glorious future…Through the appropriated biblical text, the Spirit forms in us a communal interpretive framework that creates a new world."[176] Vanhoozer points out that "Grenz has a theological reason for preferring social constructivism to metaphysical realism. The purpose of the Spirit's speaking is not revelation (reality-depicting) so much as sanctification (reality-making): reshaping the people of God."[177] Truth has to do with future possibility rather than historical actuality. Christian communities participate in this world-constructing work by inhabiting "a present linguistic world that sees all reality

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[175] Grenz's appreciation of and reliance upon Pannenberg in this area is evident. See Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[176] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 81.

[177] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea of a Theological System," In *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, A.T.B. McGowan, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006), 144.

from the perspective of the future, real world that God is bringing to pass."[178] Doctrinal articulations of the community of faith contribute to the identity-forming language by which the community of faith seeks to align itself with the future world that God is currently bringing about through the "speaking of the Spirit."[179]

Although the main thrust of Grenz's proposal has to do with the Spirit speaking through the biblical text to construct a new world and provide an interpretive framework for a community of faith's life and thought, there yet remains a major concern. As has been pointed out, Grenz is convinced that there is no way out of language for us as humans.[180] Furthermore, it has been shown that Grenz is convinced that the language use of a community constitutes the world in which that community lives. It has also been conveyed that Grenz contends that there are only multiple languages resulting from multiple contexts rather than there being an essence to language that would unify thought across contexts.[181] Despite this, Grenz argues that the Christian story is the true story. But this claim is based upon which Christian story from which particular community of faith? If, as Grenz contends, languages are discrete for their particular community and

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[178] Stanley J. Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism," In *Evangelical Futures*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 136. Vanhoozer shows Grenz's thought here also in his "On the Very Idea," 144-147.

[179] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 145.

[180] This is the major point made by R. Scott Smith throughout his writings that engage the thought of Grenz.

[181] Grenz does point out that while all theologies are local, they may be united under one designation as "Christian theology" if they are "Trinitarian in content, communitarian in focus, and eschatological in orientation." Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 166. The difficulty here remains that various local communities can differ in their understanding of the terms Trinitarian, communitarian, and eschatological orientation. Hence, it is feasible, even likely, that disunity would continue to exist across various linguistic contexts. For a thoughtful essay that engages in detail Grenz's use of social trinitarianism as a fundamental thought for his theological proposal see Archie J. Spencer, "Culture, Community and Commitments: Stanley J Grenz on Theological Method," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57 no 3 (2004): 338-360, especially 347-353.

the use of language within a community constitutes its world, then we need to know which is the relevant community that gets the story correct, if there exists such a community.

Smith makes an interesting claim when he writes, "If we take their method consistently, then these claims [world construction, the demise of foundationalism, what Christians should think and how they should live] should be understood for what they are—that is, they are just claims of local, unspecified linguistic communities that happen to have talked and thus constructed their worlds in this way."[182] That would seem to undermine the intent of Grenz's writing to a broad audience for acceptance across multiple social and linguistic contexts brought about by various local communities of faith. Grenz, however, wants to maintain that God can and does provide special revelation through the Spirit speaking through the biblical text in our current contexts. Still, if Grenz remains consistent with his following the later Wittgenstein through the thought of Lindbeck that meaning just is use, then as Smith argues "whatever God meant by his special revelation would be meaningful to people *only* as it used within the particular linguistic practices of a given community. And this would apply not only to the enscripturated revelation, but also to their appeal to communication by the Holy Spirit as he speaks now to the churches."[183] This is indeed problematic.

While we have difficulty understanding which particular Christian community of faith we should listen to in order to understand correctly the biblical narrative and the Christian "belief mosaic" or interpretive framework for life and thought, another pressing

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[182] Smith, "Christian Postmodernism," 64.

[183] Smith, "Christian Postmodernism," 66.

question is even more basic and stands in need of an answer. Grenz and Franke ask the question, "Why give primacy to the world-constructing language of the Christian community?"[184] Their response to this provocative question is, in many respects, unhelpful. They answer by referring to their system of community theological thought that seems best to them. They write that we need to inquire as to:

> [W]hich theological vision is able to provide the transcendent vision for the construction of the kind of world that particular theologizing community is in fact seeking? Which theological vision provides the framework for the construction of true community? We believe that Christian theology, focused as it is on God as the triunity of persons and on humankind as the *imago dei*, sets forth a helpful vision of the nature of the kind of community that all religious belief systems in their own way and according to their own understanding seek to foster. This vision, we maintain, provides the best transcendent basis for the human ideal of life-in-relationship, for it looks to the divine life as a plurality-in-unity as the basis for understanding what it means to be human persons-in-community.[185]

It remains difficult to understand how anyone outside of Grenz's or Franke's particular faith community would find this explanation of Christian community being the best example of real community as convincing. In fact, it is difficult to understand based upon the theologians' own previous comments on the use of language. Do there exist criteria outside of the particular Christian linguistic system that would enable us to defend why this Christian version of community is better than existing alternatives? Grenz and Franke have not provided any such criteria here. Caneday argues that rather than actually giving answer to the dilemma posed by the questions, "They simply assert their way out of their dilemma."[186] One is left to wonder if we give primacy to the world-constructing language of the Christian community simply because it is our

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[184] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 54.

[185] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 54.

[186] Caneday, "Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional?" 150.

particular community within which we live according to its socially and linguistically constructed truth for us. Stephen Wellum asserts that the theological project of Grenz and Franke on this point "leaves Christian theology apologetically defenseless, a self-contained linguistic system that is not able to demonstrate before a watching world why it is indeed true."[187]

The Community of Faith and Its Practices as the Center of Theology

Grenz insists that that the community of faith is central to the theological task. This is so because theological discourse is a second-order discipline that is "a critical, reflective activity that presupposes the beliefs and practices of the Christian community."[188] Influenced significantly by the social sciences, Grenz affirms that in order to understand theology "we must view it within the context of the life of the people of God…We need no other rationale to engage in the discipline than our presence and participation in the Christian community. And our endeavors are fundamentally, even if not totally, directed back toward that community."[189] Grenz continues this line of thought as he argues that "we may view theology as the faith community's reflecting on the faith experience of those who have encountered God through the divine activity in history and therefore now seek to live as the people of God in the contemporary world.

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[187] Wellum, "Postconservatism, Biblical Authority, and Recent Proposals," 188.

[188] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 75.

[189] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 75.

Ultimately, then, the propositions of systematic theology find their source and aim in the identity and life of the community it serves."[190]

In many ways, it seems that Grenz views the community of faith as the beginning and end of the theological task. Indeed, he presents three reasons why theology must be communitarian. For the first of these reasons, he appeals to Reformed epistemology and argues that the believing community is properly basic for theological discourse. This is because "our beliefs—and hence our faith—is dependent on the community in which we are situated."[191] Grenz continues his argument by insisting that a "central task of theology is to express communal beliefs and values as well as the meaning of the symbols of the faith community. Theological construction has as its goal the setting forth of an understanding of the particular 'web of significance,' 'matrix of meaning,' or 'mosaic of beliefs' that lies at the heart of a particular community."[192] Vanhoozer, reflecting on this central theme running throughout Grenz's writings, concludes that for Grenz, "theology's distinct object is neither God nor the Bible—these ways foundationalism lies—but rather the world-view of the community of faith, what Grenz terms the community's interpretive framework or 'belief mosaic' that arises from the community identity-constituting shared biblical narrative."[193] What is basic for Grenz, then, is the interconnected interpretive framework of his three sources for theology, namely Scripture, tradition and the contemporary cultural context which constitutes the Spirit's community-forming speech. The community of faith and her use of language

[190] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 75-76.

[191] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 231.

[192] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 231.

[193] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 144.

provide meaning for the church community and understanding of her symbols and practices. Again, the theological discussion seems to both start and end with the linguistic practices of the faith community.

Grenz's reliance on Lindbeck here is telling. He argues that theology functions in a manner similar to Lindbeck's treatment of church doctrine. Doctrine provides a "regulative" function for the church's life and speech. For a believer, the larger community of faith provides a cultural and linguistic framework that shapes life, thought, and speech. Grenz contends that the communal reality constitutes the central factor in shaping the experiences of its members. He states, borrowing from Lindbeck, that this communal reality "provides a constellation of symbols and concepts which its members employ in order to understand their lives and experiences of the world and within which they experience their world."[194] Grenz wishes to move beyond this idea: "Taking Lindbeck's idea a step further, we conclude that theology systematizes, explores and orders the community symbols and concepts into a unified whole—that is, into a systematic conceptual framework."[195] This coherent belief mosaic informs a particular community's understanding of their identity as it shapes their listening to the Spirit speak through Scripture, tradition and the contemporary cultural context in which the particular community lives. To some extent, the community both shapes and is shaped by this interpretive grid.

There is much to be admired in Grenz's presentation of the significance of the life practices and worldview of the community of faith in relation to the theological task. He

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[194] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 78. Cf. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

[195] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 78.

wisely reminds us that our beliefs are shaped and molded within the context of the communal life of our particular church. He further makes clear that at least part of our responsibility as theologians is to put forward an understanding of a coherent "web of beliefs" which lie at the heart of our particular community of faith. Grenz also properly reminds us that one purpose doctrine serves is to provide a regulative function for the life and language of the community of faith. To be sure, Grenz enlightens our theological minds through his affirming the significant role that the community of faith plays in the theological task.

Even in light of all of the profitable points made by Grenz in this area, the question still remains as to whether he has placed too much emphasis on the language and practices of the community of faith while, at the same time, placing too little emphasis on the objectivity of Scripture. Indeed, it does seem that the community of faith is the central authority and goal within Grenz's view. Like Lindbeck, it seems that meaning is determined by use. The use of language within one particular believing community may be different than that of another. Yet the interpretive grid for each of these communities may be equally valid even if not the same. This overall trajectory is difficult to unpack within Grenz's writings. What might this mean for our ability to make a truth claim?

Grenz declares that the intent of the theologian should be to provide a "model of reality, rather than to describe reality directly." Since this is the case, Grenz insists, we may engage the question of truth while never really apprehending it. How might this truth question be related to the faith community's "belief mosaic?" Grenz reasons "our participation in a faith community involves a basic commitment to a specific conceptual

framework. Because faith is linked to a conceptual framework, our participation in a

community of faith carries a claim to truth, even if that claim be merely implicit. By its

very nature, the conceptual framework of a faith community claims to represent in some

form the truth about the world and the divine reality its members have come to know and

experience."[196] Grenz further explains his view:

> To the extent that it embodies the conceptual framework of a faith community,
> therefore, theology necessarily engages in the quest for truth. It enters into
> conversation with other disciplines of human knowledge with the goal of setting
> forth a Christian worldview that coheres with what we know about human
> experience in the world. To this end, theology seeks to understand the human
> person and the world as existing in relationship to the reality of God, and in so
> doing to fashion a fuller vision of God and God's purposes in the world.[197]

Grenz again articulates his commendable desire to keep the practical and veracious

aspects of the theological enterprise together rather than as competing tasks. However, it

is this relationship between practice and truth that needs to be clearly understood. For

Grenz, theology continues to need Scripture as the norming norm, described earlier in

this chapter, but it must also engage in conversation with other disciplines and produce a

worldview or interpretive framework that coheres with human experience in our cultural

context. Here again, it seems that the community's social-linguistic context becomes the

determining factor for meaning and truth. Let me explain this further by borrowing a

thought from Scott Smith. Since Grenz and Franke insist on (1) the local and discrete

character of communities that construct their own worlds by the manner in which they

use their language, and (2) that we simply do not inhabit, nor can we know, the world-in-

itself, then we are left to determining meaning and truth through the context (our

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[196] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 79.

[197] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 79.

particular community language use and practices) in which we are currently situated.[198]

Albert Mohler sees the clear connection between Grenz's thought and Lindbeck's proposal at just this point. He writes, "The universality of the Christian truth claim is either minimalized or, depending on one's reading, denied. In any event, the abdication of the universal truth claim and the retreat into the notion of truth as communal, defined within a given cultural-linguistic system, is a massive concession fatal to any evangelical theology."[199] The depth of concern may be understood through a shared assessment from Vanhoozer toward Lindbeck and Mohler toward Grenz, namely, that there is a significant risk of reducing theology to cultural anthropology within this cultural-linguistic model of theology.[200]

The Community of Faith and Its Relationship with Scripture

The relationship between the community of faith and Scripture is unique in the thought of Grenz. While I do not wish to rehash material that I have covered earlier in this chapter regarding this relationship, a couple of points are worth addressing here. Grenz affirms biblical authority, but then seems to declare that the Bible's authority is derived from the use of the Christian community. Grenz, wishing to distance himself as far as possible from any hint of classical foundationalism, puts these thoughts together when he declares,

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[198] Smith, "Christian Postmodernism," 61-67.

[199] R. Albert Mohler, "The Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition and the Challenge of the Postmodern Paradigm," In *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2nd ed., David S. Dockery, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 67.

[200] Vanhoozer's particular assessment of Lindbeck may be found in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology," In *Evangelical Futures*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 100. Mohler's particular assessment of Grenz may be found in his "The Integrity of the Evangelical Tradition," 67.

> [A]ll such attempts to establish the role of Scripture in theology, whether or not they are successful, are ultimately unnecessary. In engaging in the theological task, we may simply assume the authority of the Bible on the basis of the integral relation of theology to the faith community. Because the Bible is the universally acknowledged book of the Christian church, the biblical message functions as the central norm for the systematic articulation of the faith of that community. Consequently, the divine nature of Scripture or its status vis-à-vis revelation need not be demonstrated in the prolegomenon to theology. Sufficient for launching the systematic-theological enterprise is the nature of theology itself as reflection on community faith. And sufficient for the employment of the Bible in this task is its status as the book of the community.[201]

So which way does this work? Does the community of faith determine the Scriptures and then offer it derived authority above it, or does Scripture have intrinsic authority in its ability to determine the reality and make-up of the community of faith? Throughout his writings, Grenz seems to offer a frustrating answer of yes. Grenz makes clear that the "Bible is the product of the community of faith that cradled it. The compiling of Scripture occurred within the context of the community. And the writings contained in the Bible represent the self-understanding of the community in which it developed."[202] Again, it is difficult to ascertain whether the community of faith or the biblical text truly has the fundamental authority in this relationship.

Grenz seems to bring the authority of the biblical text and the community of faith together when he declares that "our final authority is the Spirit speaking through scripture."[203] Scripture's authority is instrumental rather than intrinsic. How does this play out? Grenz argues that the "authority of the Bible is ultimately the authority of the Spirit whose instrumentality it is. Similarly, it is the work of the Spirit that accounts for

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[201] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 94.

[202] Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 121.

[203] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 68.

the formation of the Christian community."[204] However, Grenz moves quickly from this

thought to affirm "the community precedes the production of the scriptural texts and is

responsible for their content and for the identification of particular texts for inclusion in

an authoritative canon to which it has chosen to make itself accountable…Apart from the

authority of the Christian community, there would be no canon of authorized texts."[205]

Grenz succinctly contends that "canonical scripture is on the one hand constitutive of the

church…and on the other hand is itself derived from that community and its authority."[206]

In Grenz's proposal regarding the relationship between the community of faith

and Scripture, it becomes difficult to distinguish between God's work and the work of the

Church community. This difficulty is, in part, a direct result of Grenz's fusion of

inspiration and illumination which was taken up earlier in this chapter. Furthermore,

given Grenz's view that theology's "norming norm" is actually the Spirit speaking

through Scripture while also proclaiming that the Spirit's speaking is not limited to but

actually goes beyond authorial discourse so that the Spirit's voice may also be heard

through tradition and contemporary culture, one is inclined to give consideration to the

general assessment offered by Vanhoozer. Vanhoozer concludes that given everything

mentioned above, Grenz is left "without a criterion for distinguishing between the Word

of God and the hearing of the church, or between the gospel and its possible distortions in

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[204] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 115.

[205] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 115.

[206] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 117.

the community's understanding."[207] This makes this important relationship between Scripture and church most unclear for carrying out the proposed theological method.

Promises and Problems: A Brief Critique of Grenz's Theological Description

There are some thoughts to admire within Grenz's theological proposal. His personal character and his pietistic background is easily seen throughout his writings. We should appreciate and agree with Grenz when he speaks of the goal of good theology to be, in part, a life of wisdom lived in fellowship with God, others and God's creation. This move is an important corrective for those who might view the single theological task to be presenting and gaining more cognitive information. Grenz's clear call for the community of faith to participate in God's world-building endeavor encapsulates both this life of wisdom and life of relationship with God and others that his theological program is so intent on seeing come to full fruition in the eschaton.

Grenz's overall work to call for a "chastened rationality" against those who espouse a classical foundationalism and sense that they have an exhaustive and certain knowledge of things is warranted. I am convinced he overstates his case here, but the general caution offered to those who would espouse univocal language when speaking of God, for instance, is a needed correction.

Grenz's reclaiming the role of the Spirit in his discussion of the doctrine of Scripture as well as the hermeneutical task in theological discourse is a helpful reminder to those who would minimize the role of the Spirit in such things. This is not to say that I agree with his overall description of the role of the Spirit. I will turn to that thought

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[207] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 147.

momentarily. I find it helpful for Grenz to point out there exists some sort of necessary

and important relationship between Scripture, the tradition of the Church, and

contemporary culture when attempting to engage meaningful and thorough theological

discourse. That there exists such a relationship I find helpful. The manner in which he

relates them, however, I find confusing and unhelpful.

With all of these positive contributions from Grenz, it has been shown above that

there are good reasons to have strong reservations and even disagreements with his

overall theological proposal. For instance, it seems at times that Grenz is unaware of

how his postmodern commitments seem to disallow him from considering a more modest

form of foundationalism that can even be found within Reformed epistemology which he

strangely uses to support his nonfoundationalist position.[208] Additionally, Grenz's

outright dismissal of a correspondence theory of truth makes it difficult to put forward a

meaningful evangelical theology. The coherence and pragmatist theories of truth with

which Grenz replaces this correspondence theory do not, in then end, allow us to have a

language that refers to an extratextual reality and this leaves theology vulnerable to the

claim that a doctrinal statement is true only within the language game of a given

particular community of faith. The question, "Is Christianity true?" is never really settled

within Grenz's theological proposal.

Grenz's outright changing of the traditional evangelical positions of biblical

inspiration and biblical authority is most troubling. It has been argued that Grenz fuses

inspiration with illumination in a way that minimizes the inherent authority of the biblical

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[208] While Grenz indeed appeals to modest foundationalism through Reformed epistemology to support his project, he does not acknowledge this position as modest foundationalism. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 230-231.

text and blurs the traditional understanding of the Spirit's illuminating work, since he now illumines through Scripture, tradition and our contemporary culture. Scripture only functions as the "norming norm" for Grenz because of the Christian community's decision to submit itself to the biblical text. It has been shown that it is extremely difficult to distinguish between God's work and the work of the church as it relates to biblical interpretation. While Grenz argues that the Spirit speaking through the Scripture is the supreme authority in this theological program, he provides few criteria for determining the difference between the Spirit's correct speaking and the community of faith's incorrect reading of Scripture. This is even further complicated by the important role that our contemporary culture plays in this method as our cultural context may bring incorrect views and values into our reading of the text. It is too easy to attribute to the Spirit those theological positions that we find more comfortable for our life lived within our contemporary cultural context. Overall, many evangelical theologians will have difficulty in embracing Grenz's position that the Bible's authority is instrumental rather than intrinsic.

Grenz's placing the community of faith as the center and goal of theology brings about some troubling results as well. It has been shown above that Grenz's following Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model and his use of the later Wittgenstein's "language games" has the same problems for his theological program as it did for Lindbeck. We have observed how Grenz stresses the local character of communities that linguistically construct their own worlds and how this seems to disallow for any distinctively Christian "essence" of language or any "true" representative Christian theology. There can only be multiple theologies and traditions, not a singular Christian theology. This is certainly

troubling for Christian mission and witness. If, as Grenz suggests, meaning is determined only by use of language and if language is unable to refer to extratextual realities, then we are stuck inside our own language game and have very little to say to the rest of the world. A meaningful, culturally engaging, and comprehensive evangelical theology needs more than what Grenz's theological proposal offers.

CHAPTER 4

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER: TOWARD A POSTCONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL METHOD THAT MAINTAINS YET GOES BEYOND CONSERVATIVE THEOLOGY

Introduction

Kevin Vanhoozer, currently Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has had a tremendous impact on evangelical thinking during the past twenty years. Vanhoozer broadly engages the fields of theology, philosophy, literary theory, and hermeneutics in an attempt to offer a wholistic theological method for contemporary evangelicalism. His thinking has been stirred or shaped by authors as diverse as postliberals George Lindbeck and Hans Frei,[1] Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar,[2] philosophers and linguists J. L. Austin,[3] John R. Searle,[4] and Hans-Georg Gadamer,[5] literary theorist and philosophical scholar Paul Ricouer,[6] alongside many other

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[1] Especially evident in his interaction with Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) and even more with George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984). While Vanhoozer certainly engages more than these works, these are the chief influencers of his thought. In fact, I will later show how Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine* is an advancement of and response to Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*.

[2] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vols. 1-5, (San Fransisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998). There exists an obvious connection between the work of Balthasar and Vanhoozer's *Drama of Doctrine*, although Vanhoozer distinguishes between Balthasar's focusing on the dramatic nature of the *content* of Christian doctrine, while he desires to emphasize "*the dramatic nature of Christian doctrine itself.*" Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1st ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 18. (emphasis his).

[3] Especially in J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2d ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

[4] Especially in John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

[5] Especially in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

noteworthy influences. Vanhoozer has been and is a prolific writer in the areas of

evangelical theological method, theological hermeneutics, theological reading and

interpretation of Scripture, while also serving as a reasonable and fair voice in

postmodern literary philosophy.[7] Vanhoozer exercises a genuine love for Christ and his

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[6] Vanhoozer has done extensive work on the thought of Ricoeur. A great deal of engagement was made with Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974); Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

[7] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014) This is a more easily accessible treatment of the material found in his *Drama of Doctrine*; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks (Part 1)," In *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 25-49; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks (Part 2)," In *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 50-78; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 151-199; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Triune God of the Gospel," In *The Cambridge Companion To Evangelical Theology*, Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Trier, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17-34; 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 Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, A.K.M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 51-93; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Four Theological Faces of Biblical Interpretation," In *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward A Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, A.K.M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 131-142; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*, (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea of a Theological System," In *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, A.T.B. McGowan, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006), 125-182; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2001); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1997); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Into the Great 'Beyond': A Theologian's Response to the Marshall Plan," In *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology, I. Howard Marshall. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; Milton Keynes, Bucks, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 81-95; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)," In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-25; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Scripture and Tradition," In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149-169; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright. *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Discourse on

church as well as an engaging presence and personality in theological and philosophical

discussions. In his typical engaging manner, he describes how he views himself in the

process of attempting to transcend the boundaries in philosophy and theology. He writes,

> Some make raids; others, who hold dual citizenship, make legal passage. And
> then there are the nomads, like myself, who hold dual citizenship in Athens and
> Jerusalem yet nevertheless make their earthly home in neither city exclusively,
> preferring rather to dwell, with others in the diaspora, in the borderlands: on the
> philosophical plains at the foot of Mount Zion. Here I stand—philosophically,
> metaphysically. Theologically I can do no other.[8]

This quote represents Vanhoozer's eclectic use of the best insights from various

philosophical, theological, and linguistic thinkers from both past and present. Each and

all of these disciplines, Vanhoozer reasons, may lead us to meaningful and livable

practical wisdom.

Mark Strauss offers his overall assessment of Vanhoozer's positive influence on

and reception by the current evangelical theological scene as he reflects upon

Vanhoozer's theological method alongside three other alternative views. Strauss states,

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Matter: Hermeneutics and the 'Miracle' of Understanding," In *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson, eds., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 3-34; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Once More into the Borderlands: The Way of Wisdom in Philosophy and Theology after the 'Turn to Drama'," In *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology: Reason, Meaning and Experience*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Martin Warner, eds., (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 31-54; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/Modern Way," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 71-104; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Disputing about Words? Of Fallible Foundations and Modest Metanarratives," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 187-200; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology," In *Evangelical Futures*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 61-106; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 no 1 (Mar 2005): 89-114. Reprinted in *Whatever Happened to Truth*, Andreas Kostenberger, ed., (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 93-129.

[8] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Once More into the Borderlands: The Way of Wisdom in Philosophy and Theology after the 'Turn to Drama'," In *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology: Reason, Meaning and Experience*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Martin Warner, eds., (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 53.

"This volume in general confirms what is clear from hermeneutical discussions of recent years: *everybody likes Kevin.*"[9] While certainly an overgeneralization, Strauss's comment seems consistent with my research. In fact, there are scholars who present very different approaches in understanding how to move from Scripture to theological claims who each share appreciation for Vanhoozer's dramatic model and perceive that Vanhoozer's method could be integrated into their own theological proposal with little change. Here, I am specifically thinking about Daniel Doriani's redemptive-historical model[10] and William Webb's redemptive-movement model.[11] These scholars have little appreciation for one another's views, yet they both widely affirm Vanhoozer's position as consistent with their own. This gives reason for pause and further study to assess whether this is a good or bad indication for Vanhoozer's drama-of-redemption model.

Many evangelical scholars affirm Vanhoozer's work in theological hermeneutics and show general support of his drama-of-redemption model even if they find minor areas with which they disagree.[12] Other scholars take care to stress the perceived

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[9] Mark L. Strauss, "A Reflection by Mark L. Strauss," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 282.

[10] Daniel M. Doriani, "A Redemptive-Historical Model," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 75-120; Daniel M. Doriani, "A Response to Kevin J. Vanhoozer," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 205-209.

[11] William J. Webb, "A Redemptive-Movement Model," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 215-248; William J. Webb, "A Response to Kevin J. Vanhoozer," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 210-214.

[12] For instance, Michael Horton's key theological writings are dotted with affirmation for Vanhoozer's work and show affinity between the two scholars. See Michael Scott Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 171-175, etc.; Michael Scott Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 251-252, 569-571 where he affirms Vanhoozer's treatment of God's communicative acts; 208 where he suggests that Vanhoozer's model corrects some of the problems associated with Lindbeck's proposal, etc. Doriani writes that he finds himself in agreement with virtually every point of

weaknesses of Vanhoozer's dramatic model.[13] Some wish to take aim at Vanhoozer's

use of speech-act theory and show its limitations or inability to do as much as he claims it

can do.[14] Still others wish to show a transforming trajectory of thought within

Vanhoozer's scholarship over time regarding the role of divine agency in our

understanding of Scripture.[15] What is lacking in this scholarship is an extensive

delineation of Vanhoozer's treatment of the relationship of truth, authority and meaning

Vanhoozer's proposal although he would state things in different ways. His concern is that Vanhoozer, for all of his writing about the biblical text, does not do much exegesis of it. See Daniel M. Doriani, "A Response to Kevin J. Vanhoozer," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009, 205-209. Webb likes Vanhoozer's proposal although he finds it a bit too theoretical to be helpful with difficult ethical issues presented in various biblical texts. See William J. Webb, "A Response to Kevin J. Vanhoozer," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 210-214; Wolters appreciates Vanhoozer's approach, but warns of pushing the dramatic analogy too far and has concerns about the lack of criteria offered by Vanhoozer in order to determine if a theological "improvisation" is actually faithful. See Al Wolters, "A Reflection by Al Wolters," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 314-317; Michael Williams shares his appreciation of Vanhoozer's work and emphasis on Christian character, wisdom and habits as he considers Vanhoozer's proposal alongside Christopher Wright's missional model. See Michael D. Williams, "Theology as Witness: Reading Scripture in a New Era of Evangelical Thought Part II: Kevin Vanhoozer, The Drama of Doctrine," *Presbyterion* 37 no 1 (Spring 2011): 16-30; Christopher Wright states his positive feelings toward Vanhoozer's proposal as well. See Christopher J.H. Wright, "A Reflection by Christopher J.H. Wright," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 320-346.

[13] For instance Boersma argues that Vanhoozer needs a good dose of tradition added to his proposal. See Hans Boersma, "On Baking Pumpkin Pie: Kevin Vanhoozer and Yves Congar on Tradition," *Calvin Theological Journal* 42 (2007): 237-255; Leithart voices concern over Vanhoozer's description of authorial intent without considering the impact of other texts on the author's meaning espoused in the particular text under consideration. See Peter J. Leithart, "I don't get it: humor and hermeneutics." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 no 4 (2007): 412-425; Mark Strauss's main concern is that the analogy of drama can only go so far and breaks down when comes to knowing the manner in which we are to apply biblical thought. See Mark L. Strauss, "A Reflection by Mark L. Strauss," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 271-298.

[14] This is particularly evident in works such as C. Everett Berry, "Speech-act Theory as a Corollary for Describing the Communicative Dynamics of Biblical Revelation: Some Recommendations and Reservations," *Criswell Theological Review* ns 7 no 1 (Fall 2009): 81-100; C. Everett Berry, "Theological Vs. Methodological Postconservatism: Stanley Grenz and Kevin Vanhoozer as Test Cases," *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 no 1 (Spr 2007): 105-126; Scott A. Blue, "Meaning, Intention, and Application: Speech Act Theory in the Hermeneutics of Francis Watson and Kevin J Vanhoozer," *Trinity Journal* ns 23 no 2 (Fall 2002): 161-184.

[15] This is precisely the project found in Mark Alan Bowald, "Rendering Mute the Word: Overcoming Deistic Tendencies in Modern Hermeneutics; Kevin Vanhoozer as a Test Case," *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 367-381.

with Scripture and with the community of faith. It is this void that I wish to fill in writing this chapter.

In what follows I will briefly provide the philosophical and theological context from which Vanhoozer writes as well as provide his self-classification as a theologian who is post-conservative, post-propositionalist, and post-foundationalist. I will then provide a brief synopsis of Vanhoozer's dramatic theological proposal. Once the proposal has been shown, I will engage the central concerns of showing the relationship of truth, authority and meaning to Scripture first and then the relationship that exists between these same concerns and the community of faith. I now turn to Vanhoozer's context.

Theological and Philosophical Currents

Vanhoozer's Self-Classification

Similar terms are used to describe both Vanhoozer and Stanley Grenz. Terms such as postconservative, postpropositional, and postfoundational are all terms that are shared in the descriptions of these theologians. Yet while the terms are the same, the meaning packed within those terms is quite different. Thus it is best to consider what Vanhoozer himself means as he applies these three terms to his own theological method. He most fully describes the purpose and meaning of his use of these terms as he sketches his model of how theology derives direction from the script of the biblical canon. He asserts that "canonical-linguistic theology as an exegetical *scientia* is the attempt to hear

what the Spirit of Christ says through the word of Christ to the body of Christ."[16] This

"direction" leaves room for rationality and truth, yet may still be characterized as

postpropositional, postconservative, and postfoundational in its character. These three

terms of self-classification are important for our understanding of Vanhoozer's scholarly

identity and his overall proposal.[17]

Postpropositionalist Theology

Vanhoozer is careful to distinguish his postpropositionalist theology from that of

Grenz and other theologians by clearly articulating that "the canonical-linguistic

watchword with regard to propositions must be 'beyond, but not without.'"[18] To be sure,

Vanhoozer shows his general agreement with both Lindbeck and Grenz that the

"cognitive-propositionalist" model is fraught with problems. He contends that the "main

defect of propostionalism is that it reduces the variety of speech actions in the canon to

one type: the assertion."[19] Vanhoozer briefly traces this model of theological practice

through medieval Thomism to the "so-called Protestant scholastics of the late sixteenth

and seventeenth centuries" whose work passed through the nineteenth-century

Princetonians such as Charles Hodge and finally through twentieth-century conservative

evangelicalism prominently displayed in the works of Carl F.H. Henry and others.

Thankfully, Vanhoozer tempers his discussion with a sense of humility when mentioning

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[16] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 265.

[17] This self-classification is most clearly presented in Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 265-305.

[18] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 278.

[19] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 266.

these various scholars.[20] While he is concerned that theology not be content with "logic

rather than life," or with "causal rather than covenantal relations," he admits that "by and

large, for Thomas Aquinas, the post-Reformation orthodox, and the Princetonians alike,

propositional truth was only the means; godliness was the goal."[21]

Vanhoozer wishes to ensure that one understands his canonical-linguistic

theological model as postpropositionalist because it refuses to be overdependent upon

"*dedramatized propositions*, statements about God taken out of their context in the

economy of divine communicative action."[22] Vanhoozer is against the type of

propositionalism that works with a concept of theory and truth that reduces dialogue to its

propositional content alone. He wishes to advance the thought that "*Dialogical form

cannot be reduced to monological substance*,"[23] and this is precisely what he sees

propositionalism doing. He argues that we "must make a special effort to resist this lust

for conceptual power by refusing to put all biblical propositions into a single coherent

conceptual scheme."[24] Vanhoozer is stressing the idea that propositionalism is

inadequate, on its own, given the variety of biblical texts, "especially those that are

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[20] Although Vanhoozer tempers his discussion here, I have the same reservations for his treatment of the historical trajectory of propositionalist theology as were mentioned in the critique of Grenz's view.

[21] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 268. It is obvious in his argument here, and supported in his footnotes, that Vanhoozer's thought has been significantly impacted by the work of Richard Muller in his *Post-Reformation Dogmatics* particularly volumes 1 and 2.

[22] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 269. Emphasis his.

[23] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 270. Emphasis his.

[24] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 269.

concerned with aesthetic and affective qualities and not simply the cognitive."[25] God is

doing more than informing within the biblical text.

Vanhoozer not only states his difficulty with the propositionalist tendency for

system building, but also his perception of some propositionalists who exhibit a

proclivity toward proof-texting. He states the problem succinctly when he contends that

"proof-texting is a terrible example of how theology should treat the biblical text in order

to do it justice. Proof-texting assumes a uniform propositional revelation spread evenly

throughout Scripture: one verse, one vote. Not only does this approach risk

decontextualizing biblical discourse, it also leaves unclear just how the texts cited in

support actually lend their support to the point in question."[26] To the extent that it

regards theology as nothing more than statements about extractable propositions or

summaries of exegetical data, Vanhoozer sees proof-texting as positivistic. He suggests

that "propositionalism mistakenly assumes that language is essentially a matter of

picturing states of affairs."[27] While he agrees that this kind of "picturing" is one thing

that language does, he refuses to accept that it is the only thing that language can do.

Meaning, Vanhoozer declares, "is not limited to what is stated, nor is it limited to

sentence-length stretches of discourse only."[28] Proof-texting within the propositionalist

model seems to limit the theologian's treatment of the many kinds of literature within the

Scripture to the sentence-long propositional statement of ostensive reference. Vanhoozer

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[25] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 5.

[26] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 271.

[27] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 271.

[28] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 271.

is against this type of propositionalism because it both "removes the dialogical action" and "obscures the contextual and situational features of the action."[29]

While propositionalism "overlooks the significance of the different kinds of speech-acts and literary forms" that constitute the Bible, Vanhoozer argues that his canonical-linguistic theological model "affirms both the plurality of voices in Scripture and their theological significance."[30] Vanhoozer offers the following preliminary conclusions in consideration of this plurality of voices mentioned above. First, he suggests that we must approach the texts of Scripture on several different levels including historical, literary, and theological. Secondly, Vanhoozer warns that the theologian must be careful to not simply turn the canonical dialogue into a series of summary statements. Finally, he warns that the plurality on the level of the canon may call for an equivalent plurality on the level of interpretive traditions.[31] While he does not unpack the third point here, it is further addressed later in this chapter. Vanhoozer's goal in mentioning the point here is to show that he is seeking to "preserve both the diversity and the integrity of a theological dialogue *already canonized in Scripture*."[32]

Vanhoozer offers a helpful qualification to his treatment of what it means to be postpropositional when he writes "the *post* in *postpropositional* does not mean *against* but *beyond*. There is *more*, not less, in the canon than propositional revelation."[33] Rather than viewing the Bible as simply a place where we mine for propositional statements,

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[29] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 272.

[30] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 272-275.

[31] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 275.

[32] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 276. Emphasis his.

[33] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 276. Emphasis his.

Vanhoozer suggests that understanding Scripture as Divine communicative action will serve the theologian better for a number of reasons. He delineates those reasons in the following manner:

> (1) It overcomes the personal/propositional dichotomy inasmuch as communicative action is both a "saying" and a "doing"; (2) it corresponds to the biblical depiction of God as a communicative agent who does many things with words besides transmitting knowledge; (3) it better accounts for the diversity of Scripture itself, that is, the plurality of literary forms; (4) it enriches the notion of canonical authority by insisting that the church attend not only to propositional content (i.e., revealed truths) but to all the things God is doing communicatively in Scripture to administer his covenant; (5) it encourages us to view the Bible as a means by which we relate personally to and *commune* with God.[34]

Thus, since canonical-linguistic theology acknowledges the plurality of communicative practices in Scripture, it refuses to suggest that what is theologically significant about Scripture may be found in propositional statements alone.[35] Propositional statements are an important part of revelation and communicative action. Hence, propositional statements remain an important piece of our theological construct, albeit not the singular piece.

Postconservative Theology

Vanhoozer declares that his canonical-linguistic theological construct is postconservative. He distinguishes his particular proposal as a "new postconservative type of postmodern theology."[36] Vanhoozer's description of what he means by postconservatism is multifaceted as realized by his many partial definitions throughout this description. He contends that his canonical-linguistic theology "is *postconservative*

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[34] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 277-278.

[35] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 278.

[36] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 269.

because it holds the church accountable to an authoritative text that rules its life and language."[37] This is a fine statement as far as it goes, although it is unclear how this claim is unique to a postconservative approach to theology since most cognitive-propositionalists could assert the same thing. On the other hand, it certainly alludes to his overall view of biblical authority which will be addressed later in this chapter.

Vanhoozer also offers this explanation of why his canonical-linguistic theology is postconservative: it "is *postconservative* because it understands language as other than primarily referential and theology as other than merely propositional. *A postconservative theology recognizes the cognitive significance of literary forms other than assertorical statements*."[38] A great deal of this statement relates back to his overall thought about why he calls his theology postpropositional. It is important to note, once again, that Vanhoozer still believes that language can be referential and that assertorical statements are significant. However, he contends that theology is so much more than this limited understanding of language and cognitive capacity. Vanhoozer offers a playful corrective to the cognitive-propositionalist approach, referring to his suggestion as a "cognitive-poetic" approach which makes full use of both the intellect and the imagination. Rather than limiting reliable cognition to the two sources of experience and reason, Vanhoozer suggests that we make use of the imagination and its products such as metaphors and stories. After all, he reasons, propositional paraphrases of even biblical metaphors (think of the church as the body of Christ) are incapable to describe the beauty and richness of

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[37] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 278. Emphasis his.

[38] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 278. Emphasis his.

the metaphor.[39] The imagination enables us to discover connections that provide better understanding. Vanhoozer's definition of imagination states this quite well. He writes that the "imagination is the power of synoptic vision: the ability to synthesize heterogeneous elements into a unified whole. The imagination is that cognitive faculty that allows us to see as whole what those who lack imagination see only as unrelated parts."[40] Narratives in particular are able to bring various parts into a wholistic vision of life.

Vanhoozer argues that postconservative theology refuses to privilege one form as the only form through which real knowledge and transformation can take place. He refuses to privilege either the propositional form, against the "evangelical conservatives" on one hand, or the narrative form, against the postliberals, on the other. To be sure, Vanhoozer still stresses the narrative, since he likes the notion of the illocutionary force of a narrative being the "displaying of a world" while the "world displayed" is its propositional content.[41] I will address his use of speech-act theory later in this chapter. Here I wish to briefly describe Vanhoozer's view of the importance of narrative within the larger construct of our imagination. He contends that a narrative is able to do far more than transmit information. A narrative is better understood, for Vanhoozer, as a process of formation since it enables us or trains us as readers to see the world correctly. Furthermore, narratives provide context for our learning how to properly judge, experience and live correctly in concrete ways. Finally, narratives enable us to

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[39] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 278-281.

[40] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 281.

[41] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 283.

experience emotions that are consistent with beliefs about how things really are. While

stressing the significance of narrative, Vanhoozer's overall point is that Scripture has

multiple genres and these canonical forms "do not simply convey propositions but are

strategies for training readers to *see as*, *taste as*, and *feel as*."[42] This is the heart of

Vanhoozer's project. He writes,

> The discipline required by exegesis is at once intellectual, spiritual, and
> imaginative, for it involves nothing less than training readers to undergo the hard
> formation of following Scripture so that literary forms merge into forms of life, so
> that *seeing as* translates into *experiencing as*, even, at the limit, into *being as*. It is
> in this sense that *scientia* is a prerequisite to what ultimately matters: the
> sapiential ability to participate fittingly in the theo-drama.[43]

Vanhoozer argues that the postconservative theologian must be competent in multiple

literary forms, "for it is precisely the canonical forms that mediate to the reader the

capacity to see, taste, and feel *biblically*."[44]

Vanhoozer offers another description of his postconservative theology with regard

to our knowledge of the truth. Like others who call themselves postconservatives, or

conservatives for that matter, Vanhoozer wishes to distance himself from the ideas that

we have exhaustive and certain knowledge of God and that our words describing God are

univocal in character. However, he boldly proclaims that "a postconservative theology

will insist that *just these literary forms*—just these strategies for seeing, tasting,

participating in—describe and mediate what the church needs in order to make cognitive

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[42] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 284-285. Emphasis his.

[43] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 285. This is also his thought in *Drama of Doctrine*, 13-15.

[44] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 285. Emphasis his.

(and covenantal) contact with reality, with the one true God."[45] Thus, Vanhoozer affirms

that doctrinal truth falls under the rubric *adaequatio intellectus ad rem* as long as we

understand the *adaequatio* as sufficient or good enough and not wholly and completely.

We have true knowledge, Vanhoozer asserts, that is not absolute but adequate. It is the

canonical texts that provide for us this true knowledge that is adequate for our correct

interpretation of and participation in the theo-drama.[46]

Finally, Vanhoozer states that his canonical-linguistic theology is a

postconservative theology which "maintains that the canonical dialogue renders just what

the church needs to know about the theo-drama in order to follow it, not only with

intellectus but also with our feet."[47] Scripture is adequate in the formal sense that "just

these literary forms are adequate for rendering the Word of God…Objectivity in theology

is not some 'view from nowhere,' as if we could escape from particular points of view.

Objectivity is better conceived as the 'view from everywhere'—from everywhere in the

canon, that is."[48] Scripture is also adequate in that it enables us to know enough truth,

that is enough of what God is doing in Christ so that we can both understand his action

the manner in which we are to faithfully and fittingly participate in the theodrama.

Postfoundationalist Theology

Vanhoozer clearly identifies himself as one proposing a postfoundationalist

theology. However, he recognizes that critics of his canonical-linguistic model will seek

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[45] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 286. Emphasis his.

[46] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 288.

[47] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 291.

[48] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 291.

to discredit the proposal because they will see it as a type of canonical foundationalism. To this, Vanhoozer answers that just because the church and its theology has its foundation in Christ and the prophets' and apostles' testimony to Christ does not mean that theology must be foundationalist in the classic sense of the term.

Vanhoozer offers two theological arguments as to why he views the concept that Scripture is an indubitable foundation as problematic. First, a familiar theme resurfaces as he argues that "foundationalism privileges a certain type of information—propositional truths abstracted from Scripture—to the detriment of the diverse literary genres in and through which that information is canonically processed."[49] Secondly, "foundationalism privileges a certain type of procedure for generating knowledge that abstracts the *knower* from the process as well."[50] Vanhoozer's concern here is that the particularity of the kind of text as well as the location and identity of the one exegeting the text have no place in getting knowledge within the structure of classical foundationalism. He is convinced that classical foundationalism misses out on the real drama of knowledge which he puts forward in the following questions: "Will the exegete get—make cognitive contact with—the meaning? Will the exegete *relate* to, and *do*, the truth?"[51]

Having distanced himself from classical foundationalism for theological reasons, Vanhoozer also wishes to clearly identify himself as one type of postfoundationalist over against the larger trajectory of postfoundationalist, or nonfoundationalist, thought. Vanhoozer makes a clear distinction between his proposal and that of Grenz. He writes,

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[49] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 292.

[50] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 292.

[51] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 293. Emphasis his.

"canonical-linguistic theology demurs from those nonfoundationalist approaches that conceive knowledge as a web, net, or mosaic of belief."[52] His concern is that in a web of beliefs, no one belief is more important than another. Furthermore, beliefs can be revised due to pressure from experience, individually or communally. He then points out that in Stan Grenz and John Franke, and many others who argue for a mosaic of belief as they do, "it is not a set of beliefs but the believing community that is considered 'basic' insofar as the web or mosaic of belief is borne along, and revised by, traditions and communities of inquiry."[53] Vanhoozer contends that this gets things backwards and makes the community ultimately authoritative over the biblical canon. In fact, Vanhoozer places the basic thought of George Lindbeck and Stan Grenz together when he argues that in these types of postfoundationalist proposals the emphasis "is on the church's use of Scripture rather than the inspired authorial use."[54] Hence, he contends that Lindbeck and Grenz present proposals where the life of the church is substituted for the set of indubitable beliefs.

In contrast to the postfoundationalist proposals of Lindbeck and Grenz, Vanhoozer wishes to put forward a canonical-linguistic theology where knowing is "neither a matter of building foundations nor of weaving webs but of *following maps*."[55] Vanhoozer's chosen metaphor for knowledge here stresses the priority of the canonical text as well as its relationship to reality. It is "*just these maps*" that have priority over

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[52] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 293. He specifically cites Grenz as one theologian he has in mind here.

[53] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 293.

[54] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 294. See also the larger argumentation in *Drama of Doctrine*, 93-100, 165-179.

[55] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 294. Emphasis his.

one's use of them or one's reading of them. This description shows Vanhoozer's commitment to the thought that the interpretive framework of the church is canonical before it is communal. He sums up the distinction between his canonical-linguistic proposal and other foundationalist and postfoundationalist theologies quite directly as he declares "Scripture is neither a textbook of propositional truths that serves as the foundation for knowledge nor a narrative that relies on its position in the church's web of belief for its meaning and truth. Scripture is rather a canonical *atlas*: a collection of maps that variously render the way, the truth, and the life."[56]

Vanhoozer contends that "knowledge of God begins with trust in what we have been told about God by God, and this means taking the canon as the beginning of theological knowledge, the interpretive framework for understanding God, the world, and ourselves."[57] Thus, Scripture is the textual map that provides the directions for our participation in the theo-drama or the needed direction for walking and following after Christ. In order to rightly follow, we must achieve some level of canonical competence. Vanhoozer asserts "canonical-linguistic theology must display cartographic competence: a familiarity with the different forms of biblical discourse, with the ways in which each makes sense on its own terms, and with the way each relates to reality and to other forms."[58]

Vanhoozer develops his thought of canonical competence by describing how this competence may be seen in our understanding of fittingness in three senses. First, he

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[56] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 294.

[57] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 295.

[58] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 297.

describes intrasystematic fittingness which may also be understood as coherence. This type of fittingness would find some correlation to Lindbeck's notion of "intratextuality." Vanhoozer presents this stage of canonical competence as "understanding how each kind of text in the canon is composed and how each coheres in its own right." Intraystematic fittingness is thus "a matter of the kind of coherence within a single type of text-map."[59] We must understand the map's internal consistency.

Secondly, Vanhoozer stresses the need for extrasystematic fittingness. This may be understood as the correspondence to reality. Vanhoozer is careful to describe what he calls "canon-sense realism" where we become sensitive to the various ways in which the Bible renders reality in a genre-bound manner. He wishes to clarify that there is no "one-size-fits-all" kind of correspondence between the biblical language and reality. The manner in which the "map" corresponds to the world depends upon the kind of map that it is. In this case, biblical genre is tremendously important in that different genres are intended to correspond to the world in different ways. Vanhoozer concludes that this second aspect of canonical fittingness "is to recognize that the canon displays different kinds of correspondence, different kinds of extrasystematic fittingness."[60]

Finally, Vanhoozer describes canonical competence through intersystematic fittingness. This can be understood as coordination of the various maps as they relate to one another. A theologian, Vanhoozer reasons, must be able to make sense of individual texts (intrasystematic fittingness) and further understand the ways in which those texts relate to the world (extrasystematic fittingness). However, this third step of

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[59] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 298.

[60] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 298.

understanding how the various maps or texts relate to one another is also essential.

Vanhoozer argues that the various maps (texts) of Scripture are compatible with one

another and do fit together because they do not contradict one another and also because

"they share a common *orientation*."[61] Even though there are diverse biblical texts that

work with different "keys" and "scales," to borrow language from maps, "they all render

the same kerygma and are all oriented to Jesus Christ, their coordinating compass."[62]

The various texts of the canon cohere then because they are held together by and for

Christ.

In the end, Vanhoozer argues that his canonical-linguistic theology is

postfoundationalist because "it accepts the canonical atlas as its primary interpretive

framework with which to make sense of everything else."[63] A belief or action is judged

to be rational in the canonical-linguistic view if it "fits" with one or more of the biblical

maps. This is the goal of canonical-linguistic theology, namely, to be able to explicitly

"articulate the implicit rationality presupposed by the several canonical practices."

Furthermore, "the purpose of making this rationality explicit is to give us a handle on

those communicative practices and habits that make up the canon—not to make it easier

to explain their thoughts away but rather to make it easier to participate in and continue

them in our own idioms."[64] Thus, in Vanhoozer's postfoundationalist canonical-

linguistic model, "theological thinking is responsible to revelation, to just those forms of

testimony that God has taken up into his own communicative action and that now

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[61] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 299. Emphasis his.

[62] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 299.

[63] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 299.

[64] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 300-301.

constitute the canon. There is nothing more dramatic than coming to know God. The question is: Will our *minds* participate fittingly in the drama of redemption?"[65]

Before briefly delineating Vanhoozer's theological and philosophical context, I wish to offer a brief assessment of his thought discussed above. Vanhoozer's self classification as a postpropositionalist, postconservative and postfoundationalist theologian is helpful in understanding his overall theological goal and method. It is interesting to note the divergence in the treatment of these terms between Vanhoozer and Grenz especially and, to a lesser extent, between Vanhoozer and Lindbeck.

Vanhoozer's willingness to acknowledge that a postpropositionalist position must maintain that we are not against propositions, but we must also go beyond just propositionalism is a helpful corrective for those who contend that propositions are the only truth-bearing vehicle. Furthermore, his description as being a postconservative remains a great distance away from the likes of Grenz, Franke, Roger Olson and others. Many conservative theologians could affirm what he presented in his description of postconservatism, including that language does more than refer (although it does indeed refer). Many contemporary evangelicals could also humbly affirm that we have "adequate" knowledge from God in order to truly know him, ourselves, his world, and the nature of our relationship with God and his world. Few would argue that we have exhaustive and complete knowledge as God does. This also reflects on Vanhoozer's description of his not being a classical foundationalist, and hence calling himself a postfoundationalist. Granted, he is a different kind of postfoundationalist than Grenz or Lindbeck, as I have shown above. Many evangelical theologians do not currently

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[65] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 301. Emphasis his.

espouse classical foundationalism and would share a modest form that seems to be at work within Vanhoozer's presentation of his canonical-linguistic model.

In the end, it seems that Vanhoozer's self-classification as a postpropositionalist, postconservative, and postfoundationalist theologian is more a statement about where he sees the overall position or condition of evangelical theology today than it is a bold proclamation of any separation from his Reformed, evangelical background. His treatment of these characteristics reads more as "this is where theology currently is" (postpropositionalist, posconservative, postfoundationalist), and "this is where I uniquely take my stand within these current descriptors." If I am correct here, we will do well to be very careful to not import terminological baggage from others who use these terms in very different ways. Having considered Vanhoozer's self-classification as a theologian, it is important to further recognize the theological and philosophical currents that shape his theological proposal.

Vanhoozer's Theological-Philosophical Context

In his essay entitled "Once More Into the Borderlands," Vanhoozer seeks to delineate the nature of the relationship between theology and philosophy in the contemporary landscape.[66] While in this and other works Vanhoozer clearly identifies his work as responding to the postmodern condition or culture,[67] here he helpfully

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[66] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Once More into the Borderlands: The Way of Wisdom in Philosophy and Theology after the 'Turn to Drama'," In *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology: Reason, Meaning and Experience*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Martin Warner, eds., (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 31-54.

[67] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)," In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-25. Here Vanhoozer addresses the significance of some postmodern shifts in thought, particularly the "arts and humanities" turn, the "culture and society" turn, and the "philosophical

discusses important boundaries that keep theology and philosophy distinct in their

purpose and mission even though they remain related. Vanhoozer points out that there

exists an ontological boundary. He contends that the "living God of revelation should not

be confused with God as 'first cause' of a metaphysical system."[68] Thus, for Vanhoozer,

"one way of avoiding idolatry is to adopt a methodological distinction between the God

of philosophical theism and the triune, biblical God."[69]

A second boundary between theology and philosophy which Vanhoozer addresses

is the epistemological boundary. He construes this boundary in two different ways.

First, he shows the epistemological distinction as seen in the work of Immanuel Kant

who argues that this boundary exists between *phenomena* (the world as it appears to us)

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and theoretical" turn. In the end he calls for canonical wisdom in order to engage this context.; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the 'Miracle' of Understanding," In *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson, eds., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 3-34. Here Vanhoozer engages theological and philosophical hermeneutics especially after the influence of Barth, Ricoeur, and Gadamer.; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 no 1 (Mar 2005): 89-114. Reprinted in *Whatever Happened to Truth*, Andreas Kostenberger, ed., (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 93-129; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998). He describes the current context of postmodern thought with regard to the author, the text, and the reader in the first half of the book while providing his proposal in response to his critique in the latter half.; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "First Theology: Meditations in a Postmodern Toolshed," In *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 15-41; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Spirit of Understanding: Special Revelation & General Hermeneutics," In *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 207-236. His engagement of "Yale School" and "Chicago School" thought is enlightening here.; Kevin J. Vanhoozer. "The World Well Staged: Theology, Culture & Hermeneutics," In *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 309-336; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea of a Theological System," In *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, A.T.B. McGowan, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006), 125-182. His treatment of the triangulation of Scripture, church and the world are illuminating here.; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), especially 265-359; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/Modern Way," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 71-104.

[68] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 33.

[69] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 33.

and *noumena* (the world as it really is). There is a boundary, for Kant, "between that which is spatio-temporally structured and that which is not, between that to which our concepts apply and that to which they do not."[70] Vanhoozer argues that Soren Kierkegaard offers a better way of construing this boundary through his distinction between the genius and the apostle and what can be known by each. For Kierkegaard, the genius is the one who can reach the truths of reason the fastest, yet can never know more than his own mind. "By contrast, the apostle—one sent—knows something the genius cannot know, something transcendent, but only because he has been told by an authoritative source (for example, the Holy Spirit; cf. Matthew 16:17)."[71] Vanhoozer is thus convinced that Kierkegaard provides a possibility for transcending the epistemological boundary between theology and philosophy.

The final boundary discussed is an "ethical-eschatological" boundary. On the one hand, this distinction has to do with, borrowing from Emmanuel Levinas' thought, "philosophy's emphasis on epistemology that leads it to violate what is ultimately an ethical boundary, namely, the respect for the other."[72] When philosophical discourse utilizes "totalizing" conceptual schemes, then violence is done to God and the Word of God as well. On the other hand theology, Vanhoozer argues, has a mandate "to bear witness to God's free and loving action, a freedom to which no *a priori* conceptual scheme can do justice."[73] Thus, Vanhoozer points to Karl Barth as the theologian who

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[70] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 33.

[71] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 34.

[72] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 34.

[73] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 34.

demarcates the boundary as eschatological rather than ethical. "It is the boundary that distinguishes this world from the world to come, *ousia* from *parousia*."[74] Vanhoozer argues that, for Barth, it is a matter of an eternal world order interrupting the present world order.

Vanhoozer speaks more about being able to transcend the epistemological boundary between philosophy and theology than he does the metaphysical or ethical-eschatological. In the questions of epistemology, he readily recognizes that even though theology and philosophy are distinct types of discourse, they both have been influenced by the same cultural and intellectual developments that he refers to as "turns." Vanhoozer lists three revolutionary turns in the broader culture that set the stage for his dramatic theological proposal. They include the "turn to language," the "turn to narrative," and the "turn to practice."

The turn to language in both theology and philosophy recognizes that language is the medium "in which both thought and existence live and move and have their being." Vanhoozer contends that this turn to language "acknowledges something prior to and deeper than the subject, something—a structure, a system of differences—that serves as a framework for human reason and experience, for concepts and existence alike."[75] This turn to language is certainly evident within the name of Vanhoozer's canonical-*linguistic* theological proposal.

The turn to narrative in both theology and philosophy acknowledges "that thinkers in many disciplines have come to see narrative, like language, as the medium in

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[74] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 35.

[75] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 37.

which humans live and move and have their being."[76] Narratives sustain the identity of whole communities over time and furthermore sustain the identity of an individual within that community. The turn to narrative has stressed that we are unable to simply extricate ourselves from our place in our own particular tradition and cultural, contextual narrative. In fact, our personal identity is largely constituted by what we perceive our place to be in our ongoing contextual narrative. Vanhoozer writes that human beings "are not merely 'in' history but exist 'as' history: 'life' must be narrated if it is to be grasped as a meaningful whole."[77] It is this very thought that the theologian will utilize to stress the canonical narrative as the narrative by which the fittingness and rightness of other narratives are judged.

Finally, Vanhoozer addresses the turn to practice in both theology and philosophy. Narratives bring about traditions which, in turn, promote specific practices within a given social group. As members of a community, we are committed to regularly participate in these practices that, in part, constitute our identity. Perhaps the nod to Lindbeck is obvious here. Vanhoozer states that "philosophers and theologians who relocate the standards for speech, thought and action from universal rational criteria to the logic implicit in their local institutional practices, whether academic or ecclesial, may be said to have made the 'cultural-linguistic' turn."[78] In this type of turn, "getting it right" is equated with "conforming to the grammatical and social rules of a particular culture."[79]

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[76] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 39.

[77] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 39.

[78] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 41.

[79] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 41.

We are not primarily thinkers, but persons who relate to the world through our activity in it. This thought prompts Vanhoozer to describe his "turn to drama" in theology and philosophy as reframing the discussion of the relationship between faith and reason or theology and philosophy as one of competing forms of *phronesis*. He defines *phronesis* as "practical reason, the process of 'deliberating well' about how to realize the good in particular situations."[80] Vanhoozer is arguing that we need more than information. We need wisdom in order to understand what is fitting or what is best to do in any given situation. He states the practical nature of this turn to drama as he writes that this turn "is all about the working out and testing of convictions in the crucible of everyday life."[81] This theme carries on throughout this particular essay and makes up a significant portion of *The Drama of Doctrine* which most clearly delineates his dramatic theological proposal.

Vanhoozer not only shows his understanding of the postmodern culture or condition in which he lives, he also gives clear description of how he wishes to have theology respond to and engage postmodernity. In what I believe to be his most clear work in situating his proposal within the context of postmodernity, Vanhoozer offers ten theses that guide his theological proposal in a cautious appreciation of postmodernity that also warns of inherent weaknesses in its overall presentation. One can find many of the themes mentioned above throughout these ten theses.

1. Postmodernity is the condition of being fully aware of one's situatedness, and hence of one's contingency and deconstructability.
2. Christians can and should learn something from postmodernity, namely, the criticism of isms.

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[80] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 44.

[81] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 44.

3. Christians must not "correlate" with postmodernity or let concerns and frameworks other than Christ and canon determine faith's credenda and agenda.
4. Christian thought is faith seeking understanding and thus specifically Christian, that is, biblical and trinitarian.
5. Postmodernity has not discovered anything that was not already available, at least implicitly, in Christian scripture and tradition.
6. Thinking in a distinctly Christian way means thinking out of the mythopoetic framework of scripture (e.g., in terms of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation).
7. Christian faith is realist but insists that some truths can adequately be grasped only by means of a plurality of vocabularies or conceptual schemes oriented to different levels or aspects of reality.
8. The aim of Christian thinking about the true, the good, and the beautiful is wisdom, the ability to participate rightly in reality; the norm for Christian thinking about the true, the good, and the beautiful is the wisdom of God reflected in the face, and life, of Jesus Christ.
9. Christian thinking is one (holistic, integrative, imaginative), holy (distinct, virtuous, covenantal), catholic (demonstrating awareness of the length and breadth of the Christian tradition, philosophically eclectic), and apostolic (biblical, christocentric).
10. Modernity and postmodernity alike are ultimately digressions from the main subject, namely, the way of wisdom and of life summed up in Jesus Christ.[82]

The purpose of placing these theses here is to show Vanhoozer's understanding of the theological and philosophical context in which and from which he writes his larger proposal. Much of the content of these individual theses will be more thoroughly described when we consider the relationship of Scripture and the community of faith with the issues of authority, truth and meaning later in this chapter.

An additional marker of Vanhoozer's understanding of his theological and philosophical context may be found in his overall argument of *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* My intention is not to describe that full argument here, but simply to point out the salient features of what he sees as the problem and what he wishes for his responsive proposal to accomplish. For a number of reasons, Vanhoozer perceives that we are living

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[82] Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress," 77-100.

in an age where interpretation is the heart of the theological issue and he is convinced that we have taken a long walk in the wrong direction.

In Part I of his book, Vanhoozer points out his serious concerns about the current state of interpretation. He is concerned that we have sometimes misunderstood and at other times dismissed both the authority and, in turn, the intentionality of the author. He is furthermore concerned that we have "demeaned" meaning through an articulation of the indeterminacy of any given text. This is where the question of his book's title, in part, comes from. Can anyone really "determine" the intentional meaning from a written text by seeking to understand the author's intention of writing that text? A final concern is that the reader is given authority to use the text as they see fit. Vanhoozer contends that the text is undermined by the postulate of an ideological sub-text. All of this has tremendous impact on our reading, understanding, and using Scripture in the church. The church may constitute one set of readers of the biblical text and read it their way insofar as the church also recognizes the equal validity of the readings and renderings of non-ecclesial communities. One of Vanhoozer's points is to show that in a strong trajectory of contemporary literary theory, if one argues that the Bible should be read as the Word of God, then that person commits both a moral and an intellectual error.[83] Having set the contemporary problem, the author then describes his proposal for a cure through literary theory that has significant implications for the church's reading of Scripture.

In Part II of *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, Vanhoozer seeks to rehabilitate the author, the text, and the reader in order for meaningful interpretation to flourish. He first suggests that we "resurrect" the author by understanding meaning as "communicative

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[83] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 43-195.

action" purposed by the author in the text. Vanhoozer refutes the notion that the texts of

dead authors may be manipulated and attributed foreign meaning at the will of the reader.

He argues this point because of his understanding that the author's presence within a text,

even after she has died, guarantees its stability as a meaningful communicative action

which has a specific illocutionary force while also intending a specific perlocutionary

effect.[84] It is obvious here that Vanhoozer is utilizing the thought of speech-act theory

from Austin through Searle to enhance his argument. Having described the basic thought

of speech-act theory in the previous chapter, I will not do so again here. It is important to

note though that for Vanhoozer, as with other speech-act advocates, meaning is not

simply wrapped up in the words on a page, but also includes what the author intended to

do with those words and what effects she intended to illicit in the reader. Vanhoozer

writes "meaning is a three-dimensional communicative action, with form and matter

(propositional content), energy and trajectory (illocutionary force), and teleology or final

purpose (perlocutionary effect)…To inquire into what a text means is to ask what the

author has done in, with, and through the text."[85] I will take this up in more detail below.

Having "resurrected" the author, Vanhoozer then responds to his postmodern

context in literary theory by engaging the possibility of literary knowledge. He borrows

from the "Reformed epistemology" of Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff in order

to argue that belief in meaning is properly basic, that is to say that determinate knowledge

can be understood through proper interpretation of a given text. Vanhoozer's discussion

of the "literal sense" of a text is important to note here. He contends that, "literal, that is

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[84] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 201-265. While these thoughts are primarily argued here, they run throughout the book.

[85] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 218.

to say, literate, interpretation grasps the communicative context and is thus able to identify the communicative act. We grasp the literal meaning of an utterance when we discern its propositional matter and its illocutionary force—that is to say, when we recognize what it is: a command, assertion, joke, irony, parable, etc."[86] Vanhoozer is concerned to answer the question that makes up the title of this work through arguing that there is indeed a meaning in this text and we would do well to cease "demeaning" meaning and seek to understand what the author was saying and attempting to do with what she was saying through this particular text. He asks, "What exactly do we lose if we view communicative action as an epiphenomenon, a secondary symptom, of ideology? What we lose, I believe, is the purpose of language, its design plan. From a Christian point of view, language provides the matrix within which freedom and responsibility operate, as well as the most important medium through which human beings interact."[87] Vanhoozer provides an additional thought in a footnote when considering the type of interpretation that would replace God's speech for the reader's own intentions. He writes, "Sin corrupts this medium [language] along with all other aspects of the human being. Satan, insofar as he interprets God's speech for his own devices, may perhaps be viewed as the first radical reader-response critic—the first to replace the author's voice with his own: 'Did God say?' Theological non-realism is ultimately a rebellious protest against having to answer to any other voice than our own."[88] Vanhoozer is here pointing to both authority outside of the reader and meaning

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[86] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 312.

[87] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 330.

[88] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 361, n. 240.

residing within the communicative action of the author/speaker against the prevailing

postmodern literary theories.

Vanhoozer's final response to his postmodern literary context has to do with the

moral responsibilities of the reader. It is once again clear that the perlocutionary effect

described within Austin's speech-act theory is the pressing feature as the scholar asks "If

there is a meaning in the text, is there a right (and a wrong) way to respond to it?"[89] His

answer, of course, is yes. A reader fulfills her moral responsibilities by allowing the text

to have its intended effect upon her thinking, understanding and manner of life. This is

consistent with what Vanhoozer calls "interpretive virtue." He clearly contends, "My

thesis is that in reading we encounter an other that calls us to respond."[90] Given the

agency of the author and the action of the textual speech-act, Vanhoozer contends that the

reader must be reformed and exercise interpretive virtue by allowing the text to affect her

in the manner it intends which stems from its meaning. Vanhoozer summarizes, "The

meaning of the text…is something for which readers are responsible."[91] Thus, the reader

is responsible to check her own interpretive goals and aims in order to hear and receive

the author's intended perlocutionary effects. This thought bears a great deal of fruit for

Vanhoozer's understanding of how the church is to approach the study of Scripture as we

shall see.

Having considered the larger theological and philosophical context in which and

from which Vanhoozer writes, I wish to very briefly point out the significant influence of

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[89] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 368.

[90] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 368.

[91] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 368.

two key theologians on his dramatic theological proposal. The first is Hans Urs von

Balthasar, a Catholic theologian who employs the dramatic or theatrical metaphor in his

multivolume work *Theo-drama*.[92] Describing his own dramatic theological method in

The Drama of Doctrine, Vanhoozer states that his work "sets forth a theory of doctrine as

direction as the connecting link between the gospel as theo-drama [some of the work

done by Balthasar] and theology as Scripture's performance [borrowing from some of the

work of Paul Ricoeur]."[93] Vanhoozer borrows from and advances the general thought of

Balthasar in understanding the dramatic turn in theology. Setting the stage for his work,

Vanhoozer argues that "Drama has the advantage of combining the narrative elements of

sequence and configuration with speech-act elements that enable persons (including

readers) to enter into dialogical relation with the subject matter."[94] He affirms

Balthasar's employment of dramatic rather than metaphysical categories in order to do

justice to the content of Scripture.[95] To be sure, we see this reliance on display as

Vanhoozer utilizes Balthasar to show this need for dramatic understanding in order to

properly understand and do justice to the biblical account of Jesus' death on the cross.[96]

The entire dramatic theory of Balthasar has helped to shape the author's dramatic

theological proposal put forward in *The Drama of Doctrine*. What Balthasar does in

explicating the gospel as "theo-drama," Vanhoozer extends by describing the community

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[92] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vols. 1-5, (San Fransisco: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998).

[93] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 30.

[94] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 49 n. 48.

[95] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 48-51.

[96] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 383-396. While Balthasar is not the only theologian considered here, his thought is prominent throughout as is his general dramatic theory throughout the entire work.

of faith as an "interactive theater" where those members of the faith community perform the script of the Scriptures in their own cultural contexts.

The second theologian whose thought works prominently behind the scenes of Vanhoozer's *Drama* is George Lindbeck. In fact, one could read Vanhoozer's *Drama of Doctrine* as a dialogue with and response to Lindbeck's *Nature of Doctrine*. The sub-title of his work, *A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, is also telling. It certainly plays off of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of doctrine which was discussed in detail in chapter two. Vanhoozer approves of the linguistic turn in the theory of doctrine, yet wishes to make clear that he affirms that the biblical canon is the primary norm for assessing the truthful understanding and practice of the community of faith. The biblical canon serves as the substitute for the cultural life of the community of faith as the primary norm seen in Lindbeck's work. Vanhoozer's interaction with Lindbeck can be sensed throughout *Drama*, but his primary engagement with Lindbeck's proposal may be found early on. The author agrees with Lindbeck's refusal to embrace an experiential-expressivist model of doctrine observed in theological liberalism. While Vanhoozer partly shares Lindbeck's concern with the cognitive-propositionalist model of doctrine, he also criticizes him for too quickly dismissing the notion of propositional content within Scripture and traditional conservative theologies. This will be explained in more detail below. For now, we do well to understand that Vanhoozer is concerned with a propositionalist tendency to focus on revelatory knowledge as information to systematize rather than truth to be lived out in the performative life of the church.[97]

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[97] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 83-100.

Vanhoozer clearly distinguishes his model from that of Lindbeck. He writes, "The aim of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach is to initiate persons into and preserve the set of grammatically correct linguistic practices that structure the life of the church and shape Christian identity."[98] The problem for Vanhoozer here lies in the fact that, for Lindbeck, the testimony of the interpretative community seems to count more than the biblical text itself. Vanhoozer argues, "In Lindbeck's regulative theory, doctrine does not direct the community but is directed by it. Doctrine stands in a second-order relationship not to Scripture but to the use of Scripture in the church."[99] Thus, he concludes, "Lindbeck's emphasis on letting biblical narrative make sense on its own terms is eclipsed by his even stronger emphasis that only church practice gives the text its sense."[100] Vanhoozer wishes to maintain scriptural authority of the biblical canon over the community of faith. With respect for Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic turn, Vanhoozer sets out to improve upon the model through his canonical-linguistic model which he thinks will keep from subjecting itself to the missteps that he sees within postliberalism. With this theological and philosophical background in mind, I will now attempt to briefly delineate Vanhoozer's dramatic theological proposal.

A Brief Look at Vanhoozer's Big Idea

Vanhoozer presents his dramatic theological proposal most fully in *The Drama of Doctrine*. The encompassing vision for his theological method is that we will be able to best understand and articulate doctrine's role in directing and shaping our life of

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[98] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 96.

[99] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 97.

[100] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 97.

discipleship (faithfully following Christ) as we employ the metaphor of drama. The

metaphor plays out with the biblical canon being the script, God fulfilling the role of

playwright, the Holy Spirit functions as the director with pastors functioning as assistant

directors in the local theaters, and the church is the acting company who performs the

script together. The central metaphors pertaining to the theological method include

Scripture becoming "script" and theological understanding becoming "performance."

Vanhoozer argues for the dramatic model of theology throughout four main parts in his

book.

In Part I, Vanhoozer sets out to defend the use of drama for his theological

proposal. He argues, "Theology's method should be appropriate to its theo-dramatic

subject matter."[101] His point here is to acknowledge that the Scriptures point to Jesus as

the culmination of many revelatory and redemptive events recorded in both the Old and

New Testaments "which together recount a single drama of redemption that is both

covenantal in its focus and cosmic in its scope."[102] Vanhoozer presents the various larger

acts of this drama of redemption in the following manner:

> The first act is creation (Gen 1-3), the setting for everything else that follows. Act
> 2 (beginning from Genesis 12 and running through the rest of the Old Testament)
> concerns God's election, rejection, and restoration of Israel. The third, pivotal
> and climactic act is Jesus: God's definitive Word/Act. Act 4 begins with the risen
> Christ sending his Spirit to create the church. The fifth and final act is the
> eschaton, the consummation of all things, and the consummation of God's
> relationship with Israel and the church. The church lives at present between the
> definitive event of Jesus and the concluding event of the eschaton, poised between
> memory and hope.[103]

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[101] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 38.

[102] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 39.

[103] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 2-3.

A key question to be answered is where we, the church, currently fit within the scope of this redemptive drama. The answer is that we fit in Act 4 after the sending of the Spirit to create the church and before the eschaton, Christ's second coming, of Act 5. We recognize that there is about 2000 years between Pentecost and now and we have yet to see the second coming of Christ. What are we to make of this gap between Act 4 and Act 5? Vanhoozer's answer sets up the need for his dramatic theological proposal. He asserts that, "Strictly speaking, the last few scenes of Act 4 are not scripted, at least not in detail. The challenge for theology, and the church, is to appropriate and exemplify the biblical theo-drama in and for new cultural contexts."[104] Vanhoozer's project is needed, he argues, because part of the play has been left unwritten. We have consistent writing of the dramatic play that leads us into Act 4 and we even know the end of the story as far as it has been written. But the second scene of Act 4, the life of the contemporary church, is not fully written out because the divine playwright desires that his new covenant people fill out that story in a manner consistent with the content and character of the written portions of the story until Jesus returns. This is precisely where Vanhoozer's directive role of doctrine comes into play.

Against lyric theology (similar to Lindbeck's description of the experiential-expressive model) and epic theology (similar to Lindbeck's cognitive-propositionalist model), Vanhoozer argues for a dramatic theological method.[105] He contends, "Evangelical theology deals not with disparate bits of ideas and information but with divine doings—with the all-embracing cosmic drama that displays the entrances and

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[104] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 307.

[105] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 84-93.

exoduses of God."[106] According to Vanhoozer then, in this gap of the theo-drama from

Act 4 scene 2 until Act 5, evangelical theology should understand doctrine as "direction

for the fitting participation of individuals and communities in the drama of redemption.

This, essentially, is the gist of the proposal."[107] The author sums up his understanding of

the dramatic nature of doctrine by providing the following descriptive points.

1. Doctrine provides program notes for identifying the *dramatis personae* and for understanding the basic theo-dramatic plot.
2. Doctrine is direction for the church's fitting participation in the drama of redemption, this enabling one to continue the missions of the Son and Spirit into new situations.
3. Doctrine is direction for a scripted, yet "spirited," performance of covenantal faithfulness.
4. Doctrine as direction tells us what has already been done (by God), thus implying what remains to be done (by us). Claims about what we should do (the imperative, propositional direction) rest on claims about what God has done in Christ (the indicative, propositional declaration).
5. Doctrine gives rise to a project that is as propositional as it is personal—to something to be believed by us, done by us, felt by us. Doctrine directs disciples as they seek to orient themselves in the church and in the world vis-à-vis the truth, goodness, and beauty defined by Jesus Christ.[108]

It is important to note from what has been presented above that Vanhoozer wants to

ensure that it is Scripture that constitutes what a "fitting" participation in the theo-drama

looks like. Thus, having described his use of drama for his theological proposal and the

dramatic nature of doctrine, he moves to the second part of his book in order to address

our understanding of the biblical canon as the script for our theological performance.

Vanhoozer contends that the purpose of Part 2 of his book "is to give an account

of why the canonical Scriptures ought to be the supreme norm for Christian doctrine and

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[106] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 39.

[107] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 102.

[108] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 110.

how they so function."[109] He later writes, "The purpose of this chapter, and indeed of the whole of part 2, has been to rehabilitate the notion of *sola scriptura* in light of a Scripture principle that views the Bible as an authoritative script that calls not merely for intellectual assent but for *live performance*."[110] At the heart of the second part of Vanhoozer's book, the author wishes for the reader to acknowledge that the principle of *sola scriptura* enables us to treat Scripture alone as the "norming norm" while viewing church tradition as the "normed norm." He illustrates his thought by enlisting what he terms "the courtroom drama of doctrine" to determine how the church is to recognize the Spirit's speaking in doctrinal disputes. He contends that church tradition does not have the authority of the Judge, for that belongs to God alone. Church tradition does have the authority of a faithful witness though. In fact, he declares that "tradition enjoys the authority that attaches to the testimony of *many* witnesses."[111] Thus, the author contends that we can view church councils and the church fathers as "expert witnesses" to the sense of Scripture and how we are to respond to it. It must remain clear, however, that the triune God has the say as the one who sits on the bench. Thus, Vanhoozer argues that "the task of theology is to cross-examine the witnesses in order to offer proximate judgments under the ultimate authority of the presiding judge: the Spirit speaking in the Scriptures."[112]

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[109] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 113.

[110] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 236.

[111] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 234. Emphasis his.

[112] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 234.

The biblical canon as script functions in part as a norm for evaluating the faithfulness and fittingness of subsequent performances of that very script. Borrowing some thought from Gadamer's comments on drama, Vanhoozer points out that our actual performance of the script enriches our understanding of it even though the script itself is authoritative apart from the performance and functions as the set of directions for the actors to follow within the play.[113] Against the general thought of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model, Vanhoozer contends that "the canon is not simply a compendium of language games that arise from a covenantal way of life but a set of practices that, precisely because they are authored and authorized by the God of the covenant, are *life-giving*."[114] Thus, the canon is not only a means for understanding what God has done for us in Christ, but it is also the primary criterion for understanding what we should do and how we should speak as the church today in our context in light of God's previous acts and speech.

The central focus of the third section of Vanhoozer's book is directly concerned with the theological method, that is, what this theological method looks like when put into practice. Vanhoozer entitles this section of his argument "The Dramaturge." The author admits that this concept may be little known in America, but is readily understood in the European theatrical scene. The goal here is to make sense of the drama for both the actors and audience in order to ensure that the performance is faithful to the script and goes well. Furthermore, dramaturgy exists "to serve the practical purpose of helping

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[113] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 235. He borrows some of this thought and quotes from Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., (New York: Continuum, 2002), 147-148.

[114] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 236. Emphasis his.

directors determine how best to interpret the script."[115] "No model better approximates the work of the theologian," contends Vanhoozer, "than that of the dramaturge, whose task is *to study the playscript and prepare it for performances that truthfully realize its truth.*"[116]

Vanhoozer relates that the first aspect of dramaturgy "focuses on the study of a given play—its author, content, style, background—and emphasizes the importance of staying faithful to the text."[117] The theologian calls this the exegetical or *scientia* aspect of the dramaturge's task. I have described a great deal of this above in Vanhoozer's self-classification as postpropositional, postconservative, and postfoundational in describing what this canonical-linguistic theological model must look like. The dramaturge/theologian puts forth a postpropositional theology by engaging the script as God's communicative action. The dramaturge must go beyond propositional content while still including propositions in relaying the why and what of God's saying and doing within the theo-dramatic text. The dramaturge/theologian must also be faithful in exegeting and putting forth a canonical-linguistic theology that is postconservative in that "it holds the church accountable to an authoritative text that rules its life and language" and recognizes that "the *'cognitive' need not be equated with or reduced to assertoric propositional statements.*"[118] The theologian as dramaturge thus aspires to provide adequate knowledge of how the church may participate rightly in the theo-drama.

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[115] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 244 n. 2.

[116] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 247. Emphasis his.

[117] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 245.

[118] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 278-280. Emphasis his.

Finally, the theologian as dramaturge recognizes and puts forward three kinds of
fittingness that stem from and result in canonical competence which enables the church to
faithfully participate in the ongoing theo-drama. There should exist an intrasystematic
fittingness (coherence within a single type of text), an extrasystematic fittingness
(correspondence with how the Bible renders reality in its various genres), and an
intersystematic fittingness (coordination which provides a common orientation).[119] This
canonical-linguistic *scientia* moves directly into the need for the church to exercise
practical wisdom, *sapientia*, in fulfilling her calling to perform in her given context in a
manner consistent with the biblical canon through the assistance of the dramaturge.

While the first aspect of dramaturgy is script-oriented, the second aspect focuses
on how to best communicate the script and perform the script in terms that would be
meaningful, intelligible, and compelling for contemporary audiences.[120] This is the idea
behind that which Vanhoozer engages theologically as *sapientia*. The theologian as
dramaturge seeks primarily for understanding and to promote understanding for others so
that everyone is able to rightly follow the drama where it leads. Theology is more than
science. Canonical-linguistic theology attempts to lead to a practical wisdom that better
enables the community of faith "to make judgments about the true, the good, and the
beautiful" in order to fulfill its calling to order one's life "in accordance with the
eschatological reality of the gospel."[121] This *sapientia* comes forward through a

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[119] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 298-299.

[120] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 245.

[121] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 308.

canonical-linguistic theological method, Vanhoozer argues, by means of offering a prosaic theology, a phronetic theology, and a prophetic theology.

A canonical-linguistic theology, Vanhoozer asserts, is a prosaic theology in that both the content of Scripture and its various literary forms "help generate and govern the Christian form of life."[122] The author wishes to maintain the emphasis on the life and practices of the community of faith that we saw in both Lindbeck and Grenz. Vanhoozer recognizes that doctrine, like truth, is something that must be done not simply identified and defined. Furthermore, he contends that this doing of doctrine has a greater end goal than just the practices of the church. The practice of the community of faith in everyday life is important because it allows those who make up the community of faith to glorify and enjoy communion with the one, true, triune God. Vanhoozer articulates that "what we have in the Bible is prosaic wisdom: practical reasoning incarnated in ordinary communicative practices."[123] The challenge, the theologian admits, is moving from the prose of Scripture to the "prose" of contemporary culture. This requires a contextual theology which is neither a form of cultural relativism nor a form of cultural absolutism.[124]

Vanhoozer also explains the need for a phronetic theology. This is really the heart of his argument for *sapientia*. Perhaps Vanhoozer is most clear about the relationship between canonical-linguistic theology and *phronesis* when he declares that "theology yields directions for deliberating well about what God has done in Christ and

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[122] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 309.

[123] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 310.

[124] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 310-324.

about how we are to live in light of the gospel in order to live well with others before

God."[125] It is this "deliberating well" or good judgment that is at the heart of this

phronetic theology. *Phronesis* concerns good judgment in living well or "right human

action." The author explains that this kind of practical reasoning, grounded in the biblical

canon, involves deliberating and forming judgments about what to do in specific life

situations when there seems to be no method or theory that enables one to clearly address

the issue.[126] Vanhoozer adapts thought and language from Aristotle and Gadamer to

conclude that "Good theological judgment is largely, though not exclusively, a matter of

being apprenticed to the canon: of having one's capacity for judging (a capacity that

involves imagination, reason, emotion, and volition alike) formed and transformed by the

ensemble of canonical practices that constitute Scripture."[127] This is the practical

wisdom that Vanhoozer suggests we find within his canonical-linguistic theological

proposal. We enter the world that the canonical author establishes for us and thereby

develop an ability to rightly see and interpret our own contemporary world while also

developing the ability to judge, say and do what is canonically fitting and Christ-honoring

in our own specific situation.

The process of "deliberating well" mentioned above issues in an "act of

judgment—in action." Vanhoozer entertainingly writes, "Deliberation without end

dwindles into mere dithering."[128] His point is this: *phronesis* must be followed up by a

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[125] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 324.

[126] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 325.

[127] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 331.

[128] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 354.

prophetic moment where the believer actually speaks or does something out of the conviction that has been developed. Vanhoozer contends that this type of "prophetic theology" is precisely where a canonical-linguistic theological method will lead. This may necessitate being countercultural as well as contextual. The author explains that a "theology that is appropriately prophetic will at times have to protest the church's assimilation of or accommodation to culture, for contextualization must never go as far as capitulation."[129] A prophetic theology enacts wise judgments in everyday decisions. Vanhoozer sums up his description of *sapientia* as prophetic theology in the following manner:

> The goal of theology is to form disciples who participate fittingly in the theo-drama precisely as compelling witnesses to the resurrection. To stake a truth claim on behalf of the resurrection is ultimately to become involved not simply in arguments but in a way of life. The correspondence between our doctrine and reality involves more than a certain language/world relationship. Theology as a form of *sapience* ultimately involves persons and practices, not merely propositions and procedures; transformation, not merely information. A prophetic theology will seek to correspond in word *and* deed, proposition *and* practice, to the reality of the resurrection.[130]

The goal of Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic theology is to help enable the community of faith and the disciples that make it up, "to discern and to do Christ" in every situation and to live out the practical wisdom of God.

The fourth and final section of Vanhoozer's *Drama of Doctrine* is "The Performance." The author states, "The burden of part 4 is to bring all that we have said about Scripture and theology to bear on the Christian life by examining the outcome of this dramaturgical dogmatics: life lived to the glory of God, life bent on *performing the*

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[129] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 357.

[130] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 358.

Scriptures that attest to the covenant and its climax, the person and work of Jesus

Christ."[131] Vanhoozer leads the reader through an argument that states that doctrinal

direction shapes the way the church and individual disciples see, understand, and engage

their world. Doctrine enables the believer to see, feel and act in manners that are

consistent with and fitting of those who are in Christ. "Doctrine directs us," Vanhoozer

contends, "toward fitting participation, therefore, (1) by helping us understand the theo-

dramatic action and (2) by helping us learn our roles."[132] To be sure, it is the

performance of the actor that the author focuses upon in this fourth section. As we

faithfully play our role, directed as we are by doctrine, we realize our true selves, that is,

who we are meant to be in Christ. The author asserts "Our identity as persons is not

simply a matter of the roles we choose to play, then, but of how we respond to our divine

casting call and play the roles we have been given."[133] At this point, Vanhoozer employs

Stanislavski's Method school of acting to illustrate a sense of sanctification in our acting

out the theo-drama. In this context, he writes, "The ultimate goal of the actor, then, is not

simply to play a role but to project the main idea of the play."[134] Thus, doctrine serves an

important role in not only indicating what it is that we are to do to fittingly participate in

the drama of redemption, but also to help disciples become spiritually fit where our

fitting participation in various situations becomes normal.[135] In a helpful summary,

Vanhoozer proclaims that "doctrines are indispensable imaginative habits for conceiving

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[131] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 361, Emphasis his.

[132] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 363-364.

[133] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 368.

[134] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 372.

[135] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 373-378.

the meaning of the theo-drama and for preparing to play our part. It is in this sense that

doctrine provides direction for seeing, judging, feeling, and acting in ways that display

spiritual fitness and theo-dramatic fittingness."[136]

What are we to make of doctrines that seem removed from the performance? For

instance, how does the doctrine of the sinlessness of Christ relate to the performance or is

this an example of an abstract doctrine with no significance for the performance at all?

Vanhoozer skillfully answers this question again in light of Method acting. He writes:

> The Method, we may recall, encourages actors to prepare for their roles by imaginatively filling out the details of their character's lives and the circumstances that color their action. One needs to imagine the whole picture, Stanislavski believed, in order to act truthfully. An actor cannot even walk into a room truthfully 'until you know who you are, where you came from, what room you are entering, who lives in the house, and a mass of other given circumstances that must influence your action.' The doctrine of Jesus' sinlessness is one of those things we need to know in order to walk into the room—or rather, enter into the theo-drama—truthfully.[137]

Thus, doctrinal claims will either guide the disciple's action in what she should do or help

her, as in the case above with Jesus' sinlessness, to have the right attitude toward others

in the drama. There are certain things we must know and attitudes we must develop in

order to enter into the theo-drama "truthfully," and then continue to be directed

doctrinally in order to develop a spiritual fitness so that we might participate fittingly in

the various situations we will face in the ongoing drama of redemption in Act 4 scene 2

until Act 5 comes to pass. Having thus described Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic

theological program in general terms, I now turn to consider the specifics of how this

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[136] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 378.

[137] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 379.

theological method understands the relationships that Scripture and the community of faith have with truth, authority, and meaning.

Scripture and Theology

It is clear from Vanhoozer's naming his theological method "canonical-linguistic" that Scripture must hold a key place within that method. But just how important is Scripture and how are we to understand its role within theology? Still further, how might we understand Scripture as God's communicative act? What role does that biblical canon play as we move from it to theological discourse? Finally, how might we understand the relationship between Scripture and the questions of truth, authority and meaning? Attempting to answer these questions within Vanhoozer's proposal is the subject of what follows.

Scripture as *Principium*

Vanhoozer has written a great deal about the authority of Scripture and how it functions as the "norming norm" of theology. In two particular essays he is tasked with the responsibility of assessing whether the two statements making up the doctrinal statement of the Evangelical Theological Society are coherent.[138] These statements, "the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs," and "God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory," can and should be

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[138] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks (Part 1)," In *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 25-49; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theological Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks (Part 2)," In *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 50-78.

understood in relationship to one another, argues Vanhoozer. The author, after having

described Scripture as God's communicative act, declares that "the Trinity and Scripture,

despite looking initially like a doctrinal odd couple, actually fit together hand in glove.

Wittingly or not, the ETS statement gestures in the direction of an evangelical 'first

theology' that juxtaposes God and God's word, the *principium essendi* (foundation of

existence) and *principium cognoscendi* (foundation of knowing) of Christian

dogmatics."[139] To be sure, Vanhoozer affirms that Scripture is the epistemological

principium theologiae, without which we would not have true knowledge of God nor any

theological method that could speak of him.

Alongside his argument that Scripture functions as the *principium cognoscendi*,

Vanhoozer regularly describes the authority of the biblical canon over the life and

practices of the church and tradition itself. He writes, "The canonical Scriptures have

primal and *final* authority because just these communicative acts and practices are the

chosen media the Spirit uses to inform us of Christ, and to form Christ in us so that we

may speak and act in our own situations to the glory of God."[140] He further describes the

Bible's authority to form our judgments and actions in light of new situations and boldy

asserts, "Authority ultimately remains with the canonical text."[141] This is so because "the

Spirit binds himself publicly not only to Christ and to the church but also to the

Scriptures…The Bible is not like other texts; it has been commissioned by Jesus and

prompted by the Spirit. It is part and parcel of God's communicative action that both

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[139] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 75.

[140] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 237.

[141] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 352.

summons and governs the church."[142] Vanhoozer argues that this is not a new thought in theology, in fact "it was a virtually unanimous assumption in the early church that the Holy Spirit was the author of Scripture and that its meaning, even where it was multiple, was determinate. *Church tradition accorded supreme authority to Scripture.*"[143]

Unlike Grenz, Vanhoozer argues for both divine inspiration and divine illumination of the biblical text without collapsing the one into the other. He affirms the divine inspiration of the text while clearly communicating that "the Spirit's illumination of the reader in the present is another matter that has to do with the Bible's right interpretation not its constitution. As such, it is an epistemological work, not an ontological one."[144] Thus, Vanhoozer argues that the Scriptures are authoritative because of what they are apart from the church's use of them while still maintaining authority in illuminating how the church should speak and act in light of the inspired text today.[145]

Hans Boersma is quite right to point out the significance of Vanhoozer's description of *sola scriptura* as helping one to understand his thought on the relationship between Scripture and tradition as it pertains to authority.[146] Vanhoozer argues, "To practice *sola scriptura* is to treat Scripture alone as the 'norming norm' and tradition as the 'normed norm.' A theology that practices *sola scriptura* recognizes the *ministerial*

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[142] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 202.

[143] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 164. Emphasis his.

[144] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 1," 34 n. 32.

[145] This is a thought also supported in Michael D. Williams, "Theology as Witness: Reading Scripture in a New Era of Evangelical Thought Part II: Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*," *Presbyterion* 37 no 1 (Spring 2011): 21-22.

[146] Hans Boersma, "On Baking Pumpkin Pie: Kevin Vanhoozer and Yves Congar on Tradition," *Calvin Theological Journal* 42 (2007): 249-250.

authority of tradition, namely, its ability to nurture individuals in and to hand on the

apostolic faith through the church's corporate witness."[147] Within the theologian's

canonical-linguistic theology, the Scripture serves as authoritative script while tradition

may be understood as a part of the performance of the ongoing drama of redemption.

The purpose of the script is to enable and regulate the performance. Thus, Vanhoozer

declares, "*sola scriptura* does not preempt the need for church tradition but merely

asserts the primacy and finality of the script as a norm for evaluating subsequent

performances."[148] The author's high view of biblical authority meshes quite well with his

sense of theological realism which will be taken up later. Perhaps Vanhoozer is most

clear about his view of the nature of biblical authority when he speaks against his

perception of the postliberal position which contends that the authority in deciding how

to construe God and Scripture lies with the community of faith rather than with the text of

Scripture. In contrast, he writes the following description:

> The point to note is that theology begins neither with a *sensus divinitatis*, nor a *sensus literalis*, nor even a *sensus fidelium*, but with a *sensus scripturalis* (e.g. a sense of the Bible as a unified Scripture, as divine communicative action). Theology has to do with God in self-communicative action (incarnation) and with Scripture as God's self-communicative act (inspiration). Authority in theology, I believe, is a matter of the Triune God in self-communicative action.[149]

The development of the concept of Scripture as God's communicative act is taken up

later in this chapter. For now, it is important to note that, for Vanhoozer, Scripture is

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[147] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 234. Emphasis his.

[148] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 235.

[149] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology," In *Evangelical Futures*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 74; This thought is also clearly argued in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "First Theology: Meditations in a Postmodern Toolshed," In *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 25-39.

authoritative because of what it is, God's communicative act, and is also authoritative in its governing the church in her speech and actions.

Scripture and the Turn to Narrative

Vanhoozer, as pointed out in the treatment of his theological and philosophical context earlier in this chapter, recognizes the significance of the "postmodern" turn to narrative, or perhaps return to narrative as Hans Frei and others would argue. Indeed, one need not look far to see that many thinkers from various disciplines have come to understand that narrative, similar to language, is "the medium in which humans live and move and have their being."[150] In fact, he lists a number of authors represented in *Why Narrative?*[151] to show the impact the turn to narrative has had on the quality of experience, the narrative shape of human experience, the whole range of epistemological concerns, and even the narrative shape of human identity. Vanhoozer states, "Personal identity is largely constituted by one's place in an ongoing story. Human beings are not merely 'in' history but exist 'as' history: 'life' must be narrated if it is to be grasped as a meaningful whole."[152]

This turn to narrative is helpful in our approach to theology and in our reading of Scripture. Vanhoozer reasons, "The labors by postliberals and others in the field of biblical narrative have doubtless produced a bounteous theological harvest. Narrative theology represents an important rehabilitation of the biblical text itself as a cognitive

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[150] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 39.

[151] Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

[152] Vanhoozer, "Borderlands," 39.

instrument of theological significance."[153] Alongside this rousing support of narrative

theology found within postliberalism especially, Vanhoozer warns of overstating the case

and making narrative the 'only' biblical genre. He contends that if one elevates narrative

over all biblical genres, then we will fall into the same trap as the propositionalist who

tends to reduce the many canonical forms into one kind only. This simply must not

become the case. The Bible states as well as narrates and the exegete and theologian

must be respectful to the form. What does become clear is that, for Vanhoozer, even

propositions are dependent upon the larger unified narrative or metanarrative of the

biblical text, that is, the extended narrative of God's dealing with the world.

One advantage that Vanhoozer sees for reading Scripture as largely narrative is

that it enables us to both see and speak of the unity of Scripture. He writes, "Despite the

variety of literary material in the Bible—psalms, law, parables, prophecies, and so on—

the Bible tells one overarching story from creation to consummation."[154] The narrative

medium illustrates that form, the narrative, makes a cognitive contribution in its own

right as the storyteller creates a "unified whole from a succession of events."[155]

Vanhoozer clarifies this concept when he writes:

> The following diagnostic questions are useful in uncovering how form contributes
> to content: Whose voice is addressing us? What is its point of view? What in the
> reader is rendered active: the intellect alone, or also emotions, imagination,
> desire? What kind of precision does the text display? What kind of explanation
> does it offer? What status do its assertions have? Perhaps the primary question
> we need to ask, however, concerns literary genre: What kind of text is this, and
> what is it doing? It is not enough to know the meaning of the individual words

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[153] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 273.

[154] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 93.

[155] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 282.

only; the exegete must also determine what is going on at the level of the literary whole.[156]

Any theological thought content must be consistent with its literary vehicle and if the vehicle is narrative then the theologian must strive to understand the unique illocutionary force of that narrative.

Biblical narrative is not simply asserting that this act happened and this next act happened. There is more going on in the text. Vanhoozer argues that "narratives, for example, have the unique ability to *display human action in a temporal world.* Displaying a world is the illocutionary force of narrative; the world displayed, its propositional content."[157] Thus narratives are not simply chronologies of events. Rather, narratives should be understood as configurations of both characters and events. The narrative's plot brings a level of coherence to what might otherwise be an arbitrary diversity of actions. Vanhoozer thus contends, "Narratives make story-shaped points that cannot always be paraphrased in propositional statements without losing something in translation."[158] Surely narratives do more than just display the world. "They also establish a point of view: the stance of the narrator."[159] As authors write narratives and thereby display a world, they are furthermore developing worldviews within their readers. These narratives are teaching the readers to see, feel, and live a certain way. The author contends that by "inculcating a worldview, narrative is far more than a way of

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[156] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 283.

[157] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 283. Emphasis his.

[158] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 93.

[159] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 284.

transmitting information; it is rather a process of *formation*, a training in *seeing as*."[160] This is the power that Vanhoozer sees in the turn to understanding Scripture as primarily narrative.

We get to see and understand persons and things as they truly are through narrative accounts of things that the person has done. This is surely better and more wholistic knowledge than simply listing attributes or character traits. This certainly seems to ring true with regard to the narrative of what God was and is doing in Christ. This particular narrative clearly identifies the *dramatis personae*. Furthermore, the community of faith gains a sense of its identity through reading this narrative, knowing this narrative, swearing allegiance to this narrative, that is, this narrative becomes our narrative, the narrative in which we acknowledge ourselves to be participants.[161]

Vanhoozer finds himself largely in agreement with much of this admittedly postliberal turn to understanding Scripture as narrative. His major concern about Lindbeck's view of Scripture's role as narrative of the community is that there exists a seemingly self-contained nature of the world of the text with Lindbeck's thought. Thus there remains "serious doubt as to whether Lindbeck's approach is able to make truth claims about anything 'outside' the intratextual story world of Scripture."[162] With these thoughts in mind, Vanhoozer wishes to move beyond simply describing Scripture as narrative and employ some thoughts of speech-act theory in order to approach Scripture as God's communicative act.

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[160] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 284. Emphasis his.

[161] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 94.

[162] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 95.

Scripture as God's Communicative Act

Vanhoozer's treatment of understanding Scripture as God's communicative act is central to his canonical-linguistic theological proposal.[163] The amount of space given to explaining his thought in this area reveals just how important the concept is for his proposal.[164] At the heart of his description of a proposed dramatic understanding of theology, and Scripture in particular, is the thought that the "operative concept in the theodrama…is not 'subject and object' but *communicative interaction*."[165] Furthermore, God's communicative interactions with others are "covenantal" interactions which are "part of the broader economies of revelation and redemption."[166] To be sure, Vanhoozer contends that these communicative interactions involve God's Word, the community of faith, and their communicative interaction in the world. However, he clearly declares that

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[163] It is on this very point that Wolterstorff perceives that Vanhoozer has made a mistake especially as seen in chapter 5 of his *Is There Meaning in this Text?* Wolterstorff writes, "Though Vanhoozer and I share the view that texts and illocutionary acts are intimately related, they are not identical." Furthermore, he argues that "texts are not and could not be acts." See Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Resuscitating the Author," In *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson, eds., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 48.

[164] A partial list includes Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). The entirety of this work speaks to communicative action, God's being in communicating, and the divine author in dialogical relationship with human authors, human readers and interpreters.; Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, especially chapters 1-7 although the concept is expressed throughout the work.; Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," the entirety of this essay is describing the nature of divine communicative action and the relationship between the triune God and the text of Scripture as divine communicative act.; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea of a Theological System," In *Reformed and Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, A.T.B. McGowan, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006), especially 164-173 where he describes his view in the context of the views of Bloesch, McGrath, and Grenz.; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the 'Miracle' of Understanding," In *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson, eds., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 3-34. His interaction with Barth, Gadamer, and Ricoeur are insightful here.; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse & the Discourse of the Covenant," In *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 159-203; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning?*, chapters 5-7. This really sets the foundation and undergirds his further explanation of communicative action throughout his later works mentioned above.

[165] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 165.

[166] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 165.

it is crucial to acknowledge God's communicative prevenience, for without God's prior word and deed, theology would not have access to its object.

Vanhoozer, borrowing from the speech-act theory of Austin and Searle, sums up much of his thought on communicative action through the presentation of ten theses. He provides the following for consideration:

1. Language has a "design plan" that is inherently covenantal.
2. The paradigm for a Christian view of communication is the triune God in communicative action.
3. "Meaning" is the result of communicative action, of what an author has done in tending to certain words at a particular time in a specific manner.
4. The literal sense of an utterance or text is the sum total of those illocutionary acts performed by the author intentionally and with self-awareness.
5. Understanding consists in recognizing illocutionary acts and their results.
6. Interpretation is the process of inferring authorial intentions and of ascribing illocutionary acts.
7. An action that aims to produce perlocutionary effects on readers other than by means of *understanding* counts as strategic, not communicative, action.
8. To describe a generic (or canonic) illocution is to describe the communicative act that structures the text considered as a unified whole.
9. The Spirit speaks in and through Scripture precisely by rendering its illocutions at the sentential, generic and canonic levels perlocutionarily efficacious.
10. What God does with Scripture is covenant with humanity by testifying to Jesus Christ (illocution) and by bringing about the reader's mutual indwelling with Christ (perlocution) through the Spirit's rendering Scripture efficacious.[167]

A separate doctoral dissertation could be written for delineating the meaning of these ten theses. My point for this present section is only to get at Vanhoozer's understanding of Scripture as God's communicative act. Hence, one must read each of the theses in light of that goal since each of the theses speaks to that understanding.

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[167] Vanhoozer, "From Speech Acts," 159-203.

Vanhoozer contends that "we need to see that the Bible is the means and medium of God's communicative interaction with the church. Let us therefore acknowledge Scripture as dual-authored, human-divine discourse, where discourse is what someone (ultimately the Spirit) says to someone (ultimately the church) about something (ultimately Christ)."[168] Some key thoughts follow from this as the author points out.

First, we acknowledge that "the Bible is not merely an epistemological foundation," whether that be understood as a deposit of propositional revelation or a storehouse of facts. The biblical text enjoys epistemic primacy as a result of "its nature as the church's authoritative script, the normative specification for interpreting what God is saying and doing in creation, in the history of Israel, and in Jesus Christ."[169]

Secondly, we should note that both the substance and form of Scripture is theodramatic in Vanhoozer's theological understanding. The author here makes a key distinction between narrative and drama. He views narratives as comprehensive stories which are told by an all-knowing narrator employing a single set of concepts and categories. The theo-drama in Scripture, however, is dialogical. To be sure, there is a unifying plot (the metanarrative), but there is no single voice, no single perspective, no single set of categories that alone articulates that very plot. The author explains, "In my view, God is the playwright who communicates his ideas via the many characters (viz.

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[168] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 167.

[169] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 168.

biblical authors) who have speaking parts. So, while there is a unified author

(playwright), no one voice alone speaks for God."[170]

Thirdly, Vanhoozer argues that the forms of Scripture are just as theologically

significant as its content. He employs the thought of Bavinck when he explains

"Scripture does not give us data to interpret; it is itself the interpretation of reality, the

shaper of a distinct worldview."[171] Vanhoozer's point here is that each genre represented

in the biblical text represents a particular type of communicative interaction that each

make up the canonical whole.

Finally, Vanhoozer's claim that the Bible is the means and medium of God's

communicative interaction with the church leads him to assert that "epistemic primacy

belongs to the Word of God or, to be exact, to what the Westminster Confession of Faith

terms 'the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures.'"[172] It is here that Vanhoozer clearly

distinguishes his theological proposal from that of Grenz. Grenz is unwilling to say that

the Spirit speaks "in" Scripture without also adding a nuanced understanding of the Spirit

speaking "through" Scripture in the present. Grenz, as argued in the previous chapter,

locates the key action of the Spirit somewhere other than in the verbal form and content

of the biblical discourse. Vanhoozer contends that Grenz is correct "to insist upon the

work of the Holy Spirit in the reader's personal appropriation of God's Word," but is

wrong "to view the Spirit's work as disconnected from words and from what I shall call

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[170] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 168 n. 175.

[171] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 168 quoting Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. I: *Prolegomena,* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 354. See also Vanhoozer's longer explanation in his *Is There a Meaning?*, 335-350.

[172] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 168.

'communicative reason'."[173] The theologian's claim is that the Spirit's illumination is a matter of properly communicative force, not causal force. This is the very idea of thesis seven listed above. For Vanhoozer, the Spirit brings right understanding of the text for mind, emotion and will which is a properly textual and perlocutionary effect. Illumination, then, does not refer to a causal effect that is somehow completely separate from the textual meaning. It refers, instead, to "the right and proper outcome of communicative action." Succinctly, "illumination neither changes nor supplements the meaning of the text but rather enables those whom the Spirit illumines to recognize, feel and respond to the meaning and force of what is written."[174]

Vanhoozer illustrates his assertion that Scripture is God's communicative act through the employment of the rhetorical terms of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*. He contends that "like the church, Scripture is a fully human phenomenon subject to the contingencies of language, culture and society. *Yet it is also God's communicative work, complete with divine ethos, logos and pathos: God-voiced, God-worded, God-breathed*."[175] The author argues that God was active in producing the Scripture and is also active whenever it is read and received by the community of faith. Scripture is not a substitute for the God who speaks, but it is the locus and medium of God's continued speaking.

Thus, Vanhoozer asserts that the "*ethos* of Scripture is ultimately a function of its being the discourse not only of prophets and apostles but also of the Creator of the

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[173] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 169.

[174] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 171.

[175] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 64. Emphasis his.

universe, the Redeemer of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ."[176] He further argues that there is a real personal connection between agent and act as well as between writer and writing. Scripture, the author contends, is a modality of God's communicative action as well as an extension of sorts of his personal presence.

Vanhoozer sees the *logos* of Scripture as being thoroughly covenantal. He declares that the "Bible is the God-ordained means of communicating the terms and the reality of the covenant whose content is Jesus Christ."[177] He further states that the "Bible is the verbal medium for communicative acts constitutive of the interpersonal relations that it both establishes and regulates."[178] In the author's view, Scripture is not simply designed to provide information for us to think about. Rather, Scripture also provides an orientation of the heart and direction for the will in order that disciples of Jesus would be transformed and enjoy covenantal blessing of fellowship with God through their rightful engagement with God's communicative interaction with us.

Vanhoozer finally contends that the *pathos* of Scripture is found in God's speech which solicits our participation in the "communicative economy." In this understanding, inspiration has to do with the Spirit's work in bringing the prophets and apostles into the triune communicative action. However, Vanhoozer clearly states that his emphasis here is on the Spirit's work of illumination which he views as completing the process of communication. To be sure, the contemporary community of faith does not author but rather hears the written word of Scripture. The author wishes to point out though, that we

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[176] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 65.

[177] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 65.

[178] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 65-66.

are not called to simply read or hear the biblical text; we are to be active responders to that text as we are conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Vanhoozer states, "As the agent of divine communicative efficacy, the Spirit ministers understanding and obedience: faithful hearing is the pathos of the word. It is precisely by ministering the scriptural word that the Spirit draws the church into the economy of communication."[179]

In Vanhoozer's view, "God's triune communicative action involves Father, Son and Spirit alike: the divine speaking (locution), the divine word (illocution) and the divinely enabled hearing (perlocution)."[180] Furthermore, "God is the one to whom all other things relate, as creatures to Creator. This is the way God actively presents himself in Scripture, dialogically interacting with characters in the text and with readers—biblical reasoners—who dare to engage it."[181] Vanhoozer offers this summary of his understanding of Scripture as God's communicative act: "Scripture is a work of triune rhetoric whose purpose is to shape the church's identity and solicit the church's participation in God's being-in-conversation. As to form, the Bible is divine communication, with its own ethos, logos and pathos; as to content, the Bible is covenantal discourse whose aim is communion, a becoming one (Jn 17:21)."[182] This is the end goal that provides a deepened understanding of Vanhoozer's tenth thesis provided earlier: "What God does with Scripture is covenant with humanity by testifying to Jesus Christ (illocution) and by bringing about the reader's mutual indwelling with Christ

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[179] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 66.

[180] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 66 n. 69.

[181] Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 227.

[182] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 67.

(perlocution) through the Spirit's rendering Scripture efficacious."[183] This understanding of Scripture as communicative act goes hand in glove with the overall canonical-linguistic approach to theology as the church properly participates in the divine drama with sapiential wisdom that the Spirit has given through a proper reading and reception of the biblical text.

Scripture and Belief in Meaning as Properly Basic

Vanhoozer describes belief in meaning as properly basic as it pertains to "literary knowledge." He defines literary knowledge as that which "can refer to one of two things: either *knowledge about the text* (e.g., its circumstances of composition) or *knowledge of what the text is about* (e.g., its subject matter)."[184] He further points out that knowledge about a text is not necessarily the same as what a text is about. It is in this knowledge of what the text is about that Vanhoozer finds the meaning of a text. Thus, the primary interpretive questions involve the illocutionary force of a text, the subject matter of the text and about "what and how the author attended to his or her words."[185] To argue his point, Vanhoozer discusses the nature of what a biblical commentary should be, a text that helps the community of faith understand what the biblical authors intended to say, rather than a text whose goal is simply to reconstruct everything that happened historically in the text. In this latter view, the text has come to be seen as a means to a historical end. Rather than this type of "thin description" which omits the broader theological and canonical context of a given biblical text, Vanhoozer argues that we

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[183] Vanhoozer, "From Speech Acts," 200.

[184] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 283. Emphasis his.

[185] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 284.

should offer "thick" descriptions of what the author is doing or intending to do with the text. Vanhoozer contends that the "purpose of a commentary is to examine what was said/done in order to apprehend the author's communicative intent—in order to follow the author's thought, not back to his mind, but outwards toward the matter of his discourse."[186] His point is that the literary knowledge we have about the text is only beneficial for the purposes of interpretation when it enables us to better know what the text is actually about, that is, what it means.

Vanhoozer has thus tipped his hand in showing that he believes that there is a determinate meaning in the biblical text, as well as other texts. The question to be answered then is, "Can we justify our belief that there is a determinate meaning in the text, that texts are about something other than themselves?"[187] Eschewing both interpretive foundationalism and interpretive fideism, Vanhoozer looks to utilize insights from Reformed epistemology advanced by Plantinga and Wolterstorff so that he may apply these insights to hermeneutics "in order to argue that the belief in determinate textual meaning (viz., communicative action), far from being 'immoral,' is instead 'properly basic.'"[188]

Vanhoozer borrows Plantinga's use of three distinct worldviews and contends that neither naturalists nor anti-realists can believe in the author's mind. Within these two worldviews, Vanhoozer argues, "intended meaning is either reduced to physical events on the one hand, or deemed a matter of the interpreter's creative projection on the

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[186] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 285.

[187] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 286.

[188] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 288.

other."[189] Thus, he sets out to show how Christian theism provides a meaningful alternative to foundationalism, fideism, naturalism and creative anti-realism. He declares, "Following on from Plantinga, my thesis is that the mind is designed to interpret when it is functioning properly in an appropriate *linguistic* and *literary* environment."[190] Whether confronted with human behavior or, as in this case, written texts, Vanhoozer claims that "we do not have to prove intentionality but can legitimately assume it. *Interpreting—that is, ascribing intended meanings to discourse—is properly basic*."[191]

Vanhoozer seeks to follow Plantinga's thought pattern, yet admits that belief in textual meaning does not appear to be like properly basic beliefs that stem from memory, perception, or self-knowledge. Thus, he turns to what he views as a parallel thought between the belief in intended textual meaning and Plantinga's treatment of belief in other minds.[192] The basic argument is that when our cognitive faculties are functioning properly, we should not need to attempt to justify that there exist minds within our neighbors. The belief that these other minds exist does not need to be demonstrated. It is a properly basic belief when our cognitive, belief-producing faculties are working in right order in the right cognitive environment. Similarly, Vanhoozer argues, "we need not prove that there is meaning (e.g. the intentional agency of another person) in a text…From a Christian perspective, we can say that *God created us with linguistic*

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[189] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 288.

[190] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 288. Emphasis his.

[191] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 289. Emphasis his.

[192] Vanhoozer is primarily borrowing Alvin Plantinga's argument found in his *Warrant and Proper Function*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Further development of this thought may also be found in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

faculties in order to communicate with and understand one another (and with him). Such is the 'design plan' of *homo interpretans*."[193] The author states that it is normal for an exegete to just find themselves believing in the author's mind and intentional action from simply reading a text. Thus, he asserts, the reluctance that contemporary literary critics show in believing in authors or even to talk about the author's intentions within a given text is either a sign of "faulty epistemology" or "interpretive malfunctioning."[194]

Vanhoozer applies the thoughts presented above directly to Scripture understood as testimony. The author understands testimony to be the "linchpin that connects what the biblical authors are doing (testifying) and what the text is about (testaments)."[195] Since our interpretive faculties are designed to produce belief in the testimony of witnesses when there is no compelling reason to the contrary, and since the Bible is the "corporate testimony" to "God's self-revelation in history and in Jesus Christ," we should trust the testimony and gain the true knowledge of what the text is actually about, namely, "God's reconciliation with humanity through Jesus Christ."[196] Here, he takes on the "postmodern" hermeneutics of suspicion demonstrated by deconstructionists who deny the existence of determinate meaning in texts. He argues that "texts with no determinate meaning cannot be sources of knowledge; they can neither witness, report, or confess."[197] On the contrary, Vanhoozer has argued that "testimony is an illocutionary

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[193] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 289. Emphasis his.

[194] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 289.

[195] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 292.

[196] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 292.

[197] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 290-291.

act" whereby the witness's word "is itself evidence for the truth of what is said."[198] To be clear, the knowledge we gain from biblical testimony "is not inferential but properly basic."[199]

Vanhoozer's promotion of what he calls a "Three-Stranded Epistemological Cord" bears significance here. His first strand is "reliabilism" or right cognitive functioning, which we have encountered above. The author holds that "we are justified in holding a belief, or an interpretation, if it is the product of reliable belief-or interpretation-forming cognitive faculties, when they are functioning rightly in the right kind of cognitive environment."[200] We are functioning within our epistemic rights if we believe on the basis of testimony unless we have good reason to question the source. In fact, Vanhoozer reasons, we were created by God to believe on the basis of testimony.

The second strand of Vanhoozer's epistemological cord relates to interpretive virtues which, in the case of biblical-theological interpretation, have to do with correct spiritual relations. Since we have experienced epistemic corruption through sin, our interpretive faculties do not always function rightly, and our interpretive environments are not always pristine. Our contemporary interpretations are "always biased, always partial, always ideological."[201] In this environment, we need to pray for and cultivate "interpretive virtues," both intellectual and spiritual. Vanhoozer defines an interpretive

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[198] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 291.

[199] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 291.

[200] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology," In *Evangelical Futures*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 87.

[201] Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 87.

virtue as "a disposition of mind and heart that arises from the motivation for understanding, that is, for establishing cognitive contact with the meaning of the text."[202] This corresponds to the theologian's thought described earlier in this chapter under the rubric of practical wisdom that we need to seek to become a certain kind of knower and a certain kind of person where our cognitive acts and the character of our life are in harmony with one another in a manner consistent with the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The final strand in Vanhoozer's epistemological cord has to do with sanctification and scholarship. First, the theologian should live out the virtue of Christian humility. Vanhoozer states that he believes "that rationality is largely a matter of humility, or to be precise, of the willingness to put one's beliefs (and one's biblical interpretations) to the critical test."[203] While the author recognizes the significance of a variety of kinds of critical tests such as testing for clarity, for logical consistency, and internal coherency, he emphasizes two other types of critical tests as most significant. The first test seeks to determine "faithfulness to the text (e.g., does it give a comprehensive explanation in light of the gospel?)." The second looks for "fruitfulness in life (e.g., does it transform the reader and thus demonstrate the power of the gospel?)."[204] Utilizing these two criteria, we will be able to measure our progress in biblical interpretation. Our interpretation then, while not absolute or exhaustive, may still be understood as truthful and adequate grasping of the meaning of the text.

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[202] Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 88.

[203] Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 88.

[204] Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 89.

Vanhoozer finally puts these three strands of the cord together within the context of the biblical narrative. He writes: "In sum, all three strands of this epistemology are informed by Christian doctrine. Creation is the ground of our confidence in the reliability of our cognitive functions; the fall into noetic sin implies that our knowing is corrupt, thus necessitating the countermeasure of epistemic virtue; and sanctification implies the cultivation of one virtue in particular—humility—for 'redeeming' one's interpretative claims."[205] Within this epistemological framework, where we seek to have interpretive faculties functioning properly as well as a sanctified-clean interpretive environment, Vanhoozer confidently claims, "My belief 'that there is a meaning in this text' is a properly basic belief."[206]

Moving from Biblical Canon to Theology

Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach to Christian theology views doctrine as "direction for the church's fitting participation in the ongoing drama of redemption."[207] To be sure, this theological task of moving from biblical canon to theological statement and transformed life starts with Scripture informing the community of faith about the drama of redemption in the biblical text in order that we understand what God is doing in reconciling all things to himself in Christ. From here, the community of faith is wise to learn from and listen to past performances of the drama through historical theology, especially in their reading and understanding the Creeds and

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[205] Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 89. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014). Chapter 5 takes up this thought in a broad manner. Vanhoozer, in the same work, also clearly articulates that "doctrine gives direction for discipleship and that disciples display their understanding by their actions," 249.

[206] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 290.

[207] Vanhoozer, "Into the Great 'Beyond'," 87.

Confessions of the church. The community of faith does this in order to see if we might be able to better discern what faithful performances, that is, continuation of the biblical theodrama and canonical practices, have looked like and how we might adopt and adapt many of those past performances for our contemporary situation. This really is the goal that Vanhoozer puts forward throughout his argument, namely, that finally the church would develop practical wisdom in order to "embody the mind of Christ" and faithfully live out the drama of redemption in our own current cultural situations.

Vanhoozer has placed his central thoughts about the triangulation of Scripture, tradition, and current culture in three theses that make clear what has been stated above. The first thesis states that "*the norming norm of theodramatic systematics is Scripture, the Spirit's polyphonic and multiperspectival speaking, a rich and imaginative resource for cultivating canonic sense.*"[208] The author's point here, besides attributing fundamental authority for theology to the biblical text, is to note that while Scripture exists as a unified canon with overarching plot, it also has and is enriched by multiple voices and perspectives that provide a rich understanding for the church. Each human author under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit provides a distinct point of view. Each biblical genre affords different perspectives on the action of the drama. Vanhoozer also relates that we are able to relate the action of the drama from three overarching agent-perspectives, namely from God's point of view, from humanity's point of view and even the point of view from the "powers and principalities."[209]

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[208] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 178. Emphasis his.

[209] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 179.

Vanhoozer's second thesis contends, "*Theodramatic systematics is enriched by the polyphonic and multiperspectival scripted-yet-spirited performances that comprise church tradition, a rich resource for cultivating catholic sensibility.*"[210] The author compares the need for four different Gospels to tell the story of Jesus Christ with the church's need to consider the varied interpretative communities and traditions in order to more fully understand Scripture and to see how other local churches have both understood what Scripture has said and how that Spirit-illumined Scripture leads us in faithfully following the canonical sense in our current life situations. Vanhoozer makes some necessary qualifications of this thought for those who might perceive that he thinks any voice should have an equal "hearing" from the church as she seeks to live out the drama of redemption. He declares that this is not a matter of "disowning confessional theology but of bringing it into conversation with the other confessional traditions that make up the catholic (whole) church."[211] This practice moves forward from virtuous epistemic humility which recognizes that no one performance tradition has a "monopoly" on understanding the truth and practice of the theodramatic script. The author does make clear, however, that each "voice" must be measured against the canon. He writes:

> This is not to condone an anything-goes systematic theological relativism! Clearly, the voices of contemporary theologians are non-canonical in the sense that they are not inspired authors or witnesses to the theodrama. Consequently, the voices of post-canonical theologians must be measured (triangulated) against the canon and the catholic tradition. Some voices have more wisdom to offer than others; certain other voices may have to be excluded altogether from the conversation—the heretic you will always have with you![212]

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[210] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 179. Emphasis his.

[211] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 180.

[212] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 180 n. 205. The particular thought on heresy is expanded in his *Drama of Doctrine*, 421-426.

Thus, while it is good that we maintain our confessional identities, it is also good for us to converse with other theological traditions in order to more fully understand both the content and theological implications of the biblical canon. It is this same biblical canon which serves as the fundamental authority by which confessional statements and community of faith performances of that biblical script are to be measured.

Vanhoozer's third thesis relates to his understanding of the end goal of theology. He argues, "*Theodramatics systematics is sapiential, a form of practical wisdom that seeks to embody the mind of Christ in new situations.*"[213] The author explains that "theology is faith seeking theodramatic understanding" and this understanding "is best demonstrated not by those who can rightly parse Greek verbs" nor by those "who can defend past theological formulas." Rather, understanding is best demonstrated by "those who can participate in the ongoing drama of redemption by speaking and doing the gospel truth in new cultural situations."[214] The church deliberates in and with the Scripture in order to determine how to speak and act faithfully with the reality that God is making all things new in Christ. This requires *phronesis* (practical reason) and imagination, which Vanhoozer describes as "that cognitive faculty by which we discern meaningful patterns and meaningful wholes." This imagination "is a vital aid in making judgments about particular situations in the context of the whole theodrama (*sub specie theodramatis*)."[215]

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[213] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 181. Emphasis his.

[214] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 181.

[215] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 181. This concept of imagination is more fully developed in his *Drama of Doctrine*, 278-285.

Vanhoozer argues that faithful biblical interpretation necessitates the use of imagination and *phronesis* on three distinct levels. First, "to discern what the human author was saying;" second "to discern what God was/is saying by means of the human discourse;" and third "to discern how our saying and acting in the present situation contributes to the through-line of the evangelical action and to the 'superobjective' of the theodramatic plot."[216] This process brings about what Vanhoozer, once again, sees as the end goal of theology. The end goal is not simply knowledge but understanding: "a sense of where one is in the theodrama and a sense of how to continue on faithfully."[217] This is the essence of theodramatic correspondence, that is to say truth, in theology for Vanhoozer. In the end, the author's canonical-linguistic approach to theology is a method for forming good persons who exercise good judgment in accord with the biblical canon. "Moving 'beyond' the sacred page involves more than applying it; it involves renewing and transforming people's habits of seeing, thinking, and acting."[218]

The purpose of doctrine, for Vanhoozer, is not to simply give us the answers about how universal principles apply, but "to shape our habits of thinking and imagining so that we become people who habitually make good theodramatic judgments— judgments at to who God is, what God is doing, and what we must do in response."[219] The author engages the thought of Hebrews 2:10 as a means to talk about theodramatic

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[216] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 181. Some of this thought is drawn out in my section entitled "A Brief Look at Vanhoozer's Big Idea" earlier in this chapter.

[217] Vanhoozer, "On the Very Idea," 181.

[218] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 170-171.

[219] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 178.

fittingness. "For it was fitting [*prepo*] that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer [*archegos*] of their salvation perfect through suffering."[220] The scholar sees within this text a view of the large theodrama of Scripture as it alludes to creation, the incarnation and death of Jesus, the church and the consummation. Furthermore, he declares that, "Even more striking is the author's explanation of both the person and work of Jesus Christ in terms of the *fittingness* of divine action."[221] This is the backdrop against which Vanhoozer presents his own criteria for determining theodramatic fittingness of our theology, that is to say both our words and actions.

It is clear at this point that we indeed need criteria to help guide the church in assessing the difference between what is a faithful performance of the biblical script and what is an unfaithful performance. Vanhoozer argues, "In my view, right understanding involves grasping the relationship between what the Bible says about God and what we know about the contemporary situation, and then acting accordingly (i.e., according to the world implied by the script)."[222] What we need is theodramatic fittingness. But again, we may ask the question, "How is the community of faith to distinguish between scriptural and unscriptural "improvisations" of the biblical script?" The author answers this question by stating that in order to determine theodramatic fittingness, that which is both textually and contextually fitting, the church needs to develop "canon sense" and "catholic sensibility."

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[220] Hebrews 2:10 RSV.

[221] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 179.

[222] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 175.

Vanhoozer offers three imperatives for determining theodramatic fittingness through canon sense. The first imperative is to "*determine who is speaking and how what they are doing with their words relates to the main idea and action of the whole triune drama.*"[223] The point here is that the church must seek to understand the historically conditioned and culturally located human authors of the biblical text within their own contexts. At the same time, the believing reader should seek understanding of how the divine playwright is using the diverse human voices to communicate a unified drama. "To read with canon sense, then, is to read figurally or typologically, which is to say with the conviction that there is an underlying theodramatic consistency and coherence that underlies and unifies the whole."[224] Vanhoozer, as an example, contends that a biblical reader with good canon sense will "hear" the connection between Jesus' self-designation as "Son of Man" and the apocalyptic figure of Daniel 7:13-14.[225]

The second imperative for determining canon sense is to "*know who, when, and where you are in the drama.*"[226] Thus canon sense is really about locating oneself in relation to the theodrama in the biblical text, that is to say, the grand narrative of creation-fall-redemption-consummation. The speech and actions of the community of faith should exhibit similarity to the biblical theodrama even though we live in culturally dissimilar situations and contexts.

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[223] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 179. Emphasis his.

[224] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 180.

[225] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 180.

[226] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 180. Emphasis his.

Canon sense may be determined thirdly as we "*put on the canonical spectacles of faith in order to see, judge, and act in the spectacle of faith now playing in a world theater near you.*"[227] Vanhoozer describes believing readers as apprentices to the biblical canon which disciples and forms our minds, hearts, imaginations and wills. To be sure, according to the author, we learn from propositional statements of truth proclaimed within that biblical canon, but we learn even more through the canon "demonstrating the ways in which the prophets and apostles said and did what was fitting for their situations." Vanhoozer's main thought here is that we learn a pattern of judgment because the "Bible trains us to see things not simply from the perspective of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*) but from the perspective of the theodrama (*sub specie theodramatis*)."[228]

Along with "canon sense," which has to do with theodramatic fittingness with the script, Vanhoozer suggests that we must also foster "catholic sensibility," which has to do with fittingness to the situation at hand. This particular thought within the theologian's larger scheme reads much like a section on contextualization in a missiological text. He argues that "genuine theodramatic understanding involves knowing not simply 'what they said/did, there and then,' but 'what we should say/do, here and now.'"[229] We learn from other Christian communities of faith both that have different historical, geographical, and cultural contexts than we do. This kind of "catholic sensibility" will enable us to creatively and fittingly speak and act in manner consistent with what God is doing in Christ with the world.

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[227] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 180. Emphasis his.

[228] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 180-181.

[229] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 181.

Vanhoozer prods those would-be apprentices to the biblical canon to ask three questions when seeking the wisdom of other Christian communities of faith, whether past or present, near or far, culturally similar or dissimilar. The first question to ask is "*Does it translate?*"[230] Since the whole point of translating is moving from one language into another, we are seeking to understand if the interpreter has been faithful in rendering the biblical text in her new situation. The author clarifies that "what we are trying to keep the same is not the external form but the judgment it embodies."[231] Here again, we see the value in gleaning wisdom from the Christian catholic tradition that includes voices from the past and present and from every part of the world.

The second question to be answered is "*Does it modulate*?"[232] Vanhoozer describes that what ultimately gets transferred from one context into another is not only the "verbal meaning," that is content, but also the "patterns of communicative action," that is, the practices and forms of life of the community of faith. The author suggests that utilizing the thought of transposing will help us to understand his thought. "Dramatic transposition, like its musical counterpart, is a matter of preserving the same melodic line (speech) and harmony (action) in a different key (culture)."[233] At heart, we need to be able to preserve the same subject matter of the biblical canon while fittingly "transposing" that subject matter into a form that "fits" within our contemporary setting. This is the missiological engagement of contextualization. For Vanhoozer, "it is

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[230] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 182. Emphasis his.

[231] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 182.

[232] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 182. Emphasis his.

[233] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 182.

essentially a matter of discerning the sameness-in-difference that characterizes faithful yet fitting performances of the drama of redemption."[234]

The final question that helps to ascertain theodramtic fittingness through catholic sensibility is "*Does it resonate?*"[235] This is all about "ringing true." The community of faith resonates with the biblical text/script as it continues to faithfully and clearly display what the divine voice is saying in that biblical text. Vanhoozer returns to Hebrews 2:10 to issue the point that "what is fitting is that which is resonant or 'consonant' with God's character—with God's being-in-act displayed in Jesus Christ."[236] The author describes this thought more fully by employing the term "creative understanding" which understands Christian doctrine as the realization of canonical potential.[237] The scholar contends that this creative understanding is "the progressive discovery of the full meaning potential of biblical discourse precisely through the process of making Scripture resonate in new contexts."[238]

Vanhoozer thus provides six tests for discerning theodramatic fittingness or theodramatic correspondence. The first three tests have to do with canon sense which "keeps us centered." The last three tests engage the realm of catholic sensibility which "keeps us bounded." In all of this, the theologian makes the claim that "discerning how to embody the gospel in new contexts" must not be primarily about methodological

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[234] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 183.

[235] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 183. Emphasis his.

[236] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 184.

[237] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 352.

[238] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 184. See his *Drama of Doctrine*, 350-354 for a more full development of creative understanding.

procedures, but about "persons whose minds and hearts and imaginations are captive to the Word."[239] This leads the author to describe an additional test of theodramatic fittingness, namely "the rule of love." He claims,

> [T]ruth, goodness, and beauty, as characteristics of God's being-in-act, are also forms of theodramatic fittingness…Truth involves *apprehending* fittingness (i.e., that which corresponds to the theodrama); goodness involves *acting* fittingly (i.e., in a way that corresponds to the theodrama); beauty involves *appraising* fittingness (i.e., the way the parts of the theodrama correspond to one another).[240]

Right participation in the ongoing drama of redemption entails more than acknowledging and admiring truth, beauty and goodness. The community of faith must appropriate this truth, goodness, and beauty of Jesus Christ for themselves in their own contexts. It is then that we will rightly participate in the ongoing drama of redemption and enjoy theodramatic fittingness in our speech and actions as the community which bears the name and image of Christ.

Scripture and the Questions of Truth and Meaning

The relationship between Scripture and the issues of truth and meaning are at the heart of Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach to Christian theology. While many portions of this relationship have been addressed briefly above, the purpose of this section is to make clear these important relationships and thus, how we are to understand the nature of Scripture and doctrine. The theologian makes his basic thought about the relationship between the biblical text and meaning clear when he describes "the 'WHAT' of meaning," namely understanding the biblical text as communicative act, and "the

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[239] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 184.

[240] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 185. See his *Drama of Doctrine*, 256-263 for additional treatment on this concept of fittingness.

'WHO' of meaning," namely, authors as communicative agents who have specific intention in their writing of the biblical text.[241]

Vanhoozer clearly conveys that there is determinate meaning within the biblical text. Borrowing thought from John Searle, Paul Ricoeur, Jurgen Habermas, and others, the author speaks of Scripture as God's communicative act that has intended meaning for its readers. Searle argues that communication is the primary purpose of language. Vanhoozer agrees and further affirms that "meaning is a matter of intending to convey a message to another person. A speaker intends to produce certain effects—notably, understanding—on a hearer."[242] The author consistently argues that "meaning is a matter of communicative action" which involves both the "doing" and the resultant "deed." He asserts "meaning is a three-dimensional communicative action, with form and matter (propositional content), energy and trajectory (illocutionary force), and teleology or final purpose (perlocutionary effect)."[243] Vanhoozer likes this definition since it provides an account of the "possibility of stable meaning" within the text while also giving account for the "transformative capacity of texts." He contends that for us to "inquire into what the text means is to ask what the author has done in, with, and through the text. *The goal of understanding is to grasp what has been done, together with its effects; the possibility of attaining such understanding is the presupposition of communicative action*."[244]

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[241] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 218-240.

[242] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 211.

[243] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 218.

[244] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 218. Emphasis his.

Vanhoozer continues to argue for the ontological status of meaning within texts as both embodied authorial intention and enacted authorial intention. He contends that the "reality to which interpreters are accountable and to which their descriptions must correspond if they seek to be true is grounded in the author's embodied and enacted intention."[245] He further asserts, "*Every text is the result of an enacted intention.*"[246] The theologian promotes the idea that meaning is more than signs relating to other signs. He understands this "more" to be the author's intention, that is, the "directedness of the text as a meaningful act."[247] Thus, intention, for Vanhoozer, is an "emergent property" which is required in order to explain "what illocutionary act has been performed in the text."[248]

Vanhoozer continues his argument by affirming that "*Every text is an embodied intention.*"[249] His point here is that writing has fixed the author's *enacted* intention in a stable verbal structure, thus making meaning to be constituted by the intentions which are actually *embodied* within the written text. We are not here attempting to discern the consequences that the author hoped to achieve by writing, nor are we attempting to understand the plan by which the author set out to write in the first place. Vanhoozer is convinced that the author's intentional meaning exists and may be found in the text as we

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[245] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 253.

[246] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 252. Emphasis his.

[247] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 252.

[248] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 252.

[249] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 253. Emphasis his.

seek to describe the author's intended action understood as "what the author was doing *in* writing, in tending to his words *in* such and such a fashion."[250]

Vanhoozer describes his "metaphysics of meaning" and "hermeneutical realism" as matters of "past communicative action." He affirms, "Textual meaning…enjoys an independence and integrity of its own, apart from the process of interpretation, thanks to the nature and the directedness of the author's communicative act."[251] Vanhoozer makes important distinctions between intended results of the text (illocutions), desired or foreseen consequences (perlocutions), and consequences which were neither intended nor foreseen (accidents). He argues that authors are not in control of the resultant perlocutionary effects. Thus, "Only the illocutionary, therefore, refers to something intrinsic to the action." Furthermore, "the meaning of a communicative act depends not on its outcome (e.g. how it is received by readers) but on the direction and the purposive structure of the author's action. Meaning, in other words, refers to the intrinsic action— to the illocution and its intended result—not to its unforeseen consequences."[252] Thus, Vanhoozer describes the metaphysics of meaning by defining meaning in terms of the illocutionary action. The meaning of a text is "*what the author attended to in tending to his words*."[253]

In order to clearly make a distinction between illocutionary acts providing meaning apart from any perlocutionary effects, Vanhoozer adopts and adapts E. D.

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[250] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 253. Emphasis his.

[251] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 254.

[252] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 255.

[253] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 262. Emphasis his.

Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance.[254] Vanhoozer argues that there is

a determinate, intended meaning within the text which remains "fixed and unchanging

throughout the history of its interpretation." However, "unlike meaning, the significance

of a text can change, for significance pertains to the relation between the text's

determinate meaning and a larger context (i.e., another era, another culture, another

subject matter)."[255] Vanhoozer links meaning with the author's illocutionary acts while

significance is linked with perlocutionary effects. His point is that illocution/meaning

does not change because of context. Perlocutionary intents/significance, however, can

fail repeatedly. The author does not see this as a problem since "*perlocutionary intents*

pertain not to the act but to the effects of meaning."[256] This meaning/significance

distinction remains, for Vanhoozer, a distinction between an action that has been

completed (written, intentional meaning in the text) and its ongoing intentional or

unintentional consequences (perlocutionary effects). Against the thought of Lindbeck

and Grenz, Vanhoozer contends that "to the extent that Scripture has been taken up into

the economy of triune communicative action, it has meaning before it is used by the

interpretative community or socialized into the church's life."[257] He further distinguishes

his thought from Lindbeck by employing the familiar example of the Crusader who

proclaims that "Christ is Lord" while killing an infidel. Vanhoozer writes,

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[254] A decent source of further discussion on this count may be found in Scott A. Blue, "Meaning, Intention, and Application: Speech Act Theory in the Hermeneutics of Francis Watson and Kevin J Vanhoozer," *Trinity Journal* ns 23 no 2 (Fall 2002): 161-184.

[255] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 259.

[256] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 261. Emphasis his.

[257] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 101.

> On Lindbeck's view, the very meaning of the things we say, such as "Christ is Lord," is tied up with the action that accompanies it. The Crusader who cleaves the skull of an infidel while crying "Jesus is Lord" is not a hypocrite, because his action does not contradict his claim but displays its meaning (since meaning is determined by the actor's use). On my canonical-linguistic view, by contrast, the meaning of "Jesus is Lord" is canonically established, and the Crusader *is* a hypocrite because his action contradicts the meaning of his claim.[258]

Here again, meaning is wrapped up in the illocutions regardless of any intended or unintended perlocutionary effects.

Vanhoozer recognizes an objection that may be raised over his meaning/significance distinction as it pertains to biblical interpretation in particular. What are we to make of divine authorship of the biblical text which, at times, seems to "intend a fuller meaning (*sensus plenior*) than what the human authors could have meant?"[259] Vanhoozer's response to this question centers on his claim that the "fuller meaning" of Scripture associated with divine authorship only emerges at the level of the entire canon of Scripture. Since the canon is both a "completed and a public act," it allows us to have access to the divine intention. He asserts that "*the canon as a whole becomes the unified act for which the divine intention serves as the unifying principle.*"[260] Furthermore, "*the divine intention does not contravene the intention of the human author but rather supervenes on it.*"[261] This is so, argues Vanhoozer, because the Spirit is "tied to" the written Word in the manner that significance is "tied to" meaning. He writes, "With regard to hermeneutics, the role of the Spirit is to serve as the Spirit of significance

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[258] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 366 n. 10. Emphasis his. Vanhoozer is here borrowing thought from Jay Wesley Richards, "Truth and Meaning in George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine*," *Religious Studies* 33 (1997): 33-53, especially 43-44.

[259] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 263.

[260] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 265. Emphasis his.

[261] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 265. Emphasis his.

and thus to apply meaning, not to change it."[262] For example, the overall canon does not change the meaning of the particular text of Isaiah 53. The canon does, however, supervene on it and specifies its referent.

I have attempted to describe above Vanhoozer's treatment of the metaphysics of meaning, namely, that there is a determinate (author intentional) meaning within the biblical text. I will significantly abbreviate my treatment of his "epistemology of meaning" since many of these features have been discussed earlier in this chapter. The theologian understands his contribution to this discussion to be the following:

> My contribution to the epistemology of meaning is to stress the extent to which literary criticism is not simply a problem of the morality of knowledge, but a problem that ultimately demands theological resources—specifically, the virtues of faith, hope, obedience, and love: faith, that there is a real presence in the text that demands a response; hope, that the community of interpreters can reach, at least ideally, a reasoned agreement; obedience, that the interpreter will observe the context of the text itself and follow the literary sense where it leads; love, that the interpreter will indwell the text and attend to it on its own terms.[263]

Vanhoozer's basic thought is that the text itself is the most appropriate context for interpretation when readers of the biblical text engage it at both the level of the literary and canonical act while utilizing interpretative virtues. There is real literary knowledge and this meaningful knowledge is found in addressing four questions. First, the author asks, "What is the nature of literary knowledge?"[264] Eschewing both classical foundationalism and fideism, Vanhoozer contends that literary knowledge is a matter of

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[262] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 265.

[263] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 283.

[264] This is the question taken up in Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 283-292.

believing testimony. This thought may be seen earlier in this chapter where I wrote of Vanhoozer's understanding of meaning as a properly basic belief.

Secondly, Vanhoozer considers the main problem of literary knowledge as being a conflict of interpretations.[265] Striving to avoid relativism on one hand and absolutism on the other, the theologian offers a "regulative hermeneutic realism." He is careful to point out that hermeneutical realism does not mean that all interpretive efforts will be easy and that meaning will be immediately clear. This is so, because reality, including the reality of the communicative act, "may be extremely complex."[266] Vanhoozer explains this regulative hermeneutic realism by relating that *meaning is a regulative idea, one that orients and governs interpretive practice.*"[267] In fact, Vanhoozer argues that the regulative ideal of literary interpretation is the literal sense of the text. This thought moves us toward his third question regarding the norms of literary knowledge.

Vanhoozer's third question is really "How are we to describe the communicative acts?"[268] Within this question resides the thought of what criteria we are to use in order to arbitrate conflicting interpretations. The theologian contends that since "*the author's intention is embodied in the text, then the ultimate criterion for right or wrong interpretation will be the text itself, considered as a literary act.*"[269] He strives to get at the literal sense of a text by weaving the insights of historical, narrative, and canonical

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[265] This is the concern of Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 292-303.

[266] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 302.

[267] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 303. Emphasis his.

[268] This topic is the theme of Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 303-335.

[269] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 303. Emphasis his.

understandings of the literal sense. This is precisely the point where Vanhoozer again

brings forward a central theme of his argument, namely, that readers understand the

biblical text as a communicative act that shows what is distinctive and essential about this

particular text that yields literary knowledge as we exercise interpretive virtues in

approaching the text. Throughout this process of interpretation, we must acknowledge

that it is possible to give correct, truthful descriptions of literary acts that still are not

exhaustive in their description of intended meaning. This sense of critical realism is

Vanhoozer's pathway between absolutism and relativism. Even in our interpreting the

biblical text, he contends that "what we are after as readers is not an interpretation that

perfectly corresponds to the text (whatever that might mean), but rather an interpretation

that *adequately responds* to it. In responding to the text we allow the text to complete the

purpose for which it was sent."[270] In the end, he argues that the best explanation of the

text is that explanation that is best supported by the evidence of the text itself and that

explanation that provides the most understanding of what is happening in the locutionary,

illocutionary, and literary levels of the text. Issues of correspondence (we must avoid

anachronism), comprehensiveness and coherence (we must describe the whole text as

well as the text as a whole), and compellingness (this interpretation must enable us to

understand more than others) in relation to the whole Gospel all come into play as we

strive to rightly interpret this biblical text on its own terms.[271]

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[270] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 335. Emphasis his.

[271] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?,* 334.

The final question Vanhoozer engages in this section has to do with the method of literary knowledge.[272] He argues that one's interpretive method must be dictated by the object of literary knowledge. This object is a particular kind of literary act. Thus, "The best way to come to know what has been done is to attend to the *whole* act or, in the case of texts, the literary genre."[273] Genre gets at the thought of how this text means alongside what this text means. Vanhoozer compares biblical genres to maps which single out some properties or features of the total object domain while not one single map can include all of these properties. He relates, "Some genres (e.g., history, reporting) add to our stock of propositional knowledge; other genres (e.g., poetry, novel) increase our knowledge by deepening or intensifying our awareness of what we already know."[274] Hence, the kind of literary knowledge that we receive from reading any particular text depends upon the type of literature we are reading. When we read Scripture, for instance, we gain literary knowledge in that we know something about the text, namely its literary form, and consequently we know something of what the text is about, that is, its subject matter. We obtain meaning through our faithful engagement with the biblical text. Regarding the diversity of biblical genres, Vanhoozer argues that this diversity provides at least a twofold benefit: "Scripture can render various aspects of reality, and it can address the reader in different ways (e.g., the mind, the will, the heart)."[275] Each genre provides a new hue in the prism of our meaningful understanding of how and what the biblical text is saying. But the author offers a final warning to those who would be

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[272] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 335-350.

[273] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 282.

[274] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?,* 348.

[275] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 349-350.

interpreters of the Scriptures. He states that "though the communicative act may be successfully performed, and though meaning may really be 'there,' there is no guarantee that the interpreter will behave in a rational, or indeed moral, way."[276] We, as faithful, churchly readers of Scripture, must maintain rational and ethical integrity in our role in the covenant of discourse in order to both hear and respond appropriately to the biblical text.

Meaning and truth are inextricably linked with one another. Thus, much of what has been said about meaning above pertains to the relationship of Scripture and truth as well. Vanhoozer declares that "the truth of Scripture is that quality of the biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures that what is said corresponds to the way things are when interpreted rightly and read in faith."[277] The unpacking of this statement is found nowhere more clearly than in Vanhoozer's article, "Lost in Interpretation?"[278] This article puts forward Vanhoozer's general understanding of truth as well as our responsibility to know it and live it out.

Vanhoozer's proposal for getting at the truth in interpretation is multifaceted. First he claims that we must get beyond mere propositionalism. This is so because biblical literary forms, not just content, matter.   Agreeing with James Barr, the author writes, "Genre mistakes cause the *wrong kind of truth values* to be attached to the biblical

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[276] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 350.

[277] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 72.

[278] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 no 1 (Mar 2005): 89-114. Reprinted in *Whatever Happened to Truth*, Andreas Kostenberger, ed., (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 93-129. This is a revised version of Vanhoozer's plenary address delivered at the 56th annual meeting of the ETS on November 19, 2004 in San Antonio, TX.

sentences."[279] If all we utilize is propositionalist interpretation, then we lose some of the very cognitive significance that the varied literary genres provide. Vanhoozer contends that "what gets lost in propositionalist interpretation are the circumstances of the statement, its poetic and affective elements, and even, then, a dimension of its truth."[280] We cannot and must not do without propositional content, yet we must recognize that there is more to the biblical text than only propositional forms of truth.

Vanhoozer employs a C.S. Lewis distinction in a helpful manner for understanding truth. He quotes Lewis: "truth is always *about* something; but reality is that *about which* truth is."[281] The first point here is that the truth does have to do with some propositional content. The gospel itself is informative. The author whimsically states that "without some propositional core, the church would lose its *raison d'être*, leaving only programs and potlucks."[282] His point is that the Bible is about the words and acts of God "on the stage of world history" that climax in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is the truthful testimony of what the evangelists have seen and heard in and from Christ. Thus, "to affirm the truth of the gospel ('He is risen') is to view truth as the correspondence between the author's discourse (not the words taken out of context!) and the way things are."[283]

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[279] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 100. Emphasis his. See James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, (London: SCM, 1973), 125.

[280] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 100.

[281] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 100. Quoting C.S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," In *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 66.

[282] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 100.

[283] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 101.

Understanding truth as correspondence, Lewis's "truth is always about something," only takes us so far. We are still in need of determining what the Bible means by what it says, Lewis's "that about which truth is." Vanhoozer appeals to the Rule of Faith put forward by Irenaeus and Tertullian as "a crucial principle for true interpretation" because this Rule functions as the "necessary interpretive framework for understanding Scripture correctly," as it specifies what the Bible's truth is ultimately about: "the creative and redemptive work of the triune God."[284] This is where tradition becomes a valuable tool in correctly assessing biblical truth. Tradition does not have magisterial authority, but it does provide "ministerial authority" from the consensus of the church through time and space.

Vanhoozer further describes truth as theodramatic correspondence. He again stresses that faithful readers of the biblical text need to be able to grasp the whole of the biblical text while also situating the various parts of the biblical texts within the larger whole. Vanhoozer speaks of doctrine as both indicative, "this is what God has done in Christ," and imperative, "so, join in the drama and live according to who you have been made to be in Christ." Thus, "doctrinal truth…becomes a matter of *theodramatic correspondence* between our words and deeds and God's words and deeds."[285]

Vanhoozer continues his description of truth as "cartographic correspondence." What was said about maps and meaning above is applicable regarding truth as well. The author asserts that "truth is the fit between text and reality, between what is written and

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[284] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 101.

[285] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 102. Emphasis his.

what is written about."[286] But if there is one thing that maps teach us, it is that there is

more than one kind of fit since each type of map reflects its own certain interest.

Similarly, the Bible is composed of different types of literature. Each distinct genre maps

the theodrama in a unique way and we need them all to point us "in the same Christotelic

direction." Vanhoozer affirms that "all the maps are reliable: they correspond—in

different ways!—to this or that aspect of what is really the case."[287] Each genre provides

an aspect of reality and all of them together complement one another so we have a much

larger and more robust understanding of truth that corresponds to reality as it truly is.

Vanhoozer's discussion of truth and the interpretive process rings out with

familiar themes from our previous discussion of meaning and the interpretive process

above. The author describes interpretation as the "process of discerning the truth of the

matter from the discourse."[288] This is accomplished by working toward a three-

dimensional view of the truth that includes the worlds that are behind, of, and in front of

the text. The truth behind the text incorporates history as a truth-bearer. The biblical text

and the encompassing theodrama involves the words and the deeds of God in history.

This is interpreted history or narrated history which selects and orders the events so that

sense can be made of the succession of those events. Vanhoozer warns again, however,

that "the historical truth claims of the Bible 'will never be rightly understood unless the

literary mode of their representation is itself understood.'"[289] The narrative form of

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[286] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 103.

[287] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 104. See also Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 294-296.

[288] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 104.

[289] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 105.

history is itself a form of understanding not simply neat packaging for propositional truth claims.

The second dimension is the "truth of the text" itself where literature functions as truth-bearer. This is the heart of the discussion for Vanhoozer just as it was throughout his treatment of biblical meaning. He declares, "To speak of truth in interpretation, then, is to put the focus squarely on discourse. Discourse is *someone saying something about something to someone*, and hermeneutics is the art of discerning the discourse in written works."[290] Getting at the truth in discourse, much like getting at the meaning, has everything to do with illocutionary acts, that is, what the author is doing with the text. Vanhoozer offers specific counsel in this regard. He writes, "In treating 'truth and interpretation,' then, it is crucial to acknowledge that authors can do more than one thing with their texts. In particular, we must be careful not to confuse *using phenomenal language* (locutions) with *affirming the phenomena* (a specific illocution)."[291] Not every biblical utterance is intended to carry a propositional, truth-bearing property. Interpreters are to become apprentices to the literary forms, according to Vanhoozer, in order to discern what the author is truly saying about reality as it really is in Christ. This type of theological interpretation "involves nothing less than the ability to see/feel/taste the truth borne by Scripture's literary forms."[292]

The third dimension of truth which Vanhoozer delineates is the "truth in front of the text" where the reader serves as truth-bearer. I will take this thought up during the

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[290] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 106. Emphasis his.

[291] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 107. Emphasis his.

[292] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 110. See also Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 278-285.

next section of this chapter that deals with the relationship between the community of

faith and theology. For now, it is important to note that the theologian argues, "Truth in

the context of theological interpretation must never be merely theoretical (a mere

correspondence relation) but practical, transformative, and relation (a *covenantal*

relation)."[293] Our task as theologians is "to give faithful *and* creative witness to biblical

truth, *to make judgments that fit with our script and our situation*."[294]

Vanhoozer provides one additional thought regarding the relationship between

Scripture and truth which will make a fitting ending for this section of the chapter. He

contends that truth is finally "*eschatological correspondence to the already and not*

yet."[295] The author shows the payoff of his dramatic approach to theology by describing

the manner in which doctrine "displays an 'already-correspondence'" to what God has

done in Christ. This part of the theodrama has already taken place and our doctrine must

"fit" what has been revealed in Scripture. However, we also must recognize that the

theodrama is not yet complete and we still live in light of what God has done in Christ,

but also in light of what God is doing in the Spirit, namely making all things new in

Christ as we move toward the eschaton. Doctrine "captures this not-yet aspect of truth by

directing us to *become* what we already are."[296] This truthful, fitting doctrine directs the

community of faith to speak and act in a manner that allows the scenes that have "not-

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[293] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 111.

[294] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 111. Emphasis his.

[295] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 112. Emphasis his.

[296] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 112. Emphasis his.

yet" been performed to rightly correspond to those that have been played out "already." This, Vanhoozer suggests, is what it means to interpret the Bible in Spirit and in truth.

<div align="center">The Community of Faith and Theology</div>

Vanhoozer describes a prominent role for the community of faith within his canonical-linguistic approach to Christian theology. This role centers in the community of faith understanding and faithfully engaging her role as an interpreter and performer of the ongoing theodrama. In this section, I will consider the relationship of the community of faith with the issues of authority, truth, and meaning within the context of that central interpretative task. Finally, I will consider the virtuous, covenantal life of the community of faith as both prerequisite and goal of canonical-linguistic theology.

The Community of Faith as an Interpreting Culture

Vanhoozer clearly views the community of faith as an interpreting people. The fact that he dedicates a rather large work to describe the need for and to propose a method by which the community of faith may rightly interpret the biblical text demonstrates this view.[297] He further sharpens his presentation when he delineates the differences between what he calls "Performance I Interpretation" and "Performance II Interpretation."[298] It is

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[297] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).

[298] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, Chapter 5. In Performance II Interpretation, the interpretative community, or in our case, the particular community of faith, authors and directs the interpretation. Vanhoozer describes this as ecclesial performance interpretation where "the church's use/performance of Scripture is seen to be constitutive of the literal sense," 167. Vanhoozer would place both Lindbeck and Grenz under this Performance II umbrella, although he spends the majority of his time engaging the cultural-linguistic model of Lindbeck. Vanhoozer is decidedly against the conclusions of Performance II interpretation where "a cultural-linguistic matrix thus becomes the context of utterance in which the script takes on meaning," 173. Performance I Interpretation, which is Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic project taken up throughout the remainder of this work, argues that the interpretative community responds and enacts the theo-dramatic script, namely, Scripture. Vanhoozer articulates that within Performance I "the

important for us to understand Vanhoozer's take on Performance II interpretation so that

we may better understand what he is arguing against in order to engage his proposal for

Performance I interpretation throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Vanhoozer's description of Performance II interpretation is the type of

performance interpretation that both he and Wolterstorff argue against.[299] Wolterstorff

dislikes performance interpretation because, on his account, it ignores the actual acts of

discourse. Furthermore, he contends that performance interpretation does not seek to

"find out" what the author has said, but is rather content in making sense of a text

squarely from the perspective of the reader-interpreter.[300] Vanhoozer notes that it "is

both fascinating and highly significant for the present work that Wolterstorff views Frei's

work (and by extension, Lindbeck's) as an instance of performance interpretation."[301] It

is significant for Vanhoozer's work because it is Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of

theology that is presented as a prime example of Performance II interpretation.

Vanhoozer argues, "At key points in their respective works, both Frei and

Lindbeck privilege community use (performance) over the text itself (script)."[302]

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normative patterns from which we derive doctrine are the communicative actions in Scripture that mediate God's self-communicative act in Jesus Christ," 181. He makes this even more clear as he states that "Performance I interpretatioin acknowledges both the illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of the divine drama. Better: it acknowledges that we can have the latter only by way of the former," 182. Performace II interpretation, on the other hand, "seeks to achieve perlocutionary effects (*pathos*) without recognizing the primacy of the divine illocutions (*logos*)," 182.

[299] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 171-182.

[300] Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 181.

[301] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 166. See also Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 219.

[302] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 166. See my chapter on Lindbeck which argues this point in greater detail.

Lindbeck consistently affirms that we engage the language game and thereby learn the grammatical rules that govern our Christian faith through our active participation in the life of the community of faith. Vanhoozer wonders what we are to make of the biblical canon within such a theological framework. He asks, "Can it be a guide and govern the church, or does its very meaning hinge on how the church performs it?"[303] While Lindbeck may show signs of being open to an authorial-discourse interpretive approach,[304] the privilege still seems to lie squarely with the interpreting community of faith. The author thus presents Performance II interpretation as "*ecclesial performance interpretation*" where "the church's habitual use/performance of Scripture is seen to be constitutive of the literal sense."[305] Herein lies the problem for Vanhoozer; "Performance II privileges the aims and interests of the interpreting community over the aims and interests of the playwright."[306] Authority lies with the community of faith. Meaning is found through the community's use of the biblical text. Truth becomes a very difficult concept to define in terms other than those that remain relative to a particular community of faith.[307]

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[303] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 166.

[304] George A. Lindbeck, "Postcritical Canonical Interpretation: Three Modes of Retrieval," In *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight, eds., (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 26-51. While the openness to authorial-discourse interpretation can be found here, he does not explain how this might fit within the thought of his earlier writings, particularly his *Nature of Doctrine*.

[305] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 167.

[306] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 167.

[307] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 170-175. It is here that Vanhoozer provides a deeper assessment of the cultural-linguistic proposal of Lindbeck.

Vanhoozer's critical assessment of the cultural-linguistic model of theology engages each of these ideas mentioned above, namely truth, authority, and meaning. He contends that critics of the cultural-linguistic model usually level one or more of the following charges against it. First, "*with regard to Scripture, it tends toward fideism.*"[308] Vanhoozer perceives a difficulty within Lindbeck's scheme of determining why we should give priority to the biblical text over other texts. He argues, "Intratextual consistency alone is not a sufficient condition of truth."[309] A second charge that critics level against the cultural-linguistic model is that "*with regard to the church, it tends toward idealism.*"[310] The concern here is that we have little basis for accepting the performance of any given community of faith as authoritative since different churches inhabit differing socio-cultural contexts where their use of the text may be substantially different. Even Kathryn Tanner points out that "appeal to communal norms will not guarantee, then, as postliberals want it to, stability underneath the changing forms of history."[311] The final charge that critics may bring against the cultural-linguistic performance model is that "*with regard to God, it tends toward nonrealism.*"[312] Vanhoozer, concerned about what this nature of doctrine might mean for truth claims, asks, "If theology is a species of ethnography or community self-description, what happens to truth claims about who God is and about what God has done in Jesus

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[308] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 174. Emphasis his.

[309] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 174.

[310] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 174. Emphasis his.

[311] Kathryn E. Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 142.

[312] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 174. Emphasis his.

Christ?"[313] In Performance II interpretation, theology can seem to be more about our beliefs, our language and our practices than it is about God. It is within this context that Vanhoozer seeks to offer an alternative view for performance interpretation.

Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach to Christian theology is what he also refers to as Performance I interpretation. In contrast to Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model, meaning in Vanhoozer's proposal is "determined by authorial/canonical discourse."[314] This biblical canon functions as both transcript of the theodrama of what God has done in Christ as well as functioning as a divine prescript which commands ongoing, faithful performance by the community of faith. A further distinction from the cultural-linguistic model is, "In Performance I interpretation, what is authoritative is the divine authorial (canonical) use; the community thus performs the word and will of another."[315] With these distinctions in mind, I now move to more clearly articulate the relationship between the community of faith and the issues of authority, meaning and truth within Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic theological proposal.

The Question of Authority

Vanhoozer clearly finds authority in the biblical canon as the communicative act of God. This has been argued at length earlier in this chapter and need not be rehearsed here. The theologian does sense that hermeneutical relativism is the likely result if authority for determining meaning and truth is grounded in the interpretive community.

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[313] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 174-175.

[314] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 167.

[315] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 167.

He finds such relativism both self-refuting and self-perpetuating. It is the latter of these two qualities that specifically concerns Vanhoozer when it comes to the issue of authority. He argues, "If interpretive communities rather than texts are the locus of authority, then texts cannot challenge the tradition of their interpretations."[316] But this is precisely one of the roles that the author sees the biblical text having, namely magisterial authority over the tradition of the community of faith. Even the "Rule of Faith" put forward by some of the Ante-Nicene Church Fathers is ruled by the canon. Vanhoozer contends that "*the authority of the Rule depends on its conforming to the Scriptures*."[317] He finds that the very purpose of the Rule is "to let Scripture interpret Scripture." He declares, "*The Rule rules but is itself ruled (by the canon); the canonical script rules but is not itself ruled*."[318] Furthermore, Vanhoozer argues, "*sola scriptura* means at least this: that the church's performance is always subject to potential correction from the canon. It is for this reason that we must resist simply collapsing the text into the tradition of its interpretation and performance."[319]

The question still remains as to whether the community of faith has any authority within the canonical-linguistic proposal. Vanhoozer proclaims that the tradition of the church indeed has authority, but that authority must be understood as ministerial rather than magisterial authority. Interestingly, this argument for the ministerial authority of church tradition takes place within Vanhoozer's discussion of the practice of *sola*

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[316] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 320.

[317] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 206. Emphasis his.

[318] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 207. Emphasis his.

[319] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 152.

scriptura. He states that "*sola scriptura* describes a pattern of authority that obtains between Scripture, tradition, and the life of the church."[320] The author argues that *sola scriptura* was never designed to be a complete protest to the tradition of the church. Rather, it was to ensure that Scripture alone remained the "norming norm" of theology while tradition fulfilled its role as the "normed norm." He writes, "A theology that practices *sola scriptura* recognizes the *ministerial* authority of tradition, namely, its ability to nurture individuals in and to hand on the apostolic faith through the church's corporate witness."[321] Thus, the church's tradition has a derived, ministerial authority that teaches us in our contemporary setting what and how the church has spoken and acted throughout faithful performances of the canonical script in the past and how we might faithfully embody and enact the canonical script in our current cultural context.

There is one additional matter to consider when thinking about the church's overall ministerial authority as it seeks to faithfully speak and act in accordance with the biblical text. Vanhoozer argues that there is a distinct advantage in belonging to a church when interpreting the Bible. This is so because the church is made up, or should be, of disciples who share a primary concern for understanding the Scripture's meaning while correctly cultivating and utilizing interpretive, that is intellectual, ethical and spiritual, virtues. The author concludes, "We need the interpreting community not because it alone has the single correct conceptual scheme, but rather because the church is, or should be, the community that (1) displays the interpretive (ethical, spiritual) virtues, and (2) shares a concern for textual meaning and a desire to hear the Word of God. The community's

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[320] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 232.

[321] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 234. Emphasis his.

role [in] interpretation is not magisterial, therefore, but ministerial."[322] Thus, we are to

understand that the community of faith has ministerial authority in leading us to read and

understand the meaning of the biblical text faithfully. It has further ministerial authority

in showing us how to faithfully embody and enact the ongoing theodrama in light of past

faithful performances (church tradition), and in developing contemporary practical

wisdom that seeks to direct us into right speech and action in new contexts today (church

doctrine as direction). To be sure, all of this ministerial authority submits itself to the

magisterial authority of the biblical canon as God's communicative act.

The Question of Meaning

A second important issue to consider is the relationship between the community

of faith and meaning within the context of Vanhoozer's theodramatic proposal for

theology. It has been made clear that the primary role for the community of faith is to

rightly assess the determinate meaning that exists within the written text understood as

authorial discourse. I have previously considered the church's role within canonical-

linguistic theology as an "exegetical *scientia*" whereby the community of faith attempts

to hear "what the Spirit of Christ says through the word of Christ to the body of

Christ."[323] This requires faithful interpretive and exegetical skill and virtue as the church

seeks to discover the determinate meaning within the biblical canon. I have also

previously delineated the church's need for developing *sapientia*, that is, practical

wisdom in the present social and cultural context. It is in this very area, the church's

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[322] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 323.

[323] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 265.

performance of Scripture in practical wisdom, that I would like to consider a nuanced

view of the relationship between the church and meaning of the biblical text.

Vanhoozer states that canonical-linguistic theology is interested in discovering

what the authoritative, covenant biblical text requires of the community. It is less

concerned about what the church understands her faith commitment to entail. Yet he is

quick to point out that "this is not to say that the community is unimportant. On the

contrary, without the church's performance of Scripture, we would lack an important

dimension of what Scriptures mean."[324] This is so because Scripture implies the

community of faith constituted by it and existing under its authority. To be sure,

Vanhoozer reminds us, "to the extent that Scripture has been taken up into the economy

of triune communicative action, it has meaning *before* it is used by the interpretive

community or socialized into the church's life."[325] However, the fullness of meaning "is

an affair of context." Sapiential theology recognizes the "importance of 'prosaics': the

practices of ordinary language and of ordinary life."[326] In order to truly understand what

people are saying and doing, "we need to know something about the circumstances of

their speech and action."[327] Thus, the meaning of the biblical text must be contextualized

without having its textual meaning changed. But how might this work?

Vanhoozer maintains that the Spirit does not create new meaning that is

inconsistent with the verbal meaning within the biblical text. However, he does contend

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[324] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 141.

[325] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 101. Emphasis his.

[326] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 310.

[327] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 311.

that "*the Spirit's role in bringing about understanding is to witness to what is other than himself (meaning accomplished) and to bring its significance to bear on the reader (meaning applied).*"[328] This is an important distinction that has been modeled for us even within the biblical text. The writers of the New Testament needed to answer the question of what the Old Testament meant in light of Christ. The author argues that "when the New Testament recontextualized the Old Testament in light of Christ, it did not change its meaning but rather rendered its referent—God's gracious provision for Israel and the world—more specific."[329] Thus, significance is understood as recontextualized meaning. Vanhoozer concludes, "*In sum, the Word of God for today (significance) is a function of the Word of God in the text (meaning), which in turn is a witness to the living and eternal Word of God in the Trinity (referent).*"[330]

Vanhoozer articulates that "the meaning of Scripture is revelatory and fixed by the canonical context; the significance of the Word is relative and open to contemporary contexts."[331] While ascertaining the significance of the biblical text is an important part of interpreting the text, it must not be confused with grasping the intended meaning of the Scripture. Vanhoozer asserts, "The latter is a matter of historical and literary knowledge; discerning significance, on the other hand, is a matter of wisdom, for it concerns not the achieving of knowledge but the appreciation of knowledge and its right use."[332]

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[328] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 413.

[329] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 423.

[330] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 423. Emphasis his.

[331] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 423.

[332] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 423.

Vanhoozer argues that his method acknowledges that plurality is to be expected, "both with regard to meaning (because we need a plurality of descriptive frameworks) and with regard to significance (because we have a plurality of contemporary applications)."[333] Yet he further contends, "On my view, the Bible may be significant in different ways to different readers who nevertheless agree that there is a single meaning in the text."[334] So what is the role of the community of faith in making judgments with regard to meaning and significance? It is here that I refer the reader back to our previous discussion of developing and cultivating interpretive virtues that lead to the ability to make good theological judgments. These judgments, which have to do with meaning and significance, can best be made through determining theodramatic fittingness by developing "canon sense," understood as fittingness to the Script(ure), and "catholic sensibility," understood as fittingness to the situation.[335] Vanhoozer clearly argues that his version of contextual theology "*is the attempt, as bold as it is humble, to understand and perform the theo-drama in terms of a particular context…A genuine contextual theology is accountable both to the theo-drama (and hence to the canonical texts) and to the contemporary situation (and hence to particular cultural contexts).*"[336]

This leads us to what Vanhoozer calls "the key canonical-linguistic thesis: *Christian doctrine is the realization of canonical potential.*"[337] The author contends that

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[333] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 424.

[334] Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning?*, 424.

[335] The larger treatment of these considerations may be found earlier in this chapter under the heading "A Brief Look at Vanhoozer's Big Idea." See also Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 177-186.

[336] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 314. Emphasis his.

[337] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 352. Emphasis his.

"the notion of meaning potential allows us to affirm both the supreme authority of the canon and its meaning and the necessity of performing it in new contexts (to explore its full potential)."[338] The theologian fears that without the notion of meaning potential, we would be unable to distinguish between bringing scriptural authority to bear on new situations in new ways (Performance I interpretation—canonical-linguistic) from relocating authority to the interpreting community of faith (Performance II interpretation—cultural-linguistic). As we have already seen, Vanhoozer's entire argument is about engaging Performance I interpretation and performance. Much like the potential meaning of the Old Testament is realized over the time of completing the canon, Vanhoozer contends that theology now seeks deeper understanding of the "potential meaning of the gospel implicit in the canon as a whole. *Creative understanding thus insists on the normativity of the canon and on the necessity of outsideness in order to plumb the depths of its meaning*."[339] His point of "outsideness" here refers to cultural and historical distance. He asserts that the community of faith is able to better understand the doctrinal direction received from Scripture as we relate and perform the ongoing theo-drama in new contexts and situations. Thus, the church's development of doctrine is, for Vanhoozer, "a matter of *improvising with a canonical script*."[340] This improvisation is to be Spirit-directed, canonically sensible, communally engaged, all while learning from faithful improvisations of the past through the traditional performances of the church in both speech and action.

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[338] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 352.

[339] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 353. Emphasis his.

[340] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 353. Emphasis his.

The Community of Faith and the Question of Theological Truth-Claims

The community of faith is integrally related to truth and theological truth-claims, both in word and deed. Vanhoozer points toward the significance of the community of faith as interpreters of truth when he states that "the truth of Scripture is that quality of the biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures that what is said corresponds to the way things are when interpreted rightly and read in faith."[341] The author argues that the church's role is not to "author" the truth, but rather to rightly interpret, speak, and live out the truth of God's communicative act. This is accomplished with what Vanhoozer calls the "economy of truth" which is described as "a divinely supervised administration of truth that requires biblical interpreters not merely to push propositions around in theoretical arguments but also to embody them in concrete forms of practical reasoning." He further states that the "economy of communication terminates not in the text but in us."[342] To be sure, Vanhoozer holds that Scripture is truth apart from the church's reception of it or obedience to it. However, the church is given both the gift and responsibility of interpreting the truth in the *scientia* side of theology while also living out the truth in her contemporary context through the *sapientia* side of theology where truth is more fully embodied and enacted through the life of the church.

Vanhoozer reminds us that this work of truth and "getting at" the truth is itself a divine work of the Holy Spirit working in and through both Scripture and church. He contends that textual truth is already in the Bible by virtue of the Spirit's inspiration. But what are we to make of the Spirit's illuminating the church in understanding this truth?

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[341] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 72.

[342] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 74.

Vanhoozer argues, "Illumination does not make Scripture true but renders its truth intelligible and efficacious for wide-awake interpreters. *We short-circuit the economy of communication if we simply affirm the objective truth of Scripture and then stop*."[343] His point is that the community of faith in its living out biblical textual truth, that is, reality as it really is in Christ, provides a robust and embodied truth which actually enables us, and others, to better understand truth. The author writes, "When we learn to see, feel, think and indwell the biblical texts, interpretation becomes a matter not only of information but of personal formation: of learning how to speak and act in a way that accords with the real 'in Christ.'"[344] Thus, we may understand the community of faith's relationship with truth as both coherence and correspondence. It is important to remember before moving forward that Vanhoozer does not contend that we have exhaustive knowledge like God whereby we might know the fullness of truth. He does, however, argue that we have adequate or sufficient truth for understanding reality as it is "in Christ" so that we might live in accordance with that very reality.[345]

Coherence

Vanhoozer contends that the community of faith is integrally related to truth that coheres in two ways. First, within the framework of his describing the canonical fittingness of theological claims by comparing it to cartography, he makes clear that the community of faith must gain spiritual understanding about the manner in which each

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[343] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 75. Emphasis his.

[344] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 110.

[345] I have discussed Vanhoozer's treatment of *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*, the correspondence of mind and thing/subject matter, earlier in this chapter.

kind of text (genre) in the canon is composed and how each text coheres in its own right. This thought is similar to the notion of intratextuality in Lindbeck's model. The church is responsible, in Vanhoozer's project, to develop a Spirit-directed ability to understand that what literary genres communicate "is not simply propositional content but ways of processing this content into meaningful wholes: ways of thinking, seeing, and even experiencing this content."[346] These meaningful wholes are to cohere.

The second way in which the community of faith is related to truth that coheres is through their communal life of *sapiential* theology or practical wisdom. Vanhoozer argues, "If doctrine gives direction for our fitting participation in the theodrama, then we need to have local as well as biblical knowledge in order to know what to say and how to act in particular situations when confronted with problems not explicitly addressed in Scripture."[347] While he states that truth is one, he further recognizes that there are multiple interpretive traditions. A coherent, local, communal witness in word and deed is essential for the integrity and well-being of that local community of faith as well as its "evangelistic" witness for God to the surrounding cultural context. It is not only the requirement of attesting to a reality that is beyond itself (correspondence) that is important in providing a witness, but also "the ability to do this only in terms of one's own contextually conditioned perspective."[348] The theological truth-claims of any community of faith are to cohere with one another through their spoken witness as well as a coherent life lived as a community "in Christ." In what follows, I will show that

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[346] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 110. See also Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 298-301.

[347] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 111.

[348] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 111.

Vanhoozer embraces a correspondence theory of truth alongside this demand that truth

must cohere in theological presentation in both word and action.

Correspondence

Vanhoozer promotes his version of critical realism by stating that "while the *truth*

about what God has done in Christ depends neither on the biblical testimonies nor on the

church's reception of them, our *knowledge* of the truth does."[349] He contends that there is

truth, the fullness of which God only knows. He further contends that the community of

faith knows truth sufficiently enough as ectypal knowledge, a copy or reflection of the

archetypal knowledge of God, so that we might know, respond to, and live out truth

rightly. The community of faith, by God's design, is to seek understanding of truth that

corresponds to reality as it is "in Christ." Vanhoozer claims, "Coherence alone is

insufficient, for cartography and rationality alike. If the biblical texts are going to

mediate knowledge of God, the world, and ourselves, then they must refer to something

other than themselves."[350] The community of faith serves as interpreter and living

exhibition of that truth that corresponds. Here, the author continues to expand the use of

his "maps" analogy as he suggests that the way that a map "corresponds" to the world

depends upon the kind of map it is. Each map gives an aspect of the larger corresponding

truth of the world as it is. Vanhoozer coins this as "aspectival realism," that is, how each

genre relates an aspect of the larger "corresponding" truth of reality as it is "in Christ."

The community of faith must, according to the theologian, develop a Spirit-directed

canonical competence in order to recognize that the canon displays various kinds of

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[349] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 286.

[350] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 298.

correspondence or what he calls "extrasystematic fittingness." Thus, it is evident that the

community of faith is related to truth that "corresponds" through its ongoing

interpretation of the biblical text. But what about the life of the church itself?

The life of the community of faith in relationship to God, that is its theological

performance in word and deed, is the heart and goal of Vanhoozer's theological proposal.

Within this canonical-linguistic approach to Christian theology, the author expands the

thought of what it means to have correspondence between our doctrine and reality. He

explains:

> The goal of theology is to form disciples who participate fittingly in the theodrama precisely as compelling witnesses to the resurrection. To stake a truth claim on behalf of the resurrection is ultimately to become involved not simply in arguments but in a way of life. The correspondence between our doctrine and reality involves more than a certain language/world relationship. Theology as a form of *sapience* ultimately involves persons and practices, not merely propositions and procedures; transformation, not merely information. A prophetic theology will seek to correspond in word *and* deed, proposition *and* practice, to the reality of the resurrection.[351]

Vanhoozer still affirms that right information, correct assertions and propositional truth-

claims are of extreme importance. His concern is that this only gets us so far in

understanding truth. A more robust understanding of the truth works itself out in the

church's fitting participation in the ongoing drama of redemption. Not only does this

show the truth lived out; It actually helps us to better understand and appropriate the

truth.

Vanhoozer speaks of the truth in front of the text which focuses on the reader's

engagement with its subject matter. Here he borrows some thought from Kierkegaard as

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[351] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 358.

he describes truth as (inter)subjectivity. He rightly observes that Kierkegaard was not espousing relativism, but was instead calling for people to passionately commit themselves to the truth. Vanhoozer makes clear the distinction as he writes, "Objective truth denotes 'what is' regardless of one's relation to it; what Kierkegaard calls subjective truth, by contrast, denotes how 'what is' has an existential bearing on the life of the one who commits to it."[352] Vanhoozer refers to this type of lived out "subjective" truth as "covenantal correspondence." He contends that "the correspondence that ultimately counts in biblical interpretation is not simply that of sentences but of oneself."[353] There is to be a real, covenantal correspondence between who we show ourselves to be in word and deed with who we have truly been made to be in Christ which, in turn, corresponds to the reality of things as they really are in accordance with God's self-revelation in Christ who not only bears, but is truth.[354]

Vanhoozer asserts that the community of faith stands in close relation, in fact articulates her very identity, with theological truth claims that are both verbal and lived out. These truth claims both cohere and correspond to the reality of who God has revealed himself to be in his character, and what he has done and is doing in Christ. While espousing a sense of propositional truth that corresponds to reality, Vanhoozer wants to ensure that we include the life practice of the community of faith as truth that corresponds to reality as well. This thought is captured in the words of Vanhoozer's charge: "*True interpretation of the word of truth is an act of understanding that must be*

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[352] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 110.

[353] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 110.

[354] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 111.

proved and exhibited in practice. It takes a company of pilgrims. Our life together in the church is our most eloquent commentary on the gospel and, as such, ought itself to be exhibit number one of Christian truth."[355]

The Community of Faith and Theological Dramatic Practice

Authority, Truth and Meaning on Display Together

Vanhoozer has argued extensively that the biblical canon serves as authoritative text as we engage the theological task that ultimately leads us into becoming better disciples who seek both to speak and live out the wisdom of God. While he renders the definition of theology in many different yet unified ways, it is doubtful that a more comprehensive definition can be found in his writings than when he states:

> Let us define theology as the discipline that trains disciples (1) how to render for ourselves and commend to others the utter reliability of the Word of God, (2) how to render for ourselves and commend to others the meaning and truth of the claim that God was in Christ reconciling all things to himself, and (3) how to render for ourselves and commend to others the wisdom of the cross.[356]

This definition points toward the goal that the community of faith would become a faithful community of disciples who seek understanding from the theo-drama authoritatively articulated through Scripture and then seek to faithfully perform that ongoing theo-drama in their contemporary setting in word and deed.

Authority, truth and meaning are on display together in this canonical-linguistic approach to theology. It begins by understanding canonization as "a matter of the theo-

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[355] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?" 114. Emphasis his.

[356] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth: Mission, Martyrdom & the Epistemology of the Cross," In *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 341.

drama's authoritative articulation, of the theo-drama's coming to speech, and of the church's acknowledgment of Scripture as its authoritative script."[357] However, Vanhoozer makes clear that while Scripture is the "norming norm" and authoritative in theology as the communicative act of God in covenant with his people, "the canon as script comes into its own only when it is realized in understanding and responsive action." He further contends that "there is indeed a sense in which the church does not adequately know what the Scriptures mean 'until we are involved in their performance and in the transformation they enable when appropriated in performance.' Performing this script enriches our understanding of it."[358] The author argues that canonical reasoning (the theodrama and theodramtic practices in Scripture) is always designed to lead to right contextual judgment (the continued fittingness of working out-performing the theodrama in our contemporary contexts). He states that fittingness is a matter of "rightly ordered love" that has been trained to know truth, do good and sense beauty. He argues that this truth involves apprehending fittingness, that which corresponds to the theodrama. Goodness involves acting fittingly, in a manner which corresponds with the theodrama. Beauty involves appraising fittingness, that is, the way the various parts of the theodrama correspond to one another.[359] Vanhoozer puts these thoughts together as he concludes, "*The wise disciple is the one who discerns, deliberates, and does the truth, goodness and beauty that is the love of God in Jesus Christ*."[360]

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[357] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 229.

[358] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 235. He also here borrows thought from Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 147.

[359] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 185.

[360] Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," 186. Emphasis his.

The theodramatic performance of the community of faith puts the Spirit-directed authority, truth and meaning of Scripture on display so the world may see a witness to God reconciling things to himself in Christ. Vanhoozer contends that any would-be disciple would be wise in counting the cost because truth-tellers and truth-doers will suffer for the truth they show and tell.[361] In fact, Vanhoozer suggests that as the community of faith truly performs atonement theology, we function as a prophetic theater of martyrdom.[362] The author asserts, "Canonical-linguistic theology is sapiential in its aim to direct the church to speak, act, live—and, as we shall see, suffer—in ways that correspond and cohere with the cross of Christ, the climax of the theo-drama."[363]

Vanhoozer's description of the relationship between staking a truth claim, witnessing, and martyrdom shows the interconnectedness of authority, truth and meaning being displayed together in the faithful life-performance of the community of faith. The author wishes to make clear that "*the martyrdom that is the proper end of doctrine involves suffering for one's witness to the truth.*"[364] He further clarifies, "Martyrdom…is ultimately what is required in staking a theological truth claim, for it is the whole speech act of testifying, not only the proposition, that ultimately communicates truth claims about the way of wisdom."[365] Vanhoozer is convinced that, given our postmodern context, we can no longer justify truth claims solely through propositional statements.

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[361] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 434.

[362] This larger trajectory of thought may be found in Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 426-434. Also see his "The Trials of Truth," 355-373.

[363] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 428.

[364] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 431. Emphasis his.

[365] Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth," 351.

Rather, "one must stake a claim, and ultimately oneself" because evangelical theologians must argue for the notion of truth and that this truth matters and is, in fact, a truth for which one can justifiably live and die.[366]

The theologian is to be a witness to the truth and both surrenders to and remains committed to it. Vanhoozer employs Kierkegaard's use of *passion* in a meaningful way as he relates how we are to live this subjective, inward passion for the truth outwardly in the world. The author convincingly writes, "Questions about meaning and truth—about God as well as about everything else—will be related to the way we actually live. One's active witness therefore can disclose to others not only the meaning of the evangelical truth claim but the intelligible structure of the world as interpreted by Christians as well."[367] Thus, performing the truth is certainly one manner in which we show what the truth is and what the world is really like. For the theologian, truth should determine and transform the individual and the reality of that transformation should be seen in the faithful, enduring performance of the reality of who they have been transformed to be in Christ.

Vanhoozer contends that for a person to truly stake an evangelical truth claim means that they are willing to surrender everything for the sake of this claim. He writes, "To pour oneself out for the sake of the evangelical truth claim means making the way of Christ intelligible, both theoretically and practically."[368] The theologian is to tell the truth, live out the truth, and suffer the truth. She does this in order to lead others to do the

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[366] Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth," 356.

[367] Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth," 363-364.

[368] Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth," 367.

same for the glory of God and for their own flourishing. "Genuine theology is not only

about the art of reasoning well (rationality) but about living well (wisdom) and dying

well (martyrdom)."[369] The contemporary challenge of the community of faith staking a

truth claim (a claim that displays authority, truth, and meaning together) "is nothing less

than displaying in one's life the way of Jesus Christ," that is, that we are to "*be* a truth" to

our neighbor.[370]

Within the context of the grand theodrama of Scripture, we find ourselves in the

time of redemption awaiting the final consummation and the realization of the fullness of

the kingdom of God. Until that time, the community of faith stands as witness to and

participant in that realm through their announcing (proclaiming the truth) and their

rehearsing (performing the truth) of that reality. Vanhoozer explains, "*Only* the church

can rehearse the kingdom of God; *this, the kingdom of God, is what the church has to say

and do that no other institution can say and do*."[371] He further describes that "in a world

that is passing away, the special vocation of the people of God is to live in such a way

that shows they are in touch with reality, with the eschatological fullness of the real 'in

Christ.'"[372] Proclaiming and living out the reality of the reign of God as community,

servant and messenger is indeed displaying authority, truth and meaning together in the

church's faithful and fitting theodramatic performance.

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[369] Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth," 373.

[370] Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth," 373. Emphasis his.

[371] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 443. Emphasis his.

[372] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 444.

Different Theaters with the Same Script

Vanhoozer distinguishes between different theaters which all submit to Scripture as the supreme authority for proper meaning, understanding, and truth. Each of these types of theater are helpful in better equipping the pastor-director to be able to communicate the meaning of the Script(ure) to the actors (the community of faith) while also indirectly, through those actors, communicating to the larger audience the meaning of the performance of this church family. Vanhoozer describes the significance of (1) Masterpiece Theater: Creedal Theology, (2) Regional Theater: Confessional Theology, and (3) Local Theater: Congregational Theology.

As noted above, masterpiece theater has to do with creedal theology. This creedal theology is indispensable for a pastor who wishes to understand the broader scope of Christian theology rather than just its local form. Vanhoozer defines a creed as "an abbreviated, authorized, and adequate summary of both the biblical witness and the preaching and teaching of the universal church."[373] Thus, a creed helps us to rightly read Scripture as well as better understand our identity and beliefs. These creeds are associated with seven ecumenical councils of the ancient church and provide a theology for the entire (catholic) church. The author explains that the purpose of creedal theology "*is to direct the local church into the way of the Scriptures and to relate the local church to previous great performances.*"[374] Creedal theology thus provides us with "catholic sensibility" of how to rightly understand and participate in the theodrama even within our contemporary situations in a manner that the entire church can accept.

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[373] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 449.

[374] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 450. Emphasis his.

Regional theater has to do with confessional theology. Vanhoozer laments the description of doctrine as divisive. He contends that the only thing that doctrine should clearly divide is truth from falsehood. Thus, confessional theology should distinguish the church from the world. But how does confessional theology benefit the pastor-director of a local church? His succinct answer is, "Precisely by *mediating* between the universal (catholic) and particular (local)."[375] The author wishes for the community of faith and pastors in particular to see confessional theologies as performances that are responses to particular historical circumstances which contain lessons for the rest of the church in how to go about addressing theological issues. Vanhoozer contends that the confessional traditions are "performance traditions, bearers of theo-dramatic rationality that combine elements of stabilization with elements of innovation."[376] Confessional theologies affirm the creeds, yet they go further in delving into questions about how we best understand and perform the theodrama in a particular situation with particular theological issues at hand. The theologian is convinced that the church catholic benefits from multiple confessional theologies as they enable the condition of creative theological understanding.

Finally, the author considers local theater as congregational theology. Vanhoozer claims that the local church may be best viewed as a contextualized performance of the catholic church. Theology and doctrine are important for the local church to have a sense of both identity and mission. In fact, Vanhoozer argues that "without some such allegiance to confessional or creedal theology, the local church will struggle to participate

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[375] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 452.

[376] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 453.

fittingly in the theo-drama and will find itself speaking and acting like the other institutions…that now hold cultural center stage."[377] To be sure, as we noted earlier in this chapter, canonical-linguistic theology employs canon sense and catholic sensibility as twin checks on local performances of the biblical script in word and deed. In the end, the author warns that the local church "will become masterpiece theater only to the extent that its focus is on living out the drama of redemption and on rehearsing the kingdom of God that is its raison d'être."[378] The pastor of the local church, then, simply seeks to help the local congregation to rightly hear (understand) and to rightly do (perform) the Scripture in and for the present.[379]

Chapter Summary and Conclusions

Positive Insights

I confess a certain affinity for Vanhoozer's theological proposal. There is much to like within his treatment of a canonical-linguistic approach to theology. To be sure, Vanhoozer's description of his proposal as postconservative, postpropositional, and postfoundationalist seems more concerned to stress the advancement of theological thought within evangelicalism rather than making a clear break from what has come before. Pastorally, both the tone and explanation of his work seem to start his project off on gracious and stable footing. He carefully argues against mere propositionalist theology while also seeking to rehabilitate the helpful aspects of propositional statements. This is a necessary corrective for those who understand the theological task as merely

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[377] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 455.

[378] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 457.

[379] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 456.

cognitive in its efforts to put forward a theology of propositional statements. This is also a necessary corrective for those who wish to argue that truth and meaning are to be found principally in the practice of the community of faith. Vanhoozer helps us in two ways here. First, he is careful to point out that while narrative serves as the largest portion of Scripture, it is not the only genre within the canon. Furthermore, the biblical text contains many propositional truth-claims that must be understood for just that, namely a truth-claim in propositional form. Secondly, the author helps to see a way through the claim that those theologians who embrace any level of propositional truth are guided by a need for certain, exhaustive knowledge that belongs to God alone. Vanhoozer's thoughtful engagement of theologians having adequate knowledge for making theological truth-claims serves as a beneficial corrective to overstatements on the part of Grenz and others. This balance of humility and conviction must mark the path forward for meaningful theology.

The author's argument that Scripture is the *principium cognoscendi* for theological engagement is refreshingly communicated. Without reservation, Vanhoozer finds the biblical text to be authoritative over our theological assertions and the practices of the community of faith. His treatment of the concept of *sola scriptura*, historical in content and meaningful for contemporary theological practice, helpfully showed a possible way to triangulate Scripture, tradition, and the contemporary culture in which theology is to be enacted and embodied by the community of faith. While he may do better in utilizing a term other than the potentially problematic "triangulate," the interrelationality of Scripture, tradition, and the contemporary culture in his work remains

beneficial. Scripture has magisterial authority and rules over the other areas while the tradition(s) of the church do have meaningful ministerial authority.

Vanhoozer clearly articulates that meaning is found within the text of Scripture and that this meaning is truthful for our belief and practice. His employment of speech-act theory from Austin through Searle is helpful in distinguishing not only what is communicated in Scripture but *what* the author intended for the reader to understand, *how* the author intended for the reader to understand, and the manner in which the author wanted the reader to respond. Central to the theologian's method is his thought that Scripture is God's communicative act and that the ongoing ministry of the Spirit is to illumine the community of faith into understanding the meaning and truth of the biblical canon and how that meaning finds its significance in the contemporary life of the church. Meaning, for Vanhoozer, is tied to the locutions and illocutions of Scripture. This is certainly distinct from Grenz, Franke, and others who do not locate the key action of the Spirit within the verbal form and content of biblical discourse.

Vanhoozer's overall presentation of his Drama-of-Redemption model provides meaningful insight into the relationship of Scripture and the community of faith as they relate to authority, truth and meaning. This is perhaps most clear as he writes of how the church's words and actions should exhibit theodramatic fittingness. Whatever the church says and does in our contemporary context should be fitting with the acts of the theodrama that have already been revealed in the biblical canon. Our contemporary theological wordings and actions should exhibit "canon sense" (fit with Scripture) and "catholic sensibility" (fit with the current situation). I found these thoughts to provide

brief, yet helpful criteria in determining how we are able to distinguish faithful performances of the theodrama from non-faithful performances.[380]

Vanhoozer further demonstrates that the community of faith serves as interpreter of the biblical text where she is able to find determinate meaning. Interestingly, he also acknowledges that the more full understanding of meaning and significance is found through the reality of embodying and enacting the truth of the text. The reality of the world of the text instructs and trains the church to see, feel, and live as disciples of Jesus Christ. This is rich in practical and pastoral theological implications. In the end, the author's theological method shows that authority, meaning and truth are all on display together as the community of faith takes its theological direction from doctrine drawn from the authoritative Script(ure), assessing its faithfulness with the great dramatic performances of the past (tradition), while seeking canon sense and catholic sensibility for the theodramatic fittingness of its words and actions in the present. This provides helpful guidance that should be considered for both the "what" and "how" of contemporary evangelical theological method.

Concerns

While there is much to admire in Vanhoozer's theological method, there are some concerns that should be briefly stated here. Vanhoozer has put forward some meaningful tests that help us to assess the level of faithfulness of an improvised canonical performance. However, there is need to further help theologians understand how we are

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[380] Thiselton argues that Vanhoozer offers constructive insights in his *Drama of Doctrine* without providing a longer explanation of how they might be followed through. While we may wish for more, it seems that Vanhoozer has specific goals for each of his writings and we must look at his other writings to grasp further outworking of the model such as the canon sense and catholic sensibility criteria mentioned here. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 77.

to distinguish between scriptural and unscriptural improvisations. At times, Vanhoozer

writes with eloquent rhetoric that leaves one wondering precisely what she is to take

away from the statement or how, precisely, she is to employ its content.[381] It is striking

that representative theologians espousing significantly divergent theological models can

affirm Vanhoozer's overall method as compatible with their own. Such is the case with

Doriani's redemptive-historical model and Webb's redemptive-movement model

engaged earlier.[382]

Finally, while finding Vanhoozer's dramatic proposal enlightening and engaging,

I wish to be careful to not push the metaphor too far so that we complicate understanding

rather than enlighten it. One observation and one plea may be offered here to get at this

point. First, it is interesting to observe Vanhoozer employing the use of the metaphor of

cartography and the terms of attending, appraising and advancing when he gets at the

heart of how to use his theological method. This seems to indicate his understanding that

the metaphor of drama can only get us so far. Secondly, the plea that may be put forward

is that more examples of actually employing his canonical-linguistic theological method

are needed. The movement from theory to practice needs to have greater light shown on

it. Specifically, Vanhoozer needs to provide more explicit examples of how we are to

fittingly move from the world of the text (the theodrama as projected or implied by the

text) to the world in front of the text (our current historical situation as the community of

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[381] This is the very type of response we see within Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "A Response to Kevin Vanhoozer," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 204. He writes, "After reading and rereading Kevin's chapter many times over, for the life of me I cannot explain to anyone else, much less myself, how the 'drama-of-redemption' approach works."

[382] To be fair, it does seem that in the instance of Webb's appropriation of Vanhoozer to support his redemptive-movement model, he simply misappropriates some of Vanhoozer's terms without understanding their intended meaning or significance.

faith). It has been encouraging to see his theological method worked out in his

Remythologizing Theology,[383] but even more practical working out of the dramatic

method would be helpful in clarifying the finer points of the method as theologians

themselves participate in the ongoing drama of redemption.

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[383] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). It is also worth noting that Vanhoozer's *Faith Speaking Understanding,* while more accessible than *Drama of Doctrine*, does little to advance his thought in practical application.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has described representative postliberal and postconservative evangelical theologies as they seek to meaningfully engage a culturally postmodern context. It has specifically delineated how these representative theologians understand the important relationships between Scripture and authority, meaning, and truth within their theological proposals. Furthermore, it has shown their understanding of the relationships between the community of faith and authority, meaning, and truth as they apply to their proposed theological method. In what follows, we will briefly come into contact with some of those prior descriptions while also providing brief critique in order to finally offer a proposal of how theology should humbly, yet with conviction, move forward.

Theological and Philosophical Currents

Neither Modern nor Postmodern

Each of the theologians considered throughout this dissertation has purposefully discussed, to one extent or another, the significance of modernity and postmodernity in relation to their own theological proposal. George Lindbeck, Stanley Grenz, and Kevin Vanhoozer each describe their departure from what they perceive as modern excesses in seeking after exhaustive and certain knowledge and truth. Still further, they each describe their concern for the far-too-reaching project of the cognitivist-propositionalist theological method. While this will be considered in more detail below, it is important to

note here that each of these theologians agrees that the canons of modernity should not set the theological agenda or method for the community of faith. On this we are agreed.

The theologians' responses to or accommodations with postmodern sensitivities seem to play a more important role in their proposed theological methods. Interestingly, both Lindbeck and Grenz are recognized as putting forward broadly postmodern theological methods.[1] Vanhoozer posits a theological method that seeks to engage the concerns of postmodernism without embracing some of its central features. Grenz most clearly delineates his postmodern theological agenda as he describes knowledge and truth as participatory, socially and linguistically constructed, narrative, and pragmatic.[2] Both Grenz and Lindbeck borrow heavily from the social sciences and linguistic philosophy. Both advocate for a communal-social view of truth with a focus on "language-games" which understand the use of language within particular self-contained systems which each have unique rules. Furthermore, Grenz understands meaning and truth as internal functions of language where sentences have as many meanings as contexts. This dissertation has previously described many of these and other tenets of postmodern philosophy in more detail. My concern is simply this: It seems that we are trading the master of modernity for the master of postmodernity in the engagement of the task of theology within Lindbeck's and Grenz's respective methods.

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[1] For Lindbeck's inclusion in postmodern theology, see George Hunsinger, "Postliberal Theology," In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin Vanhoozer, ed., (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 42-57. Hunsinger broadens the scope of postliberal thought far beyond Lindbeck's proposal, yet still shows that Lindbeck's method is indebted to postmodern sensitivities. For Grenz's capitulation to postmodern sensitivities, see Dan R. Stiver, "Theological Method," In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin Vanhoozer, ed., (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 170-185, especially 175, 183. This thought was also presented throughout my chapter on Grenz and supported by many sources therein.

[2] Stanley J. Grenz, "Participating in what Frees: The Concept of Truth in the Postmodern Context," *Review and Expositor* 100 no 4 (Fall 2003): 687-693.

Theologians need not "correlate" nor "appropriate" the philosophical

developments of Anglo-American postmodern philosophy in order to properly establish

the agenda or framework of Christian theology.[3] This is not to say that we cannot benefit

from insights brought forward through areas of this trajectory of thought. However, this

is to say that neither modernity nor postmodernity should set the agenda for theological

proposals and methods. Considering this thought, Vanhoozer rightly concludes:

"Modernity and postmodernity alike are ultimately digressions from the main subject,

namely, the way of wisdom and of life summed up in Jesus Christ."[4] God's self-

revelation in creation and particularly in Christ and the Bible should guide us on our way.

I shall only offer a brief comment with regard to God's general revelation in creation as it

is not a primary focus of this dissertation. It is important to realize a creation theology

that is consistent with the revelation of the biblical canon if Christian theology is to have

both a descriptive nature and a missiological-evangelistic nature of articulating the

knowledge of God as reality as it truly is for every person. The Christian theologian's

use of metaphysics should not be understood as a capitulation to modernity or

foundationalism, but rather a seeking understanding of God's universal revelation of

reality as it is in the very structure of his creation.[5] Albert Wolters helpfully reminds us

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[3] This type of correlation or appropriation seems to be precisely what Nancey Murphy and Brad J. Kallenberg are calling for in Nancey C. Murphy and Brad J. Kallenberg, "Anglo-American postmodernity: a theology of communal practice," In *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Kevin Vanhoozer, ed., (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26-41. This thought is most clearly stated on p. 40.

[4] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/Modern Way," In *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views,* Myron Penner, ed., (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 97.

[5] A helpful essay with a broad treatment on this very topic of the need for metaphysics in theology can be found in John Bolt, "*Sola Scriptura* as an Evangelical Theological Method?" In *Reforming or Conforming?: Post Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*, Gary L.W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 62-92.

that "biblical revelation has epistemological priority over God's revelation in creation, but both come with divine authority. God speaks to us through the very structure of creation—creation conceived in a broad biblical sense to include the God-ordained fabric of human culture and society."[6]

Rather than the tenets of modern or postmodern thought, it should be the biblical framework of creation-fall-redemption-consummation that should guide us in our thinking, speaking and living (doing theology) Christianly.[7] This need not negate the use of metaphysics mentioned above. In fact, it provides a meaningful framework within which we may properly engage metaphysics. Wolters has engaged a brief example of this kind of work in crafting a reformational worldview.[8] Gabriel Fackre follows the biblical narrative in his theological structure that delineates the "literary meaning" of the biblical story.[9] While these are helpful, I find a more robust treatment of the themes mentioned above in Michael Horton's *The Christian Faith*.[10] Horton engages various presuppositions in doing Christian theology, including his treatment of Scripture as covenant canon, and then grounds the remainder of his theological discourse in the Holy Trinity as the *principium essendi*. While various *loci* of Christian theology each receive

[6] Albert M. Wolters, "A Reflection by Al Wolters," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 317.

[7] To be sure, this is the framework employed by Vanhoozer as expressed in chapter four of this dissertation. We await a more broad theological treatise from Vanhoozer to see this framework fully utilized in doctrinal formulation.

[8] Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

[9] Gabriel J. Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

[10] Michael Scott Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

treatment, they are placed within the larger narrative of creation-fall-redemption-consummation.[11] This seems to me to be helpful in showing how the various *loci* and propositional statements are tied to the larger narrative framework of Scripture. This type of theological work also serves the purpose of reminding the reader where they are as well as who they are within the ongoing drama of redemption.

Beyond Propositionalism

This dissertation has shown that Lindbeck, Grenz, and Vanhoozer each argue against a propositionalist type of theology. Lindbeck writes against the cognitive-propositionalist model that he describes as emphasizing the cognitive aspects of religion while relegating doctrines to informative propositions about objective realities. Grenz also rails against the conservative evangelical tendency to be propositional in its theology. He describes this tendency as remaining "fixated on the propositionalist approach that views Christian truth as nothing more than correct doctrine or doctrinal truth."[12] For his part, Vanhoozer tempers the thought of Lindbeck and Grenz by articulating that "the canonical-linguistic watchword with regard to propositions must be 'beyond, but not without.'"[13]   Vanhoozer argues that understanding the Bible as divine communicative action is better than understanding the Bible to contain only propositional revelation for many reasons. He writes,

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[11] Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 309-990. Horton's section headings reveal this biblical narrative pattern within which we find the various *loci*. *Part 3: God Who Creates* (Creation/Fall: anthropology, hamartiology); *Part 4: God Who Rescues* (Redemption: Christology); *Part 5: God Who Reigns in Grace* (Redemption: pneumatology, soteriology, ecclesiology); *Part 6: God Who Reigns in Glory* (Consummation: eschatology).

[12] Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 170.

[13] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 278.

> Divine communicative action is the better rubric, and this for several reasons: (1) it overcomes the personal/propositional dichotomy inasmuch as communicative action is both a "saying" and a "doing"; (2) it corresponds to the biblical depiction of God as a communicative agent who does many things with words besides transmitting knowledge; (3) it better accounts for the diversity of Scripture itself, that is, the plurality of literary forms; (4) it enriches the notion of canonical authority by insisting that the church attend not only to propositional content (i.e., revealed truths) but to all the things God is doing communicatively in Scripture to administer his covenant; (5) it encourages us to view the Bible as a means by which we relate to and commune with God.[14]

To be sure, the biblical text contains propositional, revelatory statements. But it contains so much more. Theologians do a disservice to the text if and when we reduce the many canonical forms into one form, whether that form be propositional statement, narrative, or otherwise. Furthermore, the biblical text calls us to do more than know the truth put forward in propositional statements. Literary forms such as narrative have cognitive significance that consists of something other than conveying propositions.[15] They transform us and cause us to see the world in certain ways.

Christian theology would do well to acknowledge that the Bible is not simply a collection of propositional statements waiting to be found so that the reader's knowledge could be enhanced. God desires to do more than just inform people with objective knowledge through the biblical text. There is more in the canonical text than just propositional revelation. We must recognize that propositionalism, on its own, is inadequate for our full engagement with those biblical texts that are more concerned with aesthetic and affective qualities rather than the cognitive dimension.

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[14] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 277-278.

[15] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 279.

In agreement with all three of these theologians, I contend that theology certainly needs to be concerned with transformation of the life of the community of faith. We must recognize, however, that a portion of that life transformation will come through the church's contact with propositional revelation offered by God. It is not simply that true knowledge derives from a manner of life that corresponds to the ultimately real as argued by Lindbeck and Grenz. It is correct to affirm that there is more to both the biblical text and Christian theology than simply offering propositional truth claims, but assuredly not less.

Correspondence Theory of Truth that Coheres

Christian theology must hold to a correspondence view of truth as it seeks to understand God's self-revelation. This is not to deny that theological models should cohere. In fact, this dissertation concludes that what is needed is a correspondence theory of truth which helps the theologian to clearly articulate a systematic theology that coheres. Lindbeck's theological proposal, although not completely renouncing correspondence, enables coherence and pragmatic theories of truth to rule the method. This is seen in Lindbeck arguing that meaning and truth are determined by use of language and theology in the life of the community of faith not in accord to their reference to extratextual reality. Grenz takes this thought a step further. This dissertation has shown the troubling account of Grenz's view of the correspondence theory of truth. Grenz clearly contends that "like the move to coherence or pragmatism, adopting the image of 'language games' entailed abandoning the correspondence theory of truth."[16]

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[16] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 42.

Grenz furthermore renounces metaphysical and theological realism which puts into question any claims that theological statements which are in harmony with Scripture reflect an objective reality. Strangely, Grenz does contend that the eschatological reality to which Scripture points us does enable us to have language that represents or accurately refers to a future world. Douglas Groothuis shows the oddity of this claim:

> This claim is illogical. If language cannot *now* represent the objective world, why think that language can now represent a *future* world? If language is socially constructed in essence, it remains a construct in reference to future claims as much as it does to present claims. Moreover, the authors want us to believe that their statements about eschatological reality are true *right now*. If so, these words must be more than mere social constructions. If so, it also follows that we do not—as they claim—inhabit a "linguistic world of our own making," but that we have some cognitive claim on the "world-in-itself." So, their perspective seems self-contradictory: they presuppose a view of truth that they explicitly deny.[17]

Groothuis makes a good point here. While denying a correspondence view of truth, Grenz and Franke seem to employ, or at least imply, a correspondence theory of truth when articulating the nature of the real, eschatological world. Their description of "eschatological realism" in particular implies some level of a correspondence theory of truth.[18]

Against Grenz's rejection of a correspondence theory of truth, Vanhoozer argues that we have true knowledge that does indeed correspond to extratextual reality in a manner that is not absolute but adequate for our correct interpretation of and participation in the theo-drama. Even Scripture itself seems to presuppose an uncritical correspondence view of truth. Millard Erickson affirms Vanhoozer's basic stance when

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[17] Douglas Groothuis, "Truth Defined and Defended," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 63.

[18] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalsim*, 271-273.

he contends, "The world exists independently of our perception of it, deriving its ultimate reality from God. Although our perception may be far from identical with that reality as it is, the goal is to bring our beliefs into a conformity with that reality."[19] This correspondence view carries over to our understanding of theological doctrines as well. As has been argued earlier in this dissertation, doctrines that are consistent with the biblical narrative refer to realities beyond the text of Scripture. In fact, our very salvation is found in the realities to which these doctrines refer.

Finally, some thought should be given as to how theology should treat the concept of realism. This is certainly tied up in the conversation regarding a correspondence view of truth above. While Grenz presents the case for non-realism, Vanhoozer states that "Christian faith is realist but insists that some truths can adequately be grasped only by means of a plurality of vocabularies or conceptual schemes oriented to different levels or aspects of reality."[20] Theologians would do well to appreciate the sense of Vanhoozer's aspectival realism represented in this assertion. This fits directly with his cartographical metaphor of Christian theology where certain maps (biblical genres, etc.) allow us to gain a certain aspect of the truth while not exhausting all aspects of that truth. Another map drawn up for another purpose may well serve to enlighten us with regard to an additional aspect of truth. These aspects each correspond to reality as it is independent of us. Yet, no one language, vocabulary, or genre is able to exhaust all aspects of the truth. Hence, we have aspectival realism that corresponds to reality, and we have each of these vocabularies or genres which cohere with one another as they seek to "fill out"

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[19] Millard J. Erickson, "On Flying in Theological Fog," In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 330.

[20] Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress," 89.

theological truth-claims. The future of theology seems best served with a correspondence theory of truth that coheres in such a manner.

<div align="center">Scripture and Theology</div>

Scripture as *Principium*

This dissertation has shown that Lindbeck, Grenz, and Vanhoozer have each stated that Scripture has authority in the speech, actions, and overall life of the church. It has further shown that what is meant by embracing Scripture as the "norming norm" for the theology and life of the church is quite different amidst the thought of these three scholars. A good portion of this difficulty lies in the various answers to the question of why we should accept the Scriptures as authoritative at all. I have argued that Lindbeck's prioritization of Scripture lacks theological grounding. His giving priority to Scripture mostly comes about as a result of cultural conditions where the church decides to submit itself to the authority of the biblical text. Lindbeck makes this move rather than arguing for Scripture's authority as a result of its intrinsic quality of being inspired.

Grenz moves along similar lines of argumentation that we find in Lindbeck. Grenz writes of Scripture as the "norming norm" for theology, yet declares that the Bible is not inherently authoritative. We have seen that Grenz's position is that the Bible's authority is instrumental rather than intrinsic. What is authoritative is the Spirit's use of Scripture in the ongoing life of the community of faith since this community has decided to submit itself to this text. It is here that inspiration is collapsed into illumination in Grenz's view. A central concern bears repeating here. While Grenz argues that the Spirit speaking through Scripture is the supreme authority within his theological program, he

provides little criteria for determining the difference between the Spirit's correct speaking and the community of faith's incorrect reading of Scripture.

Against both Lindbeck and Grenz, Vanhoozer offers a more traditional understanding of Scripture as the "norming norm" of theology. For him, it is neither the community of faith's submission to nor its use of the biblical text that makes that text authoritative. Rather, Scripture has intrinsic authority because it is God-breathed. Just as God is the *principium essendi*, so Scripture is the *principium cognoscendi* of Christian theology. Furthermore, Vanhoozer affirms that Scripture is the epistemological *principium theologiae* without which we would not grasp true knowledge of God nor any theological method that could speak of him.

Christian theology needs to affirm Scripture as the *principium cognoscendi*. Following Vanhoozer and others, theologians do well in recognizing the intrinsic authority of the biblical text because of what it is, not simply because of what it may do. We must continue to distinguish between the Spirit's inspiration (constitution) and illumination (interpretation) of the text while noting the important link between the two works of the Spirit. We should furthermore engage in theology that recognizes the magisterial authority of Scripture while not dismissing the ministerial authority of tradition.

Scripture as World-Forming and Person-Transforming Narrative

Each of our theologians provided helpful insight with regard to Scripture having world-forming authority. Lindbeck's main avenue of argumentation in this area was his use of intratextuality to show the primacy of Scripture's world-forming narrative.

Intratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories. In Lindbeck's view, theologians are to faithfully describe the biblical world for Christians in their community, and from this description, Christians are to rightly observe and interpret their own world through the normative world of the Bible. We are to inhabit the biblical world. The postliberal view of Scripture as a world-forming narrative is commendable in a number of ways that have been mentioned previously. It also suffers from difficulties that were presented in chapter two of this dissertation. As Alister McGrath has shown, one critical problem is that we cannot answer whether this Christian idiom articulated in Scripture emerges from human insight that has been accumulated over time or if it is truly from the self-disclosure of God in the Christ-event.[21] Furthermore, this postliberal view seems to downplay the reality that we are shaped both by Scripture and the cultural context in which we currently live. It does seem that the religious, intratextual, world is shaping as well as being shaped by the extratextual world of our culture.

Grenz uniquely contends that the Spirit appropriates the text of Scripture in order to perform a particular perlocutionary act, namely creation of a world. In many ways, Grenz extends the thought of Lindbeck here as he also borrows from Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger. However, Grenz ultimately points his "world-forming" concept in a direction that leads away from the actual words of Scripture. Chapter three of this dissertation displayed how Grenz's understanding of the Spirit's perlocutionary act of world construction lies outside of Scripture. The Spirit performs world formation

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[21] Alister E. McGrath, "An Evangelical Evaluation of Postliberalism," In *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 34.

through the illocutionary act of appropriating the biblical text as the instrumentality of his speaking in new ways to the community of faith today. It is important to note here, as was shown earlier, that Grenz locates the present speaking of the Spirit outside of the biblical canon. The basic idea of world formation is laudable within Grenz's writing. However, his explanation becomes too muddied and separated from canonical text to remain a viable evangelical theological proposal from which to work.

Chapter four has shown Vanhoozer's appreciation of the postliberal rehabilitation of narrative. He asserts that the biblical text and individual narratives within the larger unified narrative display a world, but also develop worldviews within their readers. These narratives transform us as they teach us to see, feel, and live a certain way. Vanhoozer does share his concern that Lindbeck's view of Scripture's role as narrative of the community of faith seems to indicate that because of the seemingly self-contained nature of the world of the text, there is doubt as to whether Lindbeck's approach is able to make truth claims about anything "outside" the intratextual narrative world of Scripture.[22] Instead, Vanhoozer argues that the world of the text informs and forms our understanding of reality and how we are to see, speak, feel, and live in light of that reality in our contemporary context. That is, the Scripture reveals the ongoing theodrama wherein we are taught both where we currently fit within this drama and a pattern of judgment to know how to enact and embody the character and will of Christ within our own cultural situatedness.

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[22] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 95.

God is Reconciling all Things to Himself in Jesus the Christ

Lindbeck, Grenz, and Vanhoozer each argued that theology must be centered on what God is doing in Christ as shown in the Scriptures. The central theme of each of these respective theological proposals is that God is reconciling all things to himself in Jesus the Christ. It is essential that Christian theology remain centered on this reality. Both Grenz and Vanhoozer exhibit an eschatological orientation within their theologies. This is crucial as theologians seek to present a meaningful theology for those who currently live in the "already-not yet" portion of the theodrama. Alongside being able to rightly interpret our culture, we must be able to look both back at what God has done in Christ and forward to what God will finally do in Jesus the Christ.

It is not simply our past and future that is wrapped up in the reality of God's work through Christ, but our present reality as well. Vanhoozer asserts that in all that it says and does, "the church is to be a dramatic sign that the kingdom of God has come in Christ through his Spirit."[23] Michael Horton also affirms the necessity of this eschatological orientation of theology when he writes, "the present activity of the Spirit involves the application not only of the work of Christ in the past, but the work of Christ in the future."[24] Christian theology must recognize the significance of the eschatological orientation of systematic theology. This is because eschatology not only has reference to the future aspect of Christ's work (our resurrection, glorification, etc.), but is the shape of Christian theology as a whole since Christ was the in-breaking and inauguration of "the age to come" and the first-fruits of the "new creation."

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[23] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 443.

[24] Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 224.

Propositions Dependent Upon Larger Narrative

Theologians should recognize the significance of propositions within the larger narrative structure of the biblical text. Grenz expends much of his energy writing against propositional truth and against reading the Scriptures as propositional statements of truth. As has been shown previously, Vanhoozer argues against mere propositionalist theology while also seeking to rehabilitate the helpful aspects of propositional statements especially since we find them within the biblical canon. The central issue here is that evangelical theology must continue to recognize that propositional statements are an important part of revelation and God's communicative action. Thus, propositional statements remain an important piece of our theological construct, although not the singular piece. We best understand propositional statements within the biblical text in light of the larger narrative of which they are a part, namely the overarching, unified biblical canonical narrative. These propositions depend upon the larger narrative for our proper understanding of their meaning and significance for both our written theologies and our life embodiment and enactment of the truth revealed.

Scripture as God's Communicative Act

The subsection title listed above indicates my affinity for Vanhoozer's understanding of and engagement with Scripture within his theological model. It further indicates that one can find some promise in the use of speech-act theory within a theological method. Lindbeck simply does not engage Scripture in this way. He instead provides a cultural-linguistic model which makes it difficult to understand the relationship between the biblical text and meaning, let alone truth. Lindbeck describes

meaning and truth in terms of communal use of confessional and biblical utterances.

Grenz makes similar moves as described in chapter three, but he maintains that the Spirit

does speak through Scripture although it is difficult to understand precisely what this may

mean. Vanhoozer, on the other hand, describes the biblical canon as God's

communicative act. This concept has been treated in-depth within chapter four of this

dissertation.[25]

The use of speech-act theory, and the subsequent understanding of Scripture as

God's communicative act in Vanhoozer's view, provides potential promise for

theologians. Vanhoozer's point is that we need to see that the Bible is the means and

medium of God's communicative interaction with the church. Hence, Vanhoozer finds

meaning and truth within the biblical text because Scripture, while not a substitute for the

God who speaks, is the locus and medium of God's continued speaking. Indeed, the

Bible remains the God-ordained means of "communicating the terms and the reality of

the covenant whose content is Jesus Christ."[26] This thought stands in stark contrast to

that of Grenz who locates the key action of the Spirit somewhere other than in the verbal

form and content of the biblical discourse. Since Grenz locates the Spirit's illocutions

apart from the actual illocutions of Scripture, he is unable to adequately answer how

Scripture's actual content is related to the Spirit's accomplishing his perlocutionary

effects. It is here that I find Vanhoozer's use of speech-act theory in relation to the

Spirit's ministry of both inspiration and illumination to be beneficial in understanding

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[25] See especially his ten theses describing his thought on communicative action in Vanhoozer, "From Speech Acts," 159-203.

[26] Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse 2," 65.

Scripture as both providing meaning and, in turn, truth for the community of faith as they seek to follow Christ.

Theologians should affirm that the Bible is the means and medium of God's communicative interaction with the church. As a result, we should seek to understand the illocutionary force of the text(s) in order to properly understand the meaning that resides within the text itself due to the author's intention. Our understanding of illumination should then be the enabling of the Holy Spirit to allow us to rightly recognize, feel, and respond to the meaning and force of what is written. The Spirit's illuminating ministry will not change or supplement the meaning already residing in the Spirit-inspired canon. We can embrace this Spirit intended meaning as adequate truth that both corresponds and coheres as far as God has revealed it to be just so. The Spirit performs perlocutionary acts on the basis of the textual illocutions of Scripture. As Vanhoozer contends, "What God does with Scripture is covenant with humanity by testifying to Jesus Christ (illocution) and by bringing about the reader's mutual indwelling with Christ (perlocution) through the Spirit's rendering Scripture efficacious."[27]

<div align="center">The Community of Faith and Theology</div>

Ministerial Authority Surrendering to Magisterial/Biblical Authority

The Community of Faith as an Interpretative Culture Seeking Understanding

There exists a rather large gulf between theologies that understand the community of faith to be an interpretive culture that seeks understanding from the authoritative biblical canon and those theologies that understand the community of faith as giving

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[27] Vanhoozer, "From Speech Acts," 200.

meaning themselves through their own communal use of the biblical text. Vanhoozer's classifications of Performance I and Performance II interpretations are helpful for our summary here. Performance II interpretation certainly includes Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model and, as I have argued, Grenz's theological model as well. Performance I interpretation is represented by Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic model.

Performance II interpretation affirms that we engage our own community of faith's language game and thereby learn the grammatical rules that govern our Christian faith and speech as we actively participate in the life of that particular community. This type of interpretation could also be called ecclesial performance interpretation. Within this model of theology, authority ultimately lies with the community of faith. Meaning is understood through the community's use of the biblical text rather than authorial intention. Truth seems to be spoken of in terms that must remain relative to the given particular community of faith. This model leaves evangelicals with some very important questions. Why should we give priority to the biblical text over any other texts? Secondly, on what basis are we to accept the performance of any given community of faith as authoritative since different churches inhabit varying socio-cultural contexts where their use of the biblical text may be substantially different? Thirdly we may ask an important question that Vanhoozer poses. He asks, "If theology is a species of ethnography or community self-description, what happens to truth claims about who God is and about what God has done in Jesus Christ?"[28] Furthermore, how can the biblical text challenge the tradition of a community's interpretations if it is the interpretive

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[28] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 174-175.

community itself that is the locus of authority? These questions have not been given

adequate answers from Performance II interpretation proponents.

In contrast to the Performance II interpretation above, Vanhoozer provides a

robust Performance I interpretation where the community of faith seeks to understand the

meaning that is determined by the authorial (canonical) discourse. Within this

Performance I model, understood as Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic model, authority

rests in the biblical canon as the communicative act of God. Thus, the community of

faith's tradition and performance is subject to correction from the biblical text. To be

sure, church tradition has a derived, ministerial authority that teaches us how the church

has both spoken and acted in the past as she has performed the canonical "script."

Tradition also has ministerial authority to help us understand how we might faithfully

embody and enact the canonical "script" in our current context. However, this ministerial

authority of the church's tradition and performance surrenders to the magisterial authority

of the biblical text which alone stands as the "norming norm" of theology.

Theologians should engage Performance I interpretation as it clearly articulates

the authority of the Bible as well as the fallibility of the church. This theological

approach understands that the primary role for the community of faith is to rightly assess

the determinate meaning that exists within the biblical text understood as authorial

discourse. Scripture has meaning before it is used by the community of faith and before

it is socialized into the life of the church. However, it is also the case that meaning is

filled out and put on display through the faithful performance of the church in our

contemporary context. This can be understood as meaning applied or recontextualized

meaning which Vanhoozer calls significance. Theologians should help the community of

faith to understand the meaning inherent in Scripture while also helping to give direction

in the community's participation in meaningful performances of the ongoing theodrama.

This type of interpretation is a matter not only of information but of personal formation.

The Community of Faith Determined and Shaped by Truth

Theology must not shrink from the question of truth as it relates to the community

of faith. We should contend that the community of faith is constituted by truth and is

further shaped by it. Lindbeck and Grenz seem to take this general thought in the

opposite direction. Lindbeck seems to indicate that truth, like meaning, is constituted by

the community's use or performance of the biblical text. Grenz seems to point in much

the same direction as he argues for truth to be understood as pragmatic, socially and

linguistically constructed, alongside being participatory and narrative. Meaning and truth

are determined by use. The use of biblical and theological language within a particular

community of faith may be different than that of another faith community. Still, the

interpretive grid for each of the communities may be equally valid even if not the same.

It is the communal reality of the life and language of the particular community of faith

that constitutes the central factor in shaping the experiences of its members. Throughout

Grenz's writings, we are faced with an uneasy presentation that the world-view of the

particular community determines and shapes the truth as it seems, in the end, that the

community holds authority over the biblical text.

Instead of accepting this trajectory of postconservative evangelical thought,

theologians have biblical grounds in contending that the community of faith is constituted

by truth and is further shaped by it. The church has been given the gift and responsibility

of interpreting the truth in the *scientia* side of theology. This includes the community's

coming to terms with the fact that she has been called out and made to be (constituted) a

uniquely holy community in covenantal relationship with the triune God because of what

God has done in Christ and what has been applied by the Spirit. The church has

furthermore been given the gift and responsibility to live out the truth in her

contemporary context through the *sapientia* side of theology where truth is embodied and

enacted through the life of the church. We may better understand truth (reality as it really

is in Christ) through the performance and embodiment of truth by the church, but we do

not determine that truth. The community of faith is determined and shaped by truth not

the other way around.

The Language of the Community of Faith

Internal Rules and Truth for All

Self-proclaimed postconservatives Grenz and Vanhoozer both adopt and adapt

some of Lindbeck's insights of language and "language-games" within the community of

faith. However, Grenz and Vanhoozer once again head in very different directions. This

dissertation has shown that Grenz primarily follows Lindbeck and his use of

Wittgenstein's language-games. For Grenz, like Lindbeck, doctrines function as rules of

discourse that constitute the "web of belief" of that particular community of faith who

uses her language in a particular way. Since Grenz is convinced that a church lives in a

linguistic world of their own making, he asserts that meaning and truth are determined in

the local community's use of language. For Grenz then, theological truth has more to do

with an eschatological possibility rather than historical actuality since, in his view, we

cannot know the world apart from our construction of it. This dissertation has shown how this idea of the internal relation of language and world can lead to some problematic theological trajectories not the least of which is being able to communicate that the Christian story is really the truth and the Christian community is really the kingdom of people who stand in covenantal relation with God over against rival claims.

While theologians should have deep concerns about employing Lindbeck's use of Wittgenstein's language-games such as is seen in Grenz's writings, we should agree that doctrinal language does, as one of its functions, serve as rules of discourse for how the church may speak about God. We must also state, however, that one of language's functions is to refer to external reality as it is in a manner that serves to adequately tell what is true for anyone. For instance, theologians speak truthfully of salvation that comes through the real person and work of Jesus the Christ. These words refer to an external reality which is the very basis of our salvation. Hence, language both refers to reality and provides the rules of discourse for how the church is to speak about God.

Neither Univocal nor Equivocal

Theologians should understand language about God as analogical rather than as univocal or equivocal. While the terms analogy or analogical do not show up in Vanhoozer's writings very often, the practice and understanding of theological language being analogical is evident throughout. He states his overall view early in one of his books when he asserts, "There is a true but only partial, appropriate but only approximate

correspondence between divine and human speaking."[29] This analogical understanding

of language is found throughout Horton's writings. Since God is the basis for existing

and knowing, Horton argues that "truth is established as both a goal and a possibility of

communicative acts—it has its archetype in the communicative action of the creator of

the human race. Although our knowledge doesn't penetrate the archetypal self-

knowledge of the Trinity, it is ectypal of it. Our knowledge does have ultimate reality as

its foundation even if the former has an analogical relation to the latter."[30] Thus, we can

say that our language truly refers to reality even though it is not an exact correspondence

to the exhaustive knowledge that belongs only to God. This thought not only makes

sense, but also seems to help steer clear of some of the problems found within univocal

language used within some cognitive-propositionalist theologies as well as some

equivocal language used within expressive-experiential models of theology. It

furthermore helps to soften the postmodern commitments embraced by Grenz and others

that seem to indicate that Christian claims are simply claims of local, linguistic

communities that have spoken and constructed their world in this particular fashion.

Christian theology demands more than this. Since Scripture is God's communicative act

in human language and since God has authorized the analogies, we must recognize them

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[29] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 58. He later addresses the same analogical thought with regard to God's being and our being as well as God's authoring and our authoring.

[30] Michael Scott Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 186.

to be accurate descriptions for our true knowledge even though this analogical language does not offer us univocal access to God's being.[31]

The Performance of the Community of Faith

The Need for Sapientia: The Way of Wisdom

Lindbeck, Grenz, and Vanhoozer each display a refreshing desire to put forward a theological model that recognizes the necessity of theology to be lived out rather than simply be known. To be sure, they go about addressing lived out theology differently, but they do agree that transformation of the life and world-view of Christians should be a goal of theology. Lindbeck stresses the performance of the community of faith in determining meaning and ultimately the truth of our theological language. That is, truth is determined by the faithful life and thought of the community (social embodiment) that is consistent with the character of God. Lindbeck concurs that the church needs to live out a life of wisdom, but it is this life of wisdom that determines the meaning and truth of our religious language. This thought seems to move backwards from life to truth rather than from truth to life.

Grenz's theological proposal has the life of the community of faith as both the beginning and end (*telos*) of the theological task. Grenz follows Lindbeck in asserting that the community of faith and her use of language provide meaning for the members of the church community and understanding of the community's symbols and practices. The church provides the cultural and linguistic framework that shapes the life, thought,

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[31] Michael Scott Horton, "Hellenistic or Hebrew?: Open Theism and Reformed Theological Method," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 no 2 (June 2002): 317-341. This is essentially the thought he most clearly expressed on p. 325.

and speech of its members. Once again, I wish to affirm the general anthropological and linguistic thoughts here. However, it seems to me that Grenz's proposal leaves unsettled the question of truth with regard to our uniquely Christian web of belief. Could not our communal life and thought be internally coherent while still being wrong? The church needs to hear that its life, belief, and worldview are not only coherent but correspond to reality as shown in God's self-revelation.

Vanhoozer also stresses the goal of having theology lived out through the faithful performance of the community of faith. This dissertation has shown that Vanhoozer argues that the biblical canon serves as an authoritative text as we engage the theological task that leads us into becoming better disciples who seek to speak and live out the wisdom of God. This is to say that the goal is that the members of the church would become a faithful community of disciples who seek to gain meaning and understanding from the theodrama authoritatively articulated through Scripture and then, having received that understanding, seek to faithfully perform that ongoing theodrama in their contemporary context in both word and deed.

As shown in chapter four, Vanhoozer clearly contends that the task of theology starts with *scientia*, but it also includes living in the way of wisdom, *sapientia*. The good theologian will strive to tell the truth as well as live out the truth. This is because "Genuine theology is not only about the art of reasoning well (rationality) but about living well (wisdom)."[32] Indeed, both rationality and wisdom are important and our reasoning well through the power of the Spirit with God's revelation provides the framework by which we may live well.

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[32] Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth," 373.

Theologians should follow this path of both reasoning well and living well. We simply are not being conformed to the image of Christ as whole persons without both of these activities. The faithful communal praxis of the church, with its language and rituals, must be theologically informed while it also helps to inform and display our theology. To be clear, God is the *principium essendi* (principle of being) and Scripture is the *principium cognoscendi* (principle of knowing) of Christian theology. This may be further developed as *principium cognoscendi externum* (the external, written Word), and *principium cognoscendi internum* (the internal principle of faith which knows the external Word and answers its call).[33] We must not begin with ethics as first theology without metaphysical or epistemological grounding. Rather, theologians and pastors must work from God's revelation in order to know reality as it truly is and then answer the call of that revelation to live in light of that very reality. Good theology will help to direct the theodramatic performance of the community of faith to put the Spirit-directed authority, meaning, and truth on display so the world may see a faithful witness to God reconciling things to himself in Christ. This faithful performance will also help to further form and inform future practices of the church community.

Faithful Performance as Embodiment and Enactment of Truth

Theologians should employ the concept of faithful performance as embodiment and enactment of truth within their theological method. This fits especially well with redemptive-historical and drama-of-redemption models.[34] As Horton explains, "The

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[33] Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 246.

[34] This dissertation has shown this to be the case with Vanhoozer's Drama-of-Redemption model in many of his writings, especially in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1st ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2005; Kevin J.

category of performance unites God's action (word and deed) and that of the covenant

people, but it also unites our own often divided realms of understanding and action."[35]

Truth is to be understood and lived out. Truth should transform members of the

community of faith, including the theologian. The reality of that transformation should

be seen in faithful performances of the reality of who we have been made to be in Christ.

Vanhoozer makes clear that "Questions about meaning and truth—about God as well as

about everything else—will be related to the way we actually live. One's active witness

therefore can disclose to others not only the meaning of the evangelical truth claim but

the intelligible structure of the world as interpreted by Christians as well."[36] It is the case

that performing the truth is one manner in which we show what the truth is and what the

world is really like. We come to know truth fundamentally through God's revelation. In

turn, the community of faith has the responsibility and privilege in our covenant

relationship with God to enact and embody that truth revealed. We, as a result of God's

grace and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, have the joy of displaying in our

communal life the way of Jesus Christ.

<p align="center">A Pastoral Postscript Regarding the Way, the Truth, and the Life</p>

In the introduction to this dissertation, I stated that it was largely a pastoral

concern that led me to engage the thoughts articulated within this work. My central

pastoral concern is that the church would know the way, the truth, and the life. By

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Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," In *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, Gary T. Meadors, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 151-199. This may also be seen in Horton's Redemptive-Historical model in Michael Scott Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 2002. See especially chapter nine.

[35] Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 273.

[36] Vanhoozer, "The Trials of Truth," 363-364.

making this assertion I am first saying that I wish for the flock to know the way, truth and life as the person of Jesus the Christ. Secondly, I want the church to know that Christian truth claims are indeed true and that these truth claims form and inform our communal life every day in the way we worship God in the Lord's Supper, baptism, preaching, prayer, vocational callings, parenting, stewardship and so on. As a pastor, I am called upon to bridge the disciplines of exegesis, biblical theology and systematic theology almost every day. Many times this bridging takes place in the midst of circumstances that manifest extreme brokenness. In those times, people need to hear the truth, that is, truth that relates matters as they truly are in Christ. With the joy of redemption and the confidence of an already inaugurated eschatological viewpoint, God allows me to minister to people truthfully in words consistent with God's revelation and with a life that shows, mostly anyway, the reality of or the performance of what life in Christ looks like in these very circumstances at just this time in just this place.

As I talk with fellow pastors, many with whom I went to seminary, I grow increasingly alarmed at how many are willing to allow the present renderings of cultural anthropology and linguistic philosophies, whether through informed study or by default to their cultural context, to become the theological method of the church rather than informing the theological method of the evangelical church. To be sure, we are blessed with insight through the various disciplines, but Christian theology is to inform our correct understanding of even those disciplines from which we gain insight. In the end, many of these discussions with fellow pastors seem to relegate primary authority to the community of faith in its particular cultural situatedness rather than with God or Scripture. Meaning is often understood to be simply socially and linguistically

constructed, while the concept of truth is often mocked. Many in my circles have participated in a pendulum swing from straight-forward propositionalist theology with little regard for how those truthful propositions were to be lived out to ethics becoming first theology with little to no metaphysical or epistemological grounding. In this scenario, the discussions of authority, meaning, and truth shift significantly away from what Scripture is and says to what the particular community of faith says and does more directly as a result of her cultural context than concern for canonical context.

Throughout this dissertation, we have seen the influence of the postliberal cultural-linguistic model of doctrine upon the theological method of postconservative evangelicalism. We have furthermore seen that the postconservative approaches of Grenz and Vanhoozer vary a great deal. This dissertation has spoken largely favorably of Vanhoozer's approach which still maintains key themes, practices, and doctrines of many traditional evangelicals. In contrast, this dissertation has voiced concern over Stan Grenz's postconservative proposal for the many reasons stated above. My pastoral concern grows even deeper when considering those younger evangelical students and pastors who follow in the lines of Grenz and Franke. As some of their students seek to faithfully follow through on their proposals, they are left with Christianity as one coherent truth system among many. Thus, the question of whether Christianity is really true, that is for instance, that God is reconciling all things to himself in Christ, cannot be satisfactorily answered in the manner that the church needs to hear from her pastor. Vanhoozer articulates that the church is that interactive theater where a distinctly true view of the world "—as created for fellowship with the triune God—is remembered, studied, cultivated, and celebrated in corporate performance. It is the pastor's role to

oversee, through wise doctrinal direction, these dramatic local productions. I can imagine no more exciting or urgent challenge than that."[37] To this I offer a hearty amen! I might also say that if all I have to offer the flock is a coherent web of beliefs that is culturally and linguistically constructed and does not refer to any external reality as things truly are, then I can imagine no more frustrating or scandalous work than pastoral ministry.

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[37] Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 457.

APPENDIX: THESES

Theses Related to Dissertation

1. The postliberal cultural-linguistic turn in theology helped shape the current conversation of postconservative evangelical engagement with Scripture and the community of faith.

2. Scripture is the epistemological *principium theologiae* without which we would not grasp true knowledge of God.

3. Scripture has meaning before it is used by the community of faith and before it is socialized into the life of the church.

4. The Spirit performs perlocutionary acts on the basis of the textual illocutions of Scripture.

5. We can say that our language truly refers to reality even though it is not an exact correspondence to the exhaustive knowledge that belongs only to God.

Theses Related to Coursework

1. God has organized the world in such a way that our morality and our happiness can be consistent with each other.

2. Human reason is baffled both by human nature and by God.

3. Johannes Climacus (Kierkegaard) provides both a negative and positive view of history while delineating a mostly negative view regarding the importance of historical evidence for providing any direct transition from this evidence to faith.

4. John Calvin writes of a natural knowledge of God but never employs the term *theologia naturalis* within his *Institutes*.

5. Alvin Plantinga's testimonial model is both Scripture and the divine activity leading to human belief in the truth of the Gospel and its claims. These beliefs constituting faith are not accepted by way of argument from other propositions or on the evidential basis of other propositions.

General Theses

1. God desires to do more than just inform people with objective knowledge through the biblical text.

2. Performing the truth is one manner in which we show what the truth is and what the world is really like.

3. Pastoral ministry is not designed to be a popularity contest.

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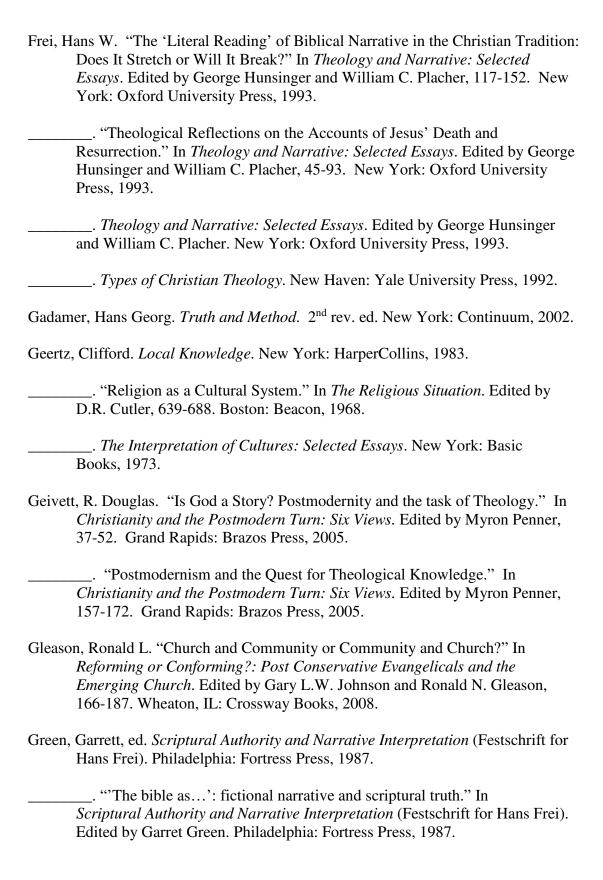
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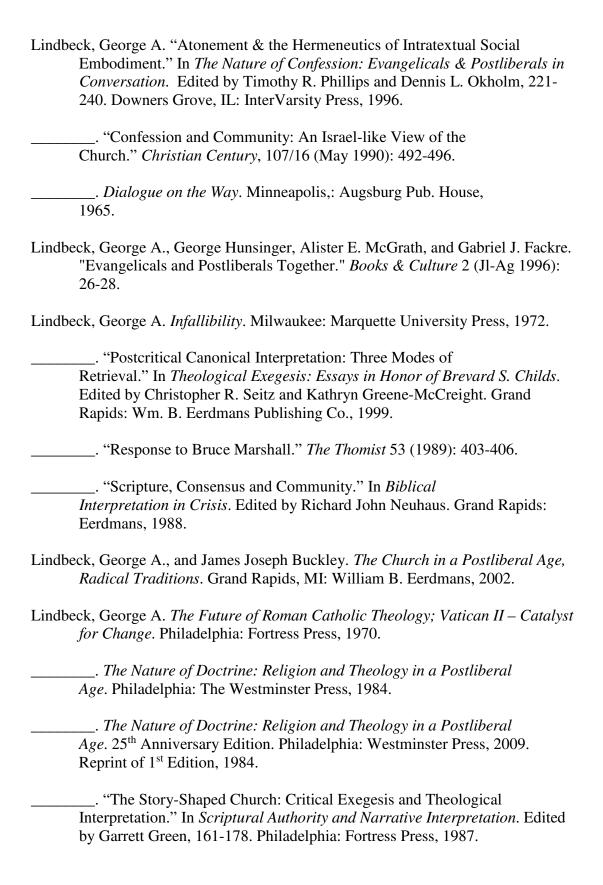Nicholls, Bruce J. "Christ, Modernity and Post-Modernity." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 22 no 1 (Ja 1998): 5-81.

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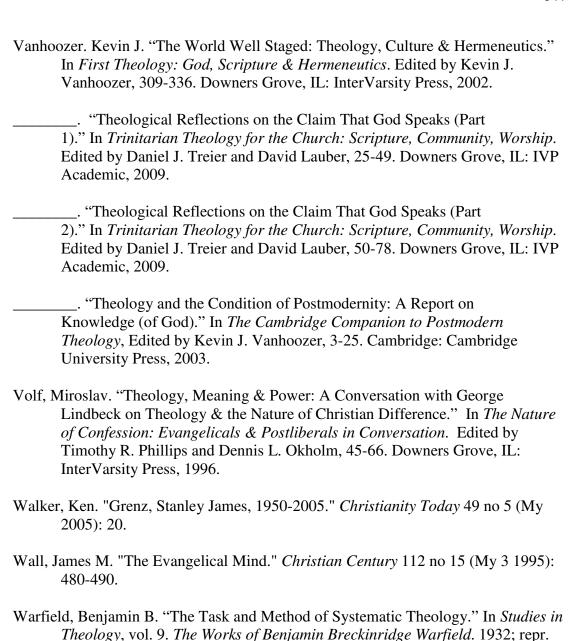_____. *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

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