

Kevin J. Vanhoozer. *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998 (ISBN Hardcover: 0-310-21156-5); (Apollos in UK).

Kevin J. Vanhoozer. *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics*. Leicester: Apollos, 2002 (UK ISBN: 0-8308-2681-5).

Kevin J. Vanhoozer. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005 (ISBN 0-664-22327-3).

Theology can be a lonely, depressing business these days. Those so inclined to plough through contemporary scholarship are greeted with a dizzying array of diversity, much of it scarcely recognizable, even when advertised, as evangelical. Concepts such as God's providence, even his omniscience, certainly once unassailable convictions of the evangelical communities of Europe and America, are routinely contradicted and replaced by the stepchildren of process theology (open theism). There is, of course, nothing new with opposition to the idea of divine sovereignty. What is new is that these and other formerly "unacceptable" ideas have been subsumed within the label, "evangelical." The list of former offences now fashionable and widely published through traditionally evangelical or conservative Protestant publishing houses is long. Penal substitution, biblical inerrancy, exclusive salvation through Christ, biblical authorial intent, Trinity, Canon, and progressive revelation are all on the block. A survey of recent evangelical, theological writing reveals that polygamy is not wrong, Hinduism is a gift of God to Christianity, Jesus only became the Son at the resurrection, Trinity is a dated Greek anachronism better quietly forgotten, a propitiatory God is a "child abuser," and that texts such as the Bible are products of readers more than authors.

Theology has become a narrow ghettoised discipline. It now deals with long, tedious discourses on epistemology, feminism, thoroughly detached from any normal reader's thought world or it seems to serve the bidding of a tyrannical global homogenisation that sets standards for life and then dictates terms to the church. It is an age dominated by pragmatists such as George Barna and Brian McLaren, men of small theological vision, not deep, integrated intellects such as Calvin or Kuyper. Barna and the others are just front men however. Behind their practicality and pragmatism lurk theologically-minded scholars often intent on creating "generous orthodoxies" barely recognizable to the Reformers or their spiritual ancestors. Don't get me wrong, conservative theologians exist, but they certainly no longer hold sway. Some disqualify themselves, choosing to fight battles among themselves in the hope of establishing one properly functioning outpost in a land increasingly filled with hostility to their message. A recent systematic theology is an example. The author treats at length, neo-orthodoxy, dispensationalism, the swoon theory, creationism, and Amyraldianism, but pays scant attention to entire schools of theology synthesizing liberal, unbiblical ideas into practices that strike at the very heart of Reformationally-based doctrine.

I am not decrying their inclusion, since there is nothing new under the sun, but I do note the common failure to address contemporary theological issues or scholars with integrated theological solutions. Interestingly, one such evangelical offering cites John Murray 132 times but never mentions N.T. Wright (I recognize that in our over-specialized academic world he is classified as a New Testament scholar, but his works are redolent with theological observation and he exerts enormous influence on theological formulation), much less John Milbank, or today's subject, the fellow-

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Presbyterian Kevin Vanhoozer. My point is that works such as this become instant anachronisms rather than important counterpoints to contemporary discussion. Other, more accessible works, such as Wayne Grudem's, are helpful in many ways (though I also disagree with him in significant areas), but still manage to reinforce an unfortunate situation. First, many new challenges to conservative, and especially reformed evangelicalism come from scholars working at a level that Grudem does not address (I assume by design) and second, Grudem still tries to write in a manner that is shaped by modernist concepts of systematic theology. His work considers categories and fields familiar to Turretin, but does little to address problems martialing on the borders of theology, where it meets, for example, language and the Bible. The difficulty with the compartmented approach of course is that large, conceptual (often world view) problems tend by their natures to be multi-disciplinary. My comments are not intended to criticize Grudem; his is an important work in its own right. It does point out the acute need for an integrated theological work of significant breadth. This raises an important point. Why is it that a survey of new books (say within the last ten years) shows that biblical scholars are writing a great deal of theology (see James Dunn, N.T. Wright, Frank Thielman, Tom Holland, Larry Hurtado, Richard Bauckham etc.), far fewer theologians write books classified as biblical studies? If nothing else, this points out the utter modern domination of "Christian" scholarship by biblical studies and the parallel discounting of theology. Carl Trueman's *The Wages of Spin* offers wise, acerbic and therapeutic commentary that is a must-read for those considering the discounting of theology and dominance of biblical studies. It was not always this way.

Theologians, the Biblical Doctor of Calvin's Geneva, were once considered officers of the Body of Christ, separate from pastors, and wielded tremendous influence in shaping heart and home, church and community. Theologians were preservers of the Rule of Faith, the church's historical understanding of the unified message of Scripture. They were also biblical scholars, translators of the Bible into the vernacular and embodied biblical wisdom. They manifested "a particular gift of interpreting Scripture, so that sound doctrine may be kept. (See Calvin's *Commentary on Ephesians*, Ephesians 4:11)." They trained both common citizenry and the elite for leadership in God's Kingdom. Most importantly, as Calvin noted, "without pastors and doctors there can be no government of the church." Doctors were theologians and biblical scholars, masters of contemporary scholarship, biblical languages, and their practical outworking in the church.

Enter Kevin Vanhoozer, once lecturer at New College, Edinburgh, and presently professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Following the publication of a number of well-received articles and an edited work, he made a "big splash" within academic circles in 1998 with the publication of *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* His difficult prose (partly due to the nature of the material) made painful reading but indispensably introduced readers to key debates over biblical hermeneutics. His work was not esoteric but sought to expose issues that lay at the heart of controversies dividing the evangelical community. Fundamentally, he sought to re-assert the authorial rights of the biblical authors as opposed to those of the readers or community (see Stanley Fish). The work really dealt with two overarching goals, proving that texts have determinative meanings and that authors determine what they are. The purpose of a believing interpretive community is not to determine what a

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text means, but to guard the otherness of a text. With *First Theology* and *The Drama of Doctrine*, Vanhoozer has set his aim on even larger targets.

Vanhoozer views *First Theology* as a sort of antecedent to *Is There a Meaning to This Text?* Rather than focusing on meaning *per se*, the author focuses on God himself as the communicative agent that generates meaning. From the start therefore Vanhoozer fuses together two disciplines sundered by modernism, Scripture and theology. Covenant, Trinity, the cross, pneumatology and speech-act theory interact in what shapes up to be a faithful promotion of traditional evangelical theology that fully interacts with a post-modern critique. His work is immensely significant. Post-modern, post-liberal evangelicals often appear to demonstrate supreme confidence, bordering on arrogance that theirs are the only formulations interacting with contemporary ideas. Vanhoozer it seems to me not only addresses current critiques of traditional biblical beliefs, he recasts many of these doctrines in a way that interacts with the new ideas and offers trenchant criticism of new schools as well. A refreshing bonus found in reading this work is the use of post-modern critique to deconstruct post-modern darlings such as pluralism, before constructing on its ruins a new understanding based on Trinitarianism. It is significant that he sees this synthetic process as enriching rather than undermining or countering Reformed theology. Eastern Orthodoxy and other non-evangelical systems are all integrated at times into the new fabric.

Vanhoozer divides his book into three parts, God, Scripture and hermeneutics. Connecting each section is a theme running through the entire work, covenantalism. The motif of the covenant is important to his work because it affords him the means to avoid dividing the baby (story and

doctrine). Additionally, his work holds together because its theology moves toward one single goal, the right practice of theology, practical wisdom, or what he calls “performance knowledge.” In contradistinction to many modern or post-modern stabs at theology, he chooses to shape the work around the cultivation of divine wisdom (as opposed to prolegomena such as epistemology). This he describes as “living along the text” rather than attempting to stand apart from it and judge it in some attempt at neutral analysis. Vanhoozer’s commitment is to build up the church, rather than the academy. In short, he attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice, church and school in such a way that theology positively under-girds every initiative of the believing community. It is important that the paradigm for the believer and even the theologian is not the scholar or scholar-minister, but the martyr, the faithful witness, even unto death.

The author signals his intention to produce a synthetic work right from the start. Posing the perpetual dilemma of the theologian, he asks, which should come first in a discussion of the “first things” of theology, God or Scripture? Characteristically, he says that both must be understood dialectically. The separation of the two has after all led to the fracturing of disciplines evident today between biblical studies and theology, with each making nightly “trench raids” into each other’s positions, but never staying long enough for real learning to take place. Subsequently, the resulting scholarship can produce no more than “an abbreviated, short-circuited substitute.” He finally settles on the balance of theological hermeneutics and hermeneutical theology, all formed around a Trinitarian approach. Popular criticisms of traditional evangelicalism as exclusivist are dealt with in a chapter that addresses love. Taking on critics such as Rahner and Pinnock,

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he asserts that their imposed “openness” and pluralism, consequences of choosing between the false choice of sovereignty or love, are nothing more than thinly disguised imperialism. Not content with turning their objections on their head, Vanhoozer counters that real love has to depend on something greater than the desire to protect someone else’s “otherness.” His efforts to use Paul Ricoeur’s *ipse* (covenant similarity) or *idem* (sameness) identities strikes me as far less successful than his appeal to the relations of the Trinity as the ground for our consideration of one another. This is important. With a growing body of evangelical writing extolling religious pluralism (see Amos Yong) that asserts God’s saving activity through the prevenient and independent agency of the Holy Spirit, it is crucial of Vanhoozer to pose a Trinitarian understanding of religions based on covenantal relations that extend from the godhead to creation, fully identified in Scripture. In other words, he once again ties word and Spirit together. Perhaps another way to describe it is to say that many ideas considered traditionally as “liberal” have simply been subsumed within evangelicalism. At any rate, he counters critics of classical theism such as Clark Pinnock and the religious pluralism/panteism of advocates such as Raimundo Panikkar, himself influenced by Hindu models with a tolerant, committed Christianity exemplified by Isaac Walton’s *Complete Angler*. “The angler has his commitments, but he is willing to be tolerant of others and to argue his case with humility and humour as well as conviction.” This tolerant faith is also balanced however by theistic transcendence seen in an effectual calling (as divine speech-act) and supervenient grace.

Targeting the relationship between love, freedom, and the will, he resolves the tension between

openness theology with its human, limited definition of love and a view of reformed theology as imperial causality by introducing us once again to a God whose loving words never return void. This communicative theory focuses on successful communication rather than coercive power. Scripture, therefore, is divine communication action that has real power to change. The underlying idea of course is that language has the power to transform not just to inform. “Is the grace that changes one’s heart a matter of energy or information? I believe it is both, and speech act theory lets us see how. God’s call is effectual precisely in bringing about a certain kind of understanding in and through the Word. The Word that summons has both propositional content (matter) and illocutionary [explained below] force (energy). This has a number of implications. First, it drives readers back to the intentions of an author to communicate something that we recognize as meaning. Second that the act of divine communications involves the persuasive power of the Holy Spirit whose rights rank above the readers’.

At the very least, it supplants much language theory with its emphasis on language as an accumulation of symbols that can be encoded and decoded at will.

Vanhoozer returns to this well-ploughed ground in his work on speech-act theory. This is, as it certainly was in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, a jarring experience for theologically-minded evangelicals. Before explaining speech-acts, the author summarizes an alternative, the code model of language. Championed by Eugene Nida, the model sees words as signs that represent thoughts. Understanding therefore consists of encoding thoughts as symbols and then decoding them. Unfortunately, the model is seriously deficient, since significant information conveyed in a communicative act is not encoded (the context for

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example), understanding means more than simply decoding linguistic symbols, and perhaps most significantly because words convey more than information. Clearly, effective understanding, particularly biblical understanding, requires something more robust.

Vanhoozer, like Anthony Thiselton, and Nicholas Wolterstorff finds the way forward in speech-act theory. Speech acts (illocutions) focus on successful, intentional communications that include words embedded in context (the author includes a useful excursus on relevance theory) to convey meaning. Unlike the code model which encourages the interpretation of texts as autonomous units, speech acts along with relevance views texts both as discrete communicative acts and as parts of covenantal, canonical communication. Communicative action is classed as locution (the words themselves, independent of context or communicative intent), illocution (the essence of communication: what one does when saying something) and perlocution (the effect of the illocutionary act). Vanhoozer summarizes the importance of all this when he defines the literal sense as “the illocutionary act performed by the author” not simply the locution. Context matters. Small texts or books must be seen both in their local settings and within their canonical framework. It seems to me the author aims at and strikes the very heart of much of contemporary biblical scholarship.

Perhaps the most entertaining chapter in the book revolves around the motif of body piercing. He makes the act of body-piercing analogous to the damage done to texts by violating the rights of their authors. Rather than readers running rough-shod over authorial intent, Vanhoozer suggests adopting a natural sense reflective of the author and his context. This is no mere surface interpretation involving

the simple encoding and decoding of symbols (translation), it is canonical understanding based on “thick descriptions.” Interestingly, he mentions, as an example of the excessively narrow interpretive practices of the biblical studies elite, the fact that recent dictionaries of biblical interpretation “are virtually silent on the subject of the theological interpretation of Scripture.” Thick descriptions (the natural, literal, literary, authorially intended sense) are arrived at through careful consideration of language, culture, history, theology (rule of faith), literary context etc. To do less is to miss or misunderstand the illocutionary act and therefore the meaning of the communication. The truth underlying all of this is ultimately theological. Vanhoozer notes Christopher Seitz, “The crisis in hermeneutics is in reality a crisis involving God’s providence, a proper ecclesiology and doctrine of the Holy Spirit.”

Stylistically, the work is uneven, perhaps a bit choppy. The reason is clear. Each chapter was written at a significantly different time, with a different setting and perhaps purpose. Clarity sometimes suffers. Each section is, it must be said, important to the whole, but the mortar between the joints is too stiff and cracks appear. At times Vanhoozer appears to invest too much trust in paradigms or devices furnished by a host of fascinating intellects (Wittgenstein, Ricoeur, Polanyi, etc). His choice of communicative force as a way of dealing with election and calling seems helpful, but left my old Calvinist bones aching a bit. I kept reflexively returning to why God needed such an excuse in order to exercise his choice. Perhaps this is just a bit of theological impatience on my part.

*First Things* represents brilliant change and synthetic development seemingly beyond the grasp of modern, over-specialized scholars. *The Drama of*

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*Doctrine*, is profound theology that exceeds the earlier work in nearly every way. Previewed in an earlier article, “The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Ministry of Theology (*Evangelical Futures*, John G. Stackhouse, ed.), this is sometimes demanding reading that does not bore and rarely disappoints. I hasten to add, it is a truly important work, one of very few. Its aim, like its predecessor, is to argue “that doctrine, far from being unrelated to life, serves the church by directing its members in the project of wise living, to the glory of God.” “Doctrine seeks not simply to state theoretical truths but to embody truth in ways of living.” This practical bent is the result of Vanhoozer’s modification of the cultural-linguistic (post-liberal) theology learned at Yale University at the hands of George Lindbeck. The former focused on the connection between theology and living. Unlike Lindbeck however, who placed control in the hands of the interpretive community of believers, Vanhoozer envisages a canonical-linguistic theology that vests the canon of Scripture with ultimate authority. The author sees this as a retrieval of sorts of *sola scriptura*. This is hugely significant given the fact that evangelicals increasingly adopt the local community as the ultimate basis of interpretive authority. While it may be true that the evangelical community primarily spurns the most radical excesses of Stanley Fish and reader-response, for example, it is equally apparent that relativism and pluralism continue to make significant inroads. The motif that unifies the work is the presentation of doctrine as drama lived out. Once again Vanhoozer is conscious to unite the idea of story with theology. Doctrine serves to bridge the gospel as “theo-drama” (borrowed from Balthazar) and theology as “gospel performance.” The motif serves a

useful function. It results in a methodology that drives biblical interpreters to consider historical background, cultural, social and intellectual concerns (stage and setting). The end of such consideration is not the development of narrow expertise, but rather the wisdom of Christ manifest in faithful and competent witnesses. The role of the theologian is to therefore serve as a dramaturge, an assistant to the director, able to remind the cast of faithful ways to interpret the script.

As he sees it, the outcome of theology viewed as dramaturgy is “a Christocentric focus, canonical framework, and a catholic flavour.” Interestingly, he aims straight at the emergent church movement declaring that his aim is for a “non-reductive” rather than a “generous” (see Brian McLaren) orthodoxy. His interest in canonical faithfulness seen as orthodoxy also leads to his reassessment of themes covered earlier in *First Theology*. The dramatic script, of course, is the canon. He sees canon and covenant as the “form” and “content” of the divine theo-drama. The practical responsibilities for providing adequate doctrinal direction to the church dictate that the whole “canonical script” (as one cohesive story) be considered. As such, the Bible cannot be considered as autonomous texts mixed and matched to circumstances at will. Neither does it allow for a primary concern for the world behind the text. In other words, the best tool for interpreting Mark is the canon, not Second Temple Judaism. It does not deny the usefulness of the latter, but it reduces its priority.

In particular, Vanhoozer is intent to recover a more prominent role for tradition, at least in the sense that the Reformers understood it, particularly with regard to the Rule of Faith (summary of apostolic teaching). This is not explained primarily either metaphysically or historically, but through an

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exegesis of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39). He points out that it is Philip who leads the eunuch into a canonical, typological reading of the Isaiah 53. The text itself did not generate understanding (hence the eunuch's question), but Philip was able to serve as an "external aid" to understanding the Scripture. As such, he was "a link in the chain of apostolic tradition" and "a symbol for the church." Vanhoozer cites both other biblical support for tradition (1Cor 15:3-5; 2Th 2:15; 2Th 3:6; Mk 7:8; Col 2:8), and also notes that the early church did not see any significant difference between Scripture and tradition. Tradition is just "a passing on of performance knowledge, canonical competence, or what we might simply call Christian wisdom." He notes, "Orthodoxy is a crystallization of the church's universal and unified knowledge of God and the gospel." He cautions against simply equating these historical opinions with scripture, but points out that "we should assume that the stance and content of the human discourse coincides with the divine discourse unless there is a good reason to think otherwise." This leads to a clear endorsement of creeds as universal helps to our understanding of the divine "script." Confessions are also supported, but only as "regional" expressions of orthodoxy.

Vanhoozer also places a premium on canonical reading that unites the whole, transcultural believing community through time and space. Interestingly, he contests the idea of cultures as closed systems impervious to change. Citing a number of scholars, he views cultures as having a "porous border" that can interact with Scriptural concepts. He is quick however to state that there is no single set of beliefs or customs that can be characterized as Christian. The goal therefore is not to create one worldwide culture through the transforming power of canonical truth. The goal

rather is "non-identical repetition," or living tradition that takes place dynamically through the incarnational, prophetic power of the Word and Spirit. Citing Christopher Morse, change takes place within cultures as the Scripture is applied in a way that insures "apostolic tradition, congruence with Scripture and catholicity." He makes a vital point in considering the interaction of gospel and culture. He underlines the criticality of seeing the canon forming the community rather than the community giving the canon authority. Quoting in part Serene Jones, he states, "The canon, then, is not some social contract drawn up by a voluntary association. The church is not a community of choice but has been brought into being by a divine initiative: an effectual call. This means that the church doesn't just choose to inhabit the story; it understands itself as being inhabited by the story." Evangelicals guilty of all sorts of excess regarding attempts to contextualize the gospel would do well to heed Vanhoozer on this point.

Perhaps the work's most exciting moments take place in the later chapters. These concern themselves with the interaction of doctrine and church. Vanhoozer concentrates on seeing the church carry through what it learns into the theatre of the world. "The church becomes deadly theatre when it loses its prophetic edge or when its members become passive spectators who feel no call to become participants." This is fundamentally true because "the church is the corporate rendering of the Word of God in the power of the Spirit." It is the proof of the transforming power of God. It is a truthful following after Jesus in life and death. Therefore both doctrine and praxis are indispensable. For example, the author singles out C. Peter Wagner's "homogeneous unit principle"

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for criticism as a crass, convenient pragmatism that is both sub-evangelical and sub-Protestant, since it bears witness to something that may be popular in the community but less than the truth of the Gospel, the fact that believers are all one in Christ. The need for a prophetic witness also drives Vanhoozer to address the unspoken “elephant in the living room,” heresy. “The church must discern the difference between the orthodox and the heterodox, between fitting and unfitting participation in the drama of redemption.” Ultimately Christian faith calls for the entire church, regardless of context to become a “theatre of martyrdom,” as “truth tellers, truth doers, and ultimately people who suffer for the truth they show and tell.”

These two works represent great competency with an enormous array of disciplines and opinions. It is theological synthesis of the highest order, and at the same time the most exciting reformulation of Reformed theology seen in many years. What Vanhoozer represents is evangelicalism’s best and most creative response to post-modernism in all its

forms. Keep an eye on this guy. Chris Sinkinson, in a *Table Talk* critique of D.G. Hart’s *Deconstructing Evangelicalism* (Issue 14, Summer 2005) excoriates Hart for the latter’s preference for denominationalism over evangelical parachurches as “blinkered idealism.” Sinkinson was of course correct to point out the significant differences between American and British evangelicalism. This, however, does not cancel the validity of Hart’s critique of evangelical drift (evident on both sides of the Atlantic). These two works both elucidate significant ways in which contemporary evangelicalism departs from a traditional, and indeed biblical, understanding of the faith, they offer positive alternatives based on a properly catholic, canonical, and reformed understanding. It would be difficult to overestimate their significance. Finally, Kevin Vanhoozer is the theologian’s treat, his reward. This reviewer may stray into excess, but it is not every day that I am able to find a place of worship in such a wilderness of words. Buy it or borrow it, but in any case read it.