

Chapter 2: Theologies of Scripture

Our investigation will find that different theologies of scripture exist not because the Christian tradition is inherently contentious and cannot reach a consensus, but because each moment, era, and epoch raises different questions about the nature, authority, and interpretation of scripture, and about how scripture relates to tradition, reason, and experience.

~ Justin Holcomb, *Christian Theologies of Scripture*¹

To survey the literature on theologies or doctrines of scripture would easily absorb a thesis. Christians as “people of the book” fill shelves on what the Book is (nature), and how it is to be used (authority). The best we can attempt here is a relatively brief outline of the history of Christian thought on the doctrine of scripture. This isn’t to trace issues of textual transmission, nor to make deep connections between the varying approaches, but rather to summarize (and possibly characterize) the progressions made in theological thought through time as a form of high-flying literature review. Our first section will rely heavily on the 2006 collection *Christian Theologies of Scripture* edited by Justin S. Holcomb, which, with seventeen contributors, treats the history of such approaches from Origen through today’s feminist approaches to scripture. For our second section, we lower the altitude enough to see several recent proposals in the doctrine of scripture. This has also been artificially narrowed. Because I’m seeking to stay within a middling evangelical tradition, we consider works that would be considered to have originated there.

There are two reasons to begin with these surveys. First we gather of pool of doctrinal resources, categories or language from which to draw upon later. Secondly, we may make a

¹ Justin Holcomb, ed., *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York University Press, 2006), 3.

modest suggestion (as Holcomb does) that at each phase in time, each formulation changes, not because God’s revelation changes, but because the cultural milieu does.²

A Brief Historical Survey

Patristic and Medieval

The church fathers viewed scripture with both the literal and figural in mind, and it did not bother them. Our first stop covers a wide but generally coherent span from the second century to the time of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth. For this period, Lewis Ayres argues that too much is made of the supposed dichotomy between Antioch and Alexandria. Both the “plain sense” and a spiritual reading of the text were held in parallel without fear of jeopardizing the other. Further, we note that patristic and medieval interpreters were unafraid to borrow and adjust their view according to secular methods, and at the end of the day, used scripture in such a way that it formed the basis of the cultural imagination.

Both Literal and Figural. The traditional “four senses of scripture” appear throughout patristic and Thomistic thought. The first is the plain, literal, or historical sense of the text.³ The second, third and fourth are spiritual or mystical interpretations, and are dependent on the first. Aquinas writes of them in the *Summa*, explaining that the second sense—allegorical—points to Christ, the third sense—moral—points to what we ought to do, and the fourth sense—anagogical—has an eschatological or eternal dimension.⁴ But these were hardly new to Aquinas. Origen of Alexandria is concerned with the literal sense—he considered the smallest geographical details in the book of Exodus to be important and literal. And yet he uses this same

² This cannot be anything but a suggestion, because we don’t have time to show this in extensive detail. And the claim is not wholly deterministic (that is, there must be multiple factors that go into forming a worldview or doctrine, the cultural question being only one). Suffice to say it will be left to the reader to decide, although perhaps it is enough to show that conceptions of scripture *have* changed over time.

³ Ayres, “Patristic and Medieval Theologies of Scripture,” Holcomb, Ed. 14.

⁴ Peter M. Candler, Jr, “St. Thomas Aquinas,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 73.

detail to allegorically map Christological connections, showing that the Israelites travelling from Ramesse to Socoth prefigures Christ's requirement to forsake trusting physical possessions and trust in him.⁵ While some interpreters have seen Origen as a capricious exegete, R. R. Reno argues this is not the case—Origen assumes that both senses can be held together because God himself intends them together in the divine economy of Scripture. And St. Augustine follows suit by arguing that scripture was “written through the agency of Moses” and possesses “the highest normative authority,”⁶ and yet views all scripture as embodying the love of Christ, and often requires allegorical interpretation in order to do so. In fact, this is Augustine's actual litmus test for when to employ figural reading.⁷

Integrating secular sources. Origen views both the world about us and scripture as tappable resources in mapping God's divine holistic economy. The process of reading scripture is not isolated to the text, but set in the context of the physical body in God's world. Here he freely borrows patterns from Platonic thought, Reno writes. Augustine and Aquinas similarly freely borrow from extra-scriptural sources. Augustine develops a theory of signs that is influenced by Plotinus. Scriptural words are signs that signify with meaning attributed by not only the Christian community, but the general culture in which they reside. And in the thirteenth century, new translations of Aristotle and his commentators—both from Greek and Arabic—filtered their way into the medieval university system, presenting for the first time significant thinkers that spoke of reason without reference to faith.⁸ Aquinas classically is associated with Aristotelian thought, writing on the autonomy of natural reason and structuring his theology in the rigorous scholastic form of a *disputatio*.⁹ His preference on the interpretation of scripture is

⁵ R.R. Reno, “Origen,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 26.

⁶ Pamela Bright, “St. Augustine,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸ John Marenbon, *Later Medieval Philosophy (1150-1350)* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 74.

⁹ Candler, Jr, “St. Thomas Aquinas,” 70.. Though Candler's essay argues this Aquinas synthesis of Aristotelean thought is often overdrawn

to the more logically-bound literal sense, but he freely incorporates the allegorical interpretation that doesn't do violence to the first.

Forms a basis for imagination. Ayers notes that to pre-modern scriptural interpretation, separate books from the systematic theology and biblical studies departments would be a foreign concept. This integrated approach of exegesis and reflection is wide: “For Ireneaus and the patristic tradition as a whole, scripture is the semiotic medium in which God encodes the pattern of the divine economy,” writes Reno.¹⁰ Further, the integration of non-Christian thought, of literal and figural approaches, leads Ayers to suggest that scripture for the patristic and medieval thinkers was the “fundamental resource for the Christian imagination.”¹¹ In the face of heresy challenges, all of Scripture speaks to and about all of reality for all time.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation

The Reformers framed their doctrines of scripture in the historical conflicts of their time. Unlike modern controversies over the nature and inspiration of scripture, two primary concerns of the sixteenth century were first the relationship of scripture to the church (tradition), and secondly the scope and clarity of scripture.¹²

Scripture and Tradition. Does the church constitute the canon of scripture, or does scripture call forth the church? For the reformers, this classic question resolves to the latter. Scripture, as God's Word, is the covenant-forming document—the constitution—of the church. Michael Horton notes that this answer was important not only in the face of the magesterium of Rome, but the Spirit-dominant enthusiasm of the radical reformers. But *sola scriptura* is often misunderstood as *scriptura nuda*—“bare scripture”—writes Mickey Mattox. Martin Luther rejected neither faith nor church tradition, but insisted that they could not stand in clear

¹⁰ Reno, “Origen,” 24.

¹¹ Ayres, “Patristic and Medieval Theologies of Scripture,” 15.

¹² Michael S. Horton, “Theologies of Scripture in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation: An Introduction,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 87.

contradiction to scripture's teaching. Recent scholarship has shown, in fact, that Luther assumed that scriptural interpretation was done in the context of the church, and particularly in relationship to the liturgy and sacraments.¹³ Calvin rooted the primacy and authority of scripture in their origin from God's Holy Spirit, advocating a strong sense of verbal inspiration (though acknowledging prior oral tradition), but emphasized the necessity of the pastors and teachers of the church in order for the scripture to be applied without error.

Catholic writers were predictably reactionary, "the Church is prior to Scripture and superior to it," wrote Latomus.¹⁴ Yet scripture played a crucial place, and examination shows Catholic theological moves that might be curiously close to what we would associate with mid-twentieth century Protestant fundamentalists today. In 1563, Melchior Cano defended the inerrancy and therefore authority of scripture in his *De Locis Theologicis*.¹⁵ And a Jesuit interpretation of Revelation (the Apocalypse) denied Protestant allegorical interpretations demonizing the papacy by constructing literal timelines for the endtimes.¹⁶ Yet the Council of Trent, after much debate, affirmed the "apostolic tradition" as to be received with "equal piety" to written scripture.¹⁷

Scope and Clarity. At a time where the relationship between church and state was suddenly on cracked ground, the Reformers, mindful of a church that would make authoritative statements on any area of human knowledge, struggled with the question of what issues scripture could speak to. Calvin, writing sixty years prior to Galileo's denunciation by Rome,¹⁸ insisted that scripture wasn't intended to teach scientific astronomy.¹⁹ Its scope was related to revealing

¹³ Mickey L. Mattox, "Martin Luther," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 107.

¹⁴ Donald S. Prudlo, "Scripture and Theology in Early Modern Catholicism," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁸ Calvin dedicated his Commentary on Genesis in 1563, Galileo's trial for heresy was in 1633. J. D. Douglas, Philip Wesley Comfort and Donald Mitchell, *Who's Who in Christian History*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1997)

¹⁹ Randall C. Zachman, "John Calvin," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 126.

the God who Created and his plan for eternal life, and did this with clarity. He challenged Rome's description of stained-glass windows as "books for the unlearned," saying that scripture was clear for the uneducated, yet he also spoke of teachers and interpreters as important resources. Luther also insisted on the clarity of the scriptures, reacting strongly to a 1524 concern by Erasmus that scripture was muddy on the issues of predestination. The *sensus literalis* necessarily governs other meanings and brings clarity, but also blurry scriptural interpretations are a result of paying attention to the Holy Spirit's necessary illumination of the text.²⁰

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

John R. Franke characterizes the theologies of scripture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as Christian thinkers attempting to construct workable doctrine with the Enlightenment thinking now soundly established. In some ways, the entire era can be branded as reaction to the German theologian Frederick Schleiermacher.

Friedrich Schleiermacher. Called the father of liberal theology, Schleiermacher emphasized the personal experiential aspect of religion (defining it as a feeling of absolute dependence), and for interpreters that generally see a canyon-fault between subjective feelings and objective scripture, he is read as unbiblical because of his combination of the two.²¹ Schleiermacher locates his doctrine of scripture within his ecclesiology, calling scripture, as an indispensable witness to Jesus the Redeemer, an *esse* (essential mark) of the church. Yet because all of scripture does not witness directly to Jesus Christ, Schleiermacher marks the full canon of Old and New Testaments as a *bene esse* (important but not essential mark).²² The authority of scripture is based on faith in Christ—not the reverse—for if faith were based on scripture,

²⁰ Mattox, "Martin Luther," 105.

²¹ Jeffrey Hensley, "Friedrich Schleiermacher," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 166.

²² *Ibid.*, 168.

scripture must be grounded in inadequate means, such as rational argument. To speak of the writers of New Testament scripture being inspired is the same to speak of their general ministry, of which scripture-writing was a part. The writing of scripture, then, was a human, historical process, that may have “slight traces of human error,” unlike Christ, who does not.²³ And while scripture is normative to test and shape Christians, the Old Testament does not share this same ability because of its different view of sin and grace.²⁴ But his largest departure from the past may have been his emphasis on hermeneutics that require not only grammatical analysis, but a psychological understanding of the author as expressed in the author’s words—his way of getting “behind the text.”²⁵

Princeton and Fundamentalism. As the new German liberal theologies slipped across the Atlantic, Reformed theologians at Princeton Seminary drew battle lines, perceiving an attack on the authority of scripture by way of inspiration. Charles Hodge’s 1873 *Systematic Theology* set the stage in attacking “partial inspiration,”²⁶ and was later joined by his son A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield in their 1881 treatise on “Inspiration,” asserting the “identity thesis”—that scriptures do not contain, but *are* the Word of God—and therefore are inerrant in all respects. Mid-century *Christianity Today* founder Carl F. H. Henry maintained the standard for neo-evangelicals, affirming the “propositional-verbal” nature of scripture.²⁷ The theological defense reached a decibel peak with the *The Battle for the Bible* by Harold Lindsell in 1976 that included chapters entitled “The Strange Case of Fuller Seminary,” and “Deviations That Follow When Inerrancy is Denied.”

²³ Ibid., 175.

²⁴ Ibid., 177.

²⁵ John R. Franke, “Theologies of Scripture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: An Introduction,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 159.

²⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1873), 182, http://books.google.com/books?id=0TEkThdhYcIC&pg=PA181&lpg=PA181&dq=charles+hodge+%22inspiration%22&source=bl&ots=lmLLYXyump&sig=OGiFTGBK7hEbd4jBHbX1WC-vEEw&hl=en&ei=twqQStnWOZP6MI-8zK8K&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=9#v=onepage&q=&f=false.

²⁷ Henry, Carl F.H. *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 12 quoted in Franke, “Theologies of Scripture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: An Intro,” 160.

John Franke characterizes this conservative position as overly focused on propositional, rational doctrine,²⁸ yet Mark Noll notes that while critics easily accuse the Princeton movement of scholastic rationalism and “mechanical Biblicism,” the Scottish philosophy of common sense on which it drew always retained a significant emphasis on the effects of the Holy Spirit and personal piety. Further, Noll notes that the Princeton position was not novel but faithful to historic Calvinism, albeit adapted to the times.²⁹

Karl Barth. Often listed as the as the most influential theologian of the twentieth century, the Swiss scholar was an essential member of the German Confessing Church’s resistance to the rise of Hitler. Under the threat of totalitarian state influence on spiritual affairs, Barth reacted from his context, insisting that scripture does not, as classic liberals suggested, need to be translated to the modern world but instead that the biblical world itself is the real world that the external world must be drawn into.

Mary Kathleen Cunningham explicates Barth’s doctrine of Scripture as both Trinitarian and Christocentric.³⁰ By analogy, Barth identifies the Father, Son, and Spirit with revelation, Scripture, and proclamation respectively; these three in concert are the Word of God, as interdependent by definition as the Trinity itself. The Bible is God Word to the extent it reveals Jesus Christ, a unified and living witness to the true Word. Further, the unity of the Old Testament and New Testament is staked on this same witness, orbiting on the incarnation of Jesus Christ in time.

Classified as neo-orthodox or post-liberal, Barth’s formulations on scripture have been criticized by both classic liberals and evangelicals. The former have read his revival of textual authority as a blind biblicism, while the latter have accused his approach as subjective—he does not support plenary verbal inspiration. Still, Barth insisted that it is God’s initiative, not ours,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Mark Noll, “Princeton Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. ; Packer Ferguson, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 533.

³⁰ Mary Kathleen Cunningham, “Karl Barth,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 186.

that makes scripture reveal, and so his approach does not abandon authority. Towards liberals, Barth is concerned, not with being overly captive with scripture, but the reverse: being overly captive to contemporary culture. But, Cunningham notes, Barth did believe Holy Scripture spoke to relevant human questions, but only after first clarifying the formation of those questions in the first place.³¹

Other postliberal voices. Franke calls the coinage of the term postliberal “fairly recent” though potentially accurate—describing approaches to scripture that avoid attempts to secure neutral ground on which to evaluate theological claims.³² Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar locates the authority of scripture in God’s presence, but views that presence both as substantialist—containing divine communication in itself, and functionalist—the instrument through which God’s Spirit manifests.³³ Yale’s Hans Frei pays special attention to narrative interpretation—recovering postcritical literary features of the Gospels that in turn draw us to real history—and figural reading—recognizing direct typological links between God’s movements (e.g. Moses and Jesus).³⁴ And fellow postliberal George Lindbeck, writing *The Nature of Doctrine*, uses categories of story to “describe reality within the scriptural framework.”³⁵

Contextual Theologies

In each step along the way so far, we’ve summarized a varying approach to a similar task: describing the relationship of the Word of God to God’s Word in Scripture. In each case, the questions and issues reflect the context of origin, though these are not typically described as contextual theologies. However, the following generally are.

³¹ Ibid., 195.

³² Franke, “Theologies of Scripture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: An Intro,” 162.

³³ W. T. Dickens, “Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 214.

³⁴ Mike Higton, “Hans Frei,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 221, 227.

³⁵ Lindbeck, 118, quoted in Franke, “Theologies of Scripture in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: An Intro,” 162.

Feminist. The locus of discussion in feminism and scripture has orbited near authority, and Pamela Cochrane argues that the three varieties exist in relationship to communities of accountability. The feminist that locates her community in the traditional Church has generally been more constrained than those who for whom the feminist movement plays the primary role.³⁶ Three categories can be defined. Rejectionist theologians like Mary Daly deny biblical authority on the grounds that it and accompanying Christian doctrine has not only been complicit, but the source of patriarchal oppression of women.³⁷ Revisionist theologians retain the scriptures as important for in historical identity for their communities, but for those like Rosemary Radford Ruether, reject the portions of the canon that promote not only misogyny, but an a more general principle of oppressive dualism—even good/evil—that is framed back onto male/female.³⁸ Reformation or evangelical feminists such as Letha Scanzoni hold a more redemptive view of scripture, arguing that patriarchal texts have been misinterpreted, and given appropriate context, can be reapplied to an egalitarian view of the world while retaining scriptural authority.³⁹ In all cases, conservative reactions have been pointed, seeing not a spectrum of positions in the feminist approaches, but a slippery slope from minor capitulations in scriptural authority to completed rejection of fundamental Christian practice and doctrines.

Liberation. In articulating African-American conceptions of theology, Lewis Baldwin and Stephen Murphey begin where liberation theology often does—not an abstract formulation but the pragmatic use of scripture in a community. In the liberation tradition, prophetic texts of God’s deliverance have often been repurposed and reimagined to the current setting of oppression, prayed out with repetition and increasing fervor.⁴⁰ Dual meanings are integral to the liberation experience of scripture: holding both the original context and present circumstances of

³⁶ Pamela D. H. Cochrane, “Scripture, Feminism, and Sexuality,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 278.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 270.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴⁰ Lewis V. Baldwin and Stephen W. Murphey, “Scripture in the African-American Christian Tradition,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin Holcomb (New York University Press, 2006), 282.

the invoked text, and emphasizing the now and eschatological not-yet of promised salvation. Father of black liberation theology James Cone found in scripture not only the Exodus narrative of the ancient Hebrews, but the New Testament suffering of Christ himself as God's taking sides with oppressed, his "divine despair."⁴¹

Current Proposals

Systematic theologian Kevin Vanhoozer observes that the doctrine of Scripture has functioned as "means of social demarcation" in the theological community. "Fundamentalism, evangelicalism, liberalism, postliberal, orthodox, neo-orthodox are distinguished in large part on the basis of their respective stance toward scripture."⁴² Further, recent evangelicals haven't been able to agree among themselves, spawning variations on the closely held assertion of biblical inerrancy. Reactions to historical-critical method have been joined by reactions to post-modern deconstruction, and, solutions found wanting, proposals abound. And though these academic tidal waves have had demonstrable effect, perhaps the fragmentation on the doctrine of scripture is the appearance of culture(s) themselves—that plurality of society that the Church does not stand apart from. Vanhoozer compares the current milieu to fifth and sixth century christological debates, which required an expansion of theological vocabulary (and not a few violent moments in the aftermath of Chalcedon).

While perhaps only a few have been forced into exile (Peter Enns?), there are a variety of proposals on the table regarding a doctrine of scripture.⁴³ Here we'll make a brief attempt to survey some of the current evangelical-family proposals. We'll mention theologian Telford

⁴¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 86 quoted in *Ibid.*, 296.

⁴² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics*, 2002, 129.

⁴³ Old Testament scholar Peter Enns was suspended and then left Westminster Theological Seminary after his 2005 book *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005. His concern, in his own words was that what has been needed "is not simply for evangelicals to work in these areas [e.g. historical and textual studies], but to engage the *doctrinal implications* that work in these areas raises." I should note that Enns view of the changes in the doctrine of scripture are due to "new evidence" coming to light, and not so much the shifting communication-cultural settings that I might implicate.

Work and biblical scholar Kenton Sparks, but will spend the majority of our time with theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, whose work we'll later find most apt to apply to questions of a digital culture.

Telford Work

***Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (2002)**

Supervised under prominent Christian academics such as Stanley Haurwaas, Richard Hays, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Miroslav Volf, Telford Work gets mentioned as a notable younger theologian from diverse sides, recently winning book awards from both the evangelical *Christianity Today* and the Archbishop of Canterbury.⁴⁴ His attempt at a ecumenical doctrine of scripture professes to incorporate a wide breadth of traditions from Eastern Orthodox to Anabaptist. Richard Hays claims that Work seriously accounts for the postmodern turn towards communities of readers, does not degenerate into Enlightenment categories to defend authority, yet avoids the segregated intratextual world of the postliberal.⁴⁵

Work notes that principal approaches to scripture have grounded its authority in one of three ways, framed by Gerard Loughlin as “literal, historical, or religious.”⁴⁶ *Living and Active* attempts to root its proposal in all three, via a Trinitarian framework, and show the forced choice is unnecessary. Presented in three sections, the first traces the analogy of the Word in Athanasius, Augustine, Barth and Balthasar, showing that the character of Scripture must reflect the character of God, but insisting that Trinitarian balance be brought to the Christological analogy of the Word. He particularly likes the Iconclast controversy of the Eighth Century under which the Second Nicene Council likened icons to books of the gospels. Words and images⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Telford Work, “CV Telford Work,” n.d., <http://www.westmont.edu/~work/material/cv.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation (Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age)* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (2001), Hardcover, 343 pages, 2001), xvi.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 125.. He notes Loughlin’s dependence on similar typologies by David Kelsey or George Lindbeck: cognitive-propositional, cultural linguistic, experiential-expressive.

⁴⁷ Verbal signs and material signs

both, though inaugurated at different times, are signs—carrying a *likeness* of God, but not his *essence* (only Jesus, Iconodule St. John of Damascus writes, does both).⁴⁸ The second division sets scripture in salvation-history centered on Jesus Christ. Taking into view scripture’s role with Israel, with Jesus’ life as Messiah, and role as future king, Work says Scripture *is* “Jesus’ very language... his heritage, his horizon, his formation, his practice, his authority, his instrument, and his glory.”⁴⁹ The reference to “his glory” leads us to Work’s final section in which he sets scripture in ecclesial and eschatological contexts—the dimension on “not yet ascended” community. Here Scripture “both confers and takes on” the characteristics of the Church.⁵⁰ It “takes on” in the traditional senses of ecclesial unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, but in the wake of division over the nature of these marks, confers upon the church her role in the restoration of all things—the *telos* of scripture.⁵¹

Work’s “systematic bibliology” challenges both liberals, reading the Bible as little more than a reader-response exercise, diminishing the divine voice, and conservatives who in emphasizing inerrancy have reduced the Scripture to static witness, diminishing the divine action.⁵²

Kenton Sparks

God’s Word In Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship (2008)

Kenton Sparks is an evangelical professor of Biblical Studies at Eastern University, and he begins by outlining the problem: the considerable gap in biblical studies between

⁴⁸ Work, *Living and Active*, 107. We might want to say that both words and images are media.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 318.

conservative evangelical scholars and the historical-critical majority of modern scholarship.⁵³ Covering technical issues with clean, accessible style, Sparks walks through multiple specific examples familiar to Bible students—discussing discrepancies in the Deuteronomic history, the authorship of Isaiah, difficult harmonizations of gospel pericopes, and the dating of Pastoral Epistles. Traditional responses to this criticism have often included fideistic special pleading, artificially lowering the threshold for historicity, and selectively making use of critical methods when it suits a particular conclusion. But attempts fail, writes Sparks, not the least because they still are devoted to the same Cartesian epistemology that much of the secular approach took as its foundation.⁵⁴

Rather than traditional or secular routes, Sparks seeks a third way—“constructive”—a term he first applies to formulations by a line of scholars from Karl Barth to Brevard Childs before moving presenting his own proposals. His first look is at the human voice of scripture, and much of this discussion is on literary genre, which shows many supposed errors to be illusory. But the human imprint on scripture yields both the “fallible horizons of its human authors and audiences” as well as their fallenness.⁵⁵ Does this concession present danger to the divine voice of scripture? Here the key doctrine is one of accommodation, a warrant used by, among others, Origen, Chrysostom and later especially Calvin. As an “explicit theological rationale for what we already do,” Sparks understands God’s accommodation to the human condition to be both for our finitude and fallenness—not introducing error into to the text, but explaining it. ⁵⁶ Harmonizing these perspectives, we further understand that the context and dependence of the scriptures is not abstract, but the created order, the revelation of Christ incarnate, and his continuing voice of the Holy Spirit to the church. In the contextual whole

⁵³ Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Baker Academic, 2008), 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

there is diversity to be sorted through—the Bible is less a lens to look through and better described as a part of a “complex web of reality.”⁵⁷

Kevin Vanhoozer

A systematic theologian at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Vanhoozer is thus classified as evangelical yet has pushed conservative edges, recently asking, “Am I evangelical, orthodox, catholic, or some combination thereof? (Yes.)”⁵⁸ Evangelical biblical studies notes his 1998 work *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, an ambitious philosophical treatise in the art and science of interpretation in a postmodern landscape. His engagement with Jacques Derrida, Ferdinand de Saussure, Stanley Fish, and classic deconstructionism is on multiple fronts, including theology, classical philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, and literary criticism. In his agenda to “resurrect the author,” “redeem the text,” and “reform the reader,” Vanhoozer begins to lay the foundation he will later take to a doctrine of scripture, particularly the component of moral responsibility he insists Christian communication requires.

First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics **(2002)**

Here Vanhoozer engages most directly with a doctrine of scripture, which he defines broadly as “an account of the relation of the words to the Word and of how this relation may legitimately be said to be “of God.” He begins by noting that formulations of the doctrine since the Enlightenment have typically arisen in response to threats to a community’s self-understanding and its narrative. B. B Warfield’s turn of the century “received view” emphasized propositional (cognitive) revelation, an identity thesis of verbal inspiration and the epistemological miracle of infallible authority—the Princeton reaction to the perceived threat of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 328.

⁵⁸ Kevin J Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach To Christian Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press (2005), Paperback, 488 pages, 2005), xii.

liberal German historical-critical method. The last century has, in-turn reacted to this view, examples including: Karl Barth's neo-orthodox critique, James Barr's semantics, and complete rejection of the Scripture principle such as by Edward Farley.

Vanhoozer acknowledges the validity of much of the critique, and suggests that the way forward is through modern communications theory, particularly the speech act philosophy of J. L. Austin and John Searle. Speech act theory requires that the sentence, not words, is the fundamental component of meaning in communicative action (semantics rather than semiotics), and each effort of discourse can be viewed in three parts. *Locution* is the act of speaking itself—"Coffee would keep me awake!" is the figure Vanhoozer employs. While easily understood in a limited sense regarding the biological effects of caffeine, the meaning of the sentence as located in a discourse is uncertain. *Illocution* is the intended effect or action of such communication, in this case it could equally be a response "yes" (affirmative) or "no" (negative) to a friendly offer for coffee. We can't know until we consider the wider discourse. *Perlocution* is the actual effect of the communication, a tricky concept that can be merged with illocution and Vanhoozer later treats extensively.

To build a doctrine of scripture, Vanhoozer first seeks to give a theological account of communication—the "covenant of discourse" in ordinary language and literature, and second makes the turn towards the "discourse of the Covenant" to show what aspects must be expounded specifically when speaking of Christian scripture.

Beginning with the economic Trinity as a paradigm for communication, we assert that communicative acts are intentional, covenantal, and relevant,⁵⁹ requiring a cooperative account of discourse. The Trinitarian model particularly fits speech act theory well, seeing the Father as the locutionary agent, the Son as the illocutionary Word, and the Spirit in the realm of perlocutions. Next Vanhoozer seeks to retain a strong sense of the speaker or author, defining the literal sense as the "sum total of those illocutionary acts performed by the author

⁵⁹ Here he introduces the "relevance theory" of Sperber and Wilson based on philosopher Paul Grice. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics*, 170.

intentionally and with self-awareness,”⁶⁰ and defining the work of understanding and interpretation as inferring authorial intentions by recognizing illocutionary acts. This is a moral act by the interpreter that may be deemed as just or unjust. Requiring both the speaker and hearer to be covenantal “citizens” of language with rights and responsibilities, Vanhoozer attempts to walk a middle road. “Speakers are neither sovereign subjects of language as a manipulable instrument (the modern error) nor slaves of language as an ideological system (the postmodern error), but rather citizens of language, with all the rights and responsibilities pertaining thereto.”⁶¹

Before shifting to look at scripture particularly, Vanhoozer addresses what he terms has potential to be the most serious objection to his formulation, namely Paul Riceour’s claim that written discourse cannot be the same as oral discourse, but instead is where the author’s intention and meaning of the text “cease to coincide.” Picking at what he sees as Riceour’s own inconsistency, as well as theologically presenting the “book of the law” as a fixed discourse of covenant, Vanhoozer concludes that “written texts preserve the same illocutionary acts potential as oral discourse.”⁶²

The anatomy of scripture is first a sentence, then an individual book, and finally the canon. Vanhoozer argues that there are new illocutionary actions at the wider level of book and widest level of canon that can only be understood at these levels. At the level of the book, genre and particularly narrative play key roles in determining illocution. The author of Jonah intends to make satirical comment on the religious complacency of the Jews, and this is the literal sense of the text (not, for instance, to make claims about sea life). At this level, we can say there is divine appropriation of the human intention, so God himself is also communicating about religious ethnocentrism. At the level of canon, God’s communicative act can be describes as instructing the believing community, testifying to Christ, and covenanting.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁶¹ Ibid., 182.

⁶² Ibid., 191.

Applying his framework of Trinitarian speech acts, Vanhoozer engages additional recent questions. Who is right in Karl Barth vs. conservative evangelicals on the question “Is the Bible God’s Word?” The assertion is that both must be: the Bible both *is* the word of God (illocution) and *becomes* the Word of God (perlocution) through pneumatological action. And what of performance readings that view the reader as author?⁶³ Their over-emphasis on perlocutionary effect only ignores its dependence on illocutionary action. “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,” summarizes Vanhoozer.⁶⁴

The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology (2005)

Vanhoozer’s most recent academic contribution attends to Scripture for a significant portion of the work, but attempts to tackle the wider task of Protestant (evangelical?) reformed theology in a post-modern, post-propositionalist, technological age. He is particularly concerned with employing a new description of the relationship of canon, the church, and the Holy Spirit when speaking of God’s Word, and rather than employ philosophy as the traditional partner of theology, he turns to formal drama theory. New metaphors and language name theology as “dramaturgy,” theological understanding as “performance,” the church as “the company,” the pastor as “director,” and Scripture as “the script” that underlies it all. The use of drama as metaphor has enjoyed increased usage in the last quarter-century. Vanhoozer himself acknowledges Hans Urs von Balthasar’s systematic theology volumes under his *Theo-Drama* moniker, or ethicist Samuel Wells’ description of the biblical meta-narrative as five acts.⁶⁵ But

⁶³ So Ricouer. Or consider an interesting softer variation by Stanley Grenz that emphasizes perlocutionary effect and does not locate the authority of Scripture in authorship or inspired character, but nonetheless places the weight on the Spirit speaking (illocution rather than locution) using the text as the medium or tool. Vanhoozer finds much to admire here but rejects the argument on the basis that Grenz does not adequately distinguish between the Spirit’s illocutionary act and the Spirit’s perlocutionary act in relation to the illocutions of Scripture. *Ibid.*, 197.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁶⁵ I’d also think of N.T Wright, although he isn’t mentioned by Vanhoozer.

these approaches are distinct, Vanhoozer insists, in emphasizing the content of Christian doctrine whereas the *Drama of Doctrine* is speaking of the “dramatic nature of Christian doctrine itself”⁶⁶ And his choice is consistent with his earlier work in speech-act theory where language and action collide.

Within the academic theological conversation, Vanhoozer locates his new approach as in contrast with George Lindbeck’s influential *The Nature of Doctrine* (1984), which is often cited as foundational to postliberal theology and sought a way between cognitive/propositional or experiential/expressive approaches to Christian doctrine via his “cultural-linguistic” approach. Vanhoozer’s “canonical-linguistic” approach, he writes, shares an appreciation of postmodern insights, and gives language crucial place in meaning, but differs in the location of normative authority: “not that of ecclesial *culture* but biblical *canon*.”⁶⁷ Lindbeck’s priorities cannot be accepted. Though praising a “turn to practice” in theological reflection, cultures are not closed systems or bounded wholes that can provide any kind of “stable core for Christian practice.”⁶⁸ Postliberals have emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in the action of the church, but have minimized the canon itself as the location of the Spirit’s voice, the canon as an active assertion of the lordship of Jesus Christ. Placed into the language of theater studies, Vanhoozer asserts that Lindbeck (and Hans Frei, among others) are employing *mise en scene*: the context of utterance that gives a script or scene meaning.⁶⁹ The context employed is the life of the church that gives the final form and realization to the text of Scripture as socially-constructed performance.

Criticisms of Lindbeck’s view certainly exist⁷⁰—a fideistic view of Scripture, an idealistic view of the church, and a non-realist view of God. But Vanhoozer’s criticism is that Lindbeck fails to see God as a member of the performing community. Returning to speech-act

⁶⁶ Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine*, 18.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.. Alister McGrath, Terrence Tilley, Nicholas Wolterstorf, Kathryn Tanner, Garrett Green are all cited.

language, canon is a divine illocution, the active work of the words of God. “The divine author is not merely a teacher who passes on propositional truths or a narrator who conveys the discourse of others but a dramatist who does things in and through the dialogical action of others.”⁷¹ This is not to say that the church’s role in faithful performance is not crucial, in fact, it becomes the most essential form of interpretation. Yet its use of Scripture cannot replace the divine use of Scripture.

But how then, does the church faithfully perform the script of scripture? Vanhoozer asserts that the actions themselves are generated by Scripture—“canonical practices.” Genres of scripture provide much more than a taxonomy, but set directions and rules for fitting participation. Drawing from Russian literature professor Mikhail Bakhtin, he finds that speech genres are actually “life genres”—literature falls into generic types because certain human situations regularly recur.⁷² Genres of scripture such as recounting history (narrative), praising God (psalms), cultivating the fear of the Lord (wisdom) are communicative practices that instruct, mentor, and call for participation.

In this way the scriptures exist in the life of the church not simply with epistemic authority but “existential authority” as well.⁷³ This can be seen most clearly in the way Christians imitate the actual practices of Christ. Vanhoozer notes two. Jesus’ example on the road to Emmaus of explicating the scriptures through figural interpretation (Luke 24.27) becomes paradigmatic for Philip (Acts 8.35) and for the church today. As a “practice of looking,” we learn to re-vision ourselves, our world, and Israel and Israel’s world in the typologies of Christ.⁷⁴ The Lord’s Prayer provides a second practical example. Prayer becomes the actor’s fitting response to God actively speaking to us in Scripture, significantly made

⁷¹ Ibid., 179.

⁷² Ibid., 214.

⁷³ Ibid., 221.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 223.

intensely personal by Jesus' identification of God the author-speaker as *Abba*. Though prayer is often learned in family or church, the practice is first canonical before it is ecclesial.⁷⁵

Beyond the direct role of scripture, *The Drama of Doctrine* completes the picture by describing the role of the church/company of players and the pastor/director as faithfully living within a robust world of scriptural intention that addresses the nature of scripture as active and authoritative while intellectually satisfying the requirements of the linguistic turn in philosophy and poststructuralist world.

Vanhoozer's willingness to thinking widely about the moral obligations of communication, the intended actions of a text, and the practical nature of scripture performed in community will be helpful in our foray into digital culture. Work's discussion of icons as well as Sparks employment of the doctrine of accommodation are also notable. We've gathered a pool of language and approaches that will resource our further theological discussion. And we've suggested that theologies' cultural contexts affect the questions and categories they form. How should we define culture? Our survey of media ecology addresses that directly.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 225.