VANHOOZER'S CANONICAL-LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO DOCTRINE:
A DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION OF ITS MAJOR CONTOURS

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INTRODUCTION

Kevin Vanhoozer’s book, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine*, is a reformulation of the concept of Christian doctrine. It is primarily an attempt to deal with the problem of the dichotomy between theory and practice in dialogue with a number of recent thinkers, most notably George Lindbeck, as well as an attempt to propose a robust view of the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* while accounting for the importance of “tradition” in the life of the church. Vanhoozer’s main proposal is that rather than viewing theology as “theoretical” it should be viewed through the controlling metaphor of “theater.” His thesis is that “Canonical-linguistic theology gives scriptural direction for one’s fitting participation in the drama of redemption today.” This essay will seek to describe Vanhoozer’s canonical-linguistic approach to doctrine (first part) and critique it (second part).

Vanhoozer’s Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Doctrine

This description has two sections. The first will look at his approach in light of George Lindbeck’s “cultural-linguistic” approach to doctrine. The second will examine Vanhoozer’s controlling metaphor of “theater” and the various dimensions of it.

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Lindbeck’s Cultural-Linguistic Approach

While the major controlling metaphor for Vanhoozer’s work is the idea of “drama,” a major impetus of the book is engagement with George Lindbeck. Lindbeck proposed what he called a “cultural-linguistic” approach to theology in his 1984 book *The Nature of Doctrine.* Vanhoozer presents the cultural-linguistic approach as follows:

Lindbeck accepts Wittgenstein’s insight that linguistic meaning is a function of use, and that linguistic usage varies according to the forms of life or practices—cultures—that users inhabit. Hence Lindbeck’s key premise: that the experience and the reasoning of the individual human subject is always already shaped by a tradition of language use (e.g., culture).

Lindbeck’s proposal effectively moves the locus of authority from the Bible to tradition as the determiner of meaning. In other words, the community’s use of the Bible determines the meaning of the biblical text.

Vanhoozer is critically appreciative of several aspects of the cultural-linguistic approach, such as the emphasis on the practices of the church, and the emphasis on “Wittgenstein’s insight that language meaning is a function of use.” However, there are some problems with the cultural-linguistic approach. Vanhoozer rightly points out that if the practices of the church determine the meaning of the Bible, then “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.” In other words, doctrine doesn’t describe the Bible, but the church’s use of the

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6. *Ibid.*, 6, 10. I especially infer this from the fact that Vanhoozer wants to move the locus from the community’s use of Scripture to God’s use of Scripture, but leaves the general principle intact.
Bible. But if this is true, then how can we identify when a community’s use of scripture is not right?\(^8\) Also, does the community’s use of Scripture refer to any reality external to the community?\(^9\) Vanhoozer rightly comments that “there is something in the nature of theology’s subject matter—God, the gospel—that resists being designated as mere ‘local custom.’”\(^10\)

Vanhoozer’s project is, in part, to correct the cultural-linguistic approach by replacing the community’s use of Scripture with God’s use of Scripture. He expresses this intention as follows: “The present study aims to correct (without overreacting to) this cultural-linguistic misstep by locating authority not in the use of Scripture by the believing community but in what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls divine authorial discourse.”\(^11\)

**Engaging Lindbeck’s Three Categories**

One way that Vanhoozer locates his present project is by distinguishing it from the three approaches that Lindbeck describes in *The Nature of Doctrine*. Lindbeck calls his three models the cognitive-propositionalist, the experiential-expressivist, and the cultural-linguistic models. Vanhoozer engages these categories by renaming them epic style, lyric style and “storied practice,” respectively.\(^12\)

Epic style of doing theology corresponds to the cognitive-propositionalist approach. Vanhoozer says that “epic takes the form of a monological system that unfolds its story from an absolute perspective. Systematic theologies resemble epics to the extent that they appear to be

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\(^8\) Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 12.

\(^9\) Vanhoozer brings up the example of Walter Brueggemann, who believed that “Israel’s testimony [about God] is rhetorical; its purpose is not to correspond to what is already in the world but rather to affect the world in significant ways and hence to create a ‘new’ world.” (*Ibid.*, 96).


\(^12\) *Ibid.*, 84.
written by impersonal and omniscient narrators who stand nowhere in particular."\textsuperscript{13} His complaint is that epic style of doctrine tries to cast one formulation of doctrine as absolute and universally applicable.\textsuperscript{14} He believes that epic theology “encourages uncritical repetition. Epic invites admiration rather than action.”\textsuperscript{15} Epic theology makes system building, rather than living, the task of theology.

Vanhoozer says that he does not want to reject the cognitive and propositional component of theology, but wants to expand cognitive to include in addition to the intellectual component, the emotional and imaginative.\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, he wants to expand propositional to include more than informative assertions, but also any communicative action, such as a promise or a joke, which communicate without primarily being informational and assertive.\textsuperscript{17}

The second approach is the lyric style, which corresponds to the experiential-expressivist approach. This was the approach of the early liberal theologians in the strain of Schleiermacher, who “virtually [identified] the subject matter of theology with the interpreter’s religious experience.”\textsuperscript{18} In this view, the Bible is not an authoritative word from God, but a record of the attempts of human beings to put their religious experiences into words. Vanhoozer points out that on this account, there is the problem of the fact that we don’t know whether or not the experiences of the biblical writers gives us any insight into the truth.\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, we don’t have any reason to find their experiences authoritative and binding on the church today.\textsuperscript{20} However, Vanhoozer also doesn’t want to “overreact and so marginalize the realm of the affections or the

\textsuperscript{13} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 85.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid}., 85–86.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid}., 86.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid}., 88.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid}., 90. He uses the example of the joke here. The example of the promise is another typical speech act.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid}., 91.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid}., 92.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid}.
imagination.”

Finally, Vanhoozer interacts with Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach under the heading of “storied practice.” This approach is closely associated with the Yale school in the late 20th century. They view theology as primarily a narrative that shapes our identity. Vanhoozer has an appreciation for this approach because of “its appeal to narrative as the identity description of Jesus Christ, and hence the ‘foundational narrative’ for the identity of the church.” However, as pointed out above, this narrative is really shaped by the community’s use of Scripture, so we are left with the two problems of whether doctrine actually refers to anything outside of the community, and how to discern correct versus incorrect practices. This leads Vanhoozer to propose his own canonical-linguistic approach.

The Theo-Dramatic Approach

Building off of Lindbeck’s three models of epic, lyric, and “storied practice,” Vanhoozer suggest that dramatic theology offers the best of all worlds. “Drama thus offers an integrative perspective within which to relate propositions, experience, and narrative.”

**Doctrine as “Theater” rather than “Theory”**

The major problem that prompts Vanhoozer’s reassessment of the nature of doctrine is the view that doctrine is “theoretical” knowledge. Vanhoozer says that the idea of theory, especially as it developed among the Greek philosophers, has to do with abstract speculation.

In Greek philosophy, *theoria* refers to the eternal truths that one beholds with the mind’s eye (from Gk. *theoreo*: “I behold”). For modern thinkers, theory is the product of universal reason or the scientific method and has unmatched explanatory power. In the

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eyes of its critics, however, theory is abstract, speculative, and generally impractical, both in the sense that its concern is with knowledge rather than practical application and because it is based on something other than experience or practice.\(^{25}\)

This view of doctrine as “theory” conceptualizes it in terms of one side of the “theory-practice dichotomy.”\(^{26}\) So Vanhoozer says that “No dichotomy is as fatal to the notion of doctrinal theology as that of theory and practice, a mortal fault line that runs through the academy and church alike.”\(^{27}\) Vanhoozer believes that this could be reconceptualized in terms of “wisdom.”\(^{28}\) Wisdom can be a helpful concept for theology because theology is not simply about information, but is fundamentally about following Christ as disciples.\(^{29}\) “Christian doctrine . . . should serve the purpose of fostering truthful ways of living.”\(^{30}\)

In light of the nature of doctrine as oriented toward living rather than simply abstract knowledge, Vanhoozer suggests that the concept of “theater” might provide a helpful metaphor to help conceptualize what doctrine is all about:

The Christian way is fundamentally dramatic, involving speech and action on behalf of Jesus’ truth and life. It concerns the way of living truthfully, and its claim to truth cannot be isolated from the way of life with which it is associated. For the way one lives bodies forth one’s beliefs about the true, the good, and the beautiful, so much so that it becomes difficult “to separate the person from the thesis or argument or doctrine uttered by the person.”\(^{31}\)

**The Metaphor**

Vanhoozer’s book is an exposition of his thesis that “doctrine is dramatic.” He arranges the book around four sections. Part one, “the Drama,” describes God’s work in the world as a “theo-
drama,” a “drama of redemption” in which the triune God is the central character and the “Christ event” the climactic point. He draws on Hans Urs von Balthazar, who believed that “the best way to do justice to the content of Scripture is to employ dramatic rather than metaphysical categories.” Vanhoozer affirms that “what lies at the heart of the gospel is not an idea or an ideal or an experience, but an action.” The drama of redemption is therefore the big picture which functions similar to a meta-narrative.

One of the recurring themes in this first part is that the Scriptures both reveal the theo-drama, as well as being a means that God uses within the theo-drama. Vanhoozer says that “Scripture not only conveys the content of the gospel but is itself caught up in the economy of the gospel, as the means by which God draws others into his communicative action.” This draws heavily on speech-act theory, which is a major conceptual tool in Vanhoozer’s belt. He views language (and especially the language of the Bible) as “not simply a tool for information processing but a rich medium of communicative action and personal interaction.” This means that for him, the Bible is both “personal” and “propositional.”

Within this theo-drama, the Christian life is conceived of as “performance of a script.” That script is the Scriptures. This performance, far from being a second step, is actually what it means to interpret the Bible:

One thinks of Shakespeare plays, or Beethoven sonatas, or even instructions for assembling bookshelves. Each of these texts is intended as a guide for specific human

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33 Ibid., 55
34 Ibid., 49.
35 Ibid., 50.
36 Ibid., 48.
37 Ibid., 47.
38 Ibid. This brings together the concerns of both traditional Conservative Evangelicals (who were concerned that the Bible revealed truth) and Barthians (who were concerned that the Bible was a means of revealing the person of Christ).
39 Ibid., 361.
activities. As we have seen, the content of the Bible consists largely of patterns of action, human and divine. As a part of that economy, Scripture aims to draw people into the action. Indeed, biblical interpretation is incomplete unless and until it issues in performance.40

Envisioning Biblical Interpretation this way is what allows Vanhoozer to tie together doctrine and practice and subvert the theory/practice dichotomy. If we are to live out the drama of redemption (i.e., “perform” it), and the Scriptures are the script, then doctrine is conceived of as “direction for the fitting participation of individuals and communities in the drama of redemption.”41

The second part of the book, “The Script,” argues for the practice of sola scriptura in the church, while explaining the place of tradition in the life of the church. In the first place, Vanhoozer wants to describe sola scriptura as a practice rather than an abstract principle. In this way he is shadowing Lindbeck’s emphasis on practice. This emphasis continues as Vanhoozer goes on to replace the emphasis on the church’s practice as determinative of meaning to the canon’s practices as determinative of meaning (thus retaining the Protestant principle that “Scripture interprets Scripture”).

There are several “practices of the canon” that he believes shape our interpretation. First, the literary practices of the canon shape interpretation.42 He believes sensitivity to genre is important because they are “social strategies” for communicating and interacting with others.43 Figural interpretation (typology) and prayer are also practices of the canon that ought to shape our interpretation of Scripture.44

The fact that the Scripture needs to be interpreted also raises the question of the place of

40 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 101.
41 Ibid., 102.
42 Ibid., 212.
43 Ibid., 214.
44 Ibid., 220ff.
tradition in the Christian life. Vanhoozer has two thoughts that are especially helpful. First, he says that tradition is the way of maintaining the same teaching in new circumstances:

. . . the church cannot simply repeat what has been said and done in the past. To repeat the same words in a new situation is in fact to say something different. The challenge is not to resist change so much as to change in a way that would be faithful to, even though different from, Christian beginnings. Tradition is the church’s attempt to negotiate this tension between “sameness” and “difference,” an attempt that aims at kind of nonidentical repetition . . . 45

In light of this need, Vanhoozer suggests that tradition tries to maintain the same substance rather than the same expression. It is the “practices of the canon” as discussed above that help discern which re-articulations are faithful and which are not.46

The second helpful concept that Vanhoozer uses is that of “different kinds of performance” (i.e., tradition).47 One view of tradition (that of postmoderns and postliberals) sees the “performance” of the play as fundamentally an expression of the “performer” rather than the playwright.48 The “aims and interest of the author” are dispensed with and the interpretation of the performer reigns supreme.49 On the other hand, Vanhoozer sees a proper place for tradition in which it is “a matter not of authoring but of . . . acknowledging what the playwright is doing in the many voices in Scripture and responding to it in an appropriate manner.”50 As an example of this kind of tradition, he uses the “rule of faith” of the early church.51 The rule of faith is a summary of the story of Scripture, and is used to norm interpretations of Scripture, but is itself normed by Scripture. Therefore tradition has “ministerial authority.” It is derived from and

45 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 125.
46 Ibid., 127.
48 Ibid., 166.
49 Ibid., 176.
50 Ibid., 180.
51 Ibid., 206–207.
depends upon Scripture.\textsuperscript{52}

The third section of the book, “The Dramaturge,” describes the canonical-linguistic theological method. The essence of his approach is the necessity to have “exegetical \textit{scientia},” or knowledge of the Scriptures, and “practical \textit{sapientia},” or wisdom for living.\textsuperscript{53} Under \textit{scientia}, he promotes a canonical and theological interpretation of the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{54} This includes an approach that is postpropositional (concerned with the various forms of communication in Scripture rather than assertions alone), postconservative (being willing to hear how Scripture addresses not only the intellect, but also the emotions and imagination), and postfoundationalist (a critical-realist approach that starts with the Scriptures).\textsuperscript{55} Under \textit{sapientia}, he promotes the idea of performance as “transposing” the biblical story into modern settings.\textsuperscript{56} This includes an approach that is prosaic (contextualized into particular cultures), phronetic (wisdom-oriented, with a focus on spontaneously being able to improvise in a way that is “fitting” in the drama), and prophetic (protesting the culture’s idols and witnessing to the resurrection).

The fourth part, “The Performance,” tries to demonstrate the implementation of the canonical-linguistic theology in the life of the believer and the church. Vanhoozer’s view of doctrine sees doctrine as helping us to “play” the roles that God has given us and shape our identity in Christ.\textsuperscript{57} They do this by acting on the imagination to help us see, feel, and “improvise” in ways that fit the theo-drama.\textsuperscript{58} Doctrines “are intellectual habits that draw upon the synthetic power of the imagination to enable us to see this world in otherworldly—which is

\textsuperscript{52} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 208.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}, 240.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, 247–251.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}, 266–305.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}, 252–256.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}, 363–374.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ibid.}, 377.
to say, eschatological—terms.”\footnote{Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 377.} Doctrine also calls forth corporate performances of the drama. This means living out the life of the kingdom of God as a community.\footnote{Ibid., 442–443.}

Finally, Vanhoozer discusses different levels of theologizing. Pastoral theology is oriented toward giving direction to the “local company” about how to perform the script.\footnote{Ibid., 447–449.} Creedal theology is important “to direct the local church into the way of the Scriptures and to relate the local church to previous great performances.”\footnote{Ibid., 450.} Confessional theology has to do with particular concerns, and mediates “between the universal (catholic) and the particular (local).”\footnote{Ibid., 452.}

Congregational theology highlights that each congregation has the responsibility to theologize on the local level.\footnote{Ibid., 454.} Finally, Vanhoozer discusses the relationship between the local and other levels of theology: “There is a kind hermeneutical circle between the whole (\textit{viz.}, the catholic church) conceived through the parts (\textit{viz.}, local churches) that actualize it, and the parts conceived through the wholes—both the smaller ‘regional’ confessional wholes and the larger catholic whole—that guide them.”\footnote{Ibid.}

\section*{II. Strengths and Weaknesses of Vanhoozer’s Approach}

\textbf{Strengths}

Vanhoozer’s book has some strengths and weaknesses. Many of the strengths fall under one of the following headings: Scripture, Tradition, Doctrine and Practice, and Epistemology.
There were several ways that his proposal strengthened theology’s dependence upon Scripture. First, his emphasis on sola scriptura as a practice rather than an abstract principle encourages people not to merely argue for it or affirm it, but to actually use Scripture as the norm for doctrine. This provides a way of discerning which traditions are faithful to the gospel, and a way for traditions to correct themselves.

Similarly the emphasis on genre awareness and speech-act promotes a view of Scripture that is multidimensional in its communicative power. His critiques of propositionalism helpfully pointed out the way that it is reductionistic. I was spiritually challenged by the constant emphasis on the fact that Scripture not only informs, but communicates. I appreciated his comment that “Theology must do more than make cognitive contact with divine reality; it must make covenantal contact.” On the other hand, he did not try to do away with propositions, only to avoid reducing all theology down to them.

I appreciated Vanhoozer’s approach to tradition as well, especially in his recognition that tradition is inevitable and useful, and yet fallible. This discussion is so necessary because tradition is often like glasses: we look through them but not at them. Vanhoozer’s approach makes a place in theology for the guidance and help of tradition and the “doctrinal stability” that it provides, without yielding Scripture as the “norming norm.”

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66 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 241.
67 Ibid., 452.
**Doctrine and Practice**

Vanhoozer’s approach to the question of doctrine and practice was one of the best parts of the book. There is a constant back and forth between scholasticism and pietism in the life of the church. The problem is that both doctrine and practice are important, but it is not always clear how they are related to one another. Christians either argue which one is better or try to do them separately without seeing the necessary connection. While the best theologians have seen the connection, on a popular level the connection often gets missed.\(^6^8\)

**Epistemology**

Vanhoozer interacted rigorously with philosophy and even postmodern epistemology in a way that recognized the insights but refused to capitulate to unbiblical ways of thinking. I appreciated how he took the best of the epic, lyric and “storied practice” approaches to doctrine, but also rejected elements that would result in theological compromise.

**Weaknesses**

While overall the book was very useful and met its objectives, there were a few places that seemed weak in his proposal.

**Circularity**

A certain amount of circularity is part of the interpreting and the knowing process. However it is slightly problematic because Vanhoozer wants to help us discern which traditions are most faithful, and when interpretations are illegitimate. The question is how Vanhoozer justifies his starting point. He claims that “The proper starting point for Christian theology is *God in*...”\(^{68}\)

\(^{68}\) It is possible that this is a result of the academic-style of theological education that pastors undergo that sets the tone for local church ministry.
communicative action.”69 The question is how to get to that starting point. It assumes the theology that supports its first principle.

**Idiosyncrasies**

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the book (and this is not even directly related to the argument) is Vanhoozer’s idiosyncratic writing. Perhaps it is just part of being a creative genius, but it is difficult at times to engage with his ideas when he invents special vocabulary unnecessarily. For example, it seems like Vanhoozer is using the phrase “well-versed realism” to refer to a critical realist epistemology.70 However it seems that he used “well-versed realism” because it fits with the literary theme. Similarly, it was difficult to conceive of literary conventions as “practices of the canon.”71 However, this fits his argument that attempts to replace the practices of the church with the practices of Scripture. While this makes his writing enjoyable in many places, at other times it makes the arguments hard to track because it is hard to connect them to broader conversations about the subject matter.

**Conclusion**

Vanhoozer’s Drama of Doctrine is a helpful engagement with many of the most pressing problems in Christian theology. In conversation with George Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach to theology, Vanhoozer is able to articulate a vision for theology that promotes a lived-out interpretation of Scripture under the final authority of Scripture, and yet with an eye to “past performances” (tradition) and contextually appropriate articulations. It will provide stimulus for both theory and living in coming years.

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69 Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 62.
70 Ibid., 286.
71 Ibid., 212ff.
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