

The Drama of Doctrine

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In Review



The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology

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You might suppose that a book about the nature and purpose of doctrine would be dull. If so, then you may be assuming that there is a dichotomy between doctrine and life. In *The Drama of Doctrine*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer seeks to convince readers that, instead, doctrine is the stuff of life: “Doctrine deals with energies and events that are as real and powerful as anything known in chemistry or physics, energies and events that can turn the world we know upside down, energies and events into which we are grafted as participants with speaking and acting parts.”

Vanhoozer shows that congregations ought to become deeply engaged in the task of being formed and directed by doctrine so they can experience a communal life that is more than “programs and potlucks.”

The Drama of Doctrine is part of a growing body of theological literature that emphasizes the purpose of doctrine: to form the church in Christian practice. Observing that “more people *profess* Christian doctrine than know how to *practice* it,” Vanhoozer shows how doctrine enables the church to perform “a reverse Midas touch”—how it gives the church “the ability to turn the gold of the gospel into the workaday stuff of ordinary life.”

Aware that the integrity of the church’s witness to the world is threatened when practice does not fit profession, Vanhoozer cites George Lindbeck’s graphic image of the Crusader who cries “Jesus is Lord” as he cleaves an infidel’s skull. His discussion of practice that is rooted in doctrine is a salutary service to a North American church that often confuses gospel with civil religion, and mission with market.

Vanhoozer considers doctrine to be a drama in which the church and Christians participate. He extends Hans Urs von Balthasar’s explication of the gospel as “theo-drama” by depicting the church as an “interactive theatre” in which the members perform the script of the scriptures in a creative way that involves improvisation in new cultural contexts.

Strictly speaking, the gospel itself is the drama; doctrine functions to give the church direction in how to fittingly participate in the drama of the gospel. The link between the gospel and doctrine is scripture—the script that presents the speech and acts of the triune God. Vanhoozer views the gospel, scripture and doctrine not merely as communications that are separate but related, but as integral dimensions of an “economy of communicative action.” Thus the gospel is the triune God’s “speech-acts,” scripture is “Triune communicative action” that solicits a response, and

doctrine is the science and wisdom that directs the church in its response. For this integration of gospel, scripture and doctrine, Vanhoozer is indebted to Karl Barth's interpretation of the doctrine of the word of God.

Curiously, Vanhoozer does not explain how theology differs from doctrine. Admitting that doctrine is easier to describe than to define, he settles for a working definition of doctrine as "the reward that faith finds at the end of its search for the meaning of the apostolic testimony to what God was doing in the event of Jesus Christ." This is a definition that might apply to theology as well as to doctrine, and at times Vanhoozer seems to be using the terms *theology* and *doctrine* interchangeably. Clearly he assumes that doctrine is the theology (or theologies) that represents "the corporate will-to-truth" of the church across many cultures and times. He contends that doctrine must be both canonical and catholic but stresses that catholic tradition is not the judge of the gospel in the canon but its many witnesses. An adequate ecclesiology requires a more careful explication of the distinction between theology and doctrine.

While the main motif of *The Drama of Doctrine* is the interpretation of the meaning and function of doctrine according to analogies derived from the theater, running through the book is a dialogue with George Lindbeck's thesis in *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984). *The Drama of Doctrine* is Vanhoozer's elaborate response to Lindbeck's proposal that religion should be understood according to a "cultural-linguistic model": that religions are like cultures with their own languages that, when learned, can enable people to have experiences they would not otherwise have and to live a different kind of life.

The subtitle of Vanhoozer's work, *A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, indicates the primary difference between his view and Lindbeck's. In short, Vanhoozer likes the linguistic theory of doctrine, but he substitutes the biblical canon for the cultural life of the church as the primary norm for adhering to the truth of God in understanding and practice. In Vanhoozer's approach, "theology locates normativity in the divine author's, not the interpretive community's, use of Scripture." While appreciating the increasing emphasis in Protestant theology on the role of the ecclesial community as the interpreter of scripture, Vanhoozer articulates the warning of the Reformed tradition that scripture must be free to perform its prophetic role in, and even against, the church.

Vanhoozer is sympathetic with Lindbeck's polemic against the "experiential-expressive model" of religion in liberal theologies but critical of Lindbeck's "simplistic" dismissal of the "propositionalist model" of traditional orthodoxies. He is mindful that "the apostolic kerygma has determinate content." Nevertheless, he does agree with Lindbeck that propositionalist theology suffers from the tendency to invite static "admiration rather than action."

This canonical-linguistic approach represents a recovery of the Reformers' method of *sola scriptura*. Vanhoozer understands the nuances of the Reformers' use of this method: it was not a refusal of the authority of tradition but an affirmation of the primary authority of scripture. He recovers the method in a postconservative manner, affirming that scripture contains a plurality of divine speech-acts instead of just revelation of knowledge, and he perceives that theology involves more than the articulation of propositions.

The dialogue between Lindbeck and Vanhoozer about the nature of doctrine is a hopeful sign in the church. It manifests the increasing intellectual confidence of theologians in the post-Enlightenment era and a recovery of the theologian's task of serving the church in its mission.

The deficit in this dialogue is that it involves mainly the voices of Protestant theologians, excluding the voices of theologians in the Eastern tradition. The apophatic theology of the ineffable God, the Christology of the cosmic Christ and the pneumatology of the procession of the Spirit from the Father in that tradition accords a role for experience that is not fully accounted for in the experiential-expressive model of liberal theologies summarily bypassed by Lindbeck and Vanhoozer.