

Whatever Happened to the Bible?

By Gary L. Scott

Since no one speaks from a neutral position it may be helpful to tell you enough of my background to help you understand my unique perspective. I now write and work within the framework of reformed theology. Let me tell you a bit of my story and how I have come to the position I now embrace. It is what Richard Lints calls “the matrix” that shapes how we view our world.¹

At the age of four I trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and began a journey of faith that has continued for over fifty years. I grew up in a conservative Christian home during the 50’s and 60’s and was very involved in a fundamental Baptist church that embraced dispensationalism and carried the Scofield reference Bible. At an early age I loved, read, studied and memorized Scripture. My family made a special effort to protect me from the negative influence of the cultural revolution underway. I was shielded from much of the music, TV, and movies that celebrated and advanced the mores of the hippie generation and was immersed in a Christian community that valued a distinctive Christian worldview set forth in the Scriptures.

I went to a Bible College that was very conservative and reflected the same fundamental dispensationalism. As I studied at a deeper level I began asking questions about the relationship between the New and Old Testament and found the dispensational answers to be seriously deficient. I was also concerned with a narrow legalism that imposed restrictions and mandates that lacked Biblical warrant. I began to think through the doctrine of the Atonement and found myself embracing a free grace position which my tradition had always treated with deep suspicion. I continued my education at a seminary that was conservative but much more strongly informed by reformed theology. I embraced much of their approach but continued to be troubled by their handling of the flow of redemptive history.

I left seminary equipped to do exegesis, homiletics, Biblical and Systematic theology. I began to pastor in 1973 and have just begun my thirty-fifth year of continuous pastoral ministry. In the context of teaching and preaching I made exegesis

and exposition of Scripture the focus of my ministry. This presented an excellent context to develop my theology informed by attending to the text of Scripture. I fit neither in the Dispensational camp nor in the camp of Covenant theology. What has gradually emerged (and continues to develop) is a New Covenant Theology that views the progress of redemptive history as the key to understanding the Bible.

At the heart of my approach to ministry is the conviction that what matters the most is giving compelling testimony to what God has done through Jesus Christ. Not only in my personal ministry but in the church in general the Bible is the primary resource that God always uses to equip his people to embrace the mission assigned to them –to be witnesses to the transforming power of the gospel.

The Missing Bible

This prompts me to ask a most important question. Whatever happened to the Bible? It can no longer be read in our public schools. Some workplace restrictions limit the exposure of a Bible at the work site. Christians who once read the Bible daily have replaced it with blogging and surfing the internet. Some pastors and theologians view the Bible as little more than a religious diary written to express religious experiences. Even in worship services the Bible is being forced to retreat from center stage and finding itself in the margins.

The effects are visible in our country, our families, our personal lives, and especially in our churches. Many churches seem to be struggling with an identity crisis; are they marketers, advocates, entertainers, counselors, social clubs, or sanctuaries? Leaders in these churches range from wolves who are exploiting the situation, to entrenched pastors who are compromised by complacency, to conscientious men who are nevertheless confused and ineffective in providing leadership, and to grim survivors who only hope they can overcome the pressure groups from within and continue their pastoral ministry.

Many people who make up the churches are shallow in their understanding of the gospel, weak in their pursuit of maturity and holiness, undisciplined in their personal life, and preoccupied with their world. Their support and commitment to their churches is shamefully weak. Crammed schedules and personal commitments prevent them from enjoying their life in Christ, fellowship with God's people, and advancing the mission

assigned to them by Christ. The best people in most churches are frightfully busy but woefully ineffective.

Most people in our communities give little attention to the message of the gospel. They are unimpressed or critical of what they have seen in our churches. They are disgusted with the obvious hypocrisy they witness in the Christian community. They fiercely oppose the moral mandates of Scripture and label believers as intolerant bigots. Because they see little spiritual substance they scoff at the message and treat the messengers with contempt. Christians who try to get involved with the affairs of the community are routinely resisted, ridiculed, and marginalized.

How did we get here? Is anyone paying attention? Does anyone have some answers? Is there a future for God's people in this society? It will not do to change the subject or ignore this vexing problem. God's glory is at stake. God's people are in peril. The gospel is being silenced. The kingdom is at risk.

A Well Timed Help

Thankfully, God is raising up ministries to address this problem. IgniteUS is a ministry that takes direct aim at these problems. IgniteUS recognizes the problem and is prepared to help leaders and churches face it squarely. IgniteUS has developed effective tools to measure its scope. They are committed to developing a process that will equip leaders to understand, measure and correct the problems facing their church. IgniteUS can coach churches through the challenge of reigniting their passion to pursue the mission that Jesus mandated. At the heart of this process stands the Word of God. God determined that our primary tool in discipling would be his powerful Word. When God used the Apostle Paul to establish the church in Thessalonica the primary tool was the Word. “*And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*” **1 Thessalonians 2:13**

It is important to be clear about the ultimate objective of every church. We are not left to guess. Jesus made it crystal clear when he said “Make disciples of all nations....” The goal is to change people from rebels to followers. It is far more than an emotional decision; it is a lifelong transformation. Jesus doesn't want fans but followers.

Our task is to make followers who are united by faith to Jesus, who are transformed into His likeness, who delight to walk with Him, and who embrace his mission. It takes tools to make a table or a car or a cake. It is the same with discipling. God may use circumstances, the witness of a friend, the words of a song, or the kindness of a stranger but His primary tool is the Bible. If we hope to accomplish the mission we must learn to handle the Bible the way God intended.

The Contemporary Challenge

Millions of people have read The Da Vinci Code and many more have seen the movie. In this quasi-historical thriller Dan Brown weaves together a compelling tale in the pursuit for the holy grail. It turns out that the real villain is the Christian church who has stymied this pursuit by intentionally silencing books of scripture, read Gnostic Gospels, and promoting the books that suppress the “sacred feminine” and advocate patriarchal dominance. It is a broadside attack on the canonicity of the Bible. Who would have believed that this issue would take center stage in the publishing world and in Hollywood? Christians must be prepared to give a convincing answer to this challenge to the Bible’s authority. Are you prepared to explain to a skeptic why the Gospel of Thomas is not included in the Bible but Gospel of Mark is? The overwhelming consensus of the past that the Bible alone, in its completed canonical form, is the Word of God is quickly fading. It will not be enough to simply recognize this but we must be prepared to thoroughly and convincingly answer such challenges.

Even when the Bible is accepted as a Word from God it is no guarantee that everyone will read it with the same meaning. The balance has shifted from respecting the original intent of the author to the power of readers to create for themselves a new reading informed by their unique perspective.² Creative new readings are challenging the historic reading of God’s Word as expressed in the historic creeds. Most areas of historic doctrinal consensus are being challenged and some have already been overturned in the Evangelical community. It is a time to do more than dig in our heels and resist. We must understand the challenge and convincingly answer it.

The problem is deeper. With those who still accept the Bible as the Word of God and read the Scriptures in line with the community of faith throughout history there still exists the challenge as to how to effectively integrate the Bible’s message into the way

we live and witness in the world. More often than we might like to admit our witness has been compromised by the blatant inconsistencies others see in our own lives. Hypocrisy accounts for a measure of these inconsistencies but not all. Our minds have not adequately grasped the truth and consequently the way we live out our faith and tell the story of redemption is flawed and self-defeating. Remember for a moment Paul's comment to the Galatians that he was travailing as in the pangs of childbirth until Christ should be formed in them (Galatians 4:19). He was not satisfied in getting a decision, imparting some information, or stimulating some deep inner feeling. His goal was to see them transformed into the very character of Jesus Christ. He wanted them to know what it meant for Christ to live in them. Paul wanted the Galatian believers to be like Christ. He wanted them to follow Jesus and embrace his mission of making disciples in every people group on earth. Does our approach to evangelism embrace or reject this model?

Let me pursue the thought one step further. For those who recognize the Bible as God's Word, interpret it responsibly, and determine to apply it to their own lives there still remains a critical question as to how the Bible will be used, that is construed. Is the focus moralism? Do we come to the Bible as God's book of Virtue? Every Bible lesson or character study routinely prompts the question, "What is the moral of this lesson?" Is the Bible simply a religious parallel to Bill Bennett's, The Book of Virtues? Is the focus of the Bible experiencing God? Whether that is informed by the approach of classic liberalism or shaped by a more conservative perspective like Henry Blackaby's, Experiencing God the focus is placed squarely in religious experience and inward piety. Is that how God wants us to construe Scripture?

Are we to view Scripture as an encyclopedia of accurate propositional statements to be structured and developed as a true system of beliefs? It is undeniable that there was a measure of this in BB Warfield and Charles Hodge and more recently in Carl Henry and Wayne Grudem.³ While critics have often overstated their adherence to classic foundationalism to the point of caricature it remains a stubborn fact that many conservative Christians have embraced this model. With this approach the sermon can become a lecture and the hearers then become students who take notes and organize what they have learned into appropriate categories.

For those who have taken the Postmodern turn the Bible is to be construed as story. In telling a story we create a world that either invites us in or warns us to stay away. There is no end to the work being done on a “Narrative Approach” to Scripture.⁴ It is undeniable that stories play an important part in our lives and are prominent throughout Scripture. One struggle comes in deciding whether there is one overarching story (read Meta-narrative) that each of us find ourselves in or whether there are as many stories as there are storytellers and that every story is local and shaped by its own subjective perspective. Another challenge is handling the significant amount of material in the Bible that does not fall in the category of story – the didactic teaching of Paul or the wisdom literature penned by Solomon.

More recently Kevin Vanhoozer and Michael S. Horton have advanced the concept of drama as the best construal of Scripture.⁵ At the heart of this approach is the conviction that the Bible is a canonical record of the great redemptive drama that God is staging in the world he created for just such a purpose. In this drama there is both action and words. God says things by doing and does things by saying. By faith people are drawn into this drama and so continue this drama by giving compelling witness to the world. At the heart of this drama is the incarnation of the Son of God, his sacrifice and subsequent resurrection. This drama is about what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ. In this approach Scripture is construed as the authorized script God has given to his people. The challenge is for each believer to learn his part and play it in a fitting way in order for the drama to continue and reach its ultimate climax.

Drama will include stories, propositional statements, moral values, and inward experience and yet retain the story line. Every church becomes a community theatre that is responsible to perform the drama in a fitting way for their neighbors and friends. The focus is not on the players or their roles but on the drama of redemption. “The play’s the thing.”

A Call for a New Kind of Church Leadership

Pastors and leaders are the key players in revitalizing churches to become effective in accomplishing the mission assigned by Jesus Christ. They can only make substantive change by replacing the programmatic approach to church life with a stunning performance of the gospel that rocks the community and persuades them to

become part of this drama of redemption. Such Christians will not be consumers whining over their selfish disappointments but agents willing to make any sacrifice to see the mission of their Savior realized. How can a whiner become a warrior? Leaders must use God's Word to teach and discipline their lives for the work ahead. *It is the contention of this paper that the Bible will not be fully trusted to shape disciples until some of the criticisms against it have been understood and convincingly answered.* Then it can be used as God intended.

The marketing approach, the seeker sensitive, the emergent, and even the therapeutic approach take a different approach than the Bible. Such leaders have more confidence in their pragmatic approach than in following the clear direction of the Biblical Script. What are some of the critical issues?

A New Challenge to Truth

Many today are questioning "truth" and the way Jesus speaks about it. Is there objective, absolute truth? Can truth be known? Can it be known with certainty? Jesus' declaration that, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free" seems odd even to many evangelicals. "Truth" has been displaced by "truths", your truth, my truth, our truth. Until we recover "truth" the message of the Bible is suspect.

Some of the strongest criticisms of the classical Christian approach to the Bible are driven by philosophical objections. "Ontology" is the philosophical term that refers to what actually exists; the older term is metaphysics. Those who have embraced the Postmodern turn reject realism, the view that things have objective existence and are proper subjects for our consideration, and accept reality as a social construct.⁶ Reality is what we create in our own social setting. The words that are used do not refer directly to this "reality" but are only part of the language game. Instead of words referring to reality we have the science of semiotics, the study of how words relate to each other. In this view we can never directly connect with a real word but are trapped in language – we can never get beyond words. The best evangelical thinkers have responded to this challenge not by embracing a model of social construction but by clarifying their realism as critical or aspectual.⁷ It attempts to affirm existent reality on the one hand and yet acknowledge a the bias occasioned by our human finitude.

Let me illustrate how this philosophy is shaping the way ministry is now being done. Recently I began reading the works of Brian McLaren, the leader of Emergent Village. I first read A New Kind of Christian, A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey, the first in what was to become a trilogy that has been widely read. I then read the sequels, The Story We Find Ourselves In and The Last Word and the Word After That. Following that I plowed through his Generous Orthodoxy, then The Church on the Other Side, Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix, and finally More Ready Than you Realize, Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix. As a result of a prolific and winsome style of communicating McLaren is recognized as the pastoral voice of the emergent phenomenon. I found his writing to be refreshing and insightful at points but more often frustrating because of intentional ambiguity. His view is that clarity is overrated (he is deeply suspicious of propositional truth claims). The expanded title of his book, A Generous Orthodoxy, makes the point perfectly as he explains why he is “...a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative +mystical/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative +fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican +methodist + catholic + green+ incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian.” One thing, however, is clear; it is impossible for McLaren to speak of truth and reality as Christians have done for generations. In fact his strongest criticism are leveled against those who speak with certainty and clarity through propositional statements.

In his writings He often refers to Stanley Grenz, who might be recognized as the unofficial theologian of Emergence. As I began to read Grenz, I realized how much of his theology has been embraced and restated by McLaren. I saw that Grenz’s approach to theology was strongly influenced by the philosophy of the French deconstructionists Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault and others.⁸ Their view of reality as social construction became the paradigm for Grenz’s theological restatement of metaphysics. In my judgment, Grenz’s theological proposal is best articulated in Renewing the Center, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, and the work he co-authored with John Franke, Beyond Foundationalism. A must read for those who have been following Grenz’s argument is a book edited by Erickson, Helseth and Taylor entitled Reclaiming the Center. It responds to what the editors call the “Evangelical Accommodation in

Postmodern times.” Their treatment of the issue is well informed, irenic and in my judgment very persuasive.

Two chapters present very thorough critiques of Grenz’s work; DA Carson writes, “Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz’s *Renewing the Center*.”⁹ Stephan Wellum presents an excellent critique of *Beyond Foundationalism*, co-authored with John Franke; he helpfully discusses how Grenz and Franke view the Bible and demonstrates that they have replaced an inspired Bible with a community consensus produced by the Spirit. Grenz proposes that our present uncertainty in regard to truth will only break out into clarity and understanding in an eschatological future that we will create.¹⁰ It seems odd that if we cannot be certain of truth now given the provisional nature of human reasoning and the nature of the Biblical text as Grenz sees them how then with these present limitations can we know that truth will be clear in some future world? I find myself still trying to think through what the eschatological world that we create will look like. One thing is certain, it is a dramatically different thing to create our world than to exercise stewardship in a real world created by God. How that question is answered will shape how we do ministry in many respects.

For McLaren and his emergent followers this enables them to remove the distasteful view of eternal punishment as traditionally believed and taught by Christians for centuries. It is obvious that his view¹¹ is driven more by his personal distaste for this doctrine than by clear statements of Scripture. McClaren just cannot believe that a loving God could have prepared Hell where people will suffer forever. He denies that Jesus taught that there was a literal hell but instead adapted ideas current in that cultural setting as a tool to warn people about their wrong behavior. He suggests that hell as envisaged by Jonathon Edwards and others was a social construct used by Christians for less than honorable purposes. McLaren believes that the traditional doctrine of hell leads people to properly conclude that such a god must have a borderline personality disorder or some worst sociopathic diagnosis.¹² It is best discarded but with it comes his brand of pluralism and perhaps even universalism. Perhaps that is why he reviles the concept of *conversion* as the goal of evangelism and wants instead to engage in an ongoing *conversation*. My point is simply that theological and philosophical constructs determine how we do ministry. It is not enough to react to McClaren and Grenz we must

understand their objection and give convincing answers. Well equipped pastors and leaders cannot afford to be ignorant of these issues. The implications of this theology/philosophy will affect many other practical issues as well.

Another critical area of philosophical debate is in the area of epistemology – how we know truth or reality. It would be naïve to think that there is anything like consensus on this issue. Can we know truth? The Postmodern turn rejects the possibility of certainty. Their posture instead is incredulity toward any comprehensive truth claim. What can be known is always local and subject to the distortions caused by a limited human perspective. There is no neutral perspective that enables one see truth objectively. Rene Descartes proposed that certainty rests on the foundation of indubitable human reason; it has been labeled Cartesian or Classical Foundationalism. He reasoned, “I think; therefore I am.” Since this could not be doubted he then built an entire system of truth based on deductive human reason. Much of modern life has been built on this bankrupt concept. For the most part, it has been censured and summarily rejected by most contemporary thinkers both Christian and non-Christian.

Most Christians would not mourn the loss of philosophical foundationalism. It has been no friend to evangelical truth claims. However the same criticism is leveled against historic Christianity for grounding their truth claims on the foundation of Scripture as an inerrant revelation from God. The critics have attacked Hodge, Warfield and the Princetonians for embracing Cartesian foundationalism and passing that perspective on to Evangelical Christianity. The most radical criticism comes from those who are skeptical that the Bible is indeed a revelation from God which has been kept from error in the original writing and providentially preserved down through the centuries. Instead it is the work of fallible people writing down their communal experience of God. It is a true expression of their spiritual experience but it cannot be accepted as true and therefore authoritative for everyone. There is not one story of redemption but many local stories of encounters with the divine. This criticism at its worst accuses Christianity of intentionally silencing books of scripture, read Gnostic Gospels, and promoting the books that suppress the “sacred feminine” and advocate patriarchal dominance. Dan Brown, the author of The DaVinci Code, is not alone; many academic theologians have advanced the same criticism.

For those who recognize the Bible as divine revelation the problem is still unresolved. We cannot attain certainty, it is argued, because of the inescapable element of human fallibility in the process of writing down the original document, in the corruption of texts that are now extant, and the unavoidable human error in interpreting the Scriptures. Even with the Bible in hand there is no sure foundation. In response, the best Christian thinkers have proposed a chastened or modest foundationalism. The Scripture does provide a sure foundation but the approach is characterized by modesty and humility. We don't know all truth with unquestioned certainty but we have an adequate understanding that enables us to honor God and follow Jesus. It attempts to acknowledge both the authority of inscripturated revelation and the inescapable subjective perspective of every human being.

Kevin Vanhoozer develops a uniquely nuanced view of foundationalism. Critics who attempt to discredit his canonical linguistic theology mistakenly label it as canonical- foundationalism. Instead, he advocates Christ as the sole foundation of the Christian faith¹³ and recognizes the Biblical witness to Christ as similarly foundational. "It need not follow" he argues "from the church's having a foundation, however, that the theology must be foundationalist."¹⁴ He presents two reasons for demurring from accepting the Bible as an indubitable foundation. First, such an approach gives too much weight to propositionalism to the detriment of the diverse literary genre we encounter in Scripture. Second, it privileges a certain type of procedure for generating knowledge that abstracts the knower from the process as well. Such propositionalism misses the real drama of knowledge.¹⁵ At the same time, Vanhoozer rejects non-foundationalist approaches that conceive of knowledge as a web, net or mosaic. In such a setting it is not beliefs but the believing community that is "basic." Vanhoozer's "...postfoundationalist [approach] seeks to hold onto the ideals of truth, objectivity, and rationality, while at the same time acknowledging the provisional, contextual, and fallible nature of human reason."¹⁶ Knowledge is neither a matter of building foundations nor weaving webs but following maps. "Canonical Cartography" is one of Vanhoozer's most creative and helpful proposals. "The map calls attention to the fact that the church's interpretive framework is canonical before it is communal. At the same time, these maps or interpretive frameworks serve various real- life purposes. Indeed, the whole purpose of

the map is not simply to inform but to be useful. In similar fashion, Scripture is neither a textbook of propositional truths that serves as the foundation for knowledge nor a narrative that relies on its position in the church's web of belief for its meaning and truth. Scripture is rather a canonical atlas: a collection of maps that variously render the way, the truth, and the life."¹⁷ Vanhoozer's proposals are invaluable because they have rightly understood the criticism of classic foundationalism and have answered the critics with a constructive model that preserves the integrity of God's Word and persuasively answers the criticisms.

Let me briefly address one other point of contention in the philosophical domain. Philosophy has always wrestled with the problem of ethics. How does one determine what is ethical and what is unethical? Ethics has to do with right behavior. Who determines right behavior? Is it human reason, intuition, communal construct, or some other alternative? Laws always reflect one's ethical values. There is an ongoing struggle to position oneself to determine the laws. The Judeo Christian consensus that informed our legal system in the US has been steadily eroding. What will take its place? Secularists want to develop a legal system based on human reason and community consensus. Most Evangelical Christians want to continue the system of ethics grounded in the ethical mandates revealed in the Bible. However, within Postmodern Christianity the approach to ethics has profoundly changed. If ethics in the Bible are seen as a cultural expression rather than divine mandate then the implications are profound. There is a virtual war over the ethical dilemma of homosexuality. Conservative Christians continue to view homosexuality as deviant sinful behavior and find themselves at odd with the prevailing cultural position of it being a respectable ethical alternative. Brian McClaren has repeatedly refused to set forth his conviction on this controversial area. His response is that whatever he says will hurt somebody. This is hardly an adequate response to developing a consistent ethical position. This response is driven by his view of Scripture we discussed earlier. It becomes easy to shape and reshape our ethics like the proverbial wax nose. The present dissent calls for courage and wisdom in reasserting a canonical approach to ethics. It remains to be seen what other ethical positions will be reshaped or abandoned. The task is complicated by the progress of redemption and the different covenantal requirements for different covenantal administrations. What is beyond

argument is that God's revelational mandates covenantally understood form the proper foundation for ethics.

Historical Overview

During the last five hundred years there is an intriguing history of how the Bible has been viewed. Up until the reformation the general consensus affirmed the Bible to be a supernatural revelation from God. It was respected and revered if not always understood and followed. Superstition and illiteracy compounded the problem. This consensus was also supported by the ecclesiastical traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. During the Reformation this naïve respect for the Bible was replaced with a far better developed view of Bible as "Sola Scriptura." This view was essentially a rejection of extra-biblical tradition and a return to the Bible as the sole source of spiritual authority. Luther refused to be persuaded by anything other than the text of Scripture; the decrees of councils and popes could not trump God's Word. The Bible is a special revelation from God that is binding and unchanging. Each person should and could read the Bible with profit. This led Luther to produce an excellent German translation that put the Bible in the vernacular so that people could read it for themselves. During this time many other translations were undertaken. The Renaissance cultivated a deep respect for ancient literature; it was no accident that Erasmus produced the first modern Greek text of the New Testament.

The Enlightenment moved away from this deep respect for the Bible as the Word of God and sought to ground all knowledge in innate human reason. This was the proposal of Descartes that announced the critical challenge to Sola Scriptura. Once a foundation was identified then human reason could construct a system of truth deduced from that first basic principle. Their optimism in rational ability was immense.

During the concluding days of the 19th century Princeton Seminary became a fortress to defend what for them was the classic view of an inspired and authoritative Bible. Paul Kjos Helseth argues persuasively that their (Hodge & Warfield) view of Scripture is not grounded on scholastic rationalism that was shaped by the Scottish Common Sense Realism of Thomas Reid. Helseth quotes Roger Schultz who mistakenly argues, "...in battling the skeptics of the Enlightenment, Scottish realists demanded an extreme (and unbiblical) standard of authority and certainty, and that the Princetonians

incorporated this rationalistic element in their inerrantist doctrine of Scripture.”¹⁸ Stanley Grenz, wrongly in my judgment, advances the same argument in his Renewing the Center. A Post-conservative historiographical consensus has endorsed this standard critique. Rogers & McKim argue that the Princetonians were not the genuine heirs of Sola Scriptura because their commitments were jettisoned by their philosophical assumptions. DA Carson in an article that reviews Grenz’s book “Renewing the Center” cites with approval the critique of John Woodbridge against Stanley Grenz, Roger Olson, and Roger Schultz that this historical reconstruction is simply false, in fact a case of revisionist historiography. Carson asserts that no one of stature now makes this same mistake.¹⁹

In the early part of the 20th century the debate between liberalism and fundamentalism focused primarily on the Bible. J Gresham Machen declared that liberalism offered a different gospel and should not be considered as authentic Christians.²⁰ Liberalism returned fire and denounced the conservative view of Scripture as an extension of the flawed rationalism of classic foundationalism and dismissed it as uninformed. Karl Barth’s Neo-Orthodox view of the Bible presented a different challenge. The Bible is not the Word of God but only witnesses to the Word, Jesus Christ. It becomes the Word of God through an existential experience. Conservatives responded with a near consensus in rejecting this view as inadequate to articulate the nature and authority of inscripturated revelation. In the closing decades of the 20th century the “Battle for the Bible”²¹ developed. The central point of contention was whether the Bible is both infallible and inerrant. The Southern Baptist Convention was deeply embroiled in this debate; in an unprecedented turn of events the conservatives turned back entrenched liberalism and re-established a beachhead for an infallible, inerrant Bible. The dramatic changes at Southern Seminary under the leadership Dr. Al Mohler illustrate the renewed commitment to a high view of Scripture.

The challenges continue into the 21st century. One can discern a pragmatic view of the Bible, a seeker/market driven view, and most recently an emergent + postmodern challenge to the classic view of inspired Scripture. The challenges often begin in academia but filter down into churches and Christian organizations. Perhaps the most disappointing result of this pilgrimage is the tendency to adopt the sound bite approach to

theology that we have learned from a culture that allows thirty seconds or less to articulate a complex concept. We are awash with slogans but bereft of understanding that comes through sapiential deliberation. So many sermons aim to motivate, inspire, entertain, and provide therapy that there is little opportunity to preach substantive theological truth and fewer people who desire it.

It is not alarmist to sound a warning. The future of Christianity is closely connected to not only our view of Scripture but even more so of our use or construal of Scripture. Isaiah said, ***“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*** **Isaiah 55:10-11** You will notice that Isaiah does not say my word “...will inform you of everything I want you to know” but ***“will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*** Just as God says things in doing so He does things in saying. Paul makes the same point in his letter to the Thessalonians, ***“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”*** **1 Thessalonians 2:13** Again you will notice that Paul asserts that the word of God is at work in them. This must remain the foundation of ministry – a conviction that God’s words powerfully work in those who hear them. God did not give us a Bible to just be admired but to be used.

The Bible as God’s Communicative Act

A couple of years ago I was introduced to the work of Kevin Vanhoozer. While on vacation in Florida I read his book, God, Scripture & Hermeneutics: First Theology. It is hard to overstate the impact this had on my thinking. He helped me to understand the dynamics of speech act theory and demonstrated that in fact the Bible is God’s mighty speech act. A fresh light penetrated some of the dark areas of my understanding. But I had more questions. I was glad to find out that VanHoozer had more answers. I noticed on the bottom of this book that it said, “Author of *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*” Immediately I bought the book and began to look for some answers to issues that had been raised in my thinking. It was one of the most difficult books I have ever read but one of the most important. Its full title is The Bible, The

Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge: Is There a Meaning in This Text? In the pages of this book I grew to love and appreciate Kevin Vanhoozer as a special gift to the people of God at just this time. I appreciated the thorough study he had made of speech act philosophy; I was finally reading someone who not only spoke about Derrida and Foulcalt but understood them and engaged them. I was impressed with his understanding of the progress of philosophical thought and his obvious reflection on postmodern thought. He was not only conversant with the best writers and thinkers but again he respectfully and thoroughly engaged them. As a pastor this was invaluable to me because he had done what I, for various reasons, was unable to do. I was benefiting so much from the things I was learning. However what I came to appreciate most was his commitment to the authority and centrality of the Word. I finally found someone who was not just firing salvos against postmodern thinking but was challenging it by presenting not only an informed critique but a better model for using Scripture. DA Carson's endorsement on the back says it well,

“What starts off as a contemporary hermeneutics to justify the move from biblical text to systematic theology becomes a full-blown, highly sophisticated, theological hermeneutics. Vanhoozer is one of the few contemporary scholars who takes a balanced measure of postmodern thought within an unflinching Christian confessionalism. Here you will find neither mere traditionalism nor faddishness. This book points the way forward – the Christian way forward—out of the contemporary hermeneutical morass.”

I can't imagine trying to confront the postmodern turn without this resource. I can't imagine another pastor who would not benefit from this book. It will take effort to work through the four hundred plus pages of carefully reasoned argument but I for one count this as one of the best investment I have made. In fact I read it through twice and continue to go back to it as an invaluable reference.

My pilgrimage with Kevin Vanhoozer was not at an end. In reading Evangelical Futures edited by John Stackhouse I came across a chapter written by Vanhoozer entitled, “The Voice and The Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology.” You guessed it! His chapter was the first I read. Another light went off and my heart resonated with this proposal for doing ministry in the church in our present setting. At the end I found my self saying, “Don't stop now!” You can imagine my surprise and joy when I learned that he didn't stop there but went on to write what has become to me one of the most important books I have ever read, The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology. This book is a full length treatment of Vanhoozer's compelling proposal to view the Bible as “Theo-Drama.” I

have read, reread and then read again this amazing book. I have studied carefully many of the sections. Let me repeat the endorsement given by Allister McGrath, “Kevin Vanhoozer is emerging as one of the most significant younger theological voices of our generation. This book will consolidate that reputation still further. It is a magisterial treatment of the origins and nature of doctrine...It is essential reading for all concerned with the nature and future of doctrine.”

Let me clarify. I am not an agent for Vanhoozer who will benefit if you buy his material. No, I do not think he is inspired! He is not a personal friend (I wish he were). He is, however, a very special gift from God who shaped my thinking in profound ways. I want to thankfully affirm my indebtedness to this contribution to pastoral ministry. I only wish I had this material when I began pastoral ministry thirty-five years ago. If Vanhoozer is not on your shelf get with the program. Let me add one other very helpful resource. Michael Scott Horton wrote, Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama. This complements and interacts with Vanhoozer and helpfully focuses on the covenantal dimension of the dramatic proposal. Horton also amplifies the eschatological implications in a helpful way. The down side of Horton’s work is the highly technical discussions that I found hard to follow and a style that really demands concentrated attention.

I would like to develop this thought about our construal of Scripture by noting the similarities and contrasts with a theo-dramatic approach to those approaches being offered from a postmodern matrix (Brian McLaren’s terminology). It will also be helpful to look at an example from Scripture to see how Jesus used Scripture in the context of doing ministry. A theo-dramatic model believes that God communicates to people by doing things and saying things. He plans out this drama, then, creates people who are image bearers; they become central players in this drama. God writes a script, assigns the parts and directs and oversees the performance. The focal point of the drama is when God actually becomes the central player by taking human flesh (the incarnation of Jesus Christ) and offering himself as a substitute for guilty humanity. The climax takes place at the resurrection when God brings vindication and judgment and the drama reaches its conclusion when Jesus Christ returns in power and glory to remake heaven and earth.

This drama is not primarily about people but about God and his passion to rescue people from the mess they caused for themselves. It highlights the goodness, mercy, justice and grace of God and presents a way for rebels to reestablish the loving relationship with the God they insulted and betrayed. It is important in drama to understand the personae of the main characters and to be able to follow the plot. Christianity is not primarily about some inner spiritual experience but about observable actions and audible words that are actually staged in real life in real time. Secular history records many of these events – the exodus, the reign of King David, the uproar in

Jerusalem over Jesus who had been raised from the dead. These are not simply stories made up by clever human minds nor real events that are then invested with some kind of magical spiritual significance by well-meaning adherents. These are historical events in real time that are part of this unfolding drama. While secular history records some of these events and corroborates the accounts in the Bible they fail to give the full story and explain the plot. However, that is exactly what God intended the Bible to be. It is a record of the drama of redemption that was orchestrated by God and written down by selected people who were guided in this process by the Holy Spirit. In a unique way God and man co-author this book we call the Bible.

The Bible is not only the record of the drama but is actually part of the drama itself. Within the Bible you see the progress of redemption or better the plot unfolding. You can read how one of the players looks back to some former scene and builds on that in the present and describes a compelling hope for the future. This is well illustrated by the account in Luke 24 where we read about Jesus' interaction with the despondent disciples he encounters on the road to Emmaus. Let me review that part of the drama.

Jesus died and has now been raised from the dead but has not yet returned to his home in heaven. During this time He encounters these disciples who were talking about the events that had just taken place. At this point the disciples fail to recognize that it is Jesus Christ who is speaking to them. He approaches them and asks a question, "What were you talking about as you walked along?" We might have expected them to say that they were just discussing the theological arguments for the existence of God. However, what is in view is not abstract theological concepts but observable, verifiable, contemporary events. The story continues; with downcast countenances they respond with a measure of sarcasm. Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who isn't aware of the things that have just happened. Notice they are not talking about inner feeling or theological concepts but observable events that everyone is talking about. The disciples then recounted their hope that Jesus would be the Messiah but instead he was executed by the religious leaders. To make matters even more complicated there are reports now circulating that angels have been spotted and they are saying Jesus is alive. At this point Jesus takes over the conversation and uses this situation to review the drama by referring to the past, bringing things up to the present and pointing ahead. He rebukes them for not knowing and not believing these things that the prophets said years ago. In fact they spoke about the sufferings of Christ and his coming glory. Notice how the record from the past is connected to the present events. The events they predicted have just now happened. Then Jesus began with Moses and all the prophets and explained to them that these Scriptures were really pointing to Him. The past record in Scripture is now becoming present reality and they are all pointing to Jesus Christ as the

focus and fulfillment of the prophecies and instruction. Jesus makes it clear that the drama reaches its focus and climax in Him and the events that take place during his incarnation. After breaking bread together their eyes are opened so they could recognize Jesus. They acknowledged that their hearts burned within them as he opened up Scripture. Shortly after that he appeared to them again and affirmed what he had said earlier and then pointed them to the task ahead. While this account must not be pressed too far or made into an inflexible paradigm it is nevertheless very instructive. In this dialogue the plot of redemption received the central focus. The words and actions are not without intentional sequence or purpose; instead they point to an intentional and meaningful plot.

The Bible not only records theo-dramatic action but is also a tool that God uses to draw people into the drama. God does something through the reading of this drama that transforms people from skeptics to disciples of Jesus. The gospel is the good news of what God has done through Jesus Christ – it is the story of redemption. When people hear the gospel and trust Jesus as Savior they move from being an observer to becoming a player.

At this point the Scripture now is used in a slightly different way. It now becomes the authoritative script that God supplies to every player. They must learn the script, understand the plot and characters, and more importantly learn how to perform just this drama in a wise and fitting way in the context in which God has placed them. It is not something they do alone but together with the other people who have been drawn into this drama. They become part of the local church which is in many respects like a local theatre. Under the leadership of the pastor they work on performing this drama in their community so that others will be drawn into the drama and become a player themselves.

How does one learn to play his part properly? First there must be a commitment to learn and understand the message of the Bible. A person must learn more than the story line; as the story develops there is much doctrine to learn. No one can play his part well without knowing the doctrinal content of the Word. The stories become teaching occasions. Second, the person must be personally changed by the Word and become like Jesus Christ. It is impossible to play your part without a transformation of character. This is accomplished through models presented in Scripture that provide a pattern to be emulated. Along with intentional modeling God uses the Holy Spirit to reshape believers to become mature disciples. The fruit of the spirit is not optional equipment but essential for playing your role well. In so doing we give convincing witness to what God has done through Jesus Christ.

A theo-dramatic approach demurs from making the construction of a true system of belief the first priority. It is not, however, a rejection of the need to develop true beliefs. The Bible is

our model for right thinking. It contains stories and parables but also didactic sections that set forth true belief by careful argument. Such concepts are usually communicated in propositional statements. The general reaction to propositional statements in the postmodern matrix is in fact an overreaction to propositionalism that should properly be criticized.

Vanhoozer makes the point that the “post” in his “post-propositional “ approach is to be understood as “more than” propositions but not “against” proposition.²² A fair reading of the Bible will respect not only the stories and the parables but the theological arguments of Paul as in Romans or Galatians. To play our part well we need to know the kind of God that we serve, the depth of sin that affects all we do, the nature of the atonement and what it actually accomplished, and a host of other things as well. It is just as imbalanced to avoid truth statements as it is to turn narratives into dry propositional statement. The proper balance will be maintained by following the balance embedded in the script. In this way the plot will be appreciated and enriched by a deeper understanding of the truth embedded it in.

A theo-dramatic approach grounds itself in the canonical script not in the Christian community. Many of the observations that Stanley Grenz makes about the community and how they develop a common understanding in the context of shared tradition and contemporary dialogue are very insightful. His emphasis on the work and presence of the Spirit in the life of the community is a needed reminder and welcome challenge. It is seriously compromised, however, by his view that all human knowledge is a social construct rather than a reflection of reality.²³ Authority is finally grounded in the community consensus rather than an authoritative canon. In my judgment it leads finally to a form of utilitarian pragmatism. DA Carson in his critique of Grenz quotes at length a critical passage from Grenz and then reflects on its significance. Grenz is quoted as saying, “The communitarian reminder that the goal of all social traditions is to construct a well-ordered society (although the various communities might well differ from each other as to what that society entails) suggests that the truth question is better formulated: Which theologizing community articulates an interpretative framework that is able to provide the transcendent vision for the construction of the kind of world that the particular community itself is in fact seeking? Hence, rather than settling for the promotion of some vague concept of community, the communitarian insight leads to the question, Which religious vision carries within itself the foundation for the community-building role of a transcendent religious vision? Which vision provides the basis for the community in its truest sense.” Carson properly criticizes this approach for removing any authoritative biblical ground for establishing criteria for community relations and grounding them instead in pragmatic value.²⁴ For Grenz the “truth question” is sidestepped.

Stephen Wellum levels the same criticism. Wellum points to the question that Grenz himself asks, “Does theology speak about anything objective, or does it content itself with merely articulating the interpretive framework of a specific religious tradition.” Grenz’s reacts to this crucial question as being both improper and ultimately unhelpful. Instead, Grenz rephrases the question the way he believes it should be better posed. “How can a non-foundationalist theological method lead us to statements about a world beyond our formulation?” Grenz & Franke ultimately embrace an epistemology and ontology of non-realism. The final issue is not truth but pragmatism.²⁵ We are left with hermeneutical subjectivism. In the end Biblical canonical authority has been surrendered.

It is interesting that Jesus can say, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” but when Grenz and his fellow postmodern pilgrims speak about truth it is neither affirmed as existing, nor embraced as something we can know. In the end Jesus must have “the last word and the word after that.” We know the truth, not comprehensively or absolutely but adequately. This level of certainty is enough to provide responsible freedom.

Conclusion

The efforts at contextualizing Evangelical ministry within the postmodern matrix must not be summarily rejected nor uncritically embraced. It will take great wisdom and real effort to understand the proposals now being made by Christians working within the matrix of Postmodernism. At the same time the historic Christian faith must be respected and evaluated. It is shortsighted to divest ourselves of two thousand years of thinking and living as Christians. How then can we distinguish between tradition that should be preserved and innovation that should be embraced? Human reason is not an adequate tool. Community consensus will not be the final answer. History records many faith communities that abandoned a living faith in Jesus and were lead astray. Our only hope is a return to the Bible as canonical authority.

The Bible is the only authorized version of the divine/human drama. The Bible is the mighty speech act of God.²⁶ At the heart of this plot is a sovereign God who has chosen to create a stage on which He will perform this great drama.²⁷ The players in the drama are not just volunteers but carefully selected players empowered by God to perform just this drama according to the authorized script. Their connection with God is not occasional and optional but covenantal. Both Vanhoozer and Horton properly emphasize the covenantal dimension to this drama. Each player is under contract to play just the role assigned. To fail to play the role is a breach of contract that results in divine judgment.

This drama can never be performed by an individual acting alone. It takes a full cast to perform this drama. By God’s sovereign plan he selects just the right actors and assembles them

under the direction of a capable leader. This leader trains and coaches each individual to play his part. The script must be understood and performed in a fitting way. Does this sound like your church? Do your leader(s) equip and coach you to be followers of Jesus? Have you been adequately trained to carry out the mission of giving witness to Jesus in the unique matrix of relationships that God has placed you? Do you know how to play your part in the cultural and historical setting you inhabit? This drama is not about you but about what God has done through Jesus Christ. Our life is unavoidably wrapped up in the Great Commission.

If the world is to hear the good news there must be churches, leaders, and people who return to the authoritative script in order to perform the greatest drama ever staged. Why would you want to do anything else?

¹ Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 13 ff.

² Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*. Vanhoozer traces these developments, engages the models being proposed and presents his own proposal that respects Scripture and interacts with speech act philosophers.

³ Reclaiming the Center, 223 ff. Paul Helseth presents an excellent treatment of this issue in his article, *Are Postconservative Evangelicals Fundamentalists? Postconservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton*. He persuasively argues that the early evangelicals did not subscribe to Cartesian Foundationalism but were continuing the reformation view of Sola Scriptura.

⁴ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian, The Story We Find Ourselves In, and the Last Word and the Word After That*. McLaren uses narrative to present his postmodern approach to Christianity and his stinging critiques of more traditional evangelicalism. Stories allow him a kind of fluidity that defies the precision associated with propositional statements and revels in the language games that he sees as creative and freeing.

⁵ Vanhoozer, *The Voice and the Actor & the Drama of Doctrine*. See also Michael Scott Horton's *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama*. It is hard for me to overstate how influential the work of Vanhoozer has been in shaping my thinking in this area.

⁶ Grenz & Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*. This is an evangelical proposal that rejects propositional truth as traditionally understood in the historic Christian Faith and embraces instead a community construction of truth. This theology forms the basis for much of Brian McLaren's work presented at a more popular level.

⁷ See the works of Kevin Vanhoozer and the contributions in *Reclaiming the Center*.

⁸ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*. His treatment of deconstruction is invaluable. He is conversant with the relevant literature and gives an excellent summary for those who are unable to read the primary sources.

⁹ See also Carson's books *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church* and his earlier work *The Gagging of God*.

¹⁰ Grenz & Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 239 ff.

¹¹ McLaren, *The Last Word and The Word After That*.

¹² *Ibid*, XII.

¹³ Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine*, 292.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 292.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 292-293.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 293.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 294.

¹⁸ Erickson, *Reclaiming the Center*, 223.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 43-44.

²⁰ Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*.

²¹ Lindsell, *Battle for the Bible*. See also *Baptists and the Bible* by L. Rush Bush and Tom J. Nettles.

²² Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 266 ff.

²³ Erickson, *Reclaiming the Center*, 51.

²⁴ Ibid, 54.

²⁵ Ibid, 174-176.

²⁶ Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 159 ff.

²⁷ Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*. Piper republishes and explains the magisterial work of Jonathon Edwards on "The Ends for which God Created the World." He powerfully sets forth God's purpose in staging a drama that best reveals his character. People not only observe this drama but become part of it and so reap the benefits of being rightly related to God, its author.

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