

Honest to God, a Voice from Heaven? Communicative Theism in Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing Theology*

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Introduction

Kevin Vanhoozer's recent book *Remythologizing Theology*¹ begins beguilingly, with a voice coming down out of heaven. On the mountain of transfiguration, the voice of God testifies aloud to Jesus Christ, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 17:5). "We heard this voice borne from heaven," reports the apostle Peter, "for we were with him on the holy mountain, and we have the prophetic word made more sure" (2 Pet. 1:17). There is much going on in the story of transfiguration, and in Peter's interpretation of it. "Yet what stands out," says Vanhoozer, "is the voice from heaven."

Back in the 1960s when theology could make headlines by killing off its god every now and then, John A. T. Robinson published his provocative book *Honest to God*.² "Our image of God must go," said Bishop Robinson, scorning the mythological idea of God as a supernatural agent who intervenes in the world; a being like us, but bigger and higher up. There is no way for rational people living a modern world to continue thinking of God as a supernatural being living "up there" somewhere, or even "out there" somewhere. Mixing a lot of Tillich with a little late Bonhoeffer, Robinson called for modern man to recognize that there was no room for God in a scientific universe, except perhaps as the ground of being itself. Fortunately, Jesus brings a kind of message from this ground of being: "It is in making himself nothing, in his utter self-surrender to others in love, that he discloses and lays bare the Ground of man's being as Love."³ In fact, reflected Robinson, "assertions about God are in the last analysis assertions about Love."⁴ That was 1963. What would the bishop say if he knew that nearly fifty years later, one of the most estimable theologians in the English-speaking world could, with a straight face and no ironic detachment, begin a major work of Christian doctrine with a voice from heaven? The God of Robinson was not even up in

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Hereinafter, cited in the body of the text as RT, followed by page reference.

² John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

³ Robinson, *Honest*, p. 75.

⁴ Robinson, *Honest*, p. 105.

heaven, and if he were, he certainly would not be so rude as to speak from there.

And yet here is Vanhoozer's big, interesting, intellectually serious book, with a quotation from God speaking in a voice from heaven, on the very first page. And from that opening gambit to the final sentence, "Only the communicating God can help" (RT, p. 504), the book is "all about voices—literal and metaphorical, biblical and theological, human and divine—and their ongoing interaction" (RT, p. xvii). Honest to God, this is a book about God speaking, and Christian theologians taking that voice seriously. But nothing is as simple as Bishop Robinson made it seem when he set up and knocked down his mythological straw god. The real voice of the real God from the real heaven is far more sophisticated than it seemed to some theologians at midcentury.

I would like to make three points. First, Kevin Vanhoozer has definitely moved on from method to matter with this book, and the matter is the doctrine of God. Not only is the matter the doctrine of God, but it turns out that something is the matter with the doctrine of God, and Vanhoozer writes to interrupt the flow of recent conversations. Second, this style of theology called remythologizing pays attention to Scripture in a powerful way, attending equally to what Scripture says and to how it says it. And third, none of this works without the doctrine of the Trinity, which turns out to be not just a doctrine announced by a voice from heaven, but our chance to overhear the conversation of the voices in heaven. Honest to God.

I. Method and Matter: The Doctrine of God

Vanhoozer has developed a reputation for reflecting deeply and at length on theological and hermeneutical prolegomena; perhaps too much at length. In the *Preface*, he admits that he has been "as guilty as anyone of procrastinating in the prolegomenal fields," but with this text he has succeeded in moving on from preparatory methodology to the thing itself, theology proper, the doctrine of God. More on that in a moment.

But first, let us admit that while it is good to get past prolegomena, there's no reason to rush away from methodology. Some sort of commitments about theological method are always at work underneath any presentation of doctrine, and it's better to be methodologically self-aware than oblivious. A great many pages of *Remythologizing Theology* are still devoted to methodology in a certain sense, and to defining what sort of theology this remythologizing is. Vanhoozer's style is to do something doctrinal and then to reflect on the meaning and reason and method of what he has done. He remains evangelical theology's greatest abstractor, conversationalist, and critic (if by "critic" we mean something more like a music critic or art critic than a biblical critic). He almost never operates at the "four views" level, simply surveying available options. That pedagogically useful method has a deadening effect on con-

structive doctrine. Vanhoozer's approach is to try something, redescribe it, abstract the principles from it, conceptually elaborate those, and then reapply them to the subject matter for further applications. Here in his theology of the God who communicates, for example, he describes his method in terms of listening to voices: "The primary voice I strain to hear is that of the triune God, discerned above all through the self-attestation of the living Word in the polyphonic Scriptures, aided and abetted by the antiphonal ecclesial choirs from East and West, as well as the occasional theological soloist" (RT, p. xvii). And of course there is plenty of hermeneutics here. I don't think we should ever expect Vanhoozer to stop honing his hermeneutics. But for all the ongoing interest in methodology, Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing* takes the step forward to doctrine proper, and his primary doctrine is that God communicates. It is no merely methodological point that God communicates; it puts us squarely into "first theology," "that coordinated construal of God, Scripture, and hermeneutics that distinguishes one theological approach from another" (RT, pp. 13-14). In this book, the emphasis falls on the doctrine of God, and if it is not a complete doctrine of God, at least it is "an essay in aid of the development of the doctrine of God."

To be precise, the doctrine of God has been developing in a certain direction for some time now, and Vanhoozer is staging an intervention in that development. He is plotting the overthrow of recent orthodoxy. I say "plotting" as a Vanhoozeresque pun, because "plot" is the primary meaning behind the root word "myth" in this project. "Mythos is Aristotle's term for dramatic plot: a unified course of action that includes a beginning, middle, and end" (RT, p. 5). To plot the overthrow of recent orthodoxy is to correct recent theological trends by paying more disciplined attention to the unified course of action carried out by God in the Son and the Spirit, and recorded in the pages of Scripture.

What Vanhoozer chronicles in this book is the rise of a new kind of theism, which he gives the appropriately unwieldy title of "voluntary kenotic-perichoretic relational theism" (RT, p. 175), or sometimes "voluntary kenotic-perichoretic relational panentheism" (RT, p. 297) or ontotheology. By assigning an almost comically long and awkward name to this diffuse trend in modern theology, Vanhoozer accomplishes a couple of things. First, he makes the doctrine seem like a difficult construct. This is a nice rhetorical feat. The advocates of relational panentheism usually present it as the common-sense view, suggesting that anyone who ever prayed to the living God was presupposing relational panentheism, while only a seminary student could ever read enough theology to think of God any other way. Second, he throws erudite adjectives at the thing until something sticks. If you've read anything in modern theology, one or two of those half-dozen terms will ring a bell and let you know what body of literature he's addressing. This approach works well because, after all, *Remythologizing* is high-level theological project intended for an audience that has already read a lot of theology. Vanhoozer is not writing for

beginners here, though he always writes very clearly. But in this volume he is joining the conversation in the middle, and much has already been said. He is necessarily commenting on vast quantities of other books. So calling the movement kenotic-perichoretic relational *et cetera* accomplishes much.

Stated most broadly, this new theism reaches as far back as Spinoza and is as recent as open theism and the latest transmutations of process theology. It is apparently what almost everybody thinks now about how God relates to the world. This trend of thought is set in intentional opposition to “classical theism,” that long-standing central Christian tradition of biblical theology elaborated in critical collaboration with Greek metaphysical concepts and vocabulary. While admitting that the older tradition had some problems, Vanhoozer tends to call the older tradition at its best “biblical-theological classical theism.” The rejection of classical theism in favor of voluntary kenotic-perichoretic relational theism got its start with the movement to de-hellenize the simple gospel: “That the God of classical theism is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but the God of Greek metaphysics has become the ‘new orthodoxy’: something everywhere believed by (almost) everyone” (RT, p. 89). But as Vanhoozer argues, the widespread, deconstructive “fear of Greek-think” (RT, p. 90) throws out the baby with the bathwater. A sympathetic reading of the church fathers, medievals, and reformers shows that they were hardly captive to Hellenistic categories. Though using them, they pressed through them at crucial points and made the categories serve the new message.

Greek philosophy affirmed ‘that which is,’ but church theology affirmed ‘he who is’ and discovered ‘who he is’ and ‘what he is like’ thanks to ‘what he has done’ in Israel and in Jesus Christ. The God of what we may call biblical-theological classical theism is neither indifferent nor apathetic but ‘with us’ and ‘for us’ (RT, p. 93).

In the struggle between classical theism and the intentionally counter-classical relational panentheism, Vanhoozer clearly takes sides. He describes his offering as communicative theism, but that is not so much a brand new third option as it is a kinder, gentler classical theism. Perhaps a neo-classical theism, or a communicative twist on the classical statement.

For example, in the crucial question about whether God suffers, Vanhoozer ultimately answers no, contra Moltmann, just as he had earlier insisted that God truly acts and speaks, contra Bultmann. Despite the fact that the re-mythologizing in the title rhymes with and counteracts the demythologizing of Rudolf Bultmann, the more prominent theological foil throughout this project is Moltmann, the most important leader of what some have called the “theopaschite revolution” of the twentieth century. In a passage quoted by Vanhoozer, Hans Urs von Balthasar noted that “Today’s theologians, while they are aware of the traditional axiom of God’s unchangeability, and notwithstanding the danger of falling back into mythology, seem to have no qualms about speaking of the pain of God” (RT, p. vii). If

the orthodoxy of the old classical theism depicted a God who could speak but not suffer, the new orthodoxy depicts one who cannot really speak, but can't help but suffer. One of the arguments of *Remythologizing* is that it is high time we got our anthropomorphisms in order.

Though divine suffering is a key issue, and the one that Vanhoozer chooses to end the book with, it is not the only aspect of the doctrine of God that he handles. There are three major issues named in the subtitle; along with divine authorship and divine passion there is divine action, a subject much discussed lately in the context of natural science. It raises the question "Is theism necessarily mythological?" (RT, p. 2) and shows up the new relational panentheism in its various forms as a way of sidestepping the problems apparently associated with affirming divine action. If classical theism runs the risk of being mythological by depicting God as an outside agent who intervenes abruptly, relational panentheism runs the risk of suggesting that God merely influences intelligent agents. This deadlock is one of the places where Vanhoozer's communicative theism indicates a third way: God does not abruptly intervene nor merely influence. Instead, as a communicator, God interjects (RT, p. 316).

So without mobilizing an entire doctrine of God, Vanhoozer judiciously picks his battle. A voice may come down from heaven, but Vanhoozer warns that anthropomorphisms like this "are only the tips of the revelatory iceberg" (RT, p. 192). Later he notes that "There is no more challenging test of biblical reasoning competence than to identify and interpret anthropomorphisms" (RT, p. 479). That is why, beginning with a voice, this book necessarily confronts the most epochal development in the doctrine of God in modern times: the shift toward panentheism, and what that shift implies for first theology. Vanhoozer makes this set of claims we have just explored, and calls the resulting project a particular kind of theism: "communicative theism." Why describe it thus, rather than calling it "communicative theology" or "a doctrine of God which features the category of communication?" The main answer is simply, that's how theologians talk these days. In contemporary theological idiom, something like "process theism" is opposed to "classical theism;" "freewill theism" morphs into the more aggressive "open theism" and gives way to a more generalized "relational theism;" a particular collaborative project broadcasts itself as "canonical theism;" or a very Trinity-focused doctrinal project may call itself "triune theism." Putting an adjective in front of the noun theism seems to suggest a certain comprehensiveness, as if to say "this is the way to believe in God." It's a package deal, a coordinated set of claims and judgments that hang together as a holistic account of God. As a result, we end up with a lot of different theisms in the marketplace of ideas, which is surely confusing to atheists if they are listening. Since this is a guild book, a book written by an academic theologian for an audience of other academic theologians (though others are welcome to overhear the discussion), Vanhoozer makes use of the guild's conventions and names his work a

theism: communicative theism. But he is also characteristically self-aware about the language he is using, and pokes a little fun at it with the ubiquitous Vanhoozeresque pun and wordplay:

To proceed with bold and humble honesty to God is to charge with a theological light brigade: theisms to right of them, theisms to left of them, into the valley of ideological warfare, into the jaws of church historians and other academicians, ride the 144,000 (RT, p. xvi).

As it turns out, Vanhoozer's account of theism under the categories of communication is in fact a pretty comprehensive undertaking. He keeps his attention focused on the doctrine of God and the God-world relation. But he leaves himself space to develop a few crucial lines of thought, in particular in the doctrine of salvation (soteriology). "Everything comes down to the way theology conceptualizes the God-world relation (RT, p. 175)." It is no contradiction that Vanhoozer can later apply the project to the foundations of soteriology and say that "Everything depends on how one understands the way in which human creatures take part in God's communicative activity such that they actually receive God's saving light, life, and love. Everything thus depends on getting the ontology of being-in-communion with God right, and this in turn depends on rightly interpreting what it means to be 'partakers in the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4)" (RT, p. 271). Because he is operating at the level of first theology, Vanhoozer is able to make theological decisions with ramifications for vast stretches of a theological system. His adjustment to the doctrine of God has immediate implications for the doctrine of providence, for example. And he spends considerable time on its application to the field of soteriology, wherein God is said to communicate himself savingly, resulting in union with Christ.

This is just a sketch of the major course correction Vanhoozer introduces. But it is enough to show that he does not just barely cross over from prolegomena into one doctrine, but has moved into the field of constructive theology with such a full grasp of the fundamentals that he must now hold himself back from spelling out an entire systematic theology of the communication of God.

II. How God Says What He Says: "The Manner is Always More Excellent than the Thing"

English metaphysical poet Thomas Traherne (1636-1674) insisted that in spiritual matters, "the manner is always more excellent than the thing."⁵ This has great implications for the idea of God as author. Vanhoozer's emphasis is never simply that God is an author, but always on what kind of author God is. Just as everything depends on exactly how we construe the God-world relationship, it is not enough to construe it as a relation of authorship. There are

⁵ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations* 3:57 (Dobell, London 1908), p. 204.

authors, and then there are authors. The task of theology is to come to understand what sort of author God is. Vanhoozer surveys a wide range of options for the specific style and strategy of the divine author. But the basic answer is that God is an author like Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

Here Vanhoozer takes up a literary quarrel that has become classic in modern criticism. Both Mikhael Bakhtin and George Steiner have noted that there is a fundamental opposition between the two great Russian novelists of the twentieth century, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. The critical discussion of this antinomy is vast, but the basic idea is perhaps best stated in George Steiner's first book, tellingly entitled *Tolstoy OR Dostoevsky*:

Thus, even beyond their deaths, the two novelists stand in contrariety. Tolstoy, the foremost heir to the traditions of the epic, Dostoevsky, one of the major dramatic tempers after Shakespeare; Tolstoy, the mind intoxicated with reason and fact; Dostoevsky, the contemner of rationalism, the great lover of paradox; Tolstoy, the poet of the land, of the rural setting and the pastoral mood; Dostoevsky, the arch-citizen, the master-builder of the modern metropolis in the province of language; Tolstoy, thirsting for the truth, destroying himself and those about him in excessive pursuit of it; Dostoevsky, rather against the truth than against Christ, suspicious of total understanding and on the side of mystery;... Tolstoy, like a colossus bestriding the palpable earth, evoking the realness, the tangibility, the sensible entirety of concrete experience; Dostoevsky, always on the edge of the hallucinatory, of the spectral, always vulnerable to daemonic intrusions into what might prove, in the end, to have been merely a tissue of dreams; ... Tolstoy, who saw the destinies of men historically and in the stream of time; Dostoevsky, who saw them contemporaneously and in the vibrant stasis of the dramatic moment; Tolstoy, borne to his grave in the first civil burial ever held in Russia; Dostoevsky, laid to rest in the cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky monastery in St. Petersburg amid the solemn rites of the Orthodox Church; Dostoevsky, pre-eminently the man of God; Tolstoy; one of His secret challengers.⁶

What is crucial for Vanhoozer is that their two modes of authorship suggest two different construals of the God-world relationship; even two different theisms: "Tolstoy and Dostoevsky work with competing conceptions of authorship that parallel the way in which the two types of theism we examined in Part I view the God-world relation" (RT, p. 306). Tolstoy has "consummate narrative artistry," but also monologic determination by an author with absolute control over the characters. The narrator in Tolstoy sees everything, the omnipotent speaker knows everything, the narrative voice invests every

⁶ George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1959), p. 347.

detail with meaning, and, reigning from on high, draws relationships among isolated incidents which no character in the story can see or comprehend. His works are gorgeous, unsurpassably rich narrations, “large-scale verbal compositions, poetic forms that provide meaningful frames for a sequence of historical and social events” (RT, p. 306). But if you once fall out of favor with that authorial voice, if you once notice the man behind the curtain, it is a fatal fall. There is nowhere to go to flee from his presence. “Tolstoy’s characters are merely mouthpieces for the author who uses them to express his own ideas, teach his own values, and display his own point of view” (RT, p. 307).

Classical theism, when it thinks of God as author, has been attracted to thinking of him on the model of Tolstoyan authorship. “Theologians, philosophers, and scientists have all made use of the analogy of authorship to explore the God-world relation though the authorship they typically have in view, for good or for ill, is the Tolstoyan variety...” (RT, p. 307). And there are benefits to thinking this way: “The strength of the Tolstoyan model is that it upholds God’s authorial transcendence... A monologic God is answerable to no one: there is no other point of view from which to pose a question, no other voice to articulate it even if there were” (RT, p. 309). The major problem is not the oppressiveness of the authorial intrusion, but the way it “fails to account for the dialogical interaction of God and human beings depicted in the Bible or, for that matter, the Bible’s diverse human authorial voices themselves” (RT, p. 309). Vanhoozer is not worried about an overly-sovereign God so much as he is worried that we risk having an inadequate read of what God has authored, and how he has authored it. He is not just thinking about how to read well, but is taking the relation of divine author to sacred text as a model for the God-world relation writ large.

Thus he is quite concerned to make the jump from “how to read a book” to how to use authorship as a conceptual model for the God-world relationship.

In light of God’s speaking creation, covenant, and canon into being, divine authorship is an apt aid for understanding the nature of the dramatic action outside (and inside) the world of the text, and thus a helpful heuristic for grasping divine transcendence and immanence. Still, important questions about the author’s control, authority, and presence to the world of the text remain (RT, p. 305).

That triad, “control, authority, and presence,” is a nod to the “theology of Lordship” developed in the last few decades by evangelical theologian John Frame. Vanhoozer’s appreciative use of the CAP triad shows that, without repudiating a Frame-like theology of lordship, Vanhoozer is moving on to a theology of authorship. “Lordship as authorship” is not a bad way of understanding the trajectory of *Remythologizing Theology*, a book which happens to be dedicated to Frame (RT, p. xix).

But here is a Vanhoozer breakthrough, made possible by his critical abilities. Instead of Tolstoyan monological authorship, Vanhoozer suggests a kind

of Dostoevskyan authorship: “a new literary genre: the polyphonic novel,” or as Vanhoozer glosses it, a “dialogical polyphonic authorship” (RT, p. 311). Dostoevsky peoples his novels with “characters that speak in their own voices, not merely as mouthpieces for their author.” In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Father Zosima speaks his own point of view, which may be right or wrong; Ivan Karamazov argues the devil’s point of view so forcefully that the author seems helpless to silence him. The conflict between the faith of Zosima and the doubt of Ivan plays itself out in the book itself, rather than (as in Tolstoy) in the voice of the narrator. If Dostoevsky were a director of a war movie, one gets the sense he would equip the actors with live ammunition. “What Dostoevsky projects into the world of his works is not a finished plot but unfinished voice ideas” (RT, p. 330).

All of this engagement with the critical discussion of two great novelists is deeply interesting, but the doctrinally-motivated reader may begin to wonder whether it actually counts as theology. “My wager,” Vanhoozer reassures us, “is that this brief detour into the dispute over the meaning of Dostoevsky’s authorship will yield theological dividends for understanding God’s communicative relation to the world” (RT, p. 311). Indeed it does, in two ways. First, it sharpens the meaning of divine authorship in a way that clarifies the God-world relationship. “God authors/elects creatures to be dialogical agents in covenantal relation through whom his Word sounds (and resounds)” (RT, p. 331). But secondly, it leads the theological interpreter into scripture in a way that is guaranteed to be more fruitful than monologic models, because more appropriate to the way God has spoken. Vanhoozer pays close attention not only to what God has said (as all good evangelicals know they should), but consummately to the way God has said it. “The Bible is both a unified (one mythos) and many-voiced (i.e. polyphonic) discourse whose form is theologically significant” (RT, p. 26). Scripture does not just contain ideas embedded in genres, but also “Genre-ideas” (RT, p. 354). Again, “the Bible schematizes God’s being-in-act through mythos, through the variety of canonical forms that together comprise the theo-drama, the form of forms” (RT, p. 477). And again, “each biblical form that contributes to the mythos is itself a thing God has done, a word God has made” (RT, p. 477). And in one of his fullest statements of the way the form and content of scripture interpenetrate:

Biblical reasoning involves more than simply abstracting and ordering statements about God into a cognitive-propositional system... God speaks through the prophetic and apostolic discourse of the Bible as a playwright speaks through the various characters in a play. God speaks his mind dialogically, communicating through different voice-ideas from multiple points of view in a variety of ways (i.e. canonical schemata). All the voices, in their specific registers, are necessary in order to achieve the total communicative effect: the understanding and obedience of faith (RT, pp. 478-79).

This massive attention to the manner of Scripture also accounts for why most of chapter 1 (RT, pp. 35-57) is a series of biblical passages explored one after the other, with more exegetical insight than is strictly necessary for a work of high-level theological abstraction. Vanhoozer is not only our chief theorist of the Theological Interpretation of the Bible, but also a gifted practitioner who increasingly makes room in his books to carry out the task.

One could describe *Remythologizing Theology* as a “higher evangelicalism,” in that evangelicals are only supposed to attend to what God says, but Vanhoozer attends to how God says it. He goes deeper into the word of God, listening to the voice of God. Perhaps he even goes beyond *sola scriptura* to *sola vox scriptura*; perhaps even the genres of the Bible are inerrant. At any rate, “Biblical reasoners do well to appreciate the subtlety and depth of the divine rhetoric” (RT, p. 193). God’s accommodation is really to be thought of as indirect communication, which makes divine speech tricky; more like “the authorship that Kierkegaard labeled ‘indirect communication’ than... Hegel’s ‘system’ of abstract theoretical truth” (RT, p. 191). Since “the watchword for indirect communication is ‘show, don’t tell’” (RT, p. 191), divine revelation is an irreducible mixture of event and word, with implications for how the second-order labor of theology should be carried out. When theological approaches to scripture fall flat, it is because we think we can have information without personal transformation. “Theology only compounds the problem when it gives the impression that knowing God is a matter of neat theoretical packaging (i.e. systems of belief)” (RT, p. 191). In contrast, “Remythologizing theology approaches each of the various forms of biblical discourse as an important ingredient in the divine communicative strategy” (RT, p. 192). In other words, we have to do with not just a voice from heaven, but this particular voice, speaking these particular words, in a complex event of communication.

III. What the Trinity Has To Do With This

Earlier I mentioned that (contra the irresistible rhyming of remythologizing with demythologizing), the major opponent throughout this book is not Bultmann, but Moltmann. The strange cluster of ideas that make up the new orthodoxy, especially the kenotic-relational panentheism that has been drawing the doctrine of God toward itself for the past several decades, was identified long ago by Karl Barth. In a letter that he wrote to Moltmann on November 17, 1964 (the year after *Honest to God*, but responding instead to Moltmann’s *Theology of Hope*), Barth asked the younger theologian, “Would it not be wise to accept the doctrine of the immanent trinity of God?”⁷ It would indeed have been wise, but this Barthian recommendation was not

⁷ Karl Barth, *Letters 1961–1968* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 174-76.

quite the path that Moltmann's theology ever took.⁸ It is, however, a chief element of the course correction offered by Vanhoozer's remythologized theology and the communicative theism it advocates. The doctrine of the immanent Trinity of God makes all the difference in Vanhoozer's doctrine of God.

Vanhoozer is definitely on the bandwagon with the rest of modern theology in being excited about the Trinity.

To recover the doctrine of the Trinity is to recover the God of the gospel: The personal and compassionate love of the Father made known in Christ through the Spirit... And it is to understand that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not simply the way God appears to be but rather the way God truly is (RT, p. 105).

But as his radically consistent trinitarianism becomes more explicit, it becomes evident that Vanhoozer is often standing against much of the recent recovery of Trinitarian theology, or at least against the sort that turns toward the wildly relational and economically reductionistic. His criticisms are sharp and to the point: "While something important has indeed been recovered, something equally important has also been lost" (RT, p. 111). "What the 'second coming' of Trinitarian theology has lost, in short, appears to be the fatherhood of God... the thrust of the new orthodoxy is to inflate the economic Trinity precisely in order to call into question the aseity and impassibility of God" (RT, p. 112). The dangers of this inflation are evident: "Unless we resist collapsing the Father into the work of his two hands, Son and Spirit, it will be difficult to resist what Calvin thought to be the persistent temptation in religion, namely, to blur—or collapse altogether—the distinction between God and the world" (RT, p. 112).

Much of *Remythologizing Theology* is devoted to shooting down trouble that Moltmann started in the doctrine of God. Vanhoozer warns that without the kind of absolute transcendence secured by the immanent Trinity, the identity of God is jeopardized: "Instead of being 'I am who I am,' God becomes the 'I am the one you make me to be.'" And while Moltmann never said anything that drastic, he did make use of the gloss, "In the beginning was relation," a quotation of Martin Buber that Moltmann deployed on p. 11 of *God in Creation*, the book in which he finally explicitly drew the pantheistic conclusions of his version of Trinitarian theology. "At the end of the twentieth century," as Vanhoozer tells the story, "theologians awoke (with a groan?) to find their world, and ontology, relational" (RT, p. 117). He is right to track all of the confusion over divine suffering back to Moltmann's fundamental loss of the immanent Trinity. "The way in which one relates the economic to the imma-

⁸ The complexity and compromises of Moltmann's account of the immanent Trinity is something I have chronicled in *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

nent Trinity has everything to do, as Moltmann rightly notes, with ‘the question about God’s capacity or incapacity for suffering’” (RT, p. 391).

How does Vanhoozer intervene to fix the modern Trinitarian problem? Not only does he have the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity sorted out well in advance (“The economic Trinity is, or rather communicates, the immanent Trinity,” [RT, p. 294]), but he also understands the kind of descriptive dogmatic work necessary to continue upholding the priority of the immanent Trinity. In one of the richest sections of the book, he dares to describe the inner life of God, on the basis of the revelation in the economy. “We begin, then, with a brief description of the inner life of the triune God—the eternal doings of Father, Son, and Spirit—to the extent that it can be discerned from the communicative patterns that comprise the economy” (RT, p. 243). We

come closest to understanding God’s inner life by attending to the intra-Trinitarian communicative action in the economy, particularly the dialogical interaction between the Father and Son that is on conspicuous display in the Fourth Gospel. There are three main topics in these Father-Son dialogues: mutual glorification; the giving of life; the sharing of love (RT, p. 261).

A series of sections on the divine light, life, and love are an exploration of how the life of God is a rich and full thing, an inner plenitude which far outstrips our experience. And this is where Vanhoozer makes it clear that his remythologizing project aims at understanding the story of Scripture as a real revelation of who God is:

Because the way God is in the economy of corresponds to the way God is in himself, we may conclude that the Father, Son, and Spirit are merely continuing in history a communicative activity that characterizes their perfect life together...Hence this triune dialogue in history fully corresponds to the conversation God is in himself (RT, p. 251).

This leads Vanhoozer to describe the Trinity in terms of his root metaphor, communication: “God is the communicator, communication, and communicatedness. The triune God is the agent, act, and effect of his own self-communication” (RT, p. 261).

Time would fail us before we could explore the treatise on the divine emotions that concludes the book (a remarkable performance). But suffice it to say that Vanhoozer’s leisurely account of the eternal life, light, and love of God helps anchor the reader in a notion of God’s inner immanent-trinitarian plenitude, so that when Vanhoozer offers a somewhat deflationary account of the recent theopaschite orthodoxy, nothing seems to have been lost. We have already glimpsed the fullness of the immanent Trinity. We are encouraged to take God’s words to us more seriously because we have been reminded that the conversation he has with us is in perfect correspondence to, and in real participation with, the conversation that makes up the divine life

itself. In other words, as the book works out its logic, we no longer have simply a voice from heaven to account for, but a voice in heaven; an eternal communication about life, love, and light, which breaks through and makes itself heard on the mount of transfiguration in a moment of revealed life, light, and love. If Bishop Robinson was worried about mythology, things are far worse than he imagined, because as far as biblical commitments go, everything is much better than we imagined. Vanhoozer fights mostly not with Robinson, but with Feuerbach. And he turns the tables: "Projection is first and foremost a divine communicative activity. Jesus Christ is the God-projected word and image of God into the created order" (RT, p. 271). Communicative theism is "triune authorial theism" (RT, p. 26), and

'authoring' covers what God does as creator, reconciler, redeemer, and perfecter, and so serves as a metaphor for the economic Trinity as well: The Father 'authors' in Christ through the Spirit.' Triune authorship... enables us better to conceive (1) the absolute distinction between Creator and creation; (2) the triune God whose being is a being-in-communicative action; and (3) God's relation to the world, and to Scripture, in terms of an 'economy of communication' (RT, p. 26).

Ronald Reagan was nicknamed "the Great Communicator," but with the advent of communicative theism, we might need to recognize that as an idolatrous title. On the other hand, communicating may be one of God's communicable attributes. Just as the mealtime prayer of classical theism taught us to pray "God is great, God is good," the insight of communicative theism is that God is the Great Communicator, God is the Good Communicator. Let us thank him for every word that proceeds out of his mouth.

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Introduction to the Volume

STR Editor

It remains a regular delight to share with our readership significant works that impact the intellectual and practical life of the Church and then engage them with charity and rigor. Previous volumes of *STR* have interacted with diverse scholarship that reflects our interests in missiology, theology, apologetics, and biblical studies, among them: Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011); Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010); Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011). With this background in place, it is understandable why *STR* has seen fit to interact with one of the foremost theologians of our day.

Dr. Kevin J. Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing Theology* is the focus of the present volume. The impetus for publishing this set of essays came from our guest editor for this volume, Dr. Mark Bowald of Redeemer University College in Ontario, Canada. Dr. Bowald assembled an international team of scholars to assess and critique *Remythologizing Theology* for a recent meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. When he contacted *STR* about publishing the papers from the meeting, we were intrigued at the prospect and excited about the possibilities. Shall we engage Dr. Vanhoozer on his most recent work of theology? Of course! The work, no doubt, needed to be done and disseminated to a wider reading audience than those who attended the ETS meeting. And so it is a pleasure to publish those papers in this volume. *STR* would like to thank Dr. Bowald for his hard work in organizing the meeting in the first place, contacting the contributors, and facilitating the transformation of oral presentations into a written format that is clear and accessible. We are grateful to have these penetrating essays in the pages of our journal.

This volume, it also needs to be said, is significant for another reason. This is the last volume in which we will have on display the talents of our current Book Review Editor, Dr. Michael Travers. Michael has served *STR* very well, and we are sad to see him go. However, he cannot go silently into the night, as we expect more reviews from him! I would like to offer a note of thanks to you Michael, for your excellent work.

Still, we are pleased to announce that Dr. Ant Greenham, a South African native who is Associate Professor of Missions and Islamic Studies at South-eastern Seminary, will step in as the Book Review Editor for *STR*. All correspondence for reviews should now be directed to him at agreenham@sebts.edu. We are happy to have Dr. Greenham on board and look forward to our reviewers working with him.

Vanhoozer responds to the four horsemen of an apocalyptic panel discussion on *Remythologizing Theology*

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Introduction

There is no higher academic compliment than sustained critical attention, so I must begin by thanking my four interlocutors, not only for their willingness to persevere to the end (of my book, that is), but also for the way in which they have engaged its argument. I am also pleased by the evangelical diversity of the panel: from Trinitarian and analytic to Southern Baptist and emerging theologians. The lot of a respondent is not always a happy one. One can either summarize the argument, and risk boring those who have read the book (no danger of that here, I think!), set out systematically to expose the nakedness of the author (and risk losing a friend), or simply use the opportunity to talk about something else in which one is more interested. All four panelists have avoided these common pitfalls. Even more remarkable: I do not feel the need to spend most of my time correcting misrepresentations of my position. This is an encouraging sign. For years I have taught my students first, to interpret people as charitably as they can, and only then to interpret them as critically as they see fit. The panelists have largely succeeded in doing just that, which means that I can give most of my attention to their important substantive questions.

This conversation is all about bearing faithful witness: to what I have written, yes, but more importantly to what I have written about: “the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God” (1 Tim. 1:17). I therefore refer to my conversation partners as the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” (c.f., Rev. 6:1-8) not because they are harbingers of the Last Battle, but because what is ultimately at stake in this discussion is God’s self-revelation. To speak well of God is the theologian’s most important mandate, and also the most difficult. I have therefore prayed over this book more than any other. Even so, I do not for a moment think that I have mastered the territory. On the contrary: “I came, I saw, I stammered...”

Fortunately for me, this is not a court session. I am not officially on trial (as far as I know). At the same time, one who seeks to give faithful witness in word and deed to the living God is, in one sense, *always* on trial, for it is the theologian’s vocation to give sound and discerning testimony to God’s works of love and words of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

Fred Sanders

And so to the first paper. Reading Fred Sanders's beautifully written response was like going to the dentist. This analogy works only if you know something about my dentist. He is extremely competent, yet his probing is the gentlest imaginable. He sees what he needs to see without inflicting any discomfort – and he typically tells me that everything is fine. In other words, I very much enjoyed my time in Dr. Sanders's dentist chair. There are many wonderful lines I could cite, but perhaps my favorite contrasts what I say about the God who can speak but not suffer (i.e., the God of communicative theism), which I commend, with “the one who cannot really speak, but can't help but suffer” (i.e., the God of kenotic relational panentheism), which I criticize.

Paul Ricoeur, the subject of my doctoral work, typically had two standard ways of responding to people who commented on his work. The polite, non-committal response, was “Thank you. You have contributed to my self-understanding.” Sanders's piece does this for me, especially in the paragraphs where he unpacks the method in my remythologizing madness. To hear Ricoeur tell it, his thought developed haphazardly, through a series of detours where each new book would take up a problem leftover from the previous one. (I can relate). Ricoeur therefore reserved his second response for those select few essays that were able to display the coherence of his thought better than he could himself. Sanders's paper does this for me.

I like the way Sanders contextualizes my project. It's true: John Robinson would be horrified to see a Cambridge University Press academic theology book waxing enthusiastic about a voice from heaven. Perhaps this is an appropriate occasion to recount the story of my one encounter with the Bishop of Woolwich. It was in 1978. I was a religious studies major as an undergraduate at Westmont College, and he had been invited to speak on campus. I won the student lottery to pick him up at LAX and drive him back to Santa Barbara. In preparation for the eighty-mile ride, I read his *Honest to God*, and much else besides. I was fully prepared to show him the error of his Tillichian ways, and I had ninety minutes in which to do it. We met at the airport without incident, but his request to sit in the backseat as we arrived at the parking lot did not bode well. Apparently the good Bishop was not entirely confident that the Ground of our Being could ensure his safety on the California freeway system. Not to worry: he could not escape from my clutches so easily. I was resourceful; I had a rear-view mirror. So, once we entered the freeway I settled into the slow lane, cleared my throat, and asked my first question. I cannot now recall exactly what it was about, but his answer is seared in my memory: “I'm sorry, I need to save my voice for the lecture.” And that was that. True story—honest to God!

In truth, I suspect Robinson was being less than totally honest. To the extent that his book was successful, it depended on borrowed theological capi-

tal. Indeed, a great deal of what contemporary theologians have to say about God is insufficiently grounded insofar as they deny that God communicates in actual words. I do not understand how contemporary theologians find it possible to speak of a forgiving God unless they can also affirm a speaking God. How else could we know that God is a forgiving God unless God first says, “I forgive you”? All this to say that Fred’s framing of my book is exactly right.

And I think, or at least I hope, that he is right in his three main points: that I have (finally!) moved beyond method to matter; that I pay attention to what Scripture says and how it says it; that none of this makes sense without the Trinity (though the better book to read on this latter subject is surely Fred’s *The Deep Things of God*).

Fred identifies my “primary doctrine”: *that God communicates*. Yes, this is my first theology, and a clear example of how one’s theological method is shaped by one’s concrete material theological convictions. Note: “communicating” means “making common.” In my book I argue that God shares not only his thought (i.e., in revelation), but also his very life (i.e., in redemption). If I focus on communicating, it is because this is what God does with words, including the words of Scripture, and supremely by means of his living Word: God makes common or shares his light, life, and love with those who are not God. *That God communicates* was the key concept that justified the use of the theatrical imagery in *The Drama of Doctrine*, the explicit focus of *First Theology*, and the implicit assumption of *Is there a Meaning in this Text? Remythologizing Theology*, however, pauses to interrogate the premise itself: what must God *be* in order to do what the Bible depicts him as doing (i.e., communicating)? I agree with Sanders’s spin on my project: It is a communicative variation on a classical theistic theme. He is also right to observe that one of my main motivations was to confront the “new orthodoxy”—that is, the emerging coalition of kenotic relational open and panentheistic theologians—just as the main motivation for writing *Is there a Meaning* was to take on the more virulent strains of postmodern hermeneutics. Theology is always occasional, situated in particular contexts, even when it has systematic ambitions.

Finally, Sanders correctly sees that a focus on God’s communicative action—which I also treat under the rubric of “authorship”—means attending not only to what God says but how God says it. I am grateful for the extended quote from George Steiner, which bears out my preference of the theist Dostoevsky, buried in a Christian graveyard, over the Moral Therapeutic Deism of Tolstoy, who was “borne to his grave in the first civil burial ever held in Russia.” Fred is also right to highlight how much my unpacking of the logic of divine authorship owes to John Frame (to whom I dedicated the book) and his theology of Lordship.

John Franke

I turn now to John Franke's paper. Franke and Sanders agree about the centrality of the notion of divine communicative action. Yet Franke is less comfortable with the notion that God's communicative agency is *the* formal and material principle of theology. More on that in a moment. Let me begin with Franke's claim that *Remythologizing Theology* "is decisively devoted to methodological considerations." Decisively. Devoted. This makes it sound as if I worship at the shrine of methodology. I am therefore disappointed that Franke does not see the decisive, devoted turn to the subject matter of theology that Fred has identified. John is calling my "conversion" into question! In my own personal narrative, I view *Remythologizing Theology* as a kind of prequel to *Drama of Doctrine* that sets forth the doctrine of God on which my proposal about the nature of doctrine depends. Of course, this does not affect, or soften, the force of his substantive question: am I really intending the model I am proposing to eclipse other approaches to God? Before answering, I need to unpack the question. Franke is rubbed raw by what seem to him to be "the pretension of either/or metaphysical assertions about God." He suggests that if I were more attuned to Scripture, I would realize that the principle of accommodation ought to make us wary of such overarching assertions. John here raises some of the most fundamental challenges every theologian has to face: how to move from the first order biblical discourse (i.e., *mythos*) to second order theological discourse (i.e., *logos*), and whether or not to construe this second order discourse as metaphysical. Unlike Franke, I do not see accommodation as a threat to speaking truly (and even ontologically) of God but rather its enabling condition. We would be in real trouble as theologians charged with speaking of God if God himself had *not* stooped to speak into our situation via ordinary human language! But he has, and seeking understanding of what God has said is intrinsic to the theology's task.

It is one thing to say that human beings lack the capacity to know God. Our native intellectual and moral resources are finite, and can take us only so far. It is quite another thing to suggest that language itself somehow blocks the way to the knowledge of God because of its inherent creaturely limitations. Yes, human users of language are fallen; need it follow that language *per se* is so corrupt as to be unable to signify God? I do not see why it has to. Franke himself admits that God truly reveals himself despite the creaturely nature of the appointed communicative medium, whether human language or Jesus' humanity. Yet he concludes that the glass is half-empty—language is subject to "inherent limitations"—whereas I see it as half-full, that is, able analogically to refer to the way God is.

It's all in the book of Hebrews, which explains that it is precisely in his humanity that the Son is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint [*character*] of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). Hebrews 1 also tells us that the Son is the final definitive word in a series of earlier words. And we know from

John 1 that the Son is the Word of God that was with God and was God from the beginning (John 1:1-2). This Word made flesh, who in turn speaks words to others, is himself the embodied personal communicative activity of God; there is nothing here to suggest that Jesus' humanity or human language limit his ability truly to reveal and mediate God. Indeed, I would argue that the sufficiency of language is implied by the sufficiency of Scripture.¹

To be fair, Franke does not question God's ability to reveal truth as much as our ability to receive it in unadulterated fashion. Must the quest for understanding be a quest for a single model, he wonders? Do I intend the model of God that I propose in *Remythologizing Theology*—what I variously term *communicative theism* or *Trinitarian dialogical theism*—to be the *only* right way of thinking about God, to the exclusion of all other models and, if so, how do I handle the patent *contextuality* and *plurality* that characterize both the biblical text and theological tradition? These are entirely proper, and extremely challenging questions, and Franke poses them pointedly. Here I stand; I cannot shirk them.

On the one hand, it does not initially sound right, to my ears at least, to say that there can be many ontologies of God. God is one. Is that simply one model among others? God is love. Is that simply one perspective among others? Relatedly: does God suffer change as a result of what happens in the world? There are only so many ways that one can think God's reality in relationship to the world: pantheism, Deism, theism, and panentheism. Does Franke think that more than one of these models can be true at the same time, or is he basically a theist who wants me to allow him some pluralistic breathing room within this one model? (I suspect the latter.) Is God triune (three persons in one nature) and, if so, must God's triunity be part of every Christian's confession? It seems to me that there can be only one right answer to such questions.

On the other hand, as Aristotle famously commented, "Being may be said in many ways."² That is, we can speak of being in terms of several different kinds of categories (e.g., substance, quantity, quality, relation, etc.). Something similar pertains to God: God is one, yet there are many things we can, and must, say (e.g., that God is love, merciful, just, etc.). Some formulations of divine simplicity (the doctrine that each of God's attributes is essential to

¹ On the sufficiency of Scripture, see Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² This, at least, is how many philosophers refer to his statement. The actual wording is "That which is may be so called in several ways." (Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Books Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon* [trans. Christopher Kirwan; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993], p. 1).

God's being) maintain that each divine attribute is a perspective on the whole of God's being.³

Back to Franke's concern: do I believe that my book sets forth the one true description of God's being? Do I want my model of God's being-in-communicative-act to eclipse all other models? Or, am I open to other ways of thinking about God's being and God's relationship to the world? The short answer is that I view my proposal as a retooling, not a displacement, of classical theism, and that I think that *Christian theism may be said (i.e., expounded) in many ways*.

In speaking of "retooling" Christian theism I mean to call attention to the new concepts (e.g., authorship; communicative action) I suggest for doing the work of thinking about God and the God-world relationship. Indeed, they are not wholly new, though the way I deploy them may be. To use John Frame's term: I am offering communicative act as a "perspective" on God's being.⁴ Like the divine attributes, it is one way of regarding the whole of God's being. To speak of perspectives is to acknowledge what I think Franke wants me to acknowledge, namely, that I am a finite creature who sees in part. I cannot see everything at once, as God does. At the same time (and here Franke may disagree), I want to claim that what I see through my perspective is true not only for me, but also for everyone, inasmuch as my perspective discloses an aspect of God's reality. It is the truth, and nothing but the truth, though not the *whole* truth.

The whole truth, or what God saw fit to reveal of it, is inscribed in the order of things and the *ordo salutis*, as described in the Scriptures. What God knows—God's perspective, as it were—is the white light of absolute truth. What we have in Scripture, a plurality of human perspectives, is the divinely inspired refraction of this light—a canonical coat of many colors. Each of these canonical perspectives gives us access to a particular aspect of God's truth and reality. Franke will shout "Huzzah!" when I say that it takes a plurality of canonical perspectives fully to render theological truth.⁵ This is my working assumption: that systematic theologians need to attend to the variety of authorial voices, forms of biblical discourse, and theological perspectives in Scripture.

³ So John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), pp. 225-30.

⁴ For the genesis of Frame's understanding of perspective, see his "Backgrounds to my Thought," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (ed. John J. Hughes; Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), pp. 12-13. See also Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism" (2008), available at <http://www.frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/>.

⁵ For Franke's own position, see his *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009).

I do not concede the point that the exegete is more biblical than the systematic theologian simply because the latter works with abstract constructions. On the contrary: theologians too clarify the grammar of the text, though on a deeper level. Wittgenstein once wrote: “*Essence* is expressed by grammar. Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar).”⁶ Implied in what we say about things is what we think these things *are*. *I believe that our grammatical analysis of biblical discourse is theologically incomplete until we have spelled out its ontological implications.* Hence the project of remythologizing theology, which is nothing more or less than spelling out the ontological implications of God’s almighty loving communicative acts.

The canon is a manifold witness to a *unified*, and *ordered*, reality. Ontology is about discerning this deeper order of reality, the *grammar* of things. I do not claim that the notion of being as communicative act exhausts what can be said about this grammar, but I do think I am parsing things correctly. I therefore wonder whether Franke inadvertently short-circuits the move from exegesis to theology, and hence faith’s search for understanding, by exaggerating the inadequacy of second-order theological discourse to its subject matter.

I agree with Franke about the pretension of metaphysics if by “metaphysics” we mean a ready-made set of categories that we impose on Scripture. There are numerous examples of theologians doing this. It is all too tempting to ride the categorical coattails of whatever metaphysic happens to be the most fashionable. The aim of remythologizing, however, is the counter-cultural way of deep exegesis and theo-ontology. The task is to mine the Bible’s own categories, or categories strongly suggested by the Bible, in order to unpack the ontological implications of what Scripture says about God.

Does Franke get me right? Not if he thinks that my abiding interest is in philosophical issues and prolegomena. On the contrary: I think the matter of theology must determine its method. Faith seeks understanding by conceptually elaborating the ontology implicit in biblical discourse. Am I proposing my approach as the only way to speak well of God? No, because though I believe that God’s being and knowledge are absolute, I also believe that God’s being may be said in many ways, that there are a variety of canonical perspectives that highlight this or that aspect of God’s being. At the same time, I do think that the communicative variation on classical theism that I propound perceives something truth about God’s being, and consequently that versions of kenotic relational theism and panentheism are wrong. Mine is a perspective that is open to other canonical perspectives, but not indefinitely so.

Theologians must avoid absolutizing any one canonical or categorical perspective. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge legitimate conceptual gains and theological insights. I am therefore troubled at the thought that African theologians (or anyone else!) might ignore the Nicene insight that the

⁶ *Philosophical Investigations* 3rd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), p. 116

Son is *homoousios* with the Father. Yes, the term is Greek, and it reeks of ontology (it means “of the same substance”). Nevertheless, it is a true perspective on the nature of the Godhead and the identity of Jesus Christ. We should no more despise or relativize *homoousios* just because it is culturally situated than we should relativize Newton’s Second Law of Motion— $F = ma$ (force = mass x acceleration)—just because he was a seventeenth-century Englishman. Truth is truth, whether it concerns physics or metaphysics, regardless of its point of origin.

Scripture shows God to be a communicative agent. I therefore believe that what I say about divine ontology is true. That God is a communicative agent is not the only thing one can say about God, however, just as there are other things to say about force than what Newton says in his Second Law. As Newton’s Second Law holds good for people in twenty-first century Guatemala and Tibet as, so what I say about God’s communicative agency, to the extent that it gets the ontological grammar of Scripture right, is true for everyone, everywhere, and at all times. Again: it is the truth, but not the whole truth of the matter of God’s being.

As to Franke’s second issue, concerning the pastoral function of a remythologized theology, I have time for a brief response only. He raises a legitimate concern, though the specific issue of homosexuality may not be the best illustration. As far as I am aware, there is nothing about my view of Scripture that lends itself to be co-opted by the GLBT community. I have written essays on homosexuality and transsexuality elsewhere.⁷ In general, I argue that the purpose of doctrine is to minister reality and direct the church in the ways of fitting participation in this reality. The reality in question, of course, is the new creation the Father is bringing into being in the Son through the Spirit. Because I view Scripture as divine discourse, I give pride of place to Scripture’s renderings of reality. So, when the Bible says that God created humanity men and women, I take this as normative for the created order. Doctrine thus directs men and women to participate fittingly in the biological sex to which they have been cast as actors.

Steven Wellum

It is a special delight to be able to respond to Steve Wellum’s paper. Steve was a student of mine in the 1980s, and I recognize the same inquisitive, careful, and sustained probing in today’s response that I saw in his earlier work. I am particularly pleased to see that Wellum has mellowed in his middle-age: my writing no longer frustrates, but only annoys him. The good news is that he declares my book “thoroughly orthodox and evangelical.” Phew! But seri-

⁷ See, for example, my “Always performing? Playing new scenes with creative fidelity: the drama-of-redemption approach,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (ed. Gary Meadors; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), pp. 151-99.

ously: Wellum here shows himself to be the model reader, one who works hard to get things right before he points out things he thinks are wrong.

Wellum raises two interconnected methodological issues concerning the place of Scripture's literary forms in my theology and my general use of Scripture. First, he wonders whether I exaggerate the significance of literary genre. Like me, he is happy to admit that we need to pay attention to literary form for the sake of interpretation and determining the author's illocutionary intent. But he is not at all sure that they have any other significance than as a means to an interpretive (and propositional?) end. For my own part, I think that the forms of biblical discourse do more than provide packaging for theological content. The challenge is to specify what this "more" involves, a point to which I shall return below.

Wellum objects in particular to my claim that canonical diversity leads to and legitimates theological diversity. Where Franke does not see enough plurality, Wellum sees too much. We need here to proceed cautiously: too much what, exactly? The first thing to be said is that I am careful to locate diversity on the level of vocabulary (e.g., metaphors) and concepts, not the more fundamental judgments that underlie them (e.g., ontological judgments). A second preliminary observation: diversity is not the same thing as indeterminacy or contradiction. To be sure, there is a certain tension in saying that the same basic theological judgment may be rendered in more than one set of concepts, some of which catch certain nuances better than others. But we need only think of the various metaphors to describe the saving significance of Jesus' cross to see how canonical perspectives generate theological perspectives. It appears that Franke is reacting to the boldness of my speech about God (he's making ontological claims—how dare he!), and Wellum to its humility (he's not claiming absoluteness for his claims—so why bother?).

I concede Wellum's point: Scripture itself does not often call attention to its literary forms. For example, when Matthew uses Exodus, he does not seem to be concerned about the poetics of biblical narrative. On the other hand, when Jesus in Luke 4:12 cites Deuteronomy 6:16 "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" to rebut Satan's use of Scripture (Ps. 91:11-12 "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you'"), he is doing more than using one revealed proposition to trump another. He is tacitly inserting these texts into a larger (canonical) form, the narrative or drama of redemption. The real issue is not whose proposition is truer (they're both canonical), but their place and function in the broader story (about Jesus' messianic mission). Even the devil uses revealed propositions—and dissembles (c.f., Jas. 2:19). It is not, therefore, that Satan says what is patently false, but rather that his discourse lacks fittingness. Satan's discourse displays bad form. And this is the salient point: to speak well of God we must attend both to form and content, for form is a leading indicator of fittingness.

Form is also an ingredient in “rightly handling [*orthotomeo*] the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). It is through the various literary forms of Scripture, including stories and histories, that the divine authorial imagination shapes our view of God, the world, and ourselves, thus forming us to be those who can make right judgments concerning fittingness. The patterns of communicative action in canon rule the disciple’s judgments about rightness (*ortho*), in all its forms: right deliberating about truth (the orthodoxy of the head); right doing of the good (the orthopraxis of the hand); right desiring of beauty (the orthopathos of the heart). In all three cases, Scripture is useful, and authoritative, for training in covenantal fittingness. I agree with Abraham Kuyper: the reason we have so many kinds of genres in the Bible is so that God’s word can strike all the chords of the human soul, not just the intellectual.

I have not worked out a full-fledged theology of literary forms. My fullest discussion these issues to date is “Love’s Wisdom: the authority of Scripture’s form and content for faith’s understanding and theological judgment.”⁸ Paul Ricoeur has gestured towards what Steve is asking for in his essays “Biblical Time,” “Naming God,” and “Interpretive Narrative.”⁹ One of Ricoeur’s line in particular continues to intrigue me: “Not just any theology can be wed to the narrative form.” How much more is this the case with a theology wed to history, apocalyptic, wisdom, prophecy, law, and gospel!

Wellum also has some material questions—simple underhand pitches such as: how and why did Adam fall? how and why did Satan fall? Why not ask me to fix the economic downturn while you’re at it? Joking aside: when Steve asks such questions, which ultimately concern divine communicative agency and the non-elect, he aims at what may seem the Achilles heel of my entire proposal. In speaking of a “dialogical” or “communicative” theism, am I not putting God into the position of helplessly having to wait for humans to respond to his overtures? Does God “fail” in his communicative action if and when his addressees choose not to respond in faith and obedience? Is God really all that he is in his communicative action in this case as well? Wellum acknowledges that I gesture towards this issue in relation to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (pp. 339-41), which is mentioned ten times in the book of Exodus alone, but in general he thinks my use of Scripture is “fairly sparse.” If so, it is only because exegesis is so demanding and involved, and because I did not want to make a long book even longer. (For the record, a quick glance at the Scripture index to *Remythologizing Theology* shows that I refer to Scripture some 600 times and cite fifty different books of the Bible).

As to the issue itself, the argument of the book makes it clear that I affirm divine sovereignty in a way that I hope Calvin would endorse. And, though I employ the idea of dialogue (because Scripture so often depicts God

⁸ *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5 (2011), pp. 247-75.

⁹ All three essays may be found in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

relating to human creatures in this way), I am careful to insist that the conversation is asymmetrical. God is in control of the conversation from first to last, and works his will effectually according to our communicative natures. As to the exegetical issue, I have dealt with Wellum's question about God's apparent "failed" communicative action and his charge about sparse exegesis in a recent essay "Divine Deception, Inception, and Communicative Action" on Ezek. 14:9, "I the Lord have deceived that prophet."¹⁰ The challenge I set myself there was to explain the verse in light of what I argue in *Remythologizing* about God being all that he is in all that he does, and says. How are we to think about God's apparent communication of something false? I wrestled mightily for thirty-four pages with this passage, not least because it is a kind of exegetical stress fracture in the hip of Reformed theology. The stakes were high: divine trustworthiness—and the argument of my book! In one section, I explicitly address a communicative variation of the problem of evil: "the argument from communicative neglect." In a nutshell: if God's being is communicative activity and if God is true (both premises to which I say "Amen"), then is God not obligated to speak truth to everyone everywhere at all times? And if people deny the truth, does it follow that God's communicative action has misfired? The bulk of the article is exegesis. I look at divine deception in its immediate and then canonical context, and then examine six explanations of what God is doing in deceiving (e.g., God deceived only those who deserve it). I then present my own interpretation, the long and short of which is that God speaks truth, though hard-hearted sinners (and false prophets) distort that truth and so deceive themselves. God "causes" the false prophet to be deceived, then, by speaking truth to one whose heart and mind are unable rightly to receive it. In the process, God demonstrates his communicative righteousness. God is never truer, or more trustworthy, than in sovereignly proving a false person false.

I had no room in *Remythologizing Theology* to spend thirty-four pages exegeting a single text. By necessity I had to take certain things for granted. Wellum thinks that I ought to come clean: "What he should say is this: 'I am assuming the exegetical and biblical-theological work of Reformed theology and my task is to make sense of it and to theologize about it by employing new analogies.'" I now thus publicly declare: "I am assuming the exegetical and biblical-theological work of Reformed theology and my task is to make sense of it and to theologize about it by employing new analogies." There: now I feel much better...

¹⁰ In Michael Allen (ed.), *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), pp. 73-98.

Oliver Crisp

Wellum's concern about the conspicuous absence of apologetics in *Remythologizing Theology* is best discussed in conjunction with Oliver Crisp's paper, which makes a similar criticism. If Wellum was aiming at my Achilles' heel, Crisp targets my Achilles' spine: the alleged absence of epistemological backbone. Wellum worries that I do not give enough—or any?—reasons why my readers should (a) accept the canonical Scriptures as fully reliable and (b) accept Christianity as true. Crisp shares the same concern, cleverly suggesting that I am hoisted by my own anti-Feuerbachian petard. I see the speck of projectionism in my opponent's eye, but I do not see its beam in my own. Stated pointedly: what prevents my book's claims from being purely fideist, a mere declaration of what I happen to believe about God? What, if anything, do I need to do in order to convince others that my own account of divine self-communication is more than a clumsily devised myth? It's a good question.

Before I answer it, however, let me make a few preliminary points. First, Crisp claims that my work “is arguably the most sophisticated postmodern evangelical theology on offer today.” This is a rather backhanded compliment, coming as it does from an analytic theologian. Can anything epistemologically good come out of postmodern Paris? The Anglo-American analytic industrial complex tends to think not. However, I want to know why Crisp thinks I'm postmodern. What exactly is it about my work that merits the qualifier “postmodern”? At the risk of being impertinent, I venture to suggest that Crisp could here do with greater clarity and analytic precision, though to be fair, I think I know what he has in mind, and this brings me to my second point.

Crisp has to ask if I am still a “five-point Alvinist,” because Alvin Plantinga is an epistemological foundationalist while I appear to hold to some kind of postfoundationalism. The problem here is semantic, and can be fairly easily cleared up (I take full responsibility for any misunderstanding). The simple explanation is that I accepted Plantinga's objections to classical foundationalism, and his proposed positive alternative. Plantinga argues that it is rationally acceptable (warranted) to believe in the existence of God without evidence, proof, or even argument (because belief in God is “properly basic”). Initially, this seemed to be a kind of Calvinist postfoundationalism. In retrospect, however, I acknowledge that Plantinga prefers to describe his Reformed epistemology as a version of foundationalism. Understood in Plantinga's way, then, I too am happy to call myself a “modest” or “chastened” foundationalist. And I am therefore delighted to accept Crisp's proposal that belief in Scripture as normative is a properly basic belief (I say as much in *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*), especially if this lets me escape, Houdini-like, from the Problem of Projection. But does it?

I certainly do not want to be heard as arguing on Feuerbach's behalf. I wonder, however, if we can exorcise his spirit as easily as Crisp wants to. It is an attractive argument: Feuerbach cannot be right because, in fact, the actual doctrines of the New Testament (Crisp mentions the Incarnation) are not what we would expect in light of our cherished human values. In other words, the doctrines of the New Testament, especially Incarnation and atonement, do not resemble or have the feel of projected ideals. Feuerbach's story, Crisp summarily concludes, is thus "likely to be extremely unconvincing." But to whom? I know students at the University of Edinburgh who rejected their faith after reading Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*. And, interestingly enough, Feuerbach does provide a rather provocative account of the Incarnation, which for him is all about the supreme value of self-giving love. I do not find his interpretation convincing, but others do. The salient point is that the project of "proving" or "grounding" Christianity proves to be a hostage to fortune: there will never be enough evidence to convince those who insist on suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Arguments may persuade heads, but not hearts. They certainly cannot produce faith, which is not ours to achieve, but the Lord's to give.

Don't get me wrong. Apologetics was my first undergraduate love, and perhaps the reason I initially chose to double-major in religious studies and philosophy. I studied all the approaches—evidentialist, rationalist, presuppositionalist. As a missionary in France after college, I met a German philosopher studying at the Sorbonne. For months, I would spend every Friday evening in his apartment where we would argue about Christianity into the wee hours of the morning. I would then return home and stay up another hour or so transcribing what I could recall of the evening's dialogue. Apologetics was a great romantic adventure: I was a knight of faith, laying siege to the modern Teutonic mind. After several months, we ran out of topics. My friend acknowledged that I had given decent responses to his many defeaters, and that he had no further objections. I was ecstatic: "So you're a believer now?" I asked. "No," he said. "Even though I cannot give you a reason, I still cannot believe."

I view my theological vocation first and foremost as one of edifying the church by helping people of faith to seek, and find, understanding. What method I have follows from my subject matter: God's triune communicative action. I begin by trying to make sense of the testimony of the prophets and apostles: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1).

Canonical-linguistic theology begins with what most Christian theologians down through the ages have taken as givens: that God communicates not only truth but life; that the biblical texts are what they by and large claim to be, namely, set-apart human writings arising from a divine commission that, in God's grace, are ingredients in the economies of revelation and redemp-

tion; that the purpose of God's self-communication is to bring about communion in Christ Jesus. This is simply historic Christian faith. I begin with it; I do not argue to it. Does this make me irrational? By no means! Rationality on my view involves four things: first, believing what I am told. Testimony is a reliable belief-forming mechanism unless there is good reason to think otherwise. Can I prove that there was indeed a voice from heaven? Probably not. Am I warranted in believing it nevertheless? Yes, because 2 Pet. 1:16-17 tells me that the first Christians did not follow cleverly devised myths but were eyewitnesses of Jesus' majesty, for, says Peter, "we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain." Second, I am willing to subject my beliefs to critical testing. Third, I try to practice the intellectual virtues. Finally, I use transcendental arguments that show why theological presuppositions are necessary. Indeed, *Remythologizing Theology* is in one sense an extended transcendental argument: unless we presuppose the reliable testimony of Scripture to God's communicative action, we will be unable to speak well of God.

Conclusion

Both Crisp and Wellum refer to the apparent vulnerability of my appeal to divine discourse. What is the grounding, where is the defense? Let me say two things by way of a final response.

First, theologians should never back down when either reality or rationality is the issue. What is in dispute is how best to speak and think about reality. I am not averse to giving evidences as part of an overall strategy, but theological argumentation ultimately requires more. What more? In personal correspondence Crisp mentioned that he had, like Captain Ahab, traversed the seven seas in search of the great White Whale of my epistemology, but all he could find were a few minnows here and there. Well, he missed two good fishing ponds. One, an article on "Theology and Apologetics," is out in the open (in the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*¹¹). The other, "The Trials of Truth: mission, martyrdom, and the epistemology of the cross," is a bit harder to find.¹²

Both essays make clear that my key apologetic categories are less epistemological than *martyrological*: staking knowledge and truth claims is ultimately a matter of bearing faithful witness, of enduring any and all critical tests, epistemological and existential alike. The operative concept, I believe, is *faithful witness*, and the paradigmatic faithful witness is Jesus Christ, God's personal

¹¹ *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (ed. Campbell Campbell-Jack and Gavin J. McGrath; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) pp. 35-43.

¹² In Andrew Kirk and Kevin Vanhoozer (eds.), *To Stake a Claim: Christian Mission in Epistemological Crisis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) pp. 120-56 (and subsequently republished as ch. 12 in my *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002]).

truth claim made flesh. Like Jesus, we bear faithful witness when we speak the truth in love and act out love in truth. When we formulate and live out Christian truth claims, and accord them epistemic primacy, all other truths will fall into their proper place. The canonical Scriptures provide the fiduciary framework for making one wise unto salvation and for forming godliness.

What I am after in theology and apologetics alike is sapience: holy wisdom. A sapiential apologetics is a defense of the whole Christian way, truth, and life that we undertake, as individual disciples and corporately as church, by bearing faithful witness in word and deed, at particular places and at particular times, to the truth and character of God. What apologists need to defend is not simply the existence of God but the *wisdom* of God displayed on the cross. This involves a willingness to endure all kinds of critical testing: physical, spiritual, historical, as well as philosophical. Bearing faithful witness involves a willingness to adopt a cruciform pattern of life. Arguments alone are not enough: the church needs to live out the truth of Jesus Christ and participate, in the power of the Spirit, in the drama of redemption. It is hard to argue against a loving community. Apologetics is a species of martyrdom, and ultimately a matter of (you guessed it) communicative action.

Why begin with divine discourse? The second thing I want to say by way of response is that Scripture itself repeatedly starts here, with a call to the people of God to hear, hearken to, and heed God's word. God calls Adam, Abraham, Moses and the prophets, and finally the apostles. In every case the mandate is to listen to, understand, and do what God says. And with this thought we return as well to my opening comments about the convergence of my theological method with the subject matter of theology.

While there are surely other ways of starting the subject matter of Christian theology, one particularly fruitful way is to speak of God in communicative action. Yes, God has spoken in various ways and at diverse times and climactically by his Son (Heb. 1:1-2), but all these ways are species of God's communicative action.¹³ Even revelation is not as large a category as communicative action. Note, too, that redemption as well is a kind of communication, whereby God shares with finite creatures, in Christ through the Spirit, his own eternal life. The concept of communicative action is all-embracing, and reminds us that the triune God shares (i.e., communicates) his light, life, and love in many ways. Communicative action also embraces Scripture itself inasmuch as it not only transmits information but also serves as a rich medium by which God interpersonally relates via his promises, commands, warns,

¹³ "The Word of God which we hear in the Holy Scriptures derives from and reposes on the inner Being of the One God; and that is its objective ground, deep in the eternal Being of God, upon which our knowledge of God rests. In his own eternal Essence God is not mute or dumb, but Word communicating or speaking himself" (T. F. Torrance, "Knowledge of God and Speech about him according to John Calvin," in his *Theology in Reconstruction* [London: SCM, 1965], p. 88).

consoles, etc. All of the things God does in Scripture are types of communicative action intended to establish and govern right covenantal relations for the sake of communion.

Why begin with divine discourse? Because “in the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1), and because the word of God is the singular enabling condition of theology. Of course, remythologizing theology—the attempt to think God and God’s thoughts after God’s self-presentation in Scripture—is only the first step in the broader project of *recontextualizing* the knowledge of God. The goal of Christian theology is eminently practical and pastoral: to equip and edify the people so that they can speak well of God, and live well towards God and one another. In the final analysis, theology exists to help the church demonstrate the wisdom and truth of Jesus Christ in its corporate life. Theology directs the church faithfully and fittingly to live out, in a variety of cultural contexts, the truth and character of God communicated in Christ and the canonical Scriptures that attest him.