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HARDING UNIVERSITY

SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION: A COMPARISON OF ALEXANDER CAMPBELL, KEVIN VANHOOZER, AND WILLIAM ABRAHAM

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of
Harding School of Theology
Memphis, Tennessee

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Daniel T. Crouch

April 2019

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Reader _____
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Dean _____
Date Approved _____

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Chapter One
INTRODUCTION

As its name would imply, the Stone-Campbell Movement is heavily indebted to the theological work of Alexander Campbell (1788–1866), especially as it deals with issues of revelation and hermeneutics. Campbell's legacy through his sermons, debates, and writings in influential serials like the *Christian Baptist* and *The Millennial Harbinger* offered his followers a way of understanding God's communication with humanity. Campbell taught that God had revealed himself most fully in the words of Holy Scripture, and that all spiritual ideas can be found in its pages. Moreover, the singular meaning of Scripture is within the Christian's grasp, obtainable through a scientific approach to interpretation. Understanding this theological influence in comparison to modern evangelical work is the topic of this study.

Campbell and the Current Movement

Expectedly, much of Campbell's theology was a product of or in some way influenced by the era in which he lived. Born on the heels of the Enlightenment, the religious culture surrounding Campbell in his developmental years emphasized the orderliness of God as well as a reasonable approach for studying matters of faith. The effects of this milieu are most evident in the opening pages of Campbell's most systematic work, *The Christian System*, where he describes the universe as a "system" created by the one God, a god of order, and subsequently lays out a Baconian method for

coming to know the will of God through interpreting Scripture.[1] Moreover, Campbell mirrored those in his generation who sought to counteract the subjectivity common in revivalism and Liberal Protestantism by appeals to the plain interpretation of the Bible, much like his contemporaries at Princeton.

During and since the time of Campbell, however, major shifts have occurred in mainstream theology and schools of biblical interpretation. In regards to theology, Liberal Protestantism dominated nineteenth century academia until the rise of neo-orthodox figures like Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Jaded by the back-to-back World Wars at the start of the twentieth century, these religious leaders rejected the optimistic theology of their pasts, opting instead to explore new, often more existential paths. This movement was paralleled by the rise of postmodernism and, later, postliberalism. Theologians also began to interact with philosophy more directly on the relationship between revelation and history. In regards to hermeneutics, the historical-critical method grew in popularity over-against the historical-grammatical method and continues to hold significant sway among scholarly circles. In less than two hundred years, Christianity witnessed an unprecedented explosion in ways to view God's act of revelation and methods for interpreting God's communication through Scripture.

These waves of change necessarily raise problems of relevance for those championing the theology of Campbell. Anyone who subscribes to Campbell's restorationist vision must honestly assess the place of his views regarding revelation in

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[1] Alexander Campbell, *Christian System* (1839; repr., Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1980), 1-5.

modern theological conversation, and if one is convinced that his thoughts on God's communicative acts need no defense, one is still obligated to compare his work to that of contemporary theologians and dialogue with them. Simply stated, the problem is that Campbell's theology of revelation and Scripture, still influential today, was developed in the early nineteenth century and is in need of comparison and refinement in light of modern approaches to the subject.

This has major implications for the Churches of Christ and the rest of the Stone-Campbell Movement. The Churches of Christ have been directly and indirectly influenced by the writings of Alexander Campbell; his conception of revelation, that God's communication is a systematic affair taking place sufficiently in the pages of Scripture, has shaped countless Christians that have come after him. Naturally, we should desire to understand how these beliefs intersect with contemporary thought on the same subject, and, in as much as the Churches of Christ have already begun to adopt other theological approaches to revelation, we should desire to understand how they compare to our heritage. It is paramount in either direction that we compare Campbell's theology to that of other confessing theologians.

A Current Evangelical Theology of Revelation

The restorationist father's work can be contrasted with any number of modern theories, but comparing his views to those writing and ministering in the same vein today can illuminate the most important features of his work. For this reason, at the center of this study is a comparison between the work of Campbell and that of Kevin J. Vanhoozer and William J. Abraham. Vanhoozer and Abraham represent contemporary trends in

confessional theology and will, therefore, act as ideal subjects for addressing the problem of bringing Campbell's theology into the current discourse.

These two figures have been chosen for their influence on current theological thought, specifically as it relates to revelation and interpretation. Kevin Vanhoozer is widely regarded as a leading theologian in American Evangelicalism and has edited several works dealing with Scripture and hermeneutics. His major works on the subject include *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (1998) and *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (2005). Across his works, Vanhoozer presents a thoroughly evangelical conception of revelation, while advancing a creative re-understanding of God as primarily communicative.

William Abraham, on the other hand, has likely written as much about divine revelation as any contemporary English-speaking theologian. From his early work in *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (1981) and *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (1982) to his later work *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (1998) and *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (2007), Abraham has challenged traditional theologies of revelation and Scripture while maintaining a focus on orthodoxy. Added to these works is *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (2008), an anthology co-edited with Jason E. Vickers and Natalie B. Van Kirk, which helped launch an influential movement within scholarship to appreciate the canonical heritage of the faith. Because of the Canonical Theism movement, there has been a surge

of those from the Stone-Campbell Movement interacting with Abraham, particularly by two of his students Mark E. Powell and Frederick D. Aquino.[2]

Both Vanhoozer and Abraham represent current and mainstream thought in the field of the theology of revelation, making them prime for this analysis. Though their current work is likely in no way dependent on Campbell's, they both stand in the same heritage of producing work and contemplating theology from a perspective of practicing Christianity and a faith that admits the existence of God. Moreover, both Abraham and Vanhoozer work within a Protestant framework and for this reason give significantly more attention to Scripture in their discussions of revelation than, perhaps, Catholic theologians would. It can be trusted that both of these scholars are approaching the topic on friendly terms.

The Task at Hand

These topics will be handled in three parts for each of the theologians; the goal is to define their beliefs regarding revelation proper, the role of Scripture in revelation, and the human response to revelation—together making up the single transaction of revelation. Revelation proper deals with God's revealing of himself and his will for creation as well as his motivation for doing so. Discussions of revelation must also concern themselves with the possibility of communication between the physical and the metaphysical. Necessarily, it must then be discerned how Campbell, Vanhoozer, and

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[2] See Powell and Aquino's chapters in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); see also Mark E. Powell, "Canonical Theism and Theological Commitments in the Stone-Campbell Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2009): 227-38.

Abraham view Sacred Scripture's role in communicating God to humanity. How does God use inspiration to speak through the written word? This leads finally to the issue of human reception of revelation. Must humans be illuminated by God? Is interpretation a requirement? These sorts of questions will guide the analysis at hand.

This study will conclude by providing a helpful vision of revelation and Scripture for the Stone-Campbell Movement. This is done first by comparing the work of Campbell, Vanhoozer, and Abraham. While they all hold certain ideas in common—for example, the centrality of Scripture in communicating divine revelation—they each understand revelation with their own nuances and differences. Campbell conceives of revelation as a propositional affair in which God communicates eternal truths or facts to humanity. Scripture is the infallible container of these facts and the root of all spiritual ideas. For him, all humans must do is read Scripture in a sound, consistent way if they desire to gain God's truth.[3]

Vanhoozer, on the other hand, rejects a merely propositional reading of the Bible, while maintaining that Scripture is the central means by which God is communicated to his creation. God sustains all communication, and by this communication, he calls all of humanity to participate in his cosmic plan of redemption. Vanhoozer likens it to a drama in which Scripture is the script, God the director, and us the actors.[4]

Abraham, offering a third approach, views Scripture and revelation as distinct concepts. While revelation is communication from God and naturally holds divine

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[3] Campbell, 1-7, 88-90.

[4] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2005), 4-38, 48, 265.

authority, Scripture is one element of the Church's canon—God's soteriological tools to bring people to him and promote spiritual formation. For Abraham, canon includes Scripture, creeds, liturgy, iconography, Fathers, and sacraments, though Scripture is unique in its delivering of divine revelation. In this way, the concepts of revelation, canon, and Scripture remain distinct, forcing Christians to synthesize a different though cogent way of understanding the concepts and purposes of these categories.[5]

It is clear even from these early analyses that more recent theology breaks with the much earlier work of Campbell. Developments in philosophy and hermeneutics have forced theologians to forge new paths, and the Stone-Campbell Movement is obligated to examine where these paths lead.

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[5] William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), 1-7, 479-80.

Chapter Two
ALEXANDER CAMPBELL

Throughout the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement, a chorus of voices have constructed and informed the diverse tradition, but in regards to its conception of revelation, Scripture, and hermeneutics, none are as influential as Alexander Campbell. To this day, his understanding of divine communication in Scripture shapes the theology and biblical interpretation of Restoration churches.

Revelation Proper

Alexander Campbell's conception of revelation is heavily influenced by his Reformed upbringing as well as his Enlightenment education. Raised up under the tutelage of his father, Thomas Campbell—at one time a Presbyterian minister—and in Reformed circles, the Restoration leader demonstrates the hallmarks of a Reformed faith: an extreme deference to and humility before God.[1] This religious background has a profound effect on Campbell's distinctly Protestant theology, a theology that emphasizes the simplicity of the gospel, the understandability of the faith, and the sufficiency of Scripture.

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[1] Campbell and his father fall mostly in line with the Westminster Confession. Additionally, they assume the Protestant emphasis on covenant and law language as well as the Protestant view of inspiration and authorship of the Bible (discussed below); James O. Duke, "The Hermeneutics of the Early Stone-Campbell Movement," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 12, no. 1 (2009): 4-5. Additionally, his Presbyterian background manifests in a Ciceronian style of preaching characteristic of those coming out of the same movement; Michael W. Casey, *The Battle of Hermeneutics in the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1998), 26-35.

On the other hand, Campbell is not just a Reformed theologian but clearly works within the Enlightenment paradigm common in his day. Many have noticed parallels between Campbell's thought and that of John Locke; Campbell rejects creeds and attempts to condense the faith—much like Locke in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*—and practices a sort of Lockean empiricism, trusting only knowledge gained through sensory experience.[2] This empiricist approach is coupled tightly with Campbell's use of a Baconian reading of the Bible whereby truth is discovered through clear, scientific induction.[3] In addition to Locke and Bacon, however, Campbell demonstrates unequivocal reliance on Scottish Common Sense Realism and the work of Thomas Reid. His dependence on Common Sense philosophy is to be expected as Campbell studied under George Jardine, a student of Thomas Reid, at Glasgow University.[4] Not only does

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[2] Samuel C. Pearson, "Enlightenment Influence on Protestant Thought in Early National America," *Encounter* 38, no. 3 (Summer 1977); Thomas H. Olbricht, "The Bible as Revelation," *Restoration Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1965): 211; Thomas H. Olbricht, "The Rationalism of the Restoration," *Restoration Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1968): 77-8; Royal Humbert, *A Compend of Alexander Campbell's Theology* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1961), 30-1; J. Caleb Clanton, "Alexander Campbell's Revealed-Idea Argument for the Existence of God," *Restoration Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2012): 105; Casey, 35-40, 264; Duke, 5-7. Pearson comments that Campbell is "more Lockean than Locke" in that Locke proved God by our intuition of existence while Campbell proved only by what is sensed—in this case, God's communicated revelation.

[3] John Mark Hicks, "Stone-Campbell Hermeneutics I – Campbell's Scholarly Baconianism," *Wineskins*, 2008, accessed January 1, 2019; Casey, 35-40. John C. Nugent argues that while Campbell took advantage of the philosophy of his time (particularly Baconianism), he was more motivated by eschatological and ecumenical concerns; Nugent, "Was Alexander Campbell Enslaved to Scottish Baconianism?" *Stone-Campbell Journal* 12, no. 1 (2009).

[4] Casey, 43-9.

Campbell frequently cite Common Sense thinkers, but he also utilizes Common Sense epistemology in his appraisal of the testimony of Scripture.[5]

By the combination of these forces—his Enlightenment thinking as well as his Protestant orthodoxy—Campbell holds without paradox to an understanding of revelation as something both beyond natural reason and within the realm of human knowledge.[6] This dialectical conception of revelation rooted in his religious and educational background leads him to a rich understanding of God's communication and at times to striking contrasts—such as in *Christianity Restored*, where he in the span of a page likens revelation to both speaking in tongues and to arithmetic.[7]

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[5] Peter Jay Rasor II, *The Influence of Common Sense Realism on Alexander Campbell's View of the Nature of Scripture and Hermeneutics* (PhD Thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010); Olbricht, "The Rationalism of the Restoration," 77-8; Clanton, 105; Duke, 5; Casey, 35-40. Peter Jay Rasor II demonstrates Campbell's extensive reliance on Common Sense philosophy, particularly its theory of signs as well as standards for verifying testimony. Moreover, Rasor contests that while most scholars focus on Campbell's Lockean connection (probably due to its accessibility), Campbell was in fact more dependent on Scottish Common Sense Realism.

[6] Carey Jerome Gifford, "The Theology about the Scriptures in Alexander Campbell," *Restoration Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1973): 81; Humbert, 62-4; Duke 4-7. Despite this clear dependence on Reformed theology and Enlightenment philosophy, Campbell rejects dogmatism and natural theology, attempting to distance himself from both ways of thinking; see Humbert, 13; Olbricht, "Alexander Campbell's View of the Holy Spirit," 6. It is also worth noting that much of Campbell's work is specifically in reaction to emotionalism in Protestant churches; Humbert, 10.

[7] Alexander Campbell, *Christianity Restored: The Principal Extras of the Millennial Harbinger, Revised and Corrected* (1835; repr., Indianapolis: Faith and Facts Press, 1998), 19.

Campbell's theology of revelation is defined by its joining of these two modes of thinking into what can best be called "rational supernaturalism."[8] For Campbell, the phenomenon of revelation is both reasonable and otherworldly, both comprehensible and rooted in divine transcendence. This way of conceiving of God's communication leads Campbell and his followers to emphasize revelation as God's communication of spiritual and moral truths alongside its being a primarily linguistic phenomenon concerned with historical facts.

For Campbell, revelation is foremost supernatural; he defines it as "nothing more or less than a Divine communication concerning spiritual and eternal things, a knowledge of which man could never have attained by the exercise of his reason upon material and sensible object."[9] He explores the otherness of revelation most fully in his debate with Robert Owen in which he explains that without supernatural communication we have no basis for human worth and we are of equal value as the coat on Campbell's back. Moreover, this communication could not be an artificial construct of humans because, just as we could never conceive of the respective worlds of the five senses without those

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[8] To describe Campbell, Royal Humbert introduces the phrase "rational supernaturalism," which is adopted by Carey Gifford to describe Campbell's seeming lack of tension between the two approaches; Humbert, 12; Gifford, 81. M. Eugene Boring notes that "rational supernaturalism" is meant to affirm the Bible's authority and accessibility; Boring, 80. "Rational" is used here to simply mean an approach keeping with reason and the non-supernatural; this is in contrast to epistemological rationalism which Campbell rejects on more than one occasion in favor of empiricism; e.g. Alexander Campbell, "The Bible," *The Christian Baptist* 3, no. 8 (March 1826): 225.

[9] Alexander Campbell and Robert Owen, *A Debate on the Evidences of Christianity* (Bethany, VA: Campbell, 1829), 151-2. This statement demonstrates Campbell's empiricist thought in his rejection of the possibility that human reasoning in a vacuum could ever deduce the spiritual and moral insights found in the Christian religion. For him, the wisdom of the Bible is wholly original.

physical faculties, so we could never conceive of God and the spiritual system without divine revelation.[10] According to Campbell, "You might as reasonably expect a person born deaf to have all the ideas of harmony, as a man destitute of supernatural revelation to have the ideas of God and a spiritual system."[11]

Revelation is also a rational phenomenon. This first means that it is reasonable, keeping with our understanding of reality. Campbell believes that "the voice of nature will never contradict the voice of revelation. Nature and the Bible are both witnesses for God—they are consistent witnesses, and mutually corroborate each other."[12] While reason is under faith and revelation, they are always in accordance with each other.[13] Revelation is also rational in its concern for facts. While revelation can be factual by its not being false or opinion, Campbell has in mind that revelation is factual because rather than being abstract it is reflective of history. Campbell defines fact as things said or done, and in this way, the revelation found in Scripture is concerned with the things said and

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[10] Ibid., 144-5, 148-51. The analogy here is rough as Campbell equates the *means* by which we experience something (e.g. hearing is the means by which we experience harmony) with the experience itself (i.e. divine revelation).

[11] Ibid., 150.

[12] Alexander Campbell, "Supernatural Facts, 1839," in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen and Son, 1863), 162.

[13] Gifford, 84-93. Humbert claims that Campbell is inconsistent over the course of his life regarding reason's relation to revelation—early on he has revelation as the foundational principles that we accept and then reason from; later he suggests we use reason to understand revelation (which is simply rational facts from an outside source); Humbert, 21. This seems less contradictory and more in step with a pervasive and multifaceted understanding of reason.

done by God.[14] Rather than dealing with propositions or abstract truths, the apostolic testimony of the Bible describes God's actions in history to save humankind. This understanding of the rationality of revelation demonstrates the restorationist's overarching emphasis on the historical element of the faith and his focus on the works of God alongside the words of God.[15]

Revelation is not only rational in its content—never contradictory or against the witness of nature—but it is conveyed in a rational way, through linguistic means.[16] Campbell emphasizes the communicative capabilities of human language and holds that "unless words are understood, ideas or sentiments can neither be communicated nor received."[17] This exchange of symbols for information is what he calls the "currency of ideas," the understanding that the written word, like the spoken, only works under the contract of communication.[18] Under this contract, consistent rules can be applied to interpret any combination of words and arrive upon a singular meaning. The application

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[14] Alexander Campbell, "The Confirmation of the Testimony," *The Millennial Harbinger* 1 (January 1830): 8-9.

[15] Ibid.; Alexander Campbell, "Testimony," *The Millennial Harbinger* 4 (August 1833): 30. As an empiricist, Campbell focuses on facts, insisting that revelation is not abstract; however, he does say in *Christian System* that we understand God's eternity and other qualities by abstractly reasoning them from the traits we do know—indicating that abstraction has a place in his theology; Campbell, *Christian System*, 8.

[16] All language is rationalistic and propositional; Boring, 101.

[17] Alexander Campbell, "Sermon on the Law," *The Millennial Harbinger* 3 (September 1846): 496. Campbell holds in especially high regard the power of the English language and its ability to transmit spiritual truths; Alexander Campbell, "Address on the Anglo-Saxon Language, 1849," in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen and Son, 1863).

[18] Alexander Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. III: The Bible—Principles of Interpretation," *The Millennial Harbinger* 17 (January 1846): 14.

of rules to interpret language demonstrates Campbell's belief that language is a closed science, able to transmit unambiguous truth if interpreted in the right, systematic way.

In addition, Campbell's theology acknowledges the classical categories of general and special revelation. On one hand, there are spiritual truths evident in nature, while on the other hand, there are spiritual truths that have been revealed directly to humanity, particularly in Scripture.[19] Both forms of revelation, for Campbell, are gracious acts of God to communicate himself to his creation—through general providence and through intervening acts and words. These dual volumes of revelation are both useful for coming to a fuller knowledge of God, and they always work in unison:

> And, even as it is, the intelligent Christian makes the greatest proficiency in studying nature and the Bible by making them subservient to each other—sometimes interpreting the Bible by nature, and at other times expounding nature by the Bible. They are two voices speaking for God—two witnesses of his being and perfections; but neither of them is wholly adequate to meet all the variety of human circumstance without the other.[20]

However, Campbell consistently held general revelation—knowledge of God through the cries of nature—to be epistemologically inferior to special revelation—namely, God revealed in the pages of Holy Scripture. This hierarchy of revelation is due, in part, to humanity's apostasy, whereby we "lost the art of reading and studying the

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[19] Alexander Campbell, "Providence, General and Special," *The Millennial Harbinger* 26 (November 1855). Campbell does not hold that Scripture *is* special revelation as much as it is reflective of special revelation. Additionally, while he believes the Bible to be the primary avenue of special revelation, he may be open to others. He does not, however, believe that the Spirit communicates in any way outside of the word; Campbell, "The Bible," 225; see also Olbricht, "Alexander Campbell's View of the Holy Spirit," 8-10; Humbert, 45.

[20] Alexander Campbell, "Literature, Science and Art, 1838," in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen and Son, 1863), 136.

works of God."[21] Relatedly, Campbell saw the cosmos as vast and incomprehensible.[22] This suggests that while there is truth to be found in the witness of nature, it is entirely too ambiguous for theology and constructing doctrine. Clear and precise communication from God is needed to have knowledge of spiritual things with any kind of certainty. For this reason, Campbell understands revelation to be, foremost, something external, something that is received. This need for clarity undergirds the place of special revelation through the written word in Campbell's theological system.

Lastly, it should be noted that for Campbell special revelation is not exclusive to the propositions of Scripture but truly reaches its apex in the person of Jesus Christ. Though the canon of Scripture varies in the directness of its divine communication—the Old Testament is generally more direct (e.g. "The Lord said…"), while the New Testament is less so—it is unequivocal in its proclamation that in the Son we meet the Father.[23] Campbell goes further to say that all Scripture is centered on Jesus and, in fact, the whole enterprise of religion is "the social knowledge of God, the social love of Jesus."[24]

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Campbell, *Christian System*, 1-3, 222; Campbell and Owen, 142-4. He also did not like general revelation or natural theology for its connection to epistemological rationalism.

[23] Campbell and Owen, 151-2.

[24] Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1897), 146.

The Role of Scripture

Central to Alexander Campbell's conception of revelation is the Holy Bible.[25] For him, inspired Scripture is the primary mode by which God narrates his revelatory acts throughout history—including the Incarnation of the Son—to his Church. Campbell, an empiricist, parallels humanity's knowledge of nature through the senses with its knowledge of spiritual matters through the Bible.[26]

To appreciate Campbell's emphasis on Scripture, it is necessary to understand how he views the relationship between revelation and the Bible. As stated above, God's revelation to humanity is primarily through Scripture. However, Scripture is not completely revelatory in the proper sense. Only that which is supernaturally communicated by God (e.g. the Decalogue) can said to be true revelation.[27] Still, the entire Bible is in someway revelatory as even that which is testimony regarding history is descriptive of God's work in history—that is, his *revealing* of himself in history.[28] While

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[25] This emphasis on *sola scriptura* is demonstrative of his Protestant influence. He views Christianity as completely encapsulated in the written record, making all externals doctrines and creeds superfluous; Campbell, *Christian System*, 102-5; Campbell, *Christianity Restored*, 15, 21-2.

[26] Campbell, *Christian System*, 2-3. Thomas H. Olbricht identifies this as the defining feature of Campbell's hermeneutic; Olbricht, "The Bible as Revelation," 211-3; Olbricht, "The Rationalism of the Restoration," 79-82.

[27] Alexander Campbell, "The Social System and Deism—No. II," *The Christian Baptist* 4, no. 11 (June 1827): 344; Campbell and Owen, 151-2.

[28] For this reason, the Bible is often used interchangeably with the Christian doctrine of revelation in Campbell's work. Donald Henderson labels this as Campbell's primary understanding of the Bible: revealing redemptive history; Henderson, "Alexander Campbell on the Bible," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 9, no. 1 (2006): 4-5, 14-7.

most of Scripture is factual or historical in nature, the parts that are divinely revealed are in some ways propositional and in other ways factual.[29]

The Bible is thus seen as the container of all spiritual truths—or at least the root of all spiritual truths. It is, for Campbell, the "One Best Book" and is understandably necessary for knowing God and developing one's faith.[30] While some truths may be available outside of Scripture—for example, that nature cries forth the glory of God—or be deduced by logic—for example, God's divine attributes or his eternity—it is Scripture that ultimately reveals the heavenly reality. Illustrating its perfection, Campbell describes the Bible as "Dictated by infinite benevolence, characterized by supreme intelligence, and perfectly adapted to the genius of human nature, it is worthy of universal reception and of the most profound and grateful homage."[31] All theology and doctrine can and should be based in the word of God.

Consequently, Campbell understands the process of revelation to be complete. No more is needed to know God (at least for salvation purposes) and nothing else is necessary to rightly interpret the present revelation. To this end, Campbell wittily remarks

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[29] For example, commandments from God are undoubtedly propositional—*thou shalt not murder*. Campbell, though acknowledging this, shied away from it and rather emphasized the dynamics of God speaking to his people in history and Scripture's recording of that.

[30] Campbell, *Christian System*, 3.

[31] Alexander Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. I: The Bible," *The Millennial Harbinger* 16 (October 1845): 439.

that "a revelation that needs to be revealed is no revelation at all."[32] This exclusivism casts aside not only latter-day prophets but also creeds and Sacred Tradition as necessary foundations for doctrine.

Of course, Scripture can only be called sufficient by the power of God through the Spirit, and so Campbell holds the Bible to be the inspired word of God. While Campbell rarely delves into the mechanics of inspiration, his beliefs generally fall under the umbrella of verbal plenary inspiration: that while God did not dictate each word of Scripture and allowed the authors to write using their own language, the Spirit guided and assured all of their words.[33] Inspiration is thus an act of accommodation on God's part; God communicates his infinite being through essential truths regarding his being and will in human language. Campbell illustrates this point by reference to the titles "Father" and "King." Clearly God is not a biological father nor an actual monarch, but these metaphors have been chosen because they describe the incomprehensible God more than any other metaphors. This demonstrates Campbell's broader axiom that things unknown can only

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[32] Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. III," 17. Campbell takes up this point repeatedly in his attack on the legitimacy of Mormonism; Alexander Campbell, "Delusions," *The Millennial Harbinger* 2 (February 1831). See also, Alexander Campbell, "Phrenology, Animal Magnetism, Clairvoyance, Spiritual Rappings, etc., 1852," in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen and Son, 1863), 210-1.

[33] Campbell viewed this process as the "superintendence" of the Spirit upon the writing of the apostles. The Holy Spirit aided the authors not only by endowing them with new, divine ideas but also by perfecting their memory; Campbell, *Christianity Restored*, 18-20. Regarding categorizing Campbell under verbal plenary inspiration, see Gifford, 93-7; Boring, 81; Rasor, 130-4.

be communicated through things known, which is why God uses everything, natural and conceptual, known to humans to communicate himself.[34]

Yet even though God accommodates his infinite reality to humans' finite understanding, humanity is assured of its trustworthiness. While the authority of Scripture ultimately rests in the word of the Father, Campbell understands the writings of the biblical authors to be infallible, particularly in regards to spiritual or moral matters.[35] For Campbell, the Bible should be thought of as testimony (as suggested by the language of "seen and heard," 1 John 1:1-4); this testimony is trustworthy, even regarding its supernatural and miraculous claims, because of the reliability of its witnesses: the inspired apostles and the Holy Spirit.[36] While this spiritual certification only goes as far as the original language of the Scriptures, Campbell is confident in modern translation practices.[37]

Campbell also sees Scripture as reliable by the very nature of language. This is not to say that language is not capable of being used to mislead—an issue answered by the reliability of the apostles—but that language is a trustworthy means by which to

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[34] Campbell and Owen, 388-9.

[35] Campbell, *Christian System*, 87; see also Campbell, "The Social System and Deism—No. II," 345; Campbell and Owen, 151-2.

[36] Campbell, "Supernatural Facts;" Campbell, "The Confirmation of the Testimony," 9-10. This whole argument seems to be in response to criticisms like that leveled by David Hume regarding the reliability of miracles.

[37] Campbell, *Christian System*, 3; Campbell, *Christianity Restored*, 21.

communicate truth.[38] God, though completely other and transcendent of humanity, is able to reliably communicate himself and his will to his Church through spoken and written words. For Campbell, language is a symbolic system that correlates directly with reality and therefore can be trusted, while maintaining the possibility that language—and therefore the Bible—can be misread if the wrong interpretive tools or methods are used.[39]

For these reasons, Scripture in Campbell's conception can be understood as a storehouse of truths, sometimes propositional though more often testifying to the work and nature of God. The text of Scripture, its sentences and verses, therefore hold singular meaning accessible to the adequate reader. There is no double sense to the Bible's meaning, no literal and metaphorical dichotomy—there is only the true meaning of the text.[40] Campbell does not hold that this singular meaning is always manifest in one way—namely *literal*, given his emphasis on the facts of revelation—but he is open to the genre of Scripture, accepting historical texts as historical and metaphorical as metaphorical. He does not rely on a predefined understanding of the genre of the Bible but on reading it as one would read any book.[41]

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[38] According to Campbell, unless one is making a riddle or intending to deceive, words have a singular, agreed upon meeting; Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. III," 14, 18-9.

[39] Alexander Campbell, "Address on the Anglo-Saxon Language, 1849," in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen and Son, 1863), 17; see also Campbell, *Christianity Restored*.

[40] Alexander Campbell, "The Double Sense of Scripture," *The Millennial Harbinger* 1 (January 1830).

[41] Alexander Campbell, "On the Laws of Interpretation—No. I," *The Millennial Harbinger* 2 (November 1831): 490-2.

The Human Response

In responding to God's revelation, humans are only called to concern themselves with the biblical text. Rather than relying on creeds or nature or even tradition, Christians ought to seek God in a systematic—that is, scientific—reading of Scripture.[42] For Campbell, this method of interpretation should be similar to our reading of any ancient text[43] and should be based in the best, most scholarly approaches to literature, using modern tactics to bring out Scripture's meaning.[44] This requires locating the singular meaning of words, which in turn involves differentiating between the literal/grammatical, historical, and figurative/tropical meanings of words and also ascertaining the meaning of ambiguous words from their context and parallel passages.[45] With this aim—and leaning on a Baconian method of interpretation—Campbell outlines seven rules for accurate interpretation of the Scriptures: consider the historical context, consider the speaker and audience, use the principles derived from the nature of language and the interpretation of other books, determine meaning based on context and parallel passages, understand metaphors by their points of comparison, understand allegories by their intended

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[42] Interpretation is to be systematic because God and his creation are orderly; Campbell, *Christian System*, 1-3. Interpretation is to be scientific because we must use human knowledge—since there is no divine guidance for how to read Scripture, we must assume human methods; Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. III," 18.

[43] Campbell, *Christian System*, 3; see also Campbell, *Christianity Restored*, 22-3.

[44] Much of Campbell's methodology comes from the popular scholarship of his day, particularly the work of Stuart of Andover; Campbell, *Christianity Restored*, 95. See also Thomas H. Olbricht, "Alexander Campbell in the Context of American Biblical Studies," *Restoration Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1991): 16.

[45] Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. III," 20-1.

message, and "come within the understanding distance."[46] These rules provide a simple and distributable means by which any Christian faithfully seeking the meaning of the text can arrive at its answers.

This method of interpretation is only viable because the human mind is, in Campbell's view, derived from the divine mind.[47] The gap between the finite and the infinite is traversable, and thus divine ideas are accessible to humans. This ability, along with a scientific reading of the text, allows certainty in biblical interpretation. Humans can have confidence that they have rightly understood God's communication to creation.[48] For Campbell, the only disagreements should be in regards to matters of expediency, in which the older and wiser are called to lead.[49]

This epistemological certainty is intended to result in Christian unity. As Christianity continued to splinter in Campbell's day on account of the hermeneutical freedom available to Protestants and different denominations continued to claim their

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[46] Campbell, *Christian System*, 3-5; also Campbell, *Christianity Restored*, 96-9; Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. III," 23. These rules demonstrate Campbell's focus on authorial intent and his adoption of the grammatical-historical method; D. Newell Williams, "Disciples Biblical Interpretation and the Fugitive," *Encounter* 59, no. 1 (1998): 3-4; Boring 85-105; Hicks. Michael W. Casey sees Campbell as progressively incorporating inference as a category of interpretation, moving toward the traditional CENI hermeneutic of Stone-Campbell churches; Casey, 94-6, 267-9.

[47] Richardson, 142. This reflects an acceptance of the Enlightenment idea that the Image of God is the human capacity for reason; Humbert, 23.

[48] Though Campbell is confident that Christians should be able to rightly interpret Scripture, he maintains that Christians need only believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah; Campbell, *Christian System*, 100-1. This idea is also found in Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*.

[49] Campbell, *Christian System*, 71-5.

creeds as authoritative, Campbell sought to strip away any extra-biblical approaches and center on a reasonable method for interpreting the text. This rational approach, transcending any human bias, would allow the disparate Christian denominations to come together and agree finally on what the Bible intended for God's people. Christians, in this way, learn from the model of the sciences in which the same body of rules are agreed upon and thus the same results are consistently reached.[50]

Yet as any Christian knows, agreement and certainty are not always achieved. According to Campbell, this is because the Bible is often misunderstood as people read it carelessly and with bias—interpretive habits that stem from people reading for knowledge of propositions rather than to be changed internally.[51] This reflects Campbell's belief that revelation is not solely to be understood rightly or to be the foundation for Christian unity; rather, God's revelation in Scripture is a call to action. The Christian relation to revelation and the events of Scripture is thus: the facts of history and God are recorded as testimony, testimony is trusted by readers in faith, faith produces in believers an internal feeling, and this feeling leads to action and ultimately personal salvation.[52] This conclusion in righteous action and the salvation of the faithful is the entire goal of

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[50] Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. III," 13.

[51] Campbell, "The Bible," 225.

[52] Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. I," 435.

revelation.[53] As Christians respond to revelation in action, they build up in themselves Christian character and morals. Beyond this, God's supernatural communication to creation provides the avenue to salvation—by no other means can humanity come to know what is expected of them to save their souls.

Conclusion

Throughout his theology of revelation, Alexander Campbell demonstrates his Reformed and Enlightenment background. His heritage manifests most clearly in his supernatural and rational approach to revelation, viewing it as the transmission of spiritual truths from God to humanity. Since God is infinite and humans finite, he sees this communication as an act of lowering, of God accommodating himself. God's accommodation and communication is mostly at work in the pages of the Bible. Though revealing himself in the human words of Scripture, God's communication remains perfect and sufficient for all spiritual needs. In order to fully benefit from these inspired words, Christians ought to approach the text scientifically, employing consistent and rational methods for reading the text. This sort of approach will naturally lead to certainty in interpretation and unity among Christians. But, most importantly, Christians are called to approach the text with the expectation of change—that God through the Spirit in the words will alter and redeem and ultimately save his children.

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[53] Over his body of work, Campbell identifies a number of purposes for revelation, including: spiritual development; teaching regarding human nature, God, and the three great works of creation, providence, and redemption; leading to happiness; and for apologetic purposes; Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. I," 433; Campbell and Owen, 151-2; Alexander Campbell, "Evidences of the Gospel—No. III: Revelation Possible and Probable," *The Millennial Harbinger* 7 (April 1836). Boring identifies in Campbell revelation's purpose to educate concerning salvation; Boring, 67-9.

Chapter Three
KEVIN VANHOOZER

Kevin J. Vanhoozer is one of the most important figures in evangelical conversations of revelation, inspiration, and hermeneutics. He has spent much of his career combating postmodern uncertainty and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism as well as providing an alternative to postliberalism for the unconvinced. In all of his works, he affirms God's powerful words in Scripture and the text's normative position in the Christian faith.

Across his writings, Vanhoozer focuses on the communicative aspects of God and the importance of Speech-Act Theory to understand that communication is not a purely propositional affair. He posits that by God's nature reliable communication is made possible, that Scripture is the definitive revelation of God, and that right religion leads to transformation and participation in the Christian "theo-drama."

Revelation Proper

The concept of revelation is central to Kevin Vanhoozer's theology not for epistemic reasons but because, for Vanhoozer, God is fundamentally a communicative agent. Principal to God's being is God's desire to communicate his will, his nature, and his redemption for all creation.[1] Through this communication, through God's speaking

[1] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Vanhoozer Responds to the Four Horsemen of an Apocalyptic Panel Discussion on *Remythologizing Theology,*" *Southeastern Theological Review* 4, no. 1 (Sum 2013): 68-9. This is so central to Vanhoozer's conception of God that he claims that we cannot speak of God unless we admit that God himself speaks.

forth mighty words and performing mighty deeds, God enters into a covenant relationship with the world, establishing a bond in which the divine speaks and is spoken to in return.[2] This relationship is initiated not by virtue of the creation, but by God's freedom and love —by his own will.[3] Still, God is more than just a communicative agent; God is the very ground of communication. According to Vanhoozer, "both the transcendence and immanence of God are best viewed in terms of communicative agency rather than motional causality."[4] God's nature is itself communication, and this nature underwrites and gives meaning to all other communication.[5] Clearly, Vanhoozer's starting conception of God is in stark contrast to other ideas of the divine (both newer and classical); for Vanhoozer, God is not panentheistic but personal, not solely causal but in communicative relationship.[6]

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[2] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 96-124; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today," in *Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. by P. E. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 176.

[3] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 96-124.

[4] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24.

[5] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 456; see also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Providence," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 643-4.

[6] Kevin Storer, *Reading Scripture to Hear God: Kevin Vanhoozer and Henri de Lubac on God's Use of Scripture in the Economy of Redemption* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015), 62.

God's identity as the ground of communication is wrapped up in his existing as Trinity.[7] This is, first, because God communicates himself as Trinity—three-in-one is how we come to meet God, and how God presents himself in redemptive history is how God is in himself.[8] Vanhoozer phrases it poignantly:

> God's mighty acts in history "represent" the perfections of God's eternal nature and the outworking of God's eternal decree. Revelation (i.e., God's self-presentation in historical word and deed) is essentially representational. The historical missions of Son (e.g., incarnation) and Spirit represent eternal processions (e.g., begetting). What God does in time represents the way God is in eternity. God is on earth as he is in heaven![9]

God is also the model for communication because God's triune nature means his very being is communicative. The persons of the Godhead are in eternal relationship and communication, and thus for Vanhoozer, "The paradigm for a Christian view of communication is the triune God in communicative action."[10] Moreover, it is by God's trinitarian action that all communication is sustained. By the workings of the Father, Son, and Spirit, we are able to faithfully communicate ideas, making communication both

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[7] Vanhoozer outlines some of the major repercussions of God's trinitarian nature as follows: "[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;'" Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 26.

[8] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 199. God communicates himself as he actually is—"The economic Trinity is, or rather communicates, the immanent Trinity;" Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 294.

[9] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2014), 30.

[10] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 168. This communicative action specifically involves the continuous sharing of love, life, and light; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 52.

reflective of God and sustained by God.[11] Fundamental to the Trinity's emphasis on communication is the place of the Son or Logos—both in the immanent and economic Trinity. For Vanhoozer, "God's Word, incarnate and inscripturate, is God in communicative action."[12] The Word of God is the great revealer of the divine, presenting Christ, administering the covenant of grace, and making all things new.[13] It is also by the Word of God that humans are brought into the triune discourse, experiencing and interpreting God's communicative acts.[14]

Vanhoozer bases these communicative claims on a model of the Trinity that understands the divine persons as mirroring the parts of a speech-act.[15] Specifically, the Father is the speaker (locution), the Son is the content or action (illocution), the Spirit is the power and applier (perlocution). God the Father utters and begets his eternal word; the Logos demonstrates the force of God's uttered word and lives out the divine promise;

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[11] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 456; see also Vanhoozer, "Providence," 644-5.

[12] Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 180. Elsewhere, Vanhoozer adds to this that God's Word is written, incarnate, and accepted, suggesting that the Bible (and possibly Jesus) are not truly the Word of God until it has the proper affect in the heart of the believer; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Word of God," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 854.

[13] Vanhoozer, "Word of God," 854.

[14] Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 32.

[15] Speech-Act Theory derives from J. L. Austin's development of performative utterances and his breaking down of speech into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.

the Spirit not only illumines the believing heart but convicts.[16] In this way, God in his ontological being takes on the force of a speech-act.

Fundamental in the comparison of the Trinity to speech-acts is their dual nature as both speech and acts, as words and deeds. This suggests that God's revelation is both personal and propositional. Rather than simply being a cognitive affair, in which God transmits information about the divine (though it is certainly this), triune communication conveys the actual divine reality.[17] It produces change, initiating and inaugurating the

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[16] Vanhoozer, "Word of God," 854; Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 176-8; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 456-7. Vanhoozer most often relates the Trinity to Speech-Act Theory parts by reference to redemptive history—the Father is the speaker of salvation, the Son is the object of the Father's words and the means of salvation, and the Spirit is the power by which the Father's words are applied and by which we respond to salvation. However, he sometimes subtly shifts the way in which the Trinity corresponds to speech-acts, conceiving of it more internally—the Father is the speaker, the Son the word of the Father, and the Spirit the power by which the Father speaks.

[17] This dialogical conception of revelation stands over-against Barth and the Old Princeton Theologians, because in this way of thinking, the Word of God is something God both says and does; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2005), 45; see also Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 156. Regarding whether Vanhoozer views revelation as "propositional," he uses the word in different ways, making it hard to determine. In some cases, he says that the Word of God is not propositional but is divine discourse, while in other cases, admits that all speech-acts are necessarily propositional but that not all propositions are necessarily assertive; cf. Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 1278-80; Vanhoozer, "Word of God," 853. Regarding the Bible, C. Everett Berry recognizes Vanhoozer's push to be "post-propositional," as Scripture's illocutions reside in the broader redemptive experience of the author; however, he questions if Vanhoozer's approach really does move beyond propositionalism or is instead still focused on the cognitive content to be found in the text; C. Everett Berry, "Speech-Act Theory as a Corollary for Describing the Communicative Dynamics of Biblical Revelation: Some Recommendations and Reservations," *Criswell Theological Review* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 95-9; C. Everett Berry, "Theological vs. Methodological Postconservatism: Stanley Grenz and Kevin Vanhoozer as Test Cases," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 69, no. 1 (2007): 115.

heavenly Kingdom. Understanding that the speech-acts of God are divine discourse, both "saying" and "doing," helps to account for the diversity of Scripture and also indicates that canonical authority is not only in the propositions of the Bible but in all of God's Word.[18] It is by the speech-acts of God, both in his immanent existence and in his communication with creation, that revelation becomes dramatic and participatory.[19]

Since God is both the archetypal communicator and the ground of communication, all human communication is reflective of him. Just as God communicates with others, so humans, created in God's image, are communicative agents.[20] Humans communicate like God and by God; it is only by God's providence that the exchange of communication can occur. In addition, language itself is seen as a gift from God. According to Vanhoozer, "the design plan of language is to serve as the medium of covenantal relations with God, with others, with the world."[21]

Still, there is a qualitative difference between divine and human communication. Because God is infinite and transcendent, to communicate with finite beings demands

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[18] Vanhoozer, "Word of God," 853. In addition, Berry suggests that Speech-Act Theory helps Vanhoozer avoid referentialism, where words directly mirror reality (something disproven by postmodernism), as well as relativism; Berry, "Theological vs. Methodological Postconservatism,"115.

[19] Drama is a recurring theme for Vanhoozer. He says, "The heart of Christian theology is a series of divine words and divine deeds, historical sayings and enactments: a drama of redemption… theodrama;" Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Systematic Theology," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 778; see also Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 38.

[20] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 198-9.

[21] Ibid., 206-7. Vanhoozer goes on to say that because humans were created with the inherent ability to communicate, it is our obligation to protect the institution of language, the gift given us.

that God accommodate himself to his creation. For Vanhoozer, "divine accommodation is a matter of God's speaking through a variety of different voice-ideas in different ways;" he communicates in a way understandable to those he communicates with.[22] Moreover, "God is free to make use of creaturely forms as media of his communicative action and self-communication."[23] Beyond form, accommodation reflects God's patience in his revelation. God communicates to individuals and allows them to freely respond. In this way, God is not coercive—God does not abruptly intervene nor merely influence; rather, God interjects.[24]

This understanding of a God who communicates and a humanity created in his image allows Vanhoozer to answer the postmodern question: can communication occur? This question roots, of course, in the crisis of meaning brought about by postmodernism and the associated deconstructionism. These modes of thought challenge the very notion that communication can occur or, if it can occur, that we can be confident in its results. Vanhoozer, while sympathetic to some of deconstructionism's critiques, holds that even though language has inherent limitations, the glass is "half-full" for language is "able analogically to refer to the way God is."[25]

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[22] Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 349; see also Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 180.

[23] Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 481.

[24] Ibid., 316, 335-6.

[25] Vanhoozer, "Vanhoozer Responds to the Four Horsemen," 70; see also Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 9, 49-52, 456-8.

Theologically, this is because God ensures his communication.[26] Since the Trinity is the ground of communication, God is able to guarantee that his own communication is perfectly trustworthy in a way that no human can—God is the supreme author who stands by his word.[27] Furthermore, by God's design, language is inherently covenantal, and because God is eternally faithful, his communication can always be accepted. In this way, language is a heavenly gift to allow relating to God.[28] God's insurance of his communication is most manifest in Scripture and in the man Jesus of Nazareth. In these, God reveals ultimate and unquestionable truth.[29]

This insurance is not limited to God's revelation to creation but extends to human communication. By God's trinitarian nature, he ensures our communication, our language, our texts; he does this not only by immanently sustaining our words but by endowing humans with the divine image by which they can faithfully communicate.[30] Additionally, since language is inherently covenantal, meaning can safely be transmitted if the intention of the speaker or author is honored. Emphasizing the importance of intention, Vanhoozer remarks that "Only intention, for example, makes a blink count as a

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[26] "Theologically" is purposeful here as Vanhoozer also offers more linguistic reasons for why communication is trustworthy, especially in *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* Some of these reasons are hinted at here, but they are discussed more fully below.

[27] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 44, 456-7.

[28] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 167.

[29] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Truth," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 821-2.

[30] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*; see also Berry, "Speech-Act Theory," 94-5; Berry, "Theological vs. Methodological Postconservatism," 111; Storer, 71-2.

wink."[31] Moreover, this safekeeping of meaning is not limited to propositions. God allows for truth to exist in all matters and genres of communication.[32] Thus all language, rightfully employed and rightfully interpreted, by the providence of the triune God, can reflect truth—the truth of this reality and the truth of the divine reality.

The Role of Scripture

For Kevin Vanhoozer, our most accessible revelation of the divine reality, our clearest communication from God, is in the pages of the Holy Scriptures. In fact, Vanhoozer's whole project can be thought of as an attempt to come to a knowledge of God starting with the witness of Scripture.[33] While he acknowledges that God reveals himself in various ways, including creation and the ultimate revelation of Christ, he holds the canon of Scripture to be preeminent among these self-disclosures.[34] The biblical text, like these other modes of communication, is able to convey the divine reality of God and

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[31] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Intention/Intentional Fallacy," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 329; see also Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 173. Regarding his specific example, the *Seinfeld* episode "The Wink" would beg to differ.

[32] Vanhoozer, "Truth," 820-1. This belief that theological truth is found not only in the statements of the Bible but in all its literary forms is distinctive of "postconservatives."

[33] Stephen J. Wellum, "A Critical Appreciation of Kevin Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing Theology,*" *Southeastern Theological Review* 4, no. 1 (Sum 2013): 12-3. To this summary, Wellum adds the need to identify the genre of Scripture in interpretation.

[34] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 47; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 86-7; cf. Storer, 51-2.

therefore give Christians a foundation from which to construct theology.[35] Yet Scripture is unique as God's revelation in written language; it is more clear and unambiguous than historical actions, and it is the source by which we come to understand God's other revelatory deeds.[36]

The authority and reliability for Scripture is grounded in the covenant nature of language and God's identity as the perfect speaker or author. In the words of Scripture, God covenants with his creation, giving to humanity his reliable Word.[37] The power of this covenant is dependent on the one initiating the bond. So, by God's eternal faithfulness, the covenant of Scripture is made perfect for creation.[38] The covenantal nature of Scripture also acts as a delimiter. Because it is only in the words of Scripture that God's promise can be found, the Church only looks to the canon of Scripture to find

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[35] Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 5-7, 11-2, 78. Rather than myth, Vanhoozer prefers to describe Scripture as (to borrow from Aristotle) *mythos*, which is a way of understanding or rendering reality; in this way, it can be said that Scripture helps render God.

[36] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 45-9. Though he sometimes pushes back against the term, Vanhoozer sees Scripture as testifying: "The Bible is the corporate testimony of the Jewish and Christian communities to God's self-revelation in history and in Jesus Christ. Taken as a whole and as a divine communicative act, the Bible is God's self-attestation;" Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 292; see also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 1 (March 2005): 100-1.

[37] This covenant reflects Scripture's nature as speech-act: "What God does with Scripture is covenant with humanity by testifying to Jesus Christ (illocution) and by bringing about the reader's mutual indwelling with Christ (perlocution) through the Spirit's rendering Scripture efficacious;" Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 200. This relationship leaves the Church as a passive recipient; Storer, 106-14.

[38] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 65; Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 84.

God.[39] On account of what Scripture is and what God is doing in it, Vanhoozer sees the Bible as the unique locus of God's revelation today. It is the "Book of books" as its author is the "Author of the Universe."[40] It is Christianity's window to the Triune God.

Though Vanhoozer closely aligns the Bible with the economic work of God, he retains its humanity. This is most clear in his discussion of genre. For Vanhoozer, most previous attempts to describe the primacy of Scripture and affirm its ability to transmit truth about God fail in their understanding of biblical genre.[41] Fundamental to God's word expressed in Scripture is the fact that it is expressed in a variety of genres; the Bible is polyphonic, having many voices.[42] This is not to say that the Bible is incoherent or is contradictory; on the contrary, Scripture maintains a singular message despite its different genres.[43] Furthermore, the genres should not be thought of as clothing around an inner

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[39] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 133.

[40] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 104.

[41] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 266-72.

[42] Ibid., 286-7; Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, 354; see also Berry, "Theological vs. Methodological Postconservatism," 115.

[43] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 272-6; Vanhoozer, "Vanhoozer Responds to the Four Horsemen," 75.

truth, but rather, they are inherent to God's Word expressed in Scripture. It is only in reading and experiencing the genred word that God communicates at all.[44]

The divinity and the humanity of Scripture most clearly meet in the phenomenon of inspiration, where the divine intention and the human authors' intentions come together. Vanhoozer considers inspiration to foremost be an act of accommodation. This means that God does not proclaim from on high, in language perceptible only to the infinite; rather, God descends to the level of humanity in order to communicate.[45] This makes inspiration a phenomenon of special providence, yet the verbal inspiration of Scripture is not interventionist but interactionist.[46] Though descending to the communicative level of humanity, God is not condescending—he engages in a dialogue with creation.

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[44] Vanhoozer, "Systematic Theology," 779; Vanhoozer, "Vanhoozer Responds to the Four Horsemen," 76. The varied though singular voice of Scripture also raises issues of inerrancy. Vanhoozer tends to shy away from this issue, though he has said that the Bible is infallible in its "direction." Using the paradigm of speech-acts, he states that the Bible is inerrant in its illocutions—in its function, not its form; Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?," 106-7, 113. Others have seen this as a major shortcoming. Berry recognizes that Vanhoozer tries to maintain the category of inerrancy while acknowledging that certain literary forms (genres) may contain historical errors; Berry, "Theological vs. Methodological Postconservatism," 120, 124-5. More strikingly, some critics see Vanhoozer as glossing over genuine tensions, dressing up bibliolatry as scholarship; Wesley Hill, "Drama King: Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer Wants To Help Christians Play Their Part In The Great Divine Story," *Christianity Today* 59, no. 5 (2015): 60.

[45] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?," 106-7. It could be argued that Vanhoozer's idea of accommodation would limit humans' ability to construct doctrine and theology; John R. Franke, "God, Plurality, and Theological Method: A Response to Kevin Vanhoozer's *Remythologizing Theology,*" *Southeastern Theological Review* 4, no. 1 (Sum 2013): 42-4.

[46] Vanhoozer, "Providence," 644.

Inspiration requires the interaction of the human authors' intention and the divine intention. According to Vanhoozer, it is by the intention of the author that a text gains its meaning.[47] This opens up the question of which intention determines the meaning of the text—do the human authors control the meaning of their writing or does the heavenly will overwrite their intentions? For Vanhoozer, God in the process of inspiration utilizes texts that "already communicate a good number of his intentions."[48] God thus does not need to contravene the human intentions but supervenes on them.[49] Beyond this, the divine intention is found in the canonical whole; it is not the sum of its parts but something greater.[50] It can be said that the divine intention both penetrates and transcends the human intention.

For Vanhoozer, the divine intention is not found merely in the assertions of Scripture but is rather discovered in the acting force of the text. This is because Scripture, like revelation in general, is not purely propositional; the Bible is part of God's redemptive plan and a means of grace—it is not just God "saying" but is God "doing."[51] Scripture should be approached in its various forms, not to attain discrete truths, but to be

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[47] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 291-3.

[48] Vanhoozer, "Intention," 329.

[49] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 291-3; Vanhoozer, "Intention," 329; Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 65. Vanhoozer is able to defend this understanding by use of speech-act theory in which the human locutions can produce canonical illocutions; Storer, 10. Kit Barker sees this however as an impossibility as the canonical illocutions require their own locutions; Kit Barker, "Speech Act Theory, Dual Authorship, and Canonical Hermeneutics: Making Sense of Sensus Plenior," *Journal Of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 236-7.

[50] This is the idea of *sensus plenior*; Barker, 235-6; see also Storer, 18.

[51] Vanhoozer, "Word of God," 853.

shaped by its words, for the Bible is a well of divine-human speech-acts: words accomplishing varying social, spiritual, and cognitive functions.[52] This is the trinitarian vision of Scripture, in which the Bible is a "work of triune rhetoric whose purpose is to shape the church's identity and solicit the church's participation in God's being-in-conversation."[53]

This dual nature of Scripture, both propositional and active, is reflective of its dual purpose: to lead with all authority and to impart grace. This first purpose demonstrates Vanhoozer's Reformed ideology as well as his belief that Scripture is the premier communication of God. As such, the Bible is intentionally designed to lead humanity in proper living, to act as a guiding norm.[54] Its authority for doing so is based in its origin as the Word of God.[55] This is the same authority by which Scripture fulfills its second soteriological purpose. If Scripture is to be conceptualized as an act of God, it is

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[52] What Scripture does follows from what Scripture is as an outworking of divine communication; Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 147-8, 172-5.

[53] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse: Theological Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks," in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 67. Scripture's role in the economic Trinity dictates that it be more than propositions. Like the Trinity, the Bible becomes a self-communicating work of triune love, a knowledge-giving work of triune light, a freeing work of triune life; Ibid., 42-3, 76-7.

[54] Vanhoozer places this purpose above even a need to depict Christ or relate to the world; Scripture is meant to covey God's covenant, making it sufficient for our doctrinal, moral, and spiritual welfare; Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 149; see also Vanhoozer, "Systematic Theology," 778; Vanhoozer, "Truth," 820.

[55] Vanhoozer also finds Scripture's authority in Jesus's authorization of the apostles as well as Christian's faith in Christ (rather than Scripture's authority defining our faith in Christ); Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 90-1; Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 141, 157, 291-3; see also Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 63, 237; Vanhoozer, "Triune Discourse," 27.

to be understood as a central part of the redemptive story. According to Vanhoozer, Scripture is not simply a revelatory tool—something that records the saving actions of God—but is itself a necessary instrument of salvation.[56] The communication of Scripture brings humanity into God's loving redemption. In this way, the two purposes of Scripture are one and the same; as the Bible authoritatively guides humanity and aids in the construction of doctrine, it is providing the direction needed for God's drama of redemption.[57] Vanhoozer describes this role of Scripture in his theology:

> 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 redemption; that the purpose of God's self-communication is to bring about communion in Christ Jesus.[58]

Scripture is thus a work by God through humans to totally and finally reveal the divine reality—an activity that is not simply cognitive but salvific as well.

The Human Response

The necessary human response to the communication of God is clear—acceptance, submission, and participation in the drama of redemption. However, God's communication must be understood before any of these steps can be followed, and the interpretation of texts has seen troubling times over the last century. Still, despite appeals to the otherwise, Kevin Vanhoozer believes that communication (particularly the

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[56] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 127-58; Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 48, 139.

[57] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 265.

[58] Vanhoozer, "Vanhoozer Responds to the Four Horsemen," 79-80.

communication of God) can be rightfully understood by employing a theological hermeneutic and accepting the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Vanhoozer pushes back against the motto that Scripture ought to be read like any other book. Rather, he posits the opposite: all hermeneutics is inherently theological and trinitarian.[59] Instead of letting the interpretive method used to study other literature determine the methodology employed on the Bible, Christians ought to let their confessing inform their secular hermeneutic. Instead of reading out of skepticism, Christians read in faith that God sustains all communicative action. For Vanhoozer, "Scripture comes into its own when read by God's people in God's way for God's purpose."[60]

A trinitarian hermeneutic emphasizes the place of the author in determining meaning. This interpretive tool sees meaning as wrapped up in the intention of the author, and it is the responsible reader's task to discover that intention.[61] Of course, the human author's intention cannot be exhaustive—or else Christians could not find Christ in the Old Testament—yet it is a fundamental locus of meaning.[62] To understand an author's

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[59] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Spirit of Understanding: Special Revelation and General Hermeneutics," in *Disciplining Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Christian Perspective*, ed. by Roger Lundin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 139, 160-1; Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 231.

[60] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 123.

[61] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 218; Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 236-56, 291-3; Vanhoozer, "The Spirit of Understanding," 156.

[62] Vanhoozer, "Intention," 329-30. The fullest meaning is found in the divine intention for the text. Additionally, Vanhoozer claims that while authorial intent is central, there can be a "fuller meaning," found in the context of the canon or the developing tradition of the Church; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 264.

intentions, Vanhoozer again appeals to speech-act theory, claiming that intention is found in identifying their illocutionary acts.[63] In this way, illocutionary acts and their results are the houses of meaning. Relying on the authorial intent also suggests that texts should be read for a singular meaning.[64] Locating authority in the intention of the author places significant limits on what can be considered proper reading of the Bible.

Beside interpreting from the author, Vanhoozer also emphasizes reading in light of the varied genres of Scripture. As stated above, genres are not to be understood as wrappings for the truth of Scripture but are rather indispensable aspects of the truth and God's communication of it. This demands, therefore, that interpretation accept the Bible in its various forms and be prepared to interpret it in its different genres.[65] No singular hermeneutical technique can be applied to all the texts of Scripture.

For Vanhoozer, any claim regarding the core message of the Bible must be checked against the canonical whole. This is reflective of Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach, in which he understands Scripture to operate at multiple levels—

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[63] To this Vanhoozer adds that the "literal sense of an utterance or text is the sum total of those illocutionary acts performed by the author intentionally and with self-awareness;" Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 178-82.

[64] Vanhoozer, "Vanhoozer Responds to the Four Horsemen," 70-4.

[65] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 275; Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 173; Berry, "Theological vs. Methodological Postconservatism," 115-6. Vanhoozer refuses to limit the sacred text to assertive propositions, stating that "Metaphors… are not susceptible to literal paraphrase, not because they are noncognitive but because they have a surplus of cognition;" Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 87-8. John Perry labels this one of Vanhoozer's major insights; it critiques both conservative interpretation (Hodge) as well as postliberal (Lindbeck); John Perry, "The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology," *Journal Of The Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 4 (December 2005): 861.

particularly the illocutions of the human authors and the illocutions of the divine author across the canon.[66] These two levels do not exist independent of each other; rather, canonical illocutions are built upon the illocutions of the individuals texts.[67] The canon not only contains the intentions of the Word of God but also acts as a boundary for acceptable interpretation. In this way, interpretation is not subject to the community or the Church or Tradition but to the corpus of Scripture.[68] According to Vanhoozer, this is what is at the heart of appeals to the Rule of Faith or to the Protestant motto *sola scriptura*. The Rule of Faith is not an external body of doctrine but an assertion that certain doctrines correspond with the witness of Scripture.[69] Similarly, *sola scriptura* is not a principle for developing doctrine but is merely the existing practice of using Scripture to interpret Scripture.[70] The Bible is thus sufficient for all matters of Christian doctrine and interpretation.

The final key to Vanhoozer's interpretive method is the work of the Spirit. According to Vanhoozer, it is only by the trinitarian action of the Spirit that we are ultimately able to read rightly.[71] The work of the Spirit is threefold: the Spirit convicts us

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[66] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 194, 200. His Canonical-linguistic approach is developed most fully in *The Drama of Doctrine*.

[67] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 291-3.

[68] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 16, 117-9; Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 275-308.

[69] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 206-7; Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 293-4.

[70] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 127-9; Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 16.

[71] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 144-6; Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 407-31.

that the Bible is the word of God; the Spirit illumines the literal meaning and intended communication of the word; the Spirit sanctifies us, helping us accept the word.[72] This manifests clearly in the development of interpretive (spiritual) virtues like faith that there is something transcendent in the text.[73] The Spirit thus completes the necessary change that Christians might truly communicate with God.[74]

However, the work of the Spirit and a canonical hermeneutic do not guarantee right interpretation. Vanhoozer's different exegetical emphases are not to be confused for a scientific method for discovering the Bible's message. In fact, Vanhoozer admits that there is a certain lack of clarity in Scripture and that "a *little* deconstruction may not be a dangerous thing."[75] Yet overwhelmingly he finds that the truth of Scripture can be found, though it will require serious interpretation. He affirms that there is meaning in the text.[76] Vanhoozer affirms this not only because God guarantees his communication but because

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[72] Vanhoozer, "The Spirit of Understanding," 163-4. It is important to qualify that the Spirit helps us understand but does not change the meaning of the words of Scripture —as the Spirit is subordinate to the Logos.

[73] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 369-81.

[74] Vanhoozer, in responding to N. T. Wright, demonstrates much of his interpretive method outlined thus far when he suggests that the Reformers interpreted rightly because they "believed that Scripture interprets Scripture, attended to the canonical context (as well as to orthodox tradition), and were illumined by the Holy Spirit?" Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation? The State of the Union with Christ in St. Paul and Protestant Soteriology," in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 258.

[75] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 229.

[76] That is the answer to Vanhoozer's *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* See also Vanhoozer, "The Spirit of Understanding," 158-9; Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 112; Berry, "Speech-Act Theory," 95-6.

humans, by the priesthood of all believers, are deemed able to rightly interpret a word from God.[77] Christians may not always agree on what is right interpretation, but this is not necessary in as much as we agree on the fundamental message of Scripture.[78]

Vanhoozer's way of interpretation both borrows from and critiques the methodology of postliberalism. Postliberalism, a form of narrative theology, emphasizes reading the Bible as a cohesive story in addition to prioritizing the community's interpretive authority. Vanhoozer's focus on genre mirrors the postliberal emphasis on Scripture as narrative.[79] Moreover, Vanhoozer appreciates postliberalism's community interpretive as it helps fight individual subjectivism.[80] Still, he sees this theological framework as intrinsically flawed. Postliberalism missteps by placing authority in the consensus of the community rather than the "divine authorial discourse" as seen in the

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[77] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 29, 65. Vanhoozer occasionally uses the language of "authoritative" applied to individual interpretation; this should not be overemphasized as he makes clear in his critiques of postliberalism that interpretive authority is only found in congruency with the canon (discussed below).

[78] "The strength of Protestant evangelicalism is its unitive interpretive plurality;" Ibid., 207, 230.

[79] Gerard Mannion, "The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology," *Modern Believing* 49, no. 2 (April 2008): 58-9. To this, Gerard Mannion adds Vanhoozer's similarity of emphasizing practice and living out the narrative of Scripture.

[80] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 168-74. Much of Vanhoozer's work, tracing back to his doctoral dissertation on the Tracy-Frei debate, has dealt with postliberalism. Though he pits himself against the movement, some see his work as deeply similar to or, at least, owing to the work of Lindbeck; Perry, 863-4; Storer, xiii.

biblical canon.[81] Canon is where meaning is found and where language receives its normative use.

This is not to say that Vanhoozer sees no merit in the Christian community. In order to defend against cultural readings of the text, Vanhoozer advocates for an interpretation that honors the whole Church, the global Church.[82] This approach he connects with the apostolic and orthodox tradition, reminding that "We best put ourselves in the way of truth when we interpret the Scriptures in their canonical context with the aid of the catholic tradition."[83] Conversely, Vanhoozer also finds authority in the local community, whereby continuous conference is held wherever two or three are gathered.[84] Still, no communal interpretive method can be truly authoritative or exhaustive; we must remember that the Church can err, and so we continually look back to Scripture as our guide.[85]

All of Vanhoozer's work on hermeneutics, including his work on interpretive strategies or interpretive authority, is in service of what he sees as the greater purpose of revelation: participating in the drama of redemption. This further distances Vanhoozer's system from a purely cognitive affair. For Vanhoozer, interpreting Scripture does not find

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[81] This is what separates Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach from Lindbeck cultural-linguistic approach. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, 168-74, 321; Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 236-56; Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 11, 16, 184, 295; see also Berry, "Theological vs. Methodological Postconservatism," 116.

[82] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?," 101.

[83] Ibid., 113; see also Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 62.

[84] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 172-3, 231-4.

[85] Ibid., 141-3; see also Berry, "Speech-Act Theory," 96.

its end in the development of doctrine or a confession of faith; Christians study Scripture to be shaped by it and to embody it.[86] Moreover, God's Word is meant to be embodied—first by Christ and subsequently by the Church.[87] For this reason, Vanhoozer sees theater as the best analogy for explaining the Christian faith. In this analogy, the Bible is more than a story to be read but is a play to be acted out—Scripture is the script for the Christian faith.[88] This script is still subject to the boundaries of canon, but these boundaries are no longer cognitive but ethical.[89] In living out the canon of Scripture, the Church is allowed to share in the divine reality; we participate in it. In so doing, Christians are transformed; we are changed by the words of the Bible to be what God desires us to be, and we more naturally live out the divine will.[90] Understanding the faith as a drama thus allows Vanhoozer to advocate for right interpretation through

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[86] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 18; Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?," 114; Vanhoozer, "Systematic Theology," 778.

[87] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 127-58; Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 180. Vanhoozer's focus on the embodiment of the Word and its ethical implications demonstrates clear reliance on his doctoral supervisor, Nicholas Lash; Mannion, 59; Hill, 61.

[88] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 15-6, 22, 237; see also Berry, "Theological vs. Methodological Postconservatism," 117-8; William H. Willimon, "Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine," *The Christian Century* 132, no. 2 (January 21, 2015): 38.

[89] Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 237.

[90] Vanhoozer, "Lost in Interpretation?," 114; see also Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts," 180. Interestingly, William J. Danaher sees Vanhoozer's Reformed roots as limiting the potential for improvisation in the divine play, even though Vanhoozer suggests that our familiarity with the script should allow us to naturally live out the drama; see William J. Danaher, "Theology as Performance: Kevin J. Vanhoozer's Dramaturgical Take on Doctrine," *Anglican Theological Review* 99, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 806-7.

acknowledging authorial intent and appreciating genre as well as to emphasize the work of the Spirit in perfecting our interpretation and transforming us that we might participate in the performance.

Conclusion

Kevin Vanhoozer's theology is centered on a God who communicates. For Vanhoozer, God is not only the archetypal communicator, existing for all eternity in Trinitarian dialogue, but is the very ground of communication, sustaining communication by his being. As Trinity, God fulfills each element of a speech-act—locution, illocution, and perlocution—and by his work in the world communicates redemption to humanity and rewards our faith in communication.

And if God's communication is the center of Vanhoozer's theology, then Holy Scripture is the central communication of God. It is through the Bible and its witness of Christ that God is most fully and clearly revealed. Scripture reveals God through propositional assertions as well as through a variety of other genres, but in every form, God works through inspired human authors. God does not overwrite the intentions of the apostolic writers but builds the canonical message on top of their writing, supervening on their intentions. In this way, God authoritatively reveals himself and communicates his redemptive plan.

God's creation is called to respond to this communication. Humans respond foremost in their interpretation of the sacred texts, reading for the authorial intent and to recognize the use of genre. Beyond this, all interpretation is guided by the canonical intention and the work of the Spirit in all believers. Yet right interpretation is not the end

goal; rather, Christians choose to participate—they engage in communication with the Triune God. They perform the drama of redemption.

Chapter Four
WILLIAM ABRAHAM

Working from within the Evangelical tradition, William J. Abraham pushes the boundaries of typical evangelical orthodoxy.[1] In some ways, his entire theological project can be seen as an attempt to bring the concerns of wider philosophical and theological concerns to bear upon the tradition. He is especially influenced by his Methodist heritage, conversing with John Wesley's two-fold understanding of Scripture as both epistemological and soteriological.[2]

A recurring aspect of Abraham's work is his effort to better understand and distinguish categories and terms, particularly the meaning of canon as well as differentiating divine revelation from inspired Scripture. This task leads Abraham to accept revelation as an important epistemological category and to understand Scripture (and the rest of the Christian heritage) as a means of grace; simultaneously, he rejects the doctrine of inerrancy or the need to avoid critical studies.

Revelation Proper

William Abraham's definition of revelation is noncontroversial from an evangelical perspective. For Abraham, "Divine revelation is constituted by disclosure of

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[1] William J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 7-8; Kenneth J. Stewart, "William J Abraham's Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: An Historical-Theological Evaluation," *Didaskalia* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 14. Abraham teaches both evangelism and philosophical theology, and his philosophical training is apparent in his theological work.

[2] William J. Abraham, "The Future of Scripture: In Search of a Theology of Scripture," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 7.

the nature and purposes of God. What is hidden is made known; what is veiled is uncovered."[3] Elsewhere, he expounds on this simple definition:

> Restricting the agent of revelation to God, the content can be the nature and purposes of God or the hidden depths of the human condition. The mode can be either by word or deed in all their variety; the recipients can be an individual, a community, or the whole known world. In the Christian tradition revelation can be general, that is, in creation and conscience; it can be special, that is, in the history of Israel; and it can be extra-special, that is in Jesus Christ. It can be internal in our hearts or external in human history. It is intimately related to the Bible and to the church; it is related to but different from divine inspiration.[4]

Central to this understanding of revelation is God's communicative activity by which God transmits his nature and will for humanity. This communication occurs solely through divine initiative and divine action; it is in every way an act of grace.[5] It is in God's revelation that he comes to us and we are able to approach him.

The content of divine revelation is variable. In some ways, revelation can convey an eventful reality—this is seen in the early Church, a community first based around not a theory of knowledge, a collection of books, or a ritual scheme but around a series of

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[3] William J. Abraham, "Revelation," in *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. by Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, and Iain R. Torrance (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 445. Abraham's conception of revelation reflects George Mavrodes's formula: *m* reveals *a* to *n* by means of *k*; William J. Abraham, "The Offense of Divine Revelation," *The Harvard Theological Review* 3 (2002): 257.

[4] Abraham, "The Offense of Divine Revelation," 257-8. Abraham also gives the following synopsis of the whole enterprise of revelation: God acts; some of this action is God's revelation; revelation's two forms are general and special; special revelation can be in actions, words, or the person of Jesus; Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 66.

[5] William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 170-1, 187.

divine events.[6] In other ways, revelation is propositional, containing facts or ideas about the divine nature.[7] In cases where the latter applies to revelation, in that its content is propositional, it must be received as knowledge.[8] This force of revelation establishes it as an epistemological concept. When brought alongside other epistemological concepts like reason, experience, or intuition, revelation must be thought of likewise as exclusive and authoritative.[9] It is a trustworthy communication of the diverse elements of divinity.

Abraham contends that revelation can take various forms. He asserts that "God is revealed in, with, and through the actions of God, so that revelation supervenes on other acts God performs… God reveals himself by creating and sustaining the world, speaking through conscience, making promises through chosen agents, becoming incarnate in Christ, and the like."[10] In this, Abraham acknowledges the polymorphic nature of revelation. In addition to the classic categories of general and special revelation, Abraham

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[6] William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (New York: Oxford Press, 1998), 466.

[7] Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 73. Abraham expresses his sympathy for propositionalism since "God has spoken to particular individuals to reveal His intentions and purposes." However, he finds propositionalism problematic in that it confuses inspiration with divine speech and uses inerrancy as an excuse to not critically study the Bible; William J. Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 10.

[8] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 87; Abraham, "The Offense of Divine Revelation," 260.

[9] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 84-9; Abraham, "The Offense of Divine Revelation," 258. Though revelation is as authoritative as these other epistemological concepts, Abraham admits that revelation is less direct and more contested than reason or experience.

[10] Abraham, "Revelation," 446.

accepts extra-special and person-relative revelation.[11] General revelation is concerned with God's revealing himself through nature and sustaining the world.[12] General revelation is unable, however, to convey the finer elements of God's nature and will, and so God must speak and act in special revelation.[13] Beyond this, Abraham identifies extra-special revelation in the Incarnation event and person-relative revelation in God's on-going communication with individuals.[14] While acknowledging the central place of the Incarnation in theology, Abraham believes it is essential to incorporate insights from general and special revelation.

Additionally, God's special revelation—God's deliberate communication in time and space—is also polymorphous. Most notably, God reveals himself through acts in

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[11] Abraham, "The Future of Scripture," 15; see also Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 11-4; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 58-61.

[12] Abraham makes sure to differentiate general revelation from natural theology. General revelation is God revealed through nature—it is something God does—while natural theology is reasoning to God—something we do. These can overlap as general revelation implies an original creating agent. For this reason, Abraham, contrary to Karl Barth, does not see revelation and natural theology as mutually exclusive; revelation is complemented by reason. See Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 71; Abraham, "Revelation," 445-6.

[13] Specifically, that God redeems us is not discoverable from history or nature; Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 88. Tied up in the subject of special revelation is the issue of divine intervention and miracles. For Abraham, some elements of revelation are miraculous (God's mighty deeds or the resurrection of Jesus) while others are not (God's speaking or becoming incarnate); moreover, some revelation is accompanied by miraculous work. While Abraham believes that Christians ought to take advances in modern knowledge seriously, he does not not believe that miracles should be rejected *a priori* and even claims that divine intervention is necessary for Christian theology. Ultimately, miracles and special revelation complement each other but neither proves the other; Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 27-8, 38-40, 67-140, 187-8; Abraham, "Revelation," 446-7.

[14] Abraham, "Revelation," 445.

history accompanied by divine words.[15] This mirrors how human-beings come to know each other—just as people demonstrate who they are through their deeds and their actions, so God is made known through his actions.[16] Yet, God cannot be revealed through his deeds alone—words are required. Without words or some use of language God cannot forgive, command, or promise; God must speak in order for his intentions to be clear.[17] Though Abraham conceives of revelation primarily in these means—through actions and especially speech—he is open to its manifestation in other forms. He allows for revelation to manifest in religious experience, though in no amount could human insight ever replace direct disclosure from God.[18] Still, the supreme mode of God's revelation is the Incarnation of the Son in the person Jesus Christ. The Incarnation represents the pinnacle of God's revelation and the greatest demonstration of his love and will.[19] The Christian community is built on this event and all claims to revelation are measured by it. Abraham claims, "Thus, in so far as Jesus Christ is seen as the Word of

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[15] Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 78-86.

[16] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 58, 79-80.

[17] Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 14-7, 21. The mechanics of how God spoke are unclear but unimportant. More than likely, when God spoke to the prophets and apostles, God did not make a sound but rather those individuals experienced God—they were more "sensitive" to the workings of God; Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 87. It is also worth noting that Abraham utilizes J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, understanding God to have performed speech-acts and revelation to occur in those illocutions; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 164-5.

[18] Abraham, "Revelation," 445; Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 19.

[19] Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 102; Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 44-66. Despite its preeminence as a revelatory act, Abraham recognizes the the Incarnation as a complex and untidy form of revelation—more holistic but less clear in its communication; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 62-5.

God par excellence, all theology must pass through the test of compatibility with what he has revealed of God."[20] While in God's speaking to the prophets we find the paradigm for God's speech-acts, it is in the Incarnation that we see the pinnacle of God's revelation through action.[21] For Abraham, God's revelation is not limited to a single form or means of transmission—God is able to and has utilized a variety of ways of communicating with creation.

Revelation is a central concept for Abraham's theology. It is only by God's revelation that Christians can know God and speak of God.[22] Still, we know that Christians cannot speak absolutely about God and that the fullness of God's revealing is yet to come.[23]

The Role of Scripture

Despite being distinct from revelation, the central texts of the Christian faith are intimately connected to the phenomenon of revelation. According to Abraham,

> Scripture mediates special revelation and provides a divinely inspired response to that revelation. Scripture is much more than a witness to revelation, where the revelation never reaches us. What is at issue is something much more robust:

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[20] Abraham, "Revelation," 446; see also Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 466.

[21] Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 45. Despite its variety, some have seen Abraham's conception as limited, particularly in its focus on the prophetic model of revelation; Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "A Roman Catholic Perspective on the Offense of Revelation: Response to William Abraham," *Harvard Theological Review* 95, no. 3 (July 2002): 269.

[22] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 170. William J. Abraham, "The Emergence of Canonical Theism," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. by William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 146.

[23] Abraham, "Revelation," 447.

> revelation is genuinely enshrined in Scripture…. To use Wesley's categories, we should think of Scripture first and foremost as a network of texts designed and inspired by God to mediate justifying and sanctifying grace.[24]

In this way, Scripture acts as a conveyer of divine revelation in which God's communication is faithfully transmitted.[25] However, Scripture is not identical to revelation, but rather, revelation is embedded in the inspired work of the biblical authors. Not all revelation is found in the pages of Scripture, nor does every word of the Bible convey a revelation from God.[26] Revelation is "enshrined" in Scripture. This relationship roots in Scripture's origin as a way to retain the treasures that had been given in Christ and to more easily share the gospel.[27] Scripture is thus more complex than conveying revelation, and God's revealing is more multifaceted than to be found solely in the sacred text.

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[24] Abraham, "The Future of Scripture," 15-6.

[25] William J. Abraham, "Canonical Theism and Evangelicalism," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. by William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 268-9; Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 90; see also Stewart, 15.

[26] Abraham, "Canonical Theism and Evangelicalism," 268; Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 331-2.

[27] Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 467. Abraham further unpacks the nuances of his subtle critique in "Smoky the Cow Horse and Wesleyan Understanding of Scripture," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 51, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 16-8. It is worth pushing back against Abraham's claim that Christians wrongfully treat the Bible as a criterion. While he is right to point out that the text's primary function is soteriological, the practicality of his complaint is in question—do Christians really believe that Scripture is their warrant or do they simply use it as metonymy for revelation? And even if they do, *Canon and Criterion* does not demonstrate how expensive this confusion of terms has been for the Christian community (though it certainly broaches the subject).

What can be said conclusively about Scripture is that it is inspired by God. Inspiration is different from revelation in that the latter refers to self-disclosure in time and space while the former claims that some communicative events are a matter of divine will rather than human.[28] Abraham builds his exact understanding of what God does in the Bible's inspiration from an inductive method and by an analysis of key texts like 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21, and passages where Scripture is equated with God's words.[29] He finds the resulting doctrine of inspiration to bear similarities to the traditional evangelical understanding of the topic while also contrasting in as much evangelicals implicitly rely on a model of divine dictation, which Abraham rejects.[30]

The exact operation by which God inspires takes many forms. Though Abraham rejects dictation as the model of inspiration, God can certainly speak to inspire just as much as he might use less explicit means. Abraham adds, "As a matter of logic, inspiration is a unique activity of God that cannot be defined in terms of his other acts or activity, but as a matter of fact he inspires in, with, and through his special revelatory acts and through his personal guidance of those who wrote and put together the various parts

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[28] Abraham, "Revelation," 445; see also Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 73.

[29] Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 56-7, 93. Abraham adopts an inductive model over against a deductive approach by which a claim is made regarding how Scripture is inspired and then the contents of the Bible are "poured into a pre-set mould;" Ibid., 14-22, 38-40.

[30] Ibid., 2-5, 34-6. Abraham understands the evangelical understanding of inspiration as: (1) a unique act of God, (2) happening in the original writing, and (3) implying inerrancy. Evangelicals disavow a dictation model of inspiration in favor of verbal plenary, though Abraham argues that evangelicals subconsciously assume a dictation model in order to maintain inerrancy.

of the Bible."[31] To understand how God might inspire, Abraham prefers the analogy of a teacher and their students. Just as a teacher can be said to inspire students through their example or lectures and the inspiration experienced by each student be unique to that individual, so can the inspiration of God upon the biblical authors be described.[32] Thus inspiration is also polymorphous, occurring to varying degrees and utilizing the native ability of the subject; it does not guarantee the exact transmission of propositions but rather guarantees unity and reliability regarding God's saving acts.[33] Lastly, for Abraham, inspiration is a continuing thing.[34] While it no longer accompanies revelation, God continues to inspire his creation.

Abraham's understanding of inspiration leads him to reject central characteristics of traditional evangelicalism, including inerrancy. Abraham's understanding of inspiration does not necessitate that the text be inerrant; moreover, modern inductive exegesis of the text suggests that it is not—at least by traditional understandings of inerrancy. For this reason, Abraham rejects inerrancy and supports critical study of the

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[31] Ibid., 67. It is not always clear what is meant by God "speaking." As with some instances of special revelation, it seems that God imparted actual words, though certainly without the use of lips or vocal cords. It is clear, however, that this is not what is meant for the entirety of inspired Scripture when we speak of it as God's "Word." The exact means by which God inspires cannot be known as God does not exist in space and time. See Ibid., 58-61, 67-9.

[32] Ibid., 62-5. This analogy, Abraham admits, is not perfect for being too cerebral. Still, he prefers it over the analogy of an inspired artist or scientist, seeing these examples as lacking objective divine activity; Ibid., 48-51.

[33] Ibid., 68.

[34] Ibid., 71-2.

text.[35] Abraham's understanding of inspiration also leads him to reject the Protestant slogan *sola scriptura*. The nature of Scripture does not necessitate that it be the sole source for Christian doctrine nor that it could be.[36] This staple of Protestantism is displaced by one of Abraham's major theological contributions: Canonical Theism.

Canonical Theism is foremost a robust vision of God and his work—it is "unapologetically Trinitarian" and distinct from open or even classical theism.[37] Though it is rooted in Scripture, it is most fully articulated across the rest of the canonical heritage of the Church, in its "persons, practices, and materials," in the historical canons of doctrine, liturgy, saints, fathers, icons, and more.[38] It is the proclamation of the undivided church of the first millennium, receiving its classic expression in the Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian Definition, and—according to Abraham—need not be expressed by an epistemic criterion or inerrant source in order to be affirmed by Christians today.

Possibly the most difficult aspect of Abraham's proposal for evangelicals is his claim that the Christian canon is not simply the sixty-six books of the Bible but the entire canonical heritage of the Church. This idea is best understood in terms of a musical analogy in which the canon is a symphony and the Holy Spirit its conductor; Scripture is

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[35] Ibid., 40, 68; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 108-9. His adoption of modern insights is discussed more below.

[36] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 98-104; Abraham, "Canonical Theism and Evangelicalism," 259. For Abraham, not all revelation need be found in Scripture; moreover, the witness of the Church is able to bear the burden of Christian revelation.

[37] William J. Abraham, "Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. by William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1.

[38] Abraham, "Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses," 2.

simply a singular voice in the Church's canonical heritage alongside other canons of creeds, Fathers, sacraments, etc.[39] Abraham builds Canonical Theism upon the argument that the Church naturally (though unfortunately) transitioned from viewing Scripture as an ecclesial canon to an epistemic criterion. This confusion caused the Church to limit "canon" to that which could be used for epistemic purposes, particularly the Bible.[40] In reality, the entire canonical heritage of the Church was meant for a soteriological purpose, to bring communion with God.[41] This theological framework of Canonical Theism drastically distinguishes Abraham's work from other evangelicals by placing Scripture alongside other elements in the Christian canon and renewing its focus on soteriology over-against epistemology.

Canonical Theism also leads to challenges regarding the authority of Scripture. For Abraham, Scripture is not an epistemic criterion and is thus unable to stand alone as a

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[39] Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 37, 55. Some challenges to this claim of Canonical Theism is that it wrongfully views every element of the canonical heritage as equal, not distinguishing between the importance of Scripture versus a particular icon, or that it cherry-picks what doctrines are accepted as "canonical;" see John Webster, "Canon and Criterion: Some Reflections on a Recent Proposal," *Scottish Journal Of Theology* 54, no. 2 (June 2001): 235-6; D. Stephen Long, "Abraham's Threshold: Crossing with Caution," *Philosophia Christi* 10, no. 2 (2008): 343-4.

[40] Ibid., 1-2, 8, 27. Abraham sees "ecclesial canon" as a means of grace—e.g. Scripture, creeds, Fathers, sacraments, etc.—and "epistemic criteria" as a means of knowledge—e.g. rationality, intuition, experience, etc. Many are skeptical of Abraham's historical argument, seeing Scripture as having always supplied some sort of theological foundation or seeing the supposed loss of its soteriological worth as unfounded; see Wiles Maurice, "Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology from the Fathers to Feminism William J. Abraham," *The Journal Of Theological Studies* no. 2 (1999); Andrie Du Toit, "Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology William J. Abraham," *Novum Testamentum* 2 (2001): 192; Webster, 231-4; Stewart, 21-2.

[41] Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 94; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 110; Abraham, "Canonical Theism and Evangelicalism," 259-61.

foundational warrant for doctrine.[42] Additionally, as a consequence of Canonical Theism, Scripture is not to be viewed as a guiding norm for understanding the other elements of the Church's canonical heritage but taken alongside them.[43] This limiting of the authority of Scripture, no longer seeing it as a criterion of truth, may lead some to seek epistemic authority in Tradition, in the creeds or the Rule of Faith, but Abraham avoids this strategy as well since these sources are likewise unable to acts as criteria of truth.[44] He surely sees the Church as empowered by the Spirit, providing the material necessary for salvation and faith, but it too cannot provide epistemic certainty.[45] For Abraham, the only epistemic authority of Scripture is to be found in its ability to reflect divine revelation and in its

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[42] Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 4-12.

[43] To extend any such normativity to the Bible is to give into an unfounded Scriptural foundationalism; William J. Abraham, "A Response to Stanley Grenz," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 47; contra Stanley J. Grenz, "Deconstructing Epistemological Certainty: An Engagement with William J. Abraham's Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology (1998)," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 44; Webster, 236.

[44] Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 35-42.

[45] William J. Abraham, "Handing on the Teaching of the Apostles: Canonical Episcopacy," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. by William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 56; see also Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 53; Abraham, "Canonical Theism and Evangelicalism," 267; Abraham, "The Emergence of Canonical Theism," 153. Abraham's Canonical Theism rejects the option of placing interpretive authority in the episcopacy; Mark E. Powell, "Canonical Theism and the Challenge of Epistemic Certainty: Papal Infallibility as a Case Study," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. by William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 206-7; see push back from Fiorenza, 270.

author who is, in some ultimate sense, God.[46] Scripture thus does not offer us theological foundations but by its written form manages clarity in conveying the divine will; it does not act as epistemic criterion but provides an epistemic function.

The Human Response

Since God's revelation is the ultimate source of authority as well as an epistemological concept like reason or experience, revelation takes on the same force as these other epistemological categories. And if revelation is accepted, it demands to be taken exclusively and authoritatively. For this reason, Abraham posits that accepting revelation is the crossing of an intellectual threshold; it changes our previous ideas and ways of knowing.[47] Once we embrace revelation, we are brought into an entirely new way of perceiving reality, and as Christians, we are brought into the canonical heritage of the Church.[48] However, not everyone crosses this threshold; rather, revelation begins with a choice. We are forced to choose to accept or reject whether that before us is truly

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[46] Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 4-6, 470; see also Powell, "Canonical Theism," 197; Bernie Van de Walle, "William J. Abraham's Canon and Criterion: A Systematic-Theological Response," *Didaskalia* 14, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 58-61.

[47] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 84-9; Abraham, "The Offense of Divine Revelation," 258.

[48] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 127-8; Abraham, "Revelation," 446.

revealed from above.[49] But once this choice is made, if revelation is accepted, it demands our full loyalty and affects every aspect of the human existence.[50] This is the offense of revelation.

The human response to this threshold decision is not simply one of intellectual transformation; the acceptance of revelation faces one with the truth of Canonical Theism and the canonical heritage of the Church, which is a means of grace. In this way, revelation is not ultimately about knowledge but transformation, not ultimately about epistemology but about soteriology.[51] This applies not only to the individual but to the

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[49] Abraham, "The Offense of Divine Revelation," 254, 258-9. Borrowing from Locke, Abraham makes clear that the content of revelation cannot be questioned, only whether or not something *is* revelation. He also finds in the prophetic writings of Scripture, unmuddied by the interpretive task, that the binary option is maintained: we must accept or reject the revelation put before us. David C. Lamberth accepts that revelation is exclusive but pushes back by saying the core of the issue is identifying true revelation. He also contests that revelation is an offense if it is also reasonable; David C. Lamberth, "Discernment and Practice: Questions for a Logic of Revelation—Response to William Abraham," *Harvard Theological Review* 95, no. 3 (July 2002): 275-6. Abraham suggests that faith is crucial for accepting revelation, that faith is not knowledge of God but a love of God; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 187-9.

[50] Abraham, "The Offense of Divine Revelation," 260.

[51] Abraham, "The Emergence of Canonical Theism," 146-7; see also Frederick D. Aquino, "Epistemic Virtues of a Theologian in the Philokalia," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. by William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Webster, 228-31. Abraham adds to this soteriological focus that "in some cases of divine manifestation, the proper response may be total silence before the mystery and complexity of the divine;" Abraham, "The Offense of Divine Revelation," 260.

Church at large. It is the goal of Canonical Theism to first mend the Church internally by understanding its story and identity before looking to confront the world.[52]

Abraham's Canonical Theism project also bears on how we are to approach the faith in terms of epistemology. Because Christians are first faced with the choice of revelation, Abraham does not prescribe a particular epistemological approach for Christian theology. Instead we begin by embracing divine revelation along with the canonical heritage of the Church, and only afterward need worry with epistemic justification.[53] Philosophical systems and interpretive methods thus come after our acceptance of God's extension of grace. This approach to knowledge mirrors Abraham's philosophical leanings as a particularist, accepting the ontology of the canonical heritage's content—that God exists in Trinity and is at work in creation and redemption—

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[52] William J. Abraham, "Canonical Theism and the Life of the Church," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. by William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

[53] William J. Abraham, "Canonical Theism and the Future of Systematic Theology," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church*, ed. by William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Abraham, "Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses;" Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 41-4. Abraham elaborates elsewhere on why epistemology should be secondary; he mentions among other reasons: the example of the early Church not using a single approach, the fact that a theory has not yet been canonized, the possibility that a single theory may be impossible, and making epistemology primary forces the canon—and specifically Scripture—to be something it is not; see Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 468-80; Abraham, "The Emergence of Canonical Theism," 153. This aspect of Abraham's project is probably the most controversial. More than one scholar has challenged that his approach leads to epistemic agnosticism or relativism (despite Abraham's clear efforts against the latter). D. Stephen Long suggests specific inconsistency in Abraham's adopting of "crossing the threshold" and *oculus contemplationis*, both epistemological theories; Long, 339-41; see also Du Toit, 193; Andrei A. Buckareff, "Metaepistemology and Divine Revelation," *Heythrop Journal* 50, no. 1 (January 2009).

before seeking to justify it.[54] For Abraham, Christians are able to receive revelation and participate in it without a theory of revelation—epistemology must necessarily come second to living out the Christian faith.[55] The acceptance of revelation begins with the borrowed concept of *oculus contemplationis*, the theory that humans have the fundamental ability to recognize actions and events by our physical and moral senses. In this way, our initial conversion is by this innate ability to understand which allows us to accept revelation and, subsequently, the canonical heritage.[56] For Abraham, the fundamental response of humans to revelation, whether presented through Scripture or other means, is first acceptance so that we might be swept up into the gospel and divine life.

This is not to say that Abraham does not address post-conversion concerns, particularly that of exegesis and the use of modern critical studies in the interpretation of Scripture. For Abraham, biblical scholars put themselves at a disadvantage unless they employ the tools available in modern knowledge and critical scholarship, particularly

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[54] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 33; William J. Abraham, "Response to Professors Long, Smith, and Beilby." *Philosophia Christi* 10, no. 2 (2008): 365; see also Grenz. This epistemological approach as well as the focus on the canonical heritage of the Church grants Abraham similarities with the Postliberalism movement (as well as Barth), but he deliberately chooses to distance himself from these allies; Long, 341-3; see also James Beilby, "On Revelation and Divine Perception: A Response to William J. Abraham," *Philosophia Christi* 10, no. 2 (2008): 346-8.

[55] Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 72-8.

[56] The language of *oculus contemplationis* is adapted from Hugh of St. Victor; Ibid., 65-9; Abraham, "Response to Professors," 368-71. In what could considered a controversial claim for evangelicalism, Abraham claims that it is *not* by the Spirit that we recognize revelation in creation, prophets, or Christ, but by perception (*oculus contemplationis*)—rather, he suggests that the Spirit witnesses regarding the redemptive work of Christ.

through the fields of science and history. By utilizing the tools of modern literary study, we will be able to better distinguish and determine the figurative and literal readings of Scripture and mine the text for all of its historical import.[57] Abraham also emphasizes reading for the authorial intent, seeing it as central to the communicative process.[58] This is fundamental to an inductive study of Scripture, in which the features of the texts construct its meaning and must be understood for best interpretation.[59] Concertedly, while he does not let the biblical canon determine the meaning of a text, he locates the significance of a text by its place in the canon.[60] This means that a text should not be interpreted to mirror the rest of Scripture, but it is only natural that the whole of the Bible affect any importance we impart to a pericope.

Beyond these more practical methods of interpretation, Abraham emphasizes the spiritual side of reading Scripture and developing theology. While Christians are to make use of modern critical studies, they should not let the skepticism of modern studies overrun their faithful reading of the Bible. Rather, we approach Scripture with

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[57] Abraham, *Divine Inspiration*, 69-71; Abraham, *Divine Revelation*, 187-8; Abraham, "The Future of Scripture," 19-23. Additionally, understanding revelation correctly (i.e. as not dictation) helps shape our interpretive practices.

[58] To be clear, Abraham does not believe that we can grasp objective meaning by focus on the author, but rather sees authorial intent as fundamental to the communicative process. Additionally, we are limited to what the author achieved in their writing rather than their actual intentions. This mode of thinking Abraham builds from J. L. Austin's speech-act theory; William J. Abraham, "Intentions and the Logic of Interpretation," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 11-20.

[59] Ibid., 20-3; William J. Abraham, "Inductive Bible Study, Divine Revelation, and Canon," *The Journal Of Inductive Biblical Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2014).

[60] Abraham, "Intentions and the Logic of Interpretation," 22-3.

confidence.[61] We do this by blanketing ourselves in virtue and spiritual discipline brought on by the Spirit. We do not rely on Tradition to supply us with authoritative interpretation, but rather with our own interpretive faculties working through the healing powers of the Holy Spirit.[62] It is by this power that Christians, and Christians only, can construct the theology of the Church.

Conclusion

In William Abraham's theology, revelation is a complex and varied event. While it is fundamentally God's communication with creation by divine initiative, its content and method can take different forms—manifesting in creation, in God's words and deeds throughout history, and in the Incarnation of the Son.

Scripture enshrines some of God's greatest revelatory acts, particularly his taking on flesh. However, even though the Bible is inspired by God, it is not identical with revelation. Moreover, Scripture is not inerrant nor does it contain all that is necessary for Christian theology; rather, it stands alongside the rest of the Church's canonical heritage in providing humanity a way to commune with God.

The human response to God's communication, revealed in and outside of Scripture, is either one of acceptance or rejection. Humanity may reject that the revelation presented in Christianity is legitimate, but if they accept it, they must take it with it epistemological force, crossing that threshold, and let it transform every aspect of their being. While Abraham places the questions of epistemology second to accepting the

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[61] Abraham, "The Future of Scripture," 10-1, 20.

[62] Ibid., 22-3; Abraham, "Intentions and the Logic of Interpretation," 23; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold*, 56; see also Grenz, 42-3.

content of the Christian canon with its classical and Trinitarian claims, he is very much interested in religious knowledge and responsible interpretation of Scripture using modern methods of study.

Chapter Five
CONCLUSION

Across the work of Alexander Campbell, Kevin Vanhoozer, and William Abraham, there is a clear common ground. They each approach theology out of a desire to understand the historic faith and glorify God. Yet there is a movement between Campbell and the latter two, and then even a different approach between Vanhoozer and Abraham. Analyzing and understanding this development is crucial for the maturation of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

Revelation Proper: A Comparison

For each of the three subjects in this study, revelation is a central concept of the Christian faith. Yet while they share this core conviction, the nuances of their respective theological projects lead to distinct systems of belief. They each have their own way of aligning God's communication into their theological program.

There seems to be the greatest cohesion across all three figures in their acceptance of revelation as a rational concept. For each of them, revelation is a sensical phenomenon, operating by similar rules as other epistemological or communicative concepts. That is not to say that they equate the knowledge gained through divine revelation with that gained through logic—in fact, both Campbell and Abraham clarify the distinction between revelation and reason. For Campbell, revelation stands above reason though they are always in agreement; similarly for Abraham, revelation stands

alongside reason as an epistemological concept that must be taken with equal force. Abraham goes further still—in a direction Campbell would not follow—when he asserts that revelation is an offense. Vanhoozer takes a different approach in defending the rationality of revelation which he sees as sustained by God. As an act of communication, its reliability is built on the divine foundation.

This agreement on revelation's rationality leads Campbell, Vanhoozer, and Abraham to similar conclusions regarding the propositionalism of revelation. Campbell understands God's communication to sometimes be propositional (e.g. "thou shalt…") yet is most often found in his dynamic work. Still, Campbell would accept the term propositional since all language by which God communicates is fundamentally propositional. Similarly, Vanhoozer uses the term in multiple ways: he says that the Word of God is not propositional but rather divine discourse, yet at other times, he admits that all speech-acts are necessarily propositional but not all propositions are necessarily assertive. Abraham mostly sympathizes with propositionalism except for when those who espouse it confuse inspiration with divine speech. Campbell, Vanhoozer, and Abraham all agree in their claim that God's revelation necessarily involves words.[1] Words provide clarity that deeds cannot.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that Campbell, Vanhoozer, and Abraham agree by acknowledging the classical categories of revelation. All three take revelation beyond the boundaries of God's spoken word and propositions and accept the categories of general

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[1] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 149. Here Vanhoozer interacts directly with Abraham.

and special revelation. Campbell is not unique in his belief that special and general revelation (as well as natural theology) are in agreement, and that special revelation is to be emphasized more than general on account of its clarity. Abraham, while not departing radically from the other two, is probably the most polymorphic in his approach; he emphasizes the wide variety of forms and methods involved in God's communication. Again, for each of them, Jesus is the central figure of God's revelation.[2] Our understanding of the divine is necessarily looking back to Christ and forward to the completion of all things. And as is made clear in the person of Jesus, God's revelation is not solely about the imparting of information about God but is a crucial piece in God's redemptive plan.

It is at this point that our theologians begin to depart, their disparity primarily rooting in their differing attitudes toward communication. Though Campbell writes concerning the "currency of ideas," he basically assumes that communication is a fixed and trustworthy activity. This is a hallmark of Enlightenment optimism and goes on to fuel most of his ecumenical efforts. Campbell's optimism is starkly contrasted with Vanhoozer's realism, which seeks to deal with the question of whether communication can even occur. Vanhoozer and Abraham both understand on account of postmodern and deconstructionist critiques that revelation and communication must now be defended as an acceptable means of knowledge—its clarity can no longer be assumed. While both of

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[2] Vanhoozer may be unique in his emphasis on the place of Scripture in our understanding of God, almost placing it alongside the preeminence of Jesus.

these later scholars hold to the ultimate reliability of divine revelation, their change in perspective reflect a seismic shift in theology of revelation.

Campbell, Vanhoozer, and Abraham further diverge in their understanding of God's relation to revelation. While for Campbell, God must reveal because he is totally transcendent, Vanhoozer sees revelation and communication as inherent to God. Moreover, Vanhoozer ties revelation to the doctrine of the Trinity, making it fundamental to his theology. Campbell works mostly independent of the classic doctrine, and Abraham, while affirming the Trinity's preeminence in Christian theology, does not utilize it in his theology of revelation. Vanhoozer thus offers the most distinctively Christian take on revelation, rather than one based in philosophical categories.

It is clear regarding revelation proper that all three theologians are coming out of some sort of evangelical Protestantism. They all to some degree value the language of divine revelation, seeing it as propositional even if the conveyance of information is not the final goal. Vanhoozer, however, incorporates a renewed interest in Trinitarian theology in his conception of revelation, and he and Abraham both acknowledge the limitations inherent in communication—especially the multi-step communication found in Scripture.

The Role of Scripture: A Comparison

For Campbell, Vanhoozer, and Abraham, Scripture is seen as central to the Christian faith and the primary bearer of divine revelation. Yet beyond this, their bibliologies diverge radically. While Vanhoozer and Abraham often stand in agreement

against Campbell, bound by their proximity in time, Abraham acts as the outlier in discussions of Scripture.

Campbell and Vanhoozer first align themselves in their emphasis on the Bible. Campbell labels the Bible the "One Best Book," and Vanhoozer calls it the "Book of Books." It stands at the center of both of their theological projects as the greatest window to the divine available to creation. Conversely, Campbell and Vanhoozer balance their high view of Scripture by acknowledging the genre and literary features of the Bible. For both, genre is crucial in containing the full range of God's revelation. Moreover, for Vanhoozer, genre clarifies the human element of Scripture. Despite its humanity, Scripture remains unified and consistent—singular in meaning. On account of this view of Scripture, Campbell and Vanhoozer both naturally adopt the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*; for them, the Bible is all that is needed for the development of doctrine and the sustenance of the faith. It is at the center of Christian theology.

This all stands in contrast to William Abraham, who—though he recognizes the importance of Scripture and its connection to divine revelation—does not view it as the definer of the Christian faith. Abraham rejects *sola scriptura* as a viable foundation for the Canonical Theism of the Church.[3] The Bible should not and cannot sustain the magnitude and beauty of all of Christianity's theology, particularly a Trinitarian vision of God.

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[3] Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 330-1. Abraham specifically attacks the Princeton theologians who made epistemology central to Scripture. The Princeton theologians, in some ways, mirror Campbell and act as forerunners to Vanhoozer.

The theologians next diverge in their understanding of inspiration. Campbell and Vanhoozer speak of the accommodation in Scripture—that the infinite God lowers himself to speak to finite humans (or in Vanhoozer's words, dialogue with humans). This is a basic feature of inspiration by which the Spirit of God supervenes on the human text of the Bible. For Campbell, this results in a verbal plenary model of inspiration by which all the words of Scripture are ensured; for Vanhoozer it means that the divine intention is both present in the text and transcends it. For Abraham, however, inspiration simply means that the text is of divine will. He sees the mechanics of inspiration as more akin to a teacher-student relationship.[4] This is similar to Vanhoozer in that the divine intention is present, but it is not quite as closely connected to every word as Vanhoozer's model.

The most substantial gap between Campbell and Vanhoozer and the work of Abraham is in their dealings with inerrancy. For Campbell, that Scripture is made infallible by the Spirit is plain. For Vanhoozer, it is more complex; in the intervening years, the difficulties dragged out by critical study have become more prominent. For this reason, Vanhoozer shies away from a blanket statement of inerrancy; however, he is willing to say that while Scripture may not necessarily be inerrant in its form, it is certainly perfect in its function. Abraham, on the other hand, has no such difficulty in dismissing the doctrine of inerrancy. He sees the idea as faulty, based on an

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[4] Vanhoozer critiques Abraham for falling to the word-concept fallacy as he bases his understanding of inspiration on the ordinary usage of the word; Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, 140-1. Vanhoozer weakens his criticism, though, by comparing Abraham to those who understand inspiration to be like the writing of poetry, a position Abraham specifically rejects. Moreover, though this theory of inspiration may root in a word-concept fallacy, its ability to more accurately predict the textual reality gives it scientific credence.

understanding of inspiration as divine dictation. Moreover, he rejects any confusing of Scripture with epistemic criteria; the Bible is not a means of fundamental knowledge but primarily a means of communing with God—its human words simply enshrine the revelation of God.[5]

While each of these scholars finds God's revelation in the pages of Scripture, the difference in how closely they associate its words with God's words results in differences in what they are each willing to claim about Scripture. Campbell and Vanhoozer recognize the process by which God's revelation became inscripturated, but they see God's supervening Spirit as sustaining the information of its words. Abraham, on the other hand, maintains the divide between what God has revealed and what has been written, honoring Scripture as enshrining that communication and offering a means of communion.

The Human Response: A Comparison

Campbell, Vanhoozer, and Abraham demonstrate the most agreement in regards to the human response to revelation. None of them shy away from the interpretive methods of academia, and each affirms the transformative and spiritual properties of encountering revelation.

Their alignment begins in how each of them deal with exegetical concerns. Campbell embraces the best scholarly methods of his day. In particular, he approaches the

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[5] Vanhoozer contests the claim that the canon was not both soteriological and epistemological and sees Abraham going too far with the human influence he applies to Scripture; Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 144-6; see also Berry, "Theological vs. Methodological Postconservatism," 114.

Bible with a scientific precision, utilizing a Baconian (inductive) approach. By these means, Campbell believes that Christians can have absolute certainty regarding the text's meaning. Vanhoozer, on the other hand, does not think that any singular method of interpretation can be applied to the text; he also believes that right interpretation is not guaranteed. Still, in practice, Vanhoozer suggests we can have confidence in approaching Scripture, and he utilizes classic tools of exegesis—not too different from Campbell—alongside contemporary theories of communication. Abraham also believes that no single method of epistemology or interpretation should be canonized by the Church. He does, however, advocate for the adopting of critical methods and specifically an inductive approach to exegesis.[6] All three theologians thus offer similar approaches, but Vanhoozer and Abraham introduce reasonable doubt into their interpretation.

These limitations in hermeneutics cause Vanhoozer and Abraham to deal with the bounds of interpretation and the purpose of the canon of Scripture. Both accept authorial intent (much like Campbell) as central in the interpretive process; it is from the author that a text is given meaning.[7] Yet, neither thinks that meaning is limited to the original author's intent. Vanhoozer, instead, places more emphasis on the canon as the bounds of interpretation. Abraham pushes back against this idea, suggesting that a text's meaning is not determined by the canon of Scripture but rather its significance. Vanhoozer also

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[6] Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*, 331-2. Abraham rejects deductive attempts to make God fit into a certain mold of revelation, something he again sees in the work of the Princeton theologians.

[7] Vanhoozer and Abraham both build from speech-act theory.

rejects the authority of the community's interpretation, something that Abraham is more receptive to.

For all three, interpretation must come out of a Christian spirit. For Campbell, this means coming within the "understanding distance" in order to rightly interpret. Vanhoozer places more emphasis than either Campbell or Abraham on the role of the Spirit in right interpretation.[8] Abraham pushes for Christian virtue in the act of interpretation; moreover, he sees the crossing of the divine threshold as shaping all of our being, including our interpretive approaches. Still, all three find agreement in the claim that Scripture is not merely to convey facts to the believer. For Campbell, Scripture is a call to action, to give one's life over to God and be transformed. Similarly, Vanhoozer sees communication's purpose as transformative, to produce in the hearer some sort of change. And in Abraham's theology, Scripture is no longer a means of knowledge but a means of grace; it is not for epistemology but for soteriology.

Overall, in Campbell's theology, revelation is to be mined from Scripture using modern methods; he sees no tension in the results of these methods and the gospel message. Vanhoozer and Abraham also embrace the cutting-edge but without dismissing the ambiguities and tensions with the traditional that such methods incur. Vanhoozer is more adamant toward a thoroughly Christian means of approaching interpretation, yet Abraham warns that we ought not be dogmatic about our means of epistemology.

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[8] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 97. Vanhoozer adapts his approach from the work of Alvin Plantinga, with whom Abraham is occasionally at odds.

Revelation and Epistemology: A Synthesis

Campbell, Vanhoozer, and Abraham coalesce around a common view of revelation in which a transcendent though personal God interjects into history, and it is beginning with that understanding of divine communication that this study follows their lead. God speaks, not through sound or by his tongue, but imparting the divine will to creation. Through a variety of means, known and unknown, God shares the mysteries of the divine reality. God communicates thus to teach a new way of living and to bring all into his presence.

Revelation, as communication from God, is perfectly trustworthy just as God is perfect in all his ways. Revelation, understood properly, is a gateway to knowledge and stands alongside reason, experience, and other epistemological concepts. It cannot be doubted

Yet while the veracity of revelation cannot be questioned, the location may be. Where is God's communication to be found? Revelation is foremost present in the Incarnation. In the gospel event of God becoming flesh, God both imparts the divine will and shares the heavenly reality with creation—this is the ultimate act of God's revealing. God has also made himself known in creation and more dramatically in the various events of salvation history—especially the exodus of Israel. But beyond all these, God's revelation has historically been associated with Scripture—the most clear communication of the divine.

However, this is only true in some respects. Scripture in the Decalogue is perhaps more clear in saying "you shall not murder," than the Incarnation is in Jesus's teaching, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," alongside his final act of sacrifice for others.[9] The limitations of the Bible are foremost rooted in the literary nature of Scripture, in its enshrining of revelation rather than being revelation. Campbell and Abraham both recognize that, technically speaking, only certain parts of the holy text contain literal revelation. This is compounded with historical concerns about the historicity and authorship the Bible. More than enough scholars have struggled over the question, what real words and actions of God are found in the text? Still more, there is the complexity of interpretation to consider. Vanhoozer, though providing a reasonable defense, acknowledges the difficulties facing modern readers. In this way, the opposite may be true and God's dramatic work in history may be more clear than the written word —the Incarnation and the Exodus may be more coherent regarding God's desire to free his people from bondage, both physically and from sin, than the long and ancient text of Scripture, both seemingly condoning slavery and at times providing support for abolition.

So while Scripture's place in the Church is special for its enshrining of revelation, it cannot be enough. The whole canonical heritage of the Church is needed. By appealing to the wider canon, a theological context is given to the interpretation of the biblical canon. Abraham's particularism gives philosophical legs to this approach—the identity of

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[9] Certainly these separate episodes in Christ's ministry and crucifixion can be reconciled, but analyzing the life of a person or the implications of a historical event are admittedly less clear than written commands.

the Church is only fully found when the greater fountain of knowledge of the canonical heritage is opened-up.

As we embrace the canon, we must necessarily ask, what is the canon? Abraham is notoriously vague in defining the boundaries or the content of his Canonical Theism besides that it favors the Patristic era and unashamedly adopts the doctrine of the Trinity. For those wishing to flesh out this canonical heritage, the Rule of Faith may be the first appeal. And while this is helpful, it too can be notoriously vague and debated. Do we have in mind Tertullian's "Rule of Faith" or Irenaeus's similarly named "Rule of Truth," the Apostle's Creed or something else entirely? Consequentially, we must content with nebulous boundaries to the canon, content that the Church in a very broad, emergent way will guide its flock as God guides it.

So what then can be said of Scripture? It is—to borrow perhaps inappropriately from the Eastern Orthodox Church—the first among equals. The Church has historically held it as such, acknowledging its preeminence and uniqueness in both conveying revelation and actings as a means of grace. It more than the other great sacraments bears an epistemological function, but it is not alone—so too do the various creeds and canons. Scripture remains thus as the principal document of the Christian faith and the divine will. Christians have met God in its pages more than in the ancient liturgies of the Church. And more than they have come to right doctrine and ethics by the Apostle's Creed, they have received a divine word through their study of the Bible.

Moving Forward in the Stone-Campbell Movement

A religious movement could certainly stand on worse shoulders than Alexander Campbell. In many ways, Campbell sets an excellent model for those in the Stone-Campbell Movement that come after him. It is apparent across the writings of Campbell, Vanhoozer, and Abraham, that many of the same issues are relevant to evangelical Christians and, moreover, many of the same answers are still applicable.

With that acknowledged, it becomes immediately obvious upon reading the more recent work of Vanhoozer and Abraham that the unbridled certainty of Campbell is no longer possible. This is most evident by the continued division in Restoration churches paralleled with the ongoing splintering of Christianity as a whole—the adoption of certain hermeneutical methods has not been able to slow down the proliferation of biblical interpretations. Moreover, Vanhoozer and Abraham recognize that deconstructionism and modern critical scholarship have dismantled the ability to reliably reach the same conclusions and to maintain complete confidence in interpretation. This is not to say that they are not confident in the Christian gospel, but simply that they understand that no interpretive or epistemological approach is perfect.

This is the first lesson for the Stone-Campbell Movement. As we take our fellowship into the future, we must face the doubts and uncertainties that come along with it. We can no longer act as if the faith has remained static over the previous millennia or that everyone is able to reach the same doctrinal conclusions if they simply use the same and best methodology. Instead, the Churches of Christ must embrace interpretive doubt alongside modern critical studies. We are not devoid of confidence, nor

must we follow wherever the scholarly community goes—but we can no longer hide from the ambiguity of a complex world.

Vanhoozer and Abraham certainly do not wallow in doubt. As Vanhoozer deals with the questions of deconstructionism, he offers certainty in the form of God's providence. It is by God's sustaining power, that we are able to have confidence in human communication as well as revelation from God. Similarly, Abraham deals with misunderstandings that come from outside the Christian circle by appealing to the threshold of revelation. When we make that leap, accepting the revelation of God, we are brought into a new way of seeing, in which everything is put into a new light and the Church's canon of grace takes on new meaning. Neither of these responses eliminate the intrinsic uncertainty or doubt that is embedded in modern hermeneutics and epistemology, but they offer a level of confidence to the Church. And while I think both are valuable, Vanhoozer's approach is of particular value to the Stone-Campbell Movement as it seeks to navigate the contemporary currents in theology. Even while respecting that not everyone will inevitably reach the same conclusions, we can have faith that God sustains communication, especially his revelation to his people.

Yet while Vanhoozer's approach excels at dealing with epistemological doubt, the Churches of Christ are behooved by not following his steps regarding certain Protestant dogmas. Vanhoozer, like Campbell, affirms the traditional Protestant doctrines of *sola scriptura*—the teaching that all that is necessary for right Christian doctrine is the text of Scripture—and the inerrancy of the Bible—the teaching that Scripture is flawless in all it says. In his early work, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture*, Abraham argues that

the latter doctrine is founded (even if unknowingly) on a model of inspiration as divine dictation, which is simply untenable.[10] When the true extent of what the Bible reveals about the process of inspiration is recognized, it becomes clear that inspiration must be defined inductively. And after considering the volumes of critical analysis produced over the last century, it becomes almost painfully obvious that inerrancy cannot be expected of the inspired text. This is the second lesson for the Churches of Christ.

The third lesson revolves around the doctrine *sola scriptura*, which is also attacked by Abraham throughout his body of work. According to him and those who subscribe to the Canonical Theism project, the Christian faith is not found in the limited books of the Bible but spans across all of the Church's canonical heritage. To grasp the relevance of this claim, one need look no further than the oft-discussed rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity by Barton W. Stone, co-founder of the Stone-Campbell Movement.[11] Stone, despite utilizing the single, best hermeneutic described by Campbell and working from the same text, came to reject the Trinity and espoused a form of Arianism. This dramatic example demonstrates the limitations of relying on the text to arrive at the full Christian faith. In this way, *sola scriptura* has likely been the greatest shortcoming of the Stone-Campbell Movement; by limiting itself to the text, neglecting the various creeds and sources of the early Church, they have cut themselves off from a healthy understanding of the Trinity and other central Christian doctrines. Abraham,

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[10] Abraham also contests inerrancy on more practical grounds since a major feature of his Canonical Theism is that no epistemological approach to Scripture should be canonized.

[11] E.g. Mark E. Powell, "Canonical Theism and Theological Commitments in the Stone-Campbell Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2009): 231-6.

again, offers the better path by widening the Christian vision of God and salvation to the entire canonical heritage of the Church.[12]

The question naturally arises whether this path is true to the Stone-Campbell vision. In as much as the Restoration plea was that "unity in the church could be attained by restoring New Testament Christianity," the answer is *yes and no*.[13] Embracing the full canon of the Church certainly pushes the movement toward unity, as we widen our net of agreement and strengthen our common foundation. But the canon of Canonical Theism is necessarily beyond the bounds of New Testament Christianity. The creeds and councils and icons of the Early Church are nowhere to be found in the text of the Bible. On its face, this canonical vision does not seem to align with the plea of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

Reconciling these two approaches is possible only by recognizing the nature and features of the New Testament Church that make it worth emulating. It cannot be said that we must simply follow Scripture, a document not even available to the first century Church. Moreover, the various traditions, hymns, sacraments, and other elements of the canonical heritage cannot be ignored as they surely helped define the identity of that early body of believers. Rather, we must look to some other traits of New Testament

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[12] Admittedly, this is an appeal to consequences: because the doctrine of the Trinity is seen as worthwhile, any framework that doesn't affirm that doctrine is rejected. Abraham's solution is thus dependent on one's acceptance of particularism as a viable epistemological approach and the importance of trinitarian doctrine. For many Stone-Campbell lay persons, further reasoning would be necessary.

[13] Powell, 227-8. Powell rightfully adds that implicit in this claim is that "Scripture alone is the criterion for the faith and practice of the early church and the church today"—above, it is challenged if this need necessarily be the case.

Christianity for what the modern Church hopes to reproduce. Answering what those aspects may be is beyond the scope of this study, but a more judicial exploration might highlight two characteristics of the first century Church worth emulating: their autonomy as well as their recognition of Christ as Lord. The former trait is supported by Vanhoozer who sees unity despite the diversity of local communities as a necessity for Christian interpretation and unification. The latter trait is at its core a Trinitarian claim supported and reinforced by the entire canon of the early Church—it is central to Abraham's Canonical Theism. This, perhaps, is a vision of New Testament Christianity on which the Stone-Campbell Movement can build unity. This is a binding force that will hold all Christians together as we all engage vulnerably with the critical issues of today and rely on the confidence that only God can provide.

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