THEOLOGICAL VS. METHODOLOGICAL POSTCONSERVATISM:
STANLEY GRENZ AND KEVIN VANHOOZER AS TEST CASES

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I. Introduction

Roger Olson has observed rightly that the current postconservative ethos within evangelical thought is by no means monolithic. However, his related observation that all of its various expressions appear to move along a trajectory away from fundamentalism and even conservatism remains to be seen. While all who adopt the postconservative label have the mutual goal of formulating a theological methodology that responds to the critiques of postmodernity, not all contributors are necessarily doing so at the expense of doctrinal tenets that historically have been intrinsic to post-fundamentalist evangelicalism.

This being the case, at the moment there appears to be an evolving distinction between at least two kinds of postconservative thought, namely theological and methodological. The former approach is marked by attempts to redefine Christian theology in ways that explicitly entail the jettisoning of certain evangelical convictions, while the latter primarily focuses on reformulating several of the previous constructs in which particular evangelical beliefs have been expressed. The question that arises is how this distinction can be seen and supported. One effective way is to compare how various evangelicals use the postconservative platform in their theological argumentation, and notice the similarities as well as the contrasts.

Two theologians in particular who serve this task well are the late Stanley J. Grenz, former professor of theology and ethics at Carey and Regent Colleges in Vancouver, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. On the one hand, Grenz believed that the edifice of conservative evangelical theology was in jeopardy because many of its doctrinal constructs were encumbered with...
modernistic versions of rationalism and metaphysics, which have been deemed untenable by postmodern thought. On the other hand, Vanhoozer's present contention is not that conservative evangelical beliefs themselves are the theological infants of modernistic outlooks. Rather, it is certain approaches that have been used to explicate them that reveal relational roots to modernity.

Notice then that regardless of the accuracy of the accusations pertaining to the popular notion that twentieth-century evangelical theology has more in common with modernity than orthodoxy, both Grenz's and Vanhoozer's work helps clarify the theological fork in the road that exists between different versions of postconservative polemics. Moreover, one topic that highlights this gap well is the doctrine of Scripture. The divine disclosure of inerrant revelation through the means of language is one of the pinnacle ideas that demarcate evangelicalism in the current postmodern intellectual climate because it touches every concern from epistemology and metaphysics to linguistic theory and hermeneutics. This being the case, examining and contrasting the ideas that Grenz and Vanhoozer advocate regarding this fundamental evangelical conviction can bring to the surface the differences that clarify their respective versions of postconservative thought.

II. Charting the Grenzian Course to a Postconservative Bibliology

The fundamental proposal that summarizes Grenz's work as a whole is his articulation of a postmodern-sensitive theological method. Herein he was convinced that in light of the new intellectual setting, evangelicals must revise their theories of systematic formulation by adopting new ways of constructing doctrinal loci; and in doing so, Grenz was also adamant that the mainline evangelical understanding of the nature of Scripture was an initial topic that needed immediate attention. In turn, the question arises as to the steps that Grenz took in forming his Bibliology, and the answer lies in observing two basic factors: (1) his initial accusation that previous views of inspiration, inerrancy, and propositional revelation, which were defended by evangelical theologians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were supported unequivocally by modernistic assumptions, and (2) his subsequent interrogation and repudiation of these former concepts in exchange for viable concepts in postmodern theories of epistemology and language.

1. The Grenzian Cross-Examination: The Modernizing of the Evangelical Heritage

Regarding the twentieth-century, postwar, evangelical view of Scripture, Grenz's case begins with a search to discover the epistemological assumptions

that had the most impact during the Enlightenment. He deduces that whether it was through Cartesian Rationalism or Lockian Empiricism, Classical Foundationalism became the dominant model for understanding the function of noetic structures. Yet because this shift to epistemic autonomy gradually led many thinkers to distinguish between religious beliefs that could be supported by reason and those that could not, Grenz highlights the fact that this dichotomy persuaded many later thinkers of the Enlightenment to adopt skeptical attitudes toward Christianity altogether.

1. Liberalism vs. Princetonianism. As the later nineteenth century approached, Grenz argues, two major attempts were made to salvage both foundationalist epistemology and Christian theology. One approach was the movement of classical liberalism wherein its adherents were convinced that Christianity could survive the cultural onslaught of modernism only if its beliefs were reconstructed in such a fashion that they would be attractive to modern scientific and philosophical mindsets. The eventual solution was to follow the heritage of Schleiermacher and relocate the locus of theological authority to the universal human reality of religious experience. An alternative movement was the resurgence of conservative evangelicalism through the groundbreaking efforts of the nineteenth-century Princeton theologians. Grenz asserts that these thinkers, like classical liberals, were searching for a foundation that could undergird Christianity in light of modernistic criticisms. But the defining difference was that they chose to solidify their epistemic foundation upon the doctrine of Scripture.

From here, Grenz asserts that the Princetonian focus upon Scripture evidenced a merging of Classical Foundationalism with biblical revelation via three ideas: inerrancy, propositional revelation, and an inductive approach to theological formulation. Regarding the first element, the primacy of inerrancy was enforced in light of the belief that Christianity was based on an objective, immutable source rather than the fallible subjectivity of religious experience, and that foundation was the Bible because it was divinely inspired and thereby error-free. Another characterization that subsequently flowed from this axiom was the concept of propositional revelation. Recognizing that all Scripture was inspired and therefore necessarily and immutably true, the Princeton thinkers also acknowledged that all biblical claims were given through the means of human communication, thereby containing objective, cognitive content. This led to the third deduction which was that allScriptural statements within the Bible could be summarized into timeless, universally applicable concepts or

6 Ibid., 62; Grenz, Renewing the Center, 189.
8 Grenz and Franke, Beyond Foundationalism, 59; Grenz, Renewing the Center, 189.
9 See Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 65-67; Grenz, Renewing the Center, 70-80, 189-90; Grenz and Franke, Beyond Foundationalism, 60-63.
mandates that transcend all cultures. Special revelation then allegedly became a vast reservoir of divinely revealed facts that could be apprehended and systematized in a coherent form.

2. Princetonianism Evolves into Evangelicalism. Grenz's analysis finally consummates with the assessment that early twentieth-century evangelicalism simply revised and advanced the priorities of the Princeton tradition. Beginning with the opposition to Barthian neo-orthodoxy by thinkers such as Gordon H. Clark and Carl Henry, Grenz notes that the ideas of inerrancy and propositional revelation again became prominent within evangelicalism. Likewise, Grenz identifies other evangelicals who he believes have accepted the mantle of evangelical rationalism such as Millard Erickson, Bruce Demarest, Gordon Lewis, and Wayne Grudem. Grenz argues that these theologians continue to echo the unfortunate modernistic tendencies of their forebears by reducing the theological task to collecting biblical data and then synthesizing the content into cohesive, forensic summaries.

Consequently, this complex accusation that evangelical theology for the last century has been practiced in light of previous nineteenth-century thinkers who rerouted Classical Foundationalism into the doctrine of Scripture convinced Grenz that contemporary conservatives are in actuality "evangelical modernists." They are evangelical because they adhere to a common spirituality grounded in the gospel, but are at the same time modernists because they "advocate that we continue to engage in theological reflection on the basis of the questions and assumptions that arose out of the Enlightenment."

2. Grenz's Redefinition of Inspiration and Illumination

In light of this verdict, Grenz openly confesses that his proposed solutions are triggered by his commitment to being a "postmodern evangelical." Note that this title marks his departure from the alleged conservative modernist agenda, which in his mind exposes the doctrine of Scripture to certain epistemic pitfalls that have been repudiated by the current intellectual ethos. Like classical liberalism, evangelical modernists postulate a problematic Bibliology because they assume a classical foundational approach by seeking a universal point of reference, the key difference being the objective biblical data as opposed to the

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10 Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 67.
11 Note that much of Grenz's case here is based on the popularized argument that the Princetonians simply nuanced Scottish Common Sense in order to formulate an objective means of theological investigation. See Grenz, Renewing the Center, 71. The seminal essay that proposed this idea was by Sydney Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," CH 24 (1955): 257-72.
12 See Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 67-70; Grenz, Renewing the Center, 86-102.
13 Grenz, Renewing the Center, 118-34, 154-59; Grenz, "Beyond Foundationalism," 64-65.
16 Ibid., 2.
Schleiermchnach religious experience. Furthermore, they fail to explain how divine revelation as disclosed in the Bible is communicated to contemporary readers. These problems, in turn, set the backdrop for Grenz's revisions.

1. Theopneustos: Functional or Ontological? To begin, Grenz observes that the reason for the shortcomings in the evangelical modernist conception of revelation is a disjunction between the Holy Spirit's formation of Scripture in the past and his utilization of it in the present. The disjunction that Grenz perceives is illustrated by the standard conservative view that inspiration is a completed deposit of truth within the words of the Bible. While this view sees the Spirit as actively guiding biblical authors to bring about desired results, there seems to be minimal significance for the Spirit beyond the one-time act of inspiration. Grenz's perception leads him to reject the classical model of biblical authority because for him, Scripture is not revelation because of the mere historical references or linguistic symbols it contains, but because the Holy Spirit somehow speaks through its pages continually. Concepts such as inerrancy and infallibility are therefore insufficient to validate Scripture as spiritually binding.17 Rather, Scripture is authoritative for the Christian community because it is the vehicle the Spirit uses to communicate.18

Grenz substantiates this idea by emphasizing a reciprocal interaction between inspiration and illumination.19 Using ideas implied in the Puritan/Catholic emphasis on the Spirit's role in biblical understanding as well as the statement on Scripture found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Grenz contends that the Bible is authoritative not simply because it was originally given by the Spirit, but also because it is constantly used by the Spirit.20 The Spirit brought life into the Scriptures as they were written (inspiration) and continues to use them as an instrument to vocalize his will in the present (illumination). Yet how does this dynamic transpire?

2. Contextualized Spirit-Discourse. Grenz formulates his alternative view of revelation by adopting a nuanced form of the linguistic model known as Speech-Act theory. This idea, which is somewhat prominent in contemporary discussions of Scripture, postulates that people use language not just to transmit messages but also to perform actions. The factors that allow this dynamic to take place include locutions (words and gestures), illocutions (intended use of locutions such as promising, commanding, and encouraging), and perlocutions.

19 Grenz, Theology for the Community, 500.
20 Grenz cites the Westminster Confession where it states, "The Supreme Judge ... can be no other than the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture"; and Bernard Ramm's claim, "The principle of authority within the Christian church must be ... the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture." Grenz, Revisioning Evangelical Theology, 113.
(outcome or results upon the audience). Grenz argues that the Spirit uses the locutions of Scripture to convey specific illocutions to the Christian community. The way in which this occurs, however, warrants further explanation.

Grenz attempts to clarify his point by applying Speech-Act theory to the act of textual communication. To do so, he acknowledges other thinkers who currently are using Speech-Act theory to explicate the nature of revelation and finds the thoughts of Nicholas Wolterstorff especially helpful. Wolterstorff argues that God communicates through biblical revelation by endorsing, or authorizing, the illocutionary forces of Scriptural locutionary acts either through "deputizing" speakers to speak divinely sent messages or simply "appropriating" discourses that biblical authors wrote. Grenz finds this idea of "appropriated discourse" to be a key to unlocking the way in which the Spirit uses the Bible, though it requires a crucial modification.

As a whole, Grenz is not comfortable with the excessive attention that Wolterstorff's concept of appropriated discourse gives to the biblical authors because it does not clearly maintain a distinction between the original derivation of Scripture and the ongoing use of it by the Spirit. Grenz, therefore, formulates a kind of pneuma-discourse approach wherein the Spirit conveys new illocutionary meanings through Scripture that are not restricted to the original authors' intentions. To support this notion, Grenz appeals to contemporary philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur who argue that when authors record literary works, the texts eventually become distanced from their authors and take on a hermeneutical life of their own. In Grenz's words, "The text has its own intention, which has its genesis in the author's intention, but is not exhausted by it." Therefore, understanding biblical texts is not obtained by mere exegesis alone because the Spirit continually appropriates the Bible in different ways as various contexts change, thereby communicating new and unique messages to every new community of hearers.

The final stage of these revisions entails the intended objectives that the Spirit has in appropriating Scripture. The initial goal is to establish a supreme source through which he can communicate. This applies to the actual formation of the canon itself. The Bible alone establishes the general formats for accurate reflection on the faith, thereby making Scripture unique. From here, the Spirit chooses to use the narratives of Scripture to remind the Christian community how the past relates to their present. Grenz describes this activity as


26 Ibid., 362.

27 Ibid.
a "paradigmatic event" in which readers of texts take on the identity of those within the narrative itself.\textsuperscript{28} In conjunction with this focus on the past, the Spirit also speaks through Scripture in order to depict what the present should be ideally so that it will instill a hunger in the hearts of believers for the future.\textsuperscript{29} So in the end, the Spirit uses the Bible to create an ideal world by orienting our present on the basis of the past and in accordance with a vision of the future. The Spirit leads contemporary hearers to view themselves and their situation in the light of God's past and future, and to open themselves and their present to the power of that future, which is already at work in the world.\textsuperscript{30}

Note then that the quality of Scripture does not lie in its ontological superiority as a collection of literary works breathed out by God, but in its functional supremacy because the Spirit uses it as an existential means for nurturing the believing community.

III. Vanhoozer's Version of Postconservative Bibliology

Similar to Grenz's outlook, part of Vanhoozer's affinity with the postconservative label lies in his concerns regarding the essentials of the doctrine of Scripture. Yet his reevaluations and conclusions are noticeably different from those of Grenz. To begin, he believes that the Scripture Principle, or the view that biblical language is to be identified as the "word of God," must be readdressed in light of at least two challenges.\textsuperscript{31} First, there is a need for clarification regarding the exact means whereby Scripture, as a text, conveys divine information. For instance, is revelation found within the words, concepts, sentences, propositions, or images of the Bible?\textsuperscript{32} Second, in conjunction with questions regarding the locus of divine revelation, there is also the postmodern reluctance to make a one-to-one correspondence between language and reality as it exists independently of linguistic description. Therefore, in order to articulate a contemporary doctrine of biblical revelation, Vanhoozer is convinced that evangelicals must explicate a more precise philosophy of language which validates the idea that words, divinely inspired or not, can accurately refer to the world.\textsuperscript{33}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{28} Ibid., 366-67.
\bibitem{29} Ibid., 368-69.
\bibitem{33} It is in providing a response to this very challenge that Vanhoozer has recently produced his most extensive work on his own perspective of theological method entitled, \textit{The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
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1. The Evangelical Ambiguity Regarding Biblical Propositionalism

Regarding the first point, again Vanhoozer's recommendations for changes in Bibliology are spawned by his deduction that past attempts to formulate a lucid presentation of propositional revelation have suffered tremendous setbacks because of multiple criticisms and an obvious lack of consensus. This can be seen in how biblical scholars and theologians who reside within both liberal and postliberal traditions have produced a plethora of critiques regarding the very possibility of language serving as a medium for divine revelation, much less any notion of propositionalism being a tenable solution. Similarly, evangelicals themselves continue to bicker theologically about the precise ways in which the dynamics of propositions explicate the nature of verbal, plenary inspiration. With both of these poles presenting a formidable challenge to an evangelical understanding of Scripture, Vanhoozer proposes a way forward.

1. External Liberal Opposition to Propositionalism. To highlight these critiques in specific form, Vanhoozer first mentions the opposition led by the school of higher criticism which strove to interpret the biblical text by first dismantling all the factors that went into its original composition and then conflating them once again in order to reconstruct an accurate rendition of the historical referents behind the text. The end result of this method was that it upheld the humanness of Scripture at the expense of divine inspiration thereby revealing more of a radical ideology than an objective hermeneutical approach. In conjunction, another corollary assault on divine revelation that Vanhoozer treats is the Biblical Theology movement. This school of thought developed in reaction to the concern that biblical interpretation had become shackled to unchallenged theological categories, and therefore J. P. Gabler and others argued that biblical studies needed to be distinguished from dogmatics as an independent discipline. Initially this project postulated theories of the “mental constructs” which were based upon lexical variations between Hebrew and Greek renderings, but as the movement extended into the mid-twentieth century the narrow focus on words and syntactical data was deemed insufficient because it ignored the broader categories of literary discourse. So while the earlier phase of the Biblical Theology movement read theology off etymology and syntax, the latter stage chose to read

37 This notion was solidified two hundred years later by Krister Stendahl who distinguished between what the text meant (Biblical Theology) and what the text means (Systematics). See Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” 53; “From Canon to Concept,” 99-100.
38 One conclusion was that the etymology, syntax, and grammar of Hebrew and Greek revealed variances regarding concepts of time and history. "Greek thought was said to be static and abstract
Despite these variances, the problem for evangelicals is that both segments of this movement rejected the idea that propositions could act as a linguistic vehicle of religious truth because "biblical statements are too large for those who believe words are the building blocks of meaning and they are too small for those who insist that the key to meaning is the text's literary form."  

2. Internal Evangelical Strife Regarding Propositionalism. These external critiques aside, Vanhoozer also identifies another source of contention that works against any potential theory of propositional revelation, namely the sheer amount of disagreement among evangelicals themselves. Herein, the idea of propositionalism as a philosophical concept is not necessarily seen by Vanhoozer as an inferior category for describing the divine-human dynamics of biblical literature. The difficulty is that evangelicals differ on the specific nature of propositions and therefore cannot arbitrate a unified way of explaining the communicative dynamics involved in biblical statements. While Vanhoozer mentions that the original purpose of the idea of "propositionalism" within evangelical thought was to stress the cognitive aspect of revelation, as the project developed evangelicals provided diverse explanations as to how revelation resides within propositional statements.

To illustrate this point Vanhoozer categorizes three prominent models within conservative evangelicalism. The first, which Vanhoozer labels as a meaning-content approach, can be seen in the work of thinkers such as Ronald Nash, Stanley Obitts, and Gordon Lewis. Vanhoozer argues that evangelicals within this line of thought make a problematic distinction between propositions, which are defined as cognitive segments of information, and the actual words of Scripture, which are the divinely ordained linguistic signs in which propositions are conveyed. What concerns Vanhoozer in this model is that it falls prey to a quasi-Barthian view wherein Scripture is merely a witness (albeit inspired) to revelation. The second model, which Vanhoozer entitles a conceptual-verbal approach, is seen in the work of thinkers such as Carl F. H. Henry. What in contrast to the dynamic and concrete thought of the Jew" (Vanhoozer, "Language, Literature, Hermeneutics," 20-21).
distinguishes this approach from the former is that it defies the dichotomy between propositions and words because in this theory, a proposition is a verbal statement that must be either true or false. Likewise, this stricter form of verbal-propositionalism leads thinkers like Henry to argue that inerrancy applies to the very words of Scripture because the veracity of biblical propositions depends upon the divinely inspired words that convey them. The third model, which Vanhoozer views as a more extreme form of Henry’s thought, is the declarative-assertive approach of Gordon H. Clark who is similar to Henry in that he views propositions as inseparable from words and sentences, but different in that he restricts propositions to sentences that entail only indicative statements. In summary, Vanhoozer’s point in this analysis is that while these evangelicals agree that revelation is disclosed in a linguistic fashion, significant variances exist regarding the nature of biblical propositions which have serious ramifications for one’s views of inerrancy and inspiration.

This being the case, the present collage of ambiguity regarding propositionalism has led many evangelicals to formulate alternate proposals for understanding the nature of textual revelation. One such example is a renewed emphasis on the mystical dynamic between the Spirit and Scripture, which Vanhoozer claims is personified in the work of Donald Bloesch who views Scripture as a sacramental means whereby the Spirit brings the reader or listener into a divine encounter with God. Another approach focuses on redefining the nature of inspiration and emphasizing the humanness of Scripture. Here Vanhoozer argues that current proponents such as Clark Pinnock and William Abraham see the Spirit as inspiring the biblical writers through supernatural encounters and historical events which in turn motivated them to record their own thoughts concerning their experiences, but the actual texts they produced do not transcend their human shortcomings. Rather, the Spirit communicates through the Scriptures in spite of them. A final alternative conceives biblical authority in terms of the salvific results that Scripture elicits. Vanhoozer notes that the contributions of G. C. Berkouwer and Donald McKim illustrate this notion well. Berkouwer argued that Scripture was authoritative not because it derived from an a priori act of inspiration but because it gives direct witness to Christ; and in a similar vein, McKim contends that the authority of Scriptural propositions resides in their soteriological purposes.

Therefore, similar to the projects of classical liberalism and the Biblical Theology movement, all of these proposals jettison the concept of propositionalism because it is deemed an unhelpful way of articulating the relationship between revelation and language. Consequently, Vanhoozer contends that new evangelicals, who desire to conserve propositionalism as a tenable concept, must come to grips with the philosophical intricacies of the topic and formulate more holistic approaches which harmonize the essential ideas that previous evangelicals originally were trying to preserve.

2. Postpositional Propositionalism: The Doctrine of Covenantal Communication

As a tenable solution to the ambiguities of "propositionalism" and as a means to preserving the evangelical commitment to verbal inspiration, Vanhoozer, like Grenz, uses Speech-Act theory as his methodological reference point. In doing so, he seemingly wants to avoid the pitfalls of objective referentialism and subjective expressivism which treat personal and cognitive aspects of textual communication as mutually exclusive ideas. Instead, he advocates a postpropositional view of Scripture in order to highlight the importance of both communicative action via the text as well as the words recorded in the text.

1. Redemptive-Historical Speech Acts. To accomplish this, Vanhoozer contends that biblical literature should be understood from two vantage points. First, words (i.e., locutions), divinely inspired or not, are used to convey specific quantities of propositional content because all sentences, paragraphs, or larger segments of literature propound cognitive ideas for readers to consider. The problem, though, is that not all sentences reflect assertive, or indicative, force. This leads to the second point, which is that locutionary acts are done for the purpose of expressing different actions, or illocutionary forces, which means that authors, including biblical ones, can use propositions in a variety of ways. For Vanhoozer then, the revelational nature of Scripture resides in the illocutionary forces of biblical literature as well as the actual locutions themselves because the meaning of divinely inspired propositions is determined not only by words on a page, but by how authors were led to use them.

With these axioms in place, Vanhoozer subsequently argues that the way to discern the illocutionary forces of various passages is to be sensitive to the literary categories, or genres, in which they are recorded because they represent the

52 Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech Acts," 143-45. Obviously, Vanhoozer is also motivated to bridge this gap because of the standardized criticisms that have been mounted by George Lindbeck against both classical liberal and conservative evangelical approaches to Scripture and doctrinal formulation. See his well-known accusations in George Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 15-25.
53 Vanhoozer, "Voice and the Actor," 76.
56 Vanhoozer, "Voice and the Actor," 76-77.
means whereby authors experience and think about the world in literary form. A genre represents an overall framework of epistemic and linguistic categories that an author utilizes to picture his view of reality, or more specifically, to perform a particular communicative action, which in turn means that genre functions as a hermeneutical guide that sets the literary rules for understanding the illocutionary forces of a given text. This is not to imply, however, that only certain kinds of genre in Scripture speak about truth while others do not because this would reveal a failure to distinguish between truth as God knows it and truth as it is described by God through Scripture. While truth essentially is unified because it is fully and exhaustively known by God, for the human mind truth is so complex and multi-faceted that it must be described in diverse literary forms. So the biblical use of various genres does not imply that the Bible contains competing kinds of truth. It shows rather that it is about various kinds of facts, whether they be historical, metaphysical, or moral.

Taking these points into consideration, at first glance Vanhoozer’s postpropositionalism does not seem inherently anti-propositional or anti-evangelical because he agrees that propositional content is an inherent part of divine revelation and has even gone to some length to show how his approach harmonizes biblical inerrancy. He argues that all the illocutionary acts of Scripture are always based on trustworthy motives, are reliable to convey each divinely ordained message, and accurately describe reality in a variety of different ways. In addition, his view does not reveal an implicit surrender to postmodern thought, because his view of divine speech-acts maintains the idea that meaning is a determinate entity created by the communicative actions of authors and that readers have a mandate to ascertain them. Nevertheless, he does argue that his theory is actually “postconservative” for two reasons. One reason is that he believes it transcends previous ways in which many conservatives have applied the idea of propositionalism to the doctrine of Scripture. Another factor motivating Vanhoozer to adopt this label is a desire to avoid being identified with the movement of postliberalism. Vanhoozer argues that in his view of postpropositionalism, the authority of revelation resides in the communicative practices of the canon, not the interpretive practices of the community. So in the end, the postconservative nature of Vanhoozer’s postpropositional model lies in how it contrasts with previous ways of explicating propositionalism and evades the danger of being misconstrued as a sympathetic capitulation to thinkers such as George Lindbeck.

60 Ibid., 96-103.
63 Ibid., 77, 99-100.
2. Interpreting Biblical Language via Theological Drama. Taking Vanhoozer's points on the dynamics of propositional revelation into consideration, one must also acknowledge how he currently is implementing these ideas into a fuller explanation of theological method. Essentially, Vanhoozer argues that while the biblical illocutions of covenantal discourse are obviously contextualized within the storyline of redemptive history, one must not make the mistake of thinking that the perlocutionary impact of Scripture is fully realized once its teachings are merely systematized into confessional axioms. To fall into this trap is to fit the unfortunate stereotype of the cognitive-propositional approach to doctrinal development that has been stigmatized as of late. Even worse, Vanhoozer believes this tendency also creates a new "ugly ditch" for theologians to cross. The original one was forged by Gotthold Lessing who distinguished between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason in order to sustain the claim that the events recorded in the gospel accounts could never sufficiently meet the criteria for religious knowledge. In a similar vein, just as Lessing left a gap between history and faith, Vanhoozer contends that a new and possibly even broader ditch has been dug between doctrine (orthodoxy) and devotion (orthoprayx). The source of this chasm begins with the evangelical ambiguity regarding the exact nature of biblical language, which then leads naturally to further deficiencies regarding the proper understanding of the role of doctrine in the academy as well as the church. It is here at this impasse that the "Lindbeckian School" continues to propose the infamous Cultural-Linguistic approach as a post-liberal solution but interestingly enough, Vanhoozer opts for what he calls a Canonical-Linguistic approach, which he sees as a viable postconservative alternative.

The basic concept behind this label, which has been articulated most definitively in his work The Drama of Doctrine, is that the functional relationship between Scripture as communicative revelation and Doctrine as contextual-confessional explication of that revelation is best described in terms of "theological drama." Note here that Vanhoozer sees the stage-setting not merely as a clever analogy but as the fundamental dynamic that is intrinsic to the way the church should relate to the gospel, because it reflects both how God reveals himself in Scripture and how the church should explicate that revelation. How, though, is this the case? Drama is essentially a composite of word and deed, speaking and action, lines and roles. On the one hand, the canon records God's drama of redemption through the Old and New Testaments, with language and action reciprocating throughout the storyline. On the other hand, the church encapsulates the present continuation of this drama because it is the company of redeemed actors and actresses who extend the canonical theme (i.e., the gospel) until Christ ushers in the final act of the eschaton. So for

64 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 12.
65 Ibid., 12-13.
67 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 39.
Vanhoozer, the idea of drama bridges the unfortunate dichotomy between theory and practice because it weds Scripture's initial speaking and acting with the church's responsive proclaiming and reenacting. It also avoids the tendency to view doctrine in terms of inductively collected pieces of information (contra propositionalism) and highlights the shortsightedness of perceiving doctrine merely as a workable vocabulary for the church (contra postliberalism). With drama as the lynch pin, doctrine is no longer restricted to scientia, or theoretical knowledge, but is extended to sapientia, or knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known. Nonetheless, Vanhoozer is clear throughout this work that in order for one to understand how the paradigm of drama properly relates to doctrine methodologically, one must concede that Bibliology should move to a postpropositional level, and that necessarily entails further shifts that are explicitly postconservative and postfoundationalist in nature.

IV. Assessing Grenz and Vanhoozer: Postmodern or Transmodern Postconservatism?

Upon treating Grenz's and Vanhoozer's reformulations of Bibliology, at least two observations can be made regarding their postconservative concerns. One is that they share common criticisms of previous conservative theological approaches and thereby harbor a mutual reluctance to adopt many of the ways in which earlier evangelical thinkers have articulated and defended certain theological axioms. Yet beyond this joint assessment, a second factor that contrasts their works is that they differ on the level of issues that warrant modifications in light of the postmodern context. Grenz believes that former evangelical methodologies as well as certain doctrinal tenets must be revised, while Vanhoozer is convinced that only particular ways in which certain conservative beliefs have been expressed require reassessments.

1. Grenz and Vanhoozer as Highlighting an Impasse on Scripture

As we have seen, an apt example that illustrates this postconservative divergence is the variation of thought between Grenz and Vanhoozer on the relevance that propositional revelation and infallibility have in constructing an evangelical Bibliology. Both argue that due to the role of foundationalism as well as the scientific model of theological inquiry, the Princetonians and their postfundamentalist successors came to view Scripture as a collection of supernatural propositions that contain eternal facts about God's person and his activity in history. The problem with this concept in Grenz's mind is that it inadvertently silences the voice of Scripture in doctrinal development because once a given theological system is organized in such a way that it accurately describes the immutable truths of the Bible, there is no longer any need to reexamine the Scriptures for new insights or ideas. Vanhoozer, in contrast, finds the concept of propositional revelation in need of revision because it tends to

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68 Ibid., 13.
69 For his treatment of each of these terms, see chapter 9 in Drama of Doctrine, 265-305.
71 Grenz and Franke, Beyond Foundationalism, 63.
treat all the diverse types of biblical literature as forensically didactic in nature. Recognizing then that Grenz and Vanhoozer are considered "post-conservatives" because they agree that modernity has influenced conservative evangelicalism via epistemological foundationalism, modernistic versions of scientific inquiry, and propositional revelation, the next question that arises is whether they agree on the solutions to these issues. And the answer is emphatically no.

All of their similar criticisms notwithstanding, Grenz and Vanhoozer diverge onto different paths in developing their solutions to a sound view of Scripture. For example, they take opposing approaches in their assessments of propositional revelation. Grenz believes that the conservative tendency to make a one-to-one correspondence between the words of Scripture and the words of God fosters a shortsighted hermeneutic wherein contemporary readers settle for the sterile tasks of exegesis and systematization of the contents of biblical texts. Though these activities are essential, they are incomplete because they neglect the need to discern the ongoing dynamic of the Spirit's use of Scripture in the contemporary context. The key idea to note here is that Grenz does not believe that the authority of Scripture lies in the intrinsic nature of the inspired texts themselves because this lapses back into the fallacy of foundationalism. Instead, the Scriptures are authoritative for the church because the Spirit chooses to use those texts on a continual basis. Furthermore, this divine-speaking through Scripture is not done solely within the confines of the canon, but through the joint efforts of the theological traditions of the church and the cultural context in which the present-day church exists.

Vanhoozer, on the other hand, argues that propositional revelation requires more attention not because it is a faulty idea that silences the function of the Spirit but because previous expressions of the idea have engendered an unhelpful distinction between divine content and divine action. Grenz would most likely agree with this point. But Vanhoozer's solution is not to make a distinction between understanding what a biblical author wrote and understanding how the Spirit later speaks trans-canonically. This would make an unhealthy bifurcation between the content of Scripture and the Spirit's role in inspiring that content. Vanhoozer argues instead that the Spirit's voice is heard within the propositional content as communicated through the biblical authors who provide a progressive recollection of God's covenantal discourses with humanity via the various literary categories of the canon. Likewise, the perlocutionary forces of those discourses, which again only come through their original

74 See Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic," 126-29; Grenz, Renewing the Center, 208-11.
76 Vanhoozer, "From Canon to Concept," 121-22.
Illocutions, are relived via the ongoing ministry of discipleship in the church and restated for future generations through theological traditions and doctrinal loci. So the difference between Grenz and Vanhoozer regarding the issue of Scripture is that the former argues that its content is communicated as the Spirit transcends the voice of the biblical authors, while for Vanhoozer it is conveyed through the variety of genres in which the Spirit originally spoke through the biblical authors. Grenz places the value of the biblical text upon its divine function rather than its form, thereby abandoning previous emphases on infallibility and inerrancy, while Vanhoozer attempts to retain these ideas by offering further clarification regarding the ways in which propositional content is conveyed through various kinds of literary discourse.

2. Reflections and Concerns Regarding Grenz's Bibliology

In light of the work of these two thinkers and the diversity of postconservatism that they represent, some final matters must be mentioned concerning where we can go from here. With regard to the legacy of Grenz, it cannot be denied that his contributions have been influential in the evangelical struggle with postmodernity. Nonetheless, his insights are under considerable criticism by many evangelicals who do not consent to the overall postconservative ethos that his approach represents, especially as it relates to the doctrine of Scripture. Several reasons could be mentioned as to why but two will be highlighted here, namely the validity of Grenz's accusation that twentieth-century evangelicals are essentially theological modernists, and the coherence of his bibliology in light of the fact that he apparently misuses various sources in order to nuance and support his own perspectives.

1. Unwarranted Accusations. Grenz seems to level an unwarranted accusation in charging that twentieth-century evangelical conservatives are Neo-Modernists. It appears that the assessment of the nineteenth-century Princetonian tradition which Grenz endorsed is beginning to show serious defects in light of further research. For example, Peter Hicks has provided an analysis of Charles Hodge's thought and concludes that his much-criticized correlation between theology and science is somewhat unfounded. The very use of the word science as well as his adaptation of an inductive method to systematic theology were not implicit capitulations to the Enlightenment, but attempts to emphasize the fact that the Bible possesses a canonical and theological symmetry. In other words, Hodge made this parallel not because he wanted to adapt theology to empirical observation, but because he desired to establish Scripture

77 This again is why Vanhoozer speaks of Scripture being the church's script.
79 One recent work to consult is Millard Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).
as the starting point for theological enquiry.\(^{81}\) Along with Hicks’s work, Paul Helseth also has examined the work of the Princetonian theologians in order to show that they were not substituting for the heritage of the Reformed tradition a sterilized form of epistemic rationalism via Enlightenment philosophy.\(^{82}\) Helseth contends that the intellectualism of old Princeton had more to do with the dynamics involved in the unitary operation of the soul, including the will, mind, and emotions, than an accommodation to the epistemological assumptions of Common Sense Realism or Baconian Inductivism.\(^{83}\) Consequently, Helseth shows that the postconservative critique of the propositional model of theological formulation is unwarranted because it fails to acknowledge that the Princetonian conception of knowledge corresponded with the Augustinian-Reformed conviction that the reception of revealed truth entailed both rational and moral elements, which, in turn, was a foreign concept to the epistemic approaches of Enlightenment thinking.\(^{84}\)

If it is then highly questionable to label these thinkers Enlightenment rationalists, it is likewise improper to demarcate twentieth-century evangelicals as modernists as well. Thinkers such as Henry, Erickson, Lewis, Demarest, and Grudem indeed have modified and implemented the methodologies of their nineteenth-century forebears. But to equate their emphases on propositional revelation, rationality, and inductive inquiry with the epistemic shortcomings of modernity is to ignore the vast differences between non-Christian ideals of the modern era and the evangelical responses to those ideals. Contrary to Grenz’s taxonomy then, conservative evangelicals are not modernists because they successfully engaged the questions and assumptions of modernity. This is the task of Christian theology in any historical setting. Furthermore, to assert that they faced those obstacles by succumbing to the humanistic predispositions that dominated that era is extremely difficult to maintain because, in actuality, conservatives discount the modern as well as the postmodern eras because the intellectual moorings of both are perceived to be mutually hostile to Christianity.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 122.


\(^{84}\) Helseth, “Re-Imagining the Princeton Mind,” 440. Also, Helseth has mentioned an interaction he had with Grenz wherein he claimed that the problem with the Princetonian methodology was not in its implementation of Common Sense Realism, but its indebtedness to the method of empirical science. Helseth then asserted that Grenz’s move is problematic because it is typically argued that the Princetonians practiced a method of empirical inquiry precisely because of their use of Common Sense Realism. So it seems that Grenz inadvertently is surrendering the essential factor that normally is used to repudiate the Princetonian approach. See Helseth, “Re-Imagining the Princeton Mind,” 433 n. 45.
2. Mishandling the Data. In conjunction with the unfair charge that conservatives are evangelical modernists, a second major concern regarding Grenz’s view of Scripture is his misuse of sources to argue his case. Two examples that clearly display this trend are his modified use of the Westminster Confession of Faith and his implementation of the philosophy of Speech-Act theory. With regard to the former, Grenz appeals to the Confession wherein it states that the “... Holy Spirit speaks in the Scripture ...” in order to argue that the proper focal point for understanding the relationship between the Spirit and Scripture should not be inspiration, but illumination.\(^{85}\) Upon making this move, Grenz rightly observes that in this statement the Westminster divines were attempting to preserve the Reformation ideal of binding the Word with the witness of the Spirit.\(^{86}\) However, to interpret this point in a way that divorces the authority of Scripture from its divine origin or to distinguish between what the biblical authors originally said from what the Spirit says radically misrepresents this creed’s intentions because in actuality the creed couches its description of Scripture, including Scripture’s relationship to the Spirit, in terms that Grenz repudiates. Clearly espoused in WCF 1.2 and 1.5 is the view that Scripture is the actual Word of God and was given by divine inspiration.\(^{87}\) Likewise, the Spirit’s role in speaking functions via divine authorship, or in the giving of the text, not in a new kind of speaking that is distinct from the inspiration of the text. This idea is enforced again by the statement in WCF 1.6: “The whole counsel of God ... is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” Furthermore, while the Confession does endorse the idea of divine illumination, it does not imply that the Spirit conveys meanings through the Bible that transcend the literary intents of the original authors. Instead, the Spirit is necessary for giving people “saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word” (WCF 1.6). The Spirit does not change the Scriptures to fit the questioning heart, but changes the heart to understand the Scriptures.

Coupled with this oversight regarding the Confession is also Grenz’s misapplication of Speech-Act theory to his view of Scripture. Here again, Grenz does not view the Spirit’s communicative activity as centering solely on the original illocutions of the biblical authors because the Scriptures take on an autonomous textual life of their own as the Spirit uses them in new contexts. The difficulties with this application of Speech-Act theory are two-fold. One shortcoming is that

\(^{85}\) Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 118. The entire statement in the WCF claims: “The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures” (WCF 1.10).


\(^{87}\) It can also be argued that though the original authors were unaware of the intricate arguments that would arise due to historical study and scientific inquiries, they were committed to a preliminary form of propositional revelation because the very character of the WCF as a seventeenth-century document accentuates this view. See John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1973), 77-78.
Grenz fails to acknowledge that the Scriptures themselves are speech acts. Grenz claims, "The biblical texts bear witness to God's acting and speaking to the communities of faith in the biblical era. But God acts and speaks today too, and the Bible is the Spirit's chosen vehicle for speaking authoritatively to us."88 He acknowledges the fact that the Spirit somehow conveys discourse through the Scriptures, but apparently chooses to dismiss the fact that the Bible itself is a collection of divinely inspired discourses, or modes of speaking. So whatever Grenz wishes to do in articulating the dynamic of the Spirit's speaking, he must do in light of the fact that the texts that the Spirit chooses to use are previously established forms of speech. This unfortunate move on Grenz's part leads to the second problem with his application of Speech-Act theory, which is a failure to maintain the functional distinction between locutions and illocutions. In developing his idea, he asserts that when acknowledging the Spirit's capacity to speak through Scripture, it must be recognized that this dynamic refers to an illocutionary rather than a locutionary act.89 But the problem, which has been noted by Vanhoozer in an engagement with Grenz's approach, is that an illocution in and of itself is not an act of speech.90 It is rather a particular contextual force that a given statement intends to enforce. Consequently, even though locutions and illocutions are dependent upon each other, speaking itself is not an illocutionary act. The ambiguity that remains then with regard to Grenz's proposal pertains to the specific way in which the Spirit's illocutionary forces can be conveyed independently of the previous illocutions that were originally established by the locutions of the biblical authors.91

3. Reflections and Concerns Regarding Vanhoozer's Bibliology

Juxtaposed with concerns pertaining to Grenz's work are questions that remain to be answered with regard to Vanhoozer's thought. While some of these matters arise simply by virtue of the fact that his perspectives are still developing, others come to the forefront in light of several points that Vanhoozer repeatedly emphasizes. Two will be mentioned here, those being his mutual agreement with other postconservatives regarding evangelical modernism and the present absence of discussion regarding the means whereby inerrancy fits into his view of theological method.

1. Not Falling Far from the Evangelical Modernist Tree. Again, the first issue of concern pertains to his choice of the term "postconservative" to describe his approach. In one sense, this concern is more of a cautionary observation rather than a strict criticism because he does use the label in a qualified sense so as to distinguish himself from the extremes of postliberalism.92 Nevertheless, another apparent reason Vanhoozer embraces the term is because he agrees with many of the criticisms that Grenz and other critics have posed against past expressions

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89 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
92 Vanhoozer, "Voice and the Actor," 76-77.
of evangelical loci. For instance, Vanhoozer has criticized Wayne Grudem’s plea for evangelicals to provide more works that discuss what the entire Bible teaches regarding pertinent contemporary issues. Though more sympathetic to Grudem than Grenz would be, Vanhoozer asserts that this “whole Bible” notion reduces evangelical theology to a conglomeration of disconnected topics. More recently, Vanhoozer has echoed similar comments regarding the theological method of Charles Hodge. He claims that Hodge’s inductive approach to doctrinal formulation “runs the risk of neglecting the larger canonical context and literary form of the biblical facts, which is perhaps the inevitable result of biblical empiricism.” The question hovering over these assessments is not whether Vanhoozer wants to move away from the core commitments that either of these thinkers maintain. By his own profession, he does not. The issue is whether these thinkers are really as far off the methodological mark as Vanhoozer thinks. In Grudem’s work it seems clear that the driving assumption behind his assertions is that there is a canonical symmetry to be discovered, articulated, and applied. Moreover, these goals can be obtained only if the theologian understands biblical texts in light of their contextual relationship to both redemptive history and the canon as a whole. It would appear then that one actually must assume Grudem’s approach to a certain degree in order to follow Vanhoozer’s recommendations, because one cannot understand the canonic drama as a whole or the nature of God as revealed in that drama without first examining the individual texts that make up the storyline. The same could be said about Hodge’s concerns as seen in his polemics against the liberal subjectivism of Schleiermacher. So in the end, a certain level of doubt remains to be satisfied as to whether Vanhoozer’s methodological postconservatism is bridging such a broad gap after all.

2. What About Inerrancy? An issue of more serious concern relates to the ambiguity that exists regarding Vanhoozer’s exact commitment to biblical inerrancy. While there is no doubt that his view of Scripture is much more in continuity with traditional evangelicalism than Grenz’s, his emphasis on genre-discourse and joint assessments of inerrancy as a hermeneutical compass in the development of doctrine still leaves some theological loopholes unfilled. Vanhoozer invests much of his time discussing the assorted dynamics that exist within various kinds

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95 Ibid., 137.


of literary discourse as well as the need to interpret Scripture in a way that is in accordance with hermeneutical guides established by theological traditions.98 Yet when he makes observations that imply that inerrancy as explicated in times past reveals an epistemic relationship with modernity or states that the Bible is wholly trustworthy because it reliably maps one's way to Christ not as a book of abstract propositions but as a book of theodramatic wisdom, an alarming concern arises as to whether Vanhoozer is wanting to maintain an implicit (or perhaps even explicit) distinction between the history portrayed in biblical texts and the actual historicity of the claims being made by biblical texts.99 Note here that this is not a direct accusation against Vanhoozer's convictions on Scripture but rather a question that arises from one who is examining his work sympathetically. Other readers of Vanhoozer's work recognize the questions that remain unanswered. John Perry, for example, in a review of The Drama of Doctrine fairly notes:

While Vanhoozer does not discuss inerrancy in this book, it is well worth considering its implications for the doctrine. Could a doctrine of scriptural authority based on Vanhoozer's model help resolve some of the lingering, seemingly perennial, questions about the meaning of inerrancy?100

This observation shows that some theologians appear to be left wondering whether Vanhoozer's model of theological drama inadvertently supports the idea that inerrancy fosters an unhealthy hermeneutical guide to interpreting the various genres of Scripture or not. These gaps notwithstanding, future clarifications will show if his understanding of postconservatism will remain distinct from other versions that continue to uphold the Grenzian mantle.

V. Conclusion

As this analysis demonstrates, the apparent differences between Grenz's and Vanhoozer's work reveal a significant chasm that exists within the postconservative ethos. As seen in their approach to Scripture, Grenz's point is that biblical authority is primarily functional in nature rather than ontological. The Bible is not authoritative because its words derive from the mind of God nor does it contain inerrant, first-order language that provides a foundational point of reference for subsequent, second-order theological reflection. Rather, the Scriptures are used by the Spirit in conjunction with the church's theological traditions as well as its contemporary cultural setting in order to explicate the Christian belief framework.101 In contrast, for Vanhoozer biblical authority is

100 John Perry, review of Kevin Vanhoozer, The Drama of Doctrine, JETS 48 (2005): 864.
101 Note that Grenzian thought is still being perpetuated and nuanced by Grenz's former colleagues and theological successors. For instance, see John R. Franke, The Character of Theology: A Postconservative-Evangelical Approach (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).
inherent within the words of Scripture because they are the communicative vehicle through which God reveals his thoughts, demands, and, yes, actions as well. In sum, all postconservative attempts to overcome the challenges that postmodernity poses for Christian orthodoxy are in no way monolithic because while some redefine the loci of evangelical beliefs, others only restate or refine the loci in more precise terms. Hence, as contemporary theologians continue to develop their ideas, the term postconservative may not always be synonymous with nonconservative.

102 For a more concise and recent treatment of Vanhoozer’s view of Scripture, see Vanhoozer, “Word of God,” in The Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible (ed. Kevin Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 850-54.
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