The Church’s One Foundation: 
the Use of Scripture in the Church 
in the Theologies of Robert Jenson, Kevin Vanhoozer, 
and Rowan Williams

by

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Abstract

Robert Jenson, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Rowan Williams represent three distinct conceptions of how scripture should be used in relation to the five sources of theology: scripture, church, tradition, reason, and experience. Jenson argues that the church, under the guidance of the Spirit, should ultimately determine scripture’s meaning. Vanhoozer contends that scripture should be regarded as highest in authority, not the interpretations of the church or tradition, nor reason or experience. Williams, finally, proposes that Christ, experienced apart from infallible mediators, should ultimately norm how scripture should be used. Reason provides the means, in light of historical testimony, to know Christ’s original significance, while the church and tradition function as further witnesses to Christ as the revelation of God.

Evaluating these three positions, it is concluded that all three are consistent, but that Vanhoozer’s best takes into account the facts of history, and has fewer practical problems than Jenson’s position does.
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Chapter 1
A Matter of Methods

Introduction

One of the most fundamental questions of human existence is undoubtedly, “how do we know?” How can we determine the truth and eliminate false beliefs from our perception of reality? Answers to these questions are presupposed by everybody, and philosophical reflection on this problem is as old as philosophy itself. In the modern era especially, this question has become emphasized more than it was in the past. The reason for this recent emphasis has to do with the epistemological implications of religion.

The main stream of the Christian religion is undoubtedly one which makes claims about God’s activity in human history. This claim decisively affects the human project of knowing. For if such a being as God exists, and God has communicated with humanity in the course of history, then such a communication would be of the utmost importance to the activity of our species. There could be no truths more certain than ones directly revealed by God. But this understanding of God and history raises a problem: if it is believed that God has communicated with us, how do we adjudicate different truth-claims if they both appeal to God?

This is exactly the problem that faced the Enlightenment philosophers. Historical events like the Protestant Reformation and its after-effects led to a situation with insoluble conflicts based on mutually exclusive claims to special revelation. In this situation, Enlightenment thinkers began to construct views of the world not based on such claims, in the hopes of being able to provide resolution by means of taking a “neutral” position between the conflicted parties. More recently, this latter project itself has become subject to criticism:
the advent of postmodern philosophy has attempted to demonstrate that the Enlightenment project was never “neutral” as it hoped to be, but rather just a more subtle attempt at justifying the ultimately arbitrary use of power. Further, at the same time as this postmodern project was being pursued, both adherents of postmodern philosophy and thinkers from outside this stream, in the tradition of “analytic philosophy”, turned their attention to the nature of human language. The nature of texts, reading, meaning, and everything related, have been steadily scrutinized and dissected, with many fruitful results in our understanding.

This thesis seeks to speak into these discussions. In order to be able to grasp this problem in a useful way, it will survey the thought of a living representative of each of three alternative visions of how scripture should be understood and used by Christians. The basic method of this essay will be to seek to explain how each figure sees the Bible functioning in relation to the other main sources of theology: church, tradition, reason, and experience. In the course of this explanatory task, it will demonstrate that the three figures chosen represent truly distinct views, and then will attempt to evaluate which is the superior of the three. The three figures chosen are: Robert Jenson, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Rowan Williams. Respectively, this thesis will argue that they represent positions which give ultimate authority to (1) church and tradition, (2) scripture, and (3) reason and experience, in the use of scripture and in the church. In the traditional terminology of scholastic theology, this thesis is more focused on how scripture and other sources function as norms in theology, rather than as sources. What this means for the purposes of this work is that emphasis will be primarily set on the doctrine of scripture that these writers set forth, not on their use of scripture per se. Following the survey, the final chapter will argue that Vanhoozer’s sola scriptura position is most preferable.
Some obvious objections can be raised against this project. The first is the problem of question-begging. How can one fairly judge what criteria for knowledge the church should use in its pursuit of knowledge? The problem is difficult, but there are possible ways to comparatively evaluate deeply disparate views on doctrinal criteria. The first, and perhaps least objectionable, is to test internal consistency. It seems fair to say that theology as an intellectual discipline must avoid crass self-contradiction. The alternative would be to disavow any need to be coherent; but if this were permitted, theology would cease to be meaningful at all.

A second possible test is along the lines of another theory of truth: correspondence to reality. In the case of Christian theological claims, the most pertinent correspondence would be the historical type. If a particular method bases itself on claims about history (like, e.g., an alleged promise of the Spirit’s guidance), it can be criticised if the facts actually disagree with those claims. One major problem with this test is that some theological methods are not entirely dependent on historical claims. Some methods based on fideism might be able to accept that all of their major historical claims are falsified by the historical record. Nevertheless, in the three systems being compared in this thesis, there do not seem to be any such problems, in that all three thinkers being evaluated do seem to stake the truth of their method on specific historical and exegetical claims.

This also provides an answer to another possible problem: bias. If anything has become clear in the study of religion in the centuries since the modern era, it is that there are many different perspectives on crucial questions in the history of Christianity. And these perspectives are often very comprehensive, being able to explain large amounts of data in persuasive ways, even while totally contradicting other models which can do the same thing.
Further, the field of religious history has become so specialized that it would be impossible to be an expert in every field. This might seem to suggest that no one scholar can really have a justified view of so many critical questions as this thesis seeks to address. But it does not seem that this epistemic pessimism is ultimately necessary. One reason for hope is that, while one person may not be an expert on every sub-issue, they can work together with other like-minded scholars, and this can make coming to a considered opinion on a broad range of issues more reasonable. Further, even if this were not the case, Jenson, Vanhoozer, and Williams all make arguments for their position, and against others, on the basis of appeals to historical facts. Because they have done this, it seems fair to be able to respond in kind. If it is appropriate for systematic theologians to appeal to history (as these have), then it must be appropriate to respond to them on the same grounds.

In addition to coherence and correspondence, a third theory of truth suggests a third possible test: practical liveability. Just as with the previous test, this one is open to the charge of bias: things that are seen as practical problems by some could be seen as virtues by others. Nevertheless, whatever position is taken still has to be actually practicable, so every view has to meet a kind of minimum liveability requirement. A view that makes it practically impossible to discover the truth about theological claims, obviously rules itself out as the correct method for theology.

Thus it is possible to evaluate these three subjects, and the systems they exemplify, in a fair manner. But there is one final problem which could be raised against this project, namely, that it is not fair to test a whole system on the basis of one example of it. This is not, however, an unanswerable problem. Jenson, Vanhoozer, and Williams, are sophisticated representatives of very long-standing traditions, all interacting with past and present critics of
their positions, and also building on their own traditions. Thus, while it is true that there are certainly some idiosyncratic positions in each of these thinkers’ writings, nevertheless, an argument which successfully undermined the strongest arguments of one of these thinkers would be serious enough to challenge the broader position as a whole.¹ This makes it a worthwhile endeavour as a means to resolving the larger question of how scripture ought to be used in the church, or how Christian knowledge can be achieved.

As has been explained, this project will seek to survey the thoughts of these theologians on the relations between scripture, church, tradition, reason, and experience. However, before this survey can be responsibly done, these terms should be more precisely defined. The definition of scripture is obvious. But the other four terms can be more complicated. In this comparison, the term “church” will be used to refer to the group of Christians that exist in the present (in whatever age), usually as a visible body of individuals. This will be set in contrast to “tradition”, which includes the teachings and customs of Christians in the past. “Reason” and “experience” are even more complicated. This is because all theologies use both of these to some degree or another, but not all give them “primacy”, in the technical sense of this thesis. All theology must engage in the use of deduction, induction, and abduction, as these just are reasoning. If it did none of these things, it would be doing nothing but baldly asserting propositions. Further, it must be consistent with what is known through direct contact with reality. Even if a theological system is said not to be based on such contact, it is not possible to assert or live out contradictions; thus every theological system, to be a consistent system at all, must be able to explain “the facts on the ground”. So, “reason” is present in all theology, as is “experience”. But a theology

¹ Exactly how each of these thinkers deviates from the abstract type will be evident in the survey below.
which asserts a “primacy” of reason or “experience” is affirming something more than just that they must be dealt with. Rather, what it is saying is negative in relation to the other three sources of theology. A method which affirms the primacy of reason and/or experience is asserting that the Bible, the church, and tradition, do not have an authority equal to that of reality or truth itself. In premodern forms of the faith, a citation from scripture, some Popes, or some ecumenical creeds were taken as sufficient in itself to end debate about what was true. This is because it was believed these sources simply reproduced reality, with no loss or corruption in mediation. Modern forms of faith which deny this conviction, in contrast, deny that these sources should be accorded such trust until they have been demonstrated by experience and reason to be in accord with truth. And yet, it is not as if all the premodern forms of religion denied there was reason to believe in these authorities. The older conceptions believed there were good reasons to trust these authorities, and therefore took everything they reported as fact; the newer conceptions do not believe there are any such reasons, and thus require independent demonstration of the claims they make. From this definition of the primacy of reason and experience, it should be clear what it means to assert the primacy of scripture or church and tradition. In each of these cases, a theology would assert that the source has an authority equal to that of reality, and that the other sources should be interpreted in light of that one.

One further comment related to the definitions of terms in this classificatory scheme needs to be made with regards to Rowan Williams in particular. That is, while Williams has been chosen to represent the primacy of “reason and experience” in the typological taxonomy of this comparison, it needs to be explained that he is not what is stereotypically represented by the label of “experienced based theology”. In some ways, it would be just as
accurate to say that his position is a “primacy of Christ” position, where what distinguishes Williams from Jenson and Vanhoozer is that he does not affirm any ultimately normative mediators between the living Christ and the members of the church. At the same time, in some ways this is still a “reason” or “experience” based theology, insofar as this position is distinct in subordinating other sources of theology to Christ as encountered directly by reason/experience. Classifying Williams in this way is not meant to suggest that he holds that an individual’s preferences or mystical experiences should trump any other authority in ecclesial decision making, which is often what “experience-based” theology is implied to be asserting. Williams’ claims are much more careful and cautious.

The following chapters will be structured along the following lines. Each thinker will be addressed in one chapter, surveying their understanding of the scriptures, church and tradition, and reason and experience, in that order. This survey will seek to explain as succinctly as possible their distinct perspectives on each, and their relationship to the others. In each chapter, after the survey of their positions on the sources of theology, two sections will explain in more depth the theological and philosophical grounding of their positions, detailing the specific exegetical, historical, and philosophical roots of each thinker. In these two sections especially, selectivity is required; it would be impossible to repeat every exegetical and philosophical argument made by these thinkers, and even more so to have to respond to them all within the space limitations of this essay. It is possible, however, to give representative samplings, and that is what will be done here, by means of focusing primarily on exemplary works by the three authors. Finally, after the three central chapters, the final chapter of the thesis will engage with these positions and arguments, and seek to demonstrate that Vanhoozer’s position is the best of the three. In order to do all this within the space
constraints given, some selectivity was used in deciding which works of each authors to use. In each case, one or two main volumes were the main sources consulted, with additional explanation coming from others when important points were made more adequately there.

For Jenson, the volumes were the two parts of his *Systematic Theology*. With Jenson in particular, it is significant that these sources were chosen, because, as several readers of Jenson have pointed out, he has gone through a theological shift in the course of his career. David Yeago explains the shift: Jenson began as a “radical” theologian, criticizing the tradition of classical theism, and has more recently become a demonstrably “catholic” theologian, supporting even hierarchical ecclesiological principles. Yeago argues there is a continuity involved, but nevertheless, it is the later “catholic” period in his career that this thesis will be focusing on. Importantly, his *Systematic Theology* was written during this time, and thus it is an appropriate choice as a primary source. For Vanhoozer, the main two works consulted were his book on hermeneutics, *Is There a Meaning In This Text?*, and his book on the function of doctrine, *The Drama of Doctrine*. For Williams, finally, the main work was his compendium of essays on various theological loci, *On Christian Theology*.

Vanhoozer and Williams have not undergone pronounced shifts in theological perspective like Jenson has, so while both have written further since these publications, these works remain good expressions of their current theological views.

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4 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning In This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), passim.


Chapter 2
“If the Spirit Guides the Church”

Introduction

Robert Jenson’s theological project is wide-ranging and sophisticated, and thus not simple to summarize. However, paying close attention, one can detect a recurrent and fundamental theme: God’s identification with his creation in history.⁷ This becomes especially evident when Jenson addresses perhaps the two main problems he has been concerned with throughout especially his later career: disunity in the church and nihilism in Western culture. In order to understand how this is the case, a brief summary of some aspects of Jenson’s doctrine of the Trinity is necessary. The most radical, and probably most revisionary, aspect of his doctrine of the Trinity is, as was mentioned above, his view of God’s relation to history. That is, unlike in classical theism, God’s historical operations do not just analogously reflect God’s immanent being; rather, they just are his being.⁸ God does not subsist outside of time at all, and is identified not by his unchanging essence, but rather by his narrated acts. Thus, the distinctions of the three persons are just their unique roles in history. The Father is the one who begets the Son in history and sends the Spirit;⁹ further, he is the one who receives the focus of our worship,¹⁰ and in himself can be seen as Trinity in person.¹¹ He takes the place of a human unity of consciousness in the divine life.¹² The Son

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⁹ Jenson, The Triune God, 123.
¹⁰ Jenson, The Triune God, 122.
¹¹ Jenson, The Triune God, 122.
¹² Jenson, The Triune God, 123.
pre-exists the historical Jesus just in being the history of Israel as directed by God to climax in the Son.\textsuperscript{13} He exists just as the human historical Jesus (thus there is no remaining ontological distinction between the two natures in the \textit{Logos ensarkos} as in Leonine and Reformed Christology; Jenson is a radical Lutheran here);\textsuperscript{14} the historical Jesus, in addition, is himself the place where God and humanity are united.\textsuperscript{15} He represents God to Israel and Israel to God. Further, Jesus is like the diachronic identity of a human being, but is uniquely that of God.\textsuperscript{16} The Spirit is the freedom, and therefore the future, of God (that which makes God able to be free from the determinations of the past)\textsuperscript{17} and as the future of God is the presence of God in all.\textsuperscript{18} The future invades the present in that the Spirit abides in the members of the church,\textsuperscript{19} creating an objective body for the subject of Christ.\textsuperscript{20}

This Trinitarian scheme provides the intellectual resources to unify the church and to undo the nihilism of Western culture. The unity of God with the universal church, as will be seen, provides a strong impetus to respect the consensus of catholic tradition, but Jenson’s doctrine of God also motivates church unity concretely by supporting the best aspects of each wing of the church: Eastern, Catholic, and Protestant. It takes the Eastern insight that the persons are uniquely identified by means of the mutual roles,\textsuperscript{21} the Catholic insight of the filioque,\textsuperscript{22} and the Protestant (Lutheran) conception of Christ as the place where God is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 140-141.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 136-137.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 83.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 137.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 159-161.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 157.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 157.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 160.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 106.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 150.
\end{itemize}
united with humanity. Simultaneously, it avoids the various ways in which each wing repeats the fundamental error of separating God’s being from history: it jettisons the Eastern division of God’s energies from his being,\(^{24}\) the Western separation of the Trinity’s processions from its missions\(^ {25}\) (and its correlative supplement of created grace in the church as a substitute for God’s presence\(^ {26}\)), and the Protestant rejection of both (in the traditions of Calvinism and Zwinglianism).\(^ {27}\) This last point is also the answer to Western nihilism: insofar as atheism is just the outcome of denying God’s direct presence in Christ (Lutheranism), his presence in his energies (Eastern Orthodoxy), and his presence in created grace (Roman Catholicism), with nothing as a substitute, it leaves creation without any presence of God.\(^ {28}\) Jenson’s radically Lutheran conception of Christ (and therefore God) provides a consistent way of reuniting God and creation in the concrete space of the church as the body of Christ. Finally, returning to the main subject of this paper, it also fits quite neatly with a very high conception of the church’s authority: if the church is the body of Christ, the place where Christ is objectively present to the world by the power of the Spirit, then it would be very easy to come to the conclusion that the church’s speech and activity are just Christ’s, who is just God present in creation. Jenson’s theological method is thus a “catholic” Lutheranism. To demonstrate this in a more detailed way, we will survey his thought on scripture, church/tradition, and reason/experience, in that order.

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\(^{24}\) Jenson, The Triune God, 152-153.


\(^{27}\) Jenson, “A ‘Protestant Constructive,’” 70.

\(^{28}\) Jenson, “A ‘Protestant Constructive,’” 70.
Scripture

Jenson’s discussion of scripture, from its beginning, evidences an ecclesial primacy in interpretation. Making perhaps his strongest statement about its authority, Jenson says of the Bible that it is “the norm with no norm over it, although other norms establish it in this position and, as we will see, are necessary to its function.” The last clause is explained when he says that “[t]he canon of Scripture, that is, a list of writings together with the instruction, ‘Take all these writings and none other as standard documents of the apostolic witness,’ is ... a dogmatic decision of the church.” The full meaning of “dogmatic decisions” for Jenson will be elaborated even more clearly below in the church/tradition section, but it will suffice at this point to note that he regards the establishment of the canon as a corporate, binding act of a single agent called “the church”; that this agent’s authority is high enough to establish the ‘unnormed norm’ implies a very high authority indeed. Nevertheless, the main point of this citation should not be missed: Jenson does regard the scriptures as supremely normative in the church once they have been established. And in this regard Jenson is representing something that the catholic tradition of the church has always held out for itself as an ideal: whatever is said about tradition and the magisterium, this tradition has never wanted to ignore the scriptures in theological practice. Catholic doctrine and practice, at least to some degree, has been deeply shaped by centuries of meditation on and practice of the scriptures, and this cannot be fairly ignored in a discussion of its function as a norm. However, this does not eliminate the real differences between the catholic tradition and the other theological alternatives available, as will become clear in the following.

30 Jenson, *The Triune God*, 27.
In addition to these comments, Jenson speaks of the function of scripture in a way that highlights the ultimate authority of the church. Firstly, he says that the “Reformation doctrine that ‘solely scripture’ is authoritative in the church was not paired with a prescription of a ‘sole’ way in which scriptural authority is to work, and later attempts to provide one have again only generated confusion.”  

Secondly, making a similar point in a more positive manner, he explains that “final scriptural verification of a theological system occurs outside the system, as it proves or fails to prove itself as a hermeneutical principle for the church’s general use of Scripture.”

Interpreting these two statements together, it is clear that Jenson’s affirmation of the “unnormed norm” formula is a comment about ontology more than hermeneutics. That ontological point, in other words, is qualified by a strong hermeneutical position which makes the church’s teaching the final arbiter of what the scriptures mean. To simplify: the scriptures are the ultimate authority in the church, but the church is a higher authority in interpretation than any of its members.

In response to scholastic Protestant theories of inspiration, Jenson explains the relation of the Spirit to the scriptures in a manner which confirms this position. Jenson affirms that the Logos spoke through the prophets, and that the Spirit is the primary author of the scriptures. He also affirms the diachronically united church as the primary reader (another way of giving it hermeneutical control over the text’s meaning), and secondly, he

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31 Jenson, The Triune God, 30.  
32 Jenson, The Triune God, 33.  
33 This aspect of Jenson’s theology is noted in, e.g., David C. Ratke, "Lutheran Systematic Theology: Where Is It Going?" Dialog 40, no. 3 (September 1, 2001): 219-220.  
34 Robert W. Jenson, "A Second Thought About Inspiration," Pro Ecclesia 13, no. 4 (2004): 398. The changes of mind expressed by this article seem to be indirectly in response to the criticisms found in, e.g., Francis Watson, “‘America’s Theologian’: An Appreciation of Robert Jenson’s Systematic Theology, With Some Remarks About the Bible,” Scottish Journal of Theology 55, no. 2 (2002): 218, where Watson argues Jenson simply does not have a doctrine of scripture, since all Jenson discussed was ecclesial use of it.  
35 Jenson, "A Second Thought,” 396.  
36 Jenson, "A Second Thought,” 396.
argues that the original human authorial intentions are not necessarily the same as what the
text says in itself.\textsuperscript{37} The second point provides a defeater for any objection to the first: one
cannot pit the “original meaning” of the text against the meaning the church gives it. The
ecclesial meaning is what the text says in itself, regardless of the intentions of human
authors. Explication of how the primary author (the Spirit) and the primary reader (the
church) determine the meaning of the text will become evident in the next section.

\textbf{Church and Tradition}

Jenson’s views of the church have already been intimated, but more comment is
worthwhile. One pervasive theme in his ecclesiology is the close connection between the
activity of God and that of the church. Two examples express this theme clearly. Firstly, he
suggests that “[t]he miracle by which the community of Jesus’ disciples and their converts
\textit{can} be the body or bride of the risen one is that the spirit of this particular community is
identically the Spirit of God.”\textsuperscript{38} Building on this point he argues that the Spirit appears in the
NT as the one who enables the church as a whole to prophesy.\textsuperscript{39} In connection with baptism,
he explains:

If we remember that the gift of the Spirit is made by baptism, that is, by initiation into
the church rather than into any of the offices within her, we will not be tempted to
identify the church’s prophesying with the work of any of those offices nor yet with
any particular charism... . The teaching must be: the church is as a whole a
prophesying community. Or even: the church is a single \textit{communal prophet}.\textsuperscript{40}

Prophets speak on God’s behalf, and thus carry God’s authority. The claim being made for
the church here should be obvious: the church speaks with God’s authority.

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\textsuperscript{37} Jenson, “A Second Thought,” 395.
\textsuperscript{38} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 182.
\textsuperscript{39} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 198.
\textsuperscript{40} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 199.
\end{flushright}
Secondly, in addition to the theme of the Spirit, Jenson also expresses his high view of the church in discussing Christology. One example of this kind of reasoning appears in the first chapter of his prolegomena:

Can the gospel’s God really thus be an object for us, that is, something we see and hear and can intend? He can be if the voice of the gospel, which witnesses to the resurrection and which we do in fact hear, is God’s own voice, and if the objects to which this voice calls us to attend—the loaf and cup, the bath, and the rest of the gospel’s factual churchly embodiment—are his own objectivity. That is, the gospel’s God can be an object for us if and only if God is so identified by the risen Jesus and his community as to be identified with them.”  

One should not miss the radical claim here: Jenson is literally identifying Jesus, who is the God of the Gospel, with the church. And he highlights specific ways in which Jesus is identified with the church: in preaching, in the sacraments, and in the entirety of “the gospel’s factual churchly embodiment.” In order to fill out more of that “entirety”, further comment will be made on the role of dogma, councils, and the magisterium in his thought.

Jenson argues that dogma is a subset of a larger category of doctrines, which consists of theological propositions. All such propositions are asserting that a certain way of speaking is the gospel, and that its contrary is not. A dogma is a statement of this type that has been irreversibly decided by the church to be correct. This explanation uses the terminology of ecclesial “choice”, which raises the question of what person or bodies are making these choices. Jenson answers this question with councils and the magisterium.

With regard to the infallibility of councils, Jenson argues that councils can err by contradicting established dogma or the scriptures, even when it formally resembles other


42 Jenson, The Triune God, 17. Jenson’s support for this catholic conception of dogmatic decision is noted in Susan K. Wood, "Robert Jenson's Ecclesiology from a Roman Catholic Perspective," in Trinity, Time, and Church, 185.
ecumenical councils that were guided to speak dogma. He gives specific historic examples of this occurring: the “Robber Council” of Ephesus, and (in some sense) the Council of Chalcedon (which Jenson describes not quite as in error, but rather as unsupported by scripture and thereafter “bent” by “later ecumenical councils” “ever more to Cyril’s insight into the unity of the Gospels’ narrative...”). However, in such cases, the church will later discover the error; indeed, Jenson argues that this necessarily must happen if the Spirit guides the church. Thus, while he is careful enough to affirm the possibility that councils can err, he also makes clear the means by which it is made clear that a council has spoken infallibly.

Similarly, with regard to the magisterium, Jenson states his approval of an authoritative teaching office: “But if the church as community is to defend the text against the interpreting of the church’s associated members, the church must have a voice with which to speak for herself to her own members.” It would be odd for a Protestant to affirm any unilateral style of papal infallibility, and thus perhaps predictably he adds some qualifications about how the church knows when the magisterium speaks. Explaining (and agreeing with) the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, he says that while the council asserts infallible statements by the pope are so in their own right, and not because the church already agrees with them, nevertheless

the council then exegetes this by saying that when a decision is in fact irreformable the “assent of the church cannot fail” to be forthcoming... . What then if in fact a papal or conciliar promulgation is in the long term ignored or contravened in the

47 Jenson, The Triune God, 40.
common teaching of the church? This can only mean, in the council’s logic, that the promulgation was not in fact irreformable.\textsuperscript{48}

Jenson suggests there is a time when this actually happened: “Honourius I formally propounded the monothelite position; an undoubted ecumenical council defined monothelitism as heresy and explicitly rebuked this pope; and a subsequent pope confirmed the council’s judgment.”\textsuperscript{49}

Jenson’s epistemic qualification of the magisterium’s authority correlates with a strong view of the Spirit’s presence to the whole church. This is borne out clearly in two arguments, one in the \textit{Systematic Theology}, and one from an essay on ecclesial sovereignty. The first argument says that because baptism gives the Spirit, the prophetic role of the church is carried out by the church as a whole and not by any subset of members within the church; rather “the church is a single \textit{communal prophet}.\textsuperscript{50}” The second argument asserts that since both the congregation and catholicity are essential to the church, sovereignty must reside in whatever body contains both the local and representation of the whole church, and that this is the diocese submitted to the bishop.\textsuperscript{51} In the same essay Jenson adds two further qualifications which are important for understanding the practical import of his views here. Firstly: if the creation of such a body is practically impossible, then sovereignty resides in the congregation, since the substance of the church resides there.\textsuperscript{52} Secondly: the current church’s sovereignty is limited by the dogmatic decisions of the past church.\textsuperscript{53} These two points together imply that the local congregations must obey whatever dogmatic teaching has

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\textsuperscript{48} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 245. \\
\textsuperscript{49} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 244. \\
\textsuperscript{50} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 199 \\
\textsuperscript{52} Jenson, “Sovereignty in the Church,” 48. \footnote{Jenson, “Sovereignty in the Church,” 52.}
\end{flushleft}
already been established, but that no new dogma can be considered established until all the local dioceses of the church accept it.

**Reason and Experience**

Jenson’s positions on reason are nuanced, but clear. He strongly disapproves of the modernist, rationalistic, attempts to ground Christian theology in neutral deliverances of reason. In the midst of his discussion on prolegomena, Jenson argues that any prolegomena not already part of Christian teaching, beyond “a formal demand for coherence and argumentative responsibility,” will inevitably contradict that teaching.⁵⁴ Addressing a similar mentality in modern historical critical approaches to scripture, he says:

> The modern attempt to interpret Scripture “historically” has been intrinsically self-defeating and has now defeated itself, since it has curiously supposed that to interpret the Bible historically we must abstract from the history for whose attestation the church assembled this collection in the first place, the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ.⁵⁵

These positions are related to substantive conclusions on several issues. With regards to natural theology, Jenson makes clear to distinguish his position from one which would separate a truth about God grasped by a human agent from a preceding divine self-revelation.⁵⁶ Regarding the historical-critical reasoning, he is not persuaded that Wolfhart Pannenberg’s proof of the resurrection through putatively objective historical-critical research can actually succeed.⁵⁷ At the same time, Jenson is not entirely negative about the role of reason in theology. He explicitly affirms that it is virtuous to be willing to let one’s

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⁵⁷ Jenson, *The Triune God*, 196n14: “To accept Pannenberg’s demolition of the usual historicisms, one need not share his belief that this constitutes a historical demonstration of the Resurrection’s facticity.” This note seems to suggest Jenson has not changed his view of Pannenberg since he wrote *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For: The Sense of Theological Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 226-229, where he wrote argued against Pannenberg that the resurrection was not historically demonstrable if it was understood to include the implication that he is the Lord of all, since this can only be eschatologically verified.
views be tested, and vicious to continue to hold one’s views just because one holds them, or because one’s community does.\textsuperscript{58} In his discussion of prolegomena just mentioned, he also affirmed that it is right for theology to be held to the standard of internal consistency and responsibility for arguments (i.e., not just arbitrarily stipulating assertions).\textsuperscript{59} Fundamentally, Jenson argues, theology cannot escape being a practical discipline, which means a self-critical one; theology must always be open to critique that it is not properly speaking the gospel.\textsuperscript{60} Further, he argues that historical-critical research serves to preserve the meaning and significance of the scriptures in their own context, and to keep contemporary readers from assuming the biblical writers think the same way do.\textsuperscript{61} And finally, he states that the “weighty deliverances” of research must agree with the canonical narrative\textsuperscript{62} (and the church’s dogmas\textsuperscript{63}) if Christianity is to be believed; in other words, he argues that Christianity is historically falsifiable.\textsuperscript{64}

Addressing contemporary theological projects not based on the church’s dogmas but rather on subjective experience, Jenson renders a strongly negative verdict on any theology “that escapes control by any determinate object and makes the gospel be whatever is ‘justifying’ or ‘healing’ or ‘liberating’ or whatever such value the theologian finds her- or himself affirming.”\textsuperscript{65} In a word, he calls them “disastrous.”\textsuperscript{66} However, just as with reason, Jenson also has a positive place for experience, though he does not label it as such. That is,

\textsuperscript{58} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 147.
\textsuperscript{59} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 9.
\textsuperscript{60} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 11.
\textsuperscript{61} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 278.
\textsuperscript{62} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 174.
\textsuperscript{63} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 281.
\textsuperscript{64} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 12.
\textsuperscript{65} In line with this, he does ultimately agree that Pannenberg’s case for the resurrection is successful in refuting the alternate explanations that have been given for the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus. Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 196. Jenson’s position on Christianity being falsifiable is also noted, and criticized, for its dismissal of other possibilities, in Maurice F. Wiles, "Systematic Theology. Vol 1, the Triune God." \textit{Journal of Theological Studies} 50, no. 1 (1999): 430.
\textsuperscript{66} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 12.
he is also willing to affirm that God does indeed speak to us in a way that we can experience. The first way God does this is by means of his speech in creation, which extends to all creatures.\textsuperscript{67} The second way is through the mysteries of communion in the church, including the preaching of the gospel and the eucharist.\textsuperscript{68} In both cases, Jenson explains that the speech of God can be ignored,\textsuperscript{69} but nevertheless is there and recognizable, and that when it is, knowledge is acquired.\textsuperscript{70}

Jenson has thus made himself very clear about both rationalist and experientialist expressions of theology: they are mistaken, and disastrously so. The only possibility for Christian theology is to begin the hermeneutical process from within the teaching of the church. Yet, at the same time, it would be false to represent Jenson as an irrationalist or a simple fideist. He does believe there are experiences that grant knowledge of Christian truths, and that thinkers are obligated to be consistent and non-arbitrary in their arguments from such experiences, and in response to criticisms of those experiences. Both the positive and negative aspects of his view are completely consistent with his position on the role of scripture, church, and tradition.

**Theological Grounding of Views**

Given Jenson’s emphasis on the importance of the biblical narrative, one would expect his theology of the church to be grounded in features of that narrative, and indeed he states outright that “[t]he historical ground of the church’s institutions is the events told in


\textsuperscript{69} Regarding natural revelation, Jenson affirms that idolatry is a response to God’s speech (Jenson, *The Works of God*, 163), and regarding the preaching of the gospel, he affirms it “may not find faith.” Jenson, *The Works of God*, 302.

Beginning with the claim that the church is hierarchical, Jenson defends his position by explaining that “the community of Jesus’ disciples was never structurally homogeneous but was instead ‘hierarchical’...” The texts he appeals to to prove this are Acts 2:14, Matthew 16:19 and 18:8, “charter” texts for the hierarchical nature of church government. Beyond the Gospels, 1 Timothy 3:1-8 is said to demonstrate that in Pauline churches there were ordained officers, and that the role of this office included care for the diachronic unity of the church with the teaching of the apostles, and this, in turn included choosing their own successors. Further, maintaining diachronic unity with the apostles’ teaching implies that “the magisterium belongs to the pastoral charism; the ordained have the duty to say what is and is not to be taught in the church and the right to depend on the Spirit as they do so.” The duty to select their own successors is also implied by the necessity of succession: “it is logically included in responsibility for the church’s historically continuing consensus that those who bear it are responsible for their own successors. If this choice is concrete as an initiatory rite, then they must be the ministers of the rite.” The personal nature of the church’s communion in turn means continuity must also be personal and not just doctrinal or legal. Jenson confirms that “[t]he classic structure of churchly office is the result of a long series of postapostolic contingencies,” but, despite these events being contingencies, he argues that this development is now irreversible because it is an ecclesial

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74 Jenson, *The Works of God*, 229
decision about the criterion of faith, an essential doctrine of the church; an error here would imply the Spirit-guided church no longer exists.\textsuperscript{79}

All the texts presented so far in this section establish for Jenson that the Spirit has irreversibly mandated a hierarchical church sustained through history by manual apostolic succession. In addition to this position Jenson also argues for a kind of ecclesial infallibility based on texts which describe the church as the body of Christ, and those which teach about the Holy Spirit. These two lines of argument should not be surprising: they are elaborations on the ways in which the Son and Spirit were identified in the introduction to this chapter, and grow organically out of Jenson’s larger trinitarian theology.\textsuperscript{80} The first set of texts are focused around Paul’s discussion of the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians. Jenson states clearly that “the teaching itself is a proposition and not a trope. That is, ‘...is the body of...’ is a proper concept also where Paul uses it of the church and Christ.”\textsuperscript{81} Paul’s statements about the “body of Christ” should be taken literally, not as metaphors. There is no alternative to taking them literally “that does not make mush of Paul’s arguments.”\textsuperscript{82} Further, when 1 Corinthians 11:17-22 indicts the Corinthian church for not ‘discerning the body’, it is referring simultaneously to the “body” of the church and to the Eucharist,\textsuperscript{83} and the former because it participates in the latter.\textsuperscript{84} Indeed, the union of the church is not simply a union of individuals with Christ. This is because, as mentioned above, the “body” given in the elements is “itself identical with the community it creates.”\textsuperscript{85} Thus “[w]e receive one another with Christ and Christ with one another; we at once receive Christ and the church in which

\textsuperscript{79} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 239.
\textsuperscript{81} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 204
\textsuperscript{82} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 205.
\textsuperscript{83} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 211.
\textsuperscript{84} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 212.
\textsuperscript{85} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 221-222.
we receive him."\textsuperscript{86} That is: participants in the Eucharist do not receive one another in a separate act after receiving Christ in the Eucharist. They are united to one another and Christ simultaneously, and Christ only in the church. With the addition of the premise that because the church ultimately has one God it must be one community, it further appears that "[i]f believers do not create local communion by their affinity, then no more do local communions create by their comity the communion of whatever other levels are properly called church, whether the one universal church or regional and confessional churches."\textsuperscript{87} This means that the union of the universal church is given in the body of the Eucharist, and not as a subsequent deliberate action of the local churches. Finally, from all the arguments from the Gospels, Pastoral Epistles, and Paul’s Corinthian correspondence, it follows that "[t]here are local churches, each of them the church, and there is the one church which each of the local churches is... . If now it is established that the pastoral office is constitutive of the church, it follows that both the one church and the many must have pastors."\textsuperscript{88} That is, given everything the Gospels and Pastoral Epistles say about church government, and given what Paul teaches about the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians, it is theologically necessary that there be a universal pastor, or a Pope, for the whole church.

As we have seen, Jenson argues that the language of "body" must be taken literally. However, he recognizes it is not obvious how a literal reading could apply here, as "[n]either the bread and cup nor the gathering of the church look like a human body or react as one."\textsuperscript{89} Jenson’s understanding of what this ‘literally’ means is that a ‘‘body’ is simply the person him or herself insofar as this person is available to other persons and to him or herself,

\textsuperscript{86} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 222.
\textsuperscript{87} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 225.
\textsuperscript{88} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 234.
\textsuperscript{89} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 205.
insofar as the person is an object for other persons and him or herself." Applying this conception of the body to Paul’s language, he explains that

[t]he subject that the risen Christ is, is the subject who comes to word in the gospel. The object—the body—that the risen Christ is, is the body in the world to which this word calls our intention, the church around her sacraments. He needs no other body to be a risen man, body and soul.

The church and the Eucharist are the body of Christ in that he is the subject/soul that enlivens and directs them, and in that in them he is available to the church and the world. This is said to fit with other Pauline texts, specifically Galatians 6:17 (where Paul mentions having marks in his body), 1 Corinthians 5:3 (where Paul mentions being absent in body), and 9:27 (where Paul discusses how he disciplines his body). The conclusion is clear: the church’s authority is Christ’s, who is God. Obviously, then, nothing but the highest authority can be accorded to the church when it speaks. Jenson directly states this conclusion in relation to Matthew 18:20: “He is the Speech of the Father; as the Father’s speech to us he is embodied in the church and therefore does not... speak except by this body... . When two or three gather together as the church to petition the Father, there he is, praying with and indeed through them.”

As mentioned above, Jenson also reaches his conclusions about ecclesial authority based on texts which discuss the Holy Spirit. The first such text is Joel 2:28, which demonstrates Israel’s eschatological hope included a possession of the prophetic Spirit by the whole community of God’s people. The second text is Acts 2:17-18, which explicitly describes the Joel text being fulfilled on the day of Pentecost with Jesus pouring out his

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90 Jenson, *The Triune God*, 205.
92 Jenson, *The Triune God*, 205.
Spirit on the church. Jenson focuses especially on the communal aspect of the fulfillment: “At Pentecost the prophetic Spirit was ‘poured out’ to make not individual prophets but a prophetic community.” Confirming this particular point, he also appeals to Romans 8:1-11, 1 Corinthians 12:4-13, and 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, which speak of the renewal, gifting, and communion of the Holy Spirit respectively.

Along similar lines, Jenson argues that many texts describe the apostolic church as “a sort of congeries of prophetic phenomena.” He appeals to several lines of evidence in the NT for the following points. Firstly, Acts describes the apostles in terms reminiscent of Elijah and Elisha (4:31; 5:32; 6:3-10; 7:55-56; 8:29; 10:19-20). Secondly, Acts describes the reception of the Spirit in acts reminiscent of OT descriptions of ecstatic seizures (8:14-18; 11:15-17; 19:2-6). Thirdly, various places in the NT (1 Peter 1:11-12; Acts 7:51-52; Hebrews 3:9; 9:8; 10:15; Acts 28:25; 2 Peter 1:21; 1 Corinthians 2:4) show that “leaders of all sorts understood their offices in material continuity with Israel’s prophecy.” The obvious implication of this point is that the Spirit’s presence within the church is the grounding of its authority. The church’s Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and therefore the church can speak prophetically with Christ’s authority.

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Philosophical Grounding of Views

In the context of postmodern discussions of hermeneutics, Jenson is certainly on the side of many “communitarian” approaches to interpretation. He states this agreement concisely: “The insistence of late-twentieth-century hermeneutics on the determining role of ‘communities of interpretation’ is fully justified.”\(^{101}\) Further, he argues that

A speaker is there to defend his or her intention against my interpretation. Once discourse has become text, it lacks this defense. A text is a bundle of signs left behind by their user, and merely as such cannot defend itself against readers; if the text itself is in any degree to adjudicate between proposed interpretations, some living, personal reality must maintain the text’s independence.\(^{102}\)

Situating himself even more clearly in the communitarian school of hermeneutics, Jenson summarizes (while affirming) a central insight of Hans Georg-Gadamer’s view of tradition in this way:

according to Gadamer ... my life is always already determined by the living *tradition* of which any specific writing is but a part. If the hermeneutical circle means that I always already understand, in a way, the matter of the text that I interpret, this is so because interpretation of a text is an act of further appropriation of the living tradition by which I always already live.\(^{103}\)

Continuing in the same vein of thought, in his essay on inspiration cited above Jenson appeals directly to a postmodern insight about authorial intention and textual meaning to ground his view of ecclesial authority:

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\(^{101}\) Jenson, *The Triune God*, 59.

\(^{102}\) Jenson, *The Triune God*, 39. Jenson does, immediately after this quote, explain that “in another way, precisely in being abandoned by its author the text acquires a different sort of independence over against my interpreting, in that it becomes my *object*. Objects are the components of facts; thus there are facts about any actual text that no interpretation can ignore and sustain its claim to be interpretation of that text rather than some other.” Jenson, *The Triune God*, 39. However, while Jenson affirms this in a formal sense, it does not have the effect of allowing for the possibility of an individual theologian’s interpretation of Scripture to override ecclesial teaching. Rather, he seems to accept that the objectivity of the text must not be ignored, but then regards the magisterium as the only interpreter fit to finally explain what the text objectively says. As he puts it: “If we now ask who is to defend a biblical text against its churchly interpreters—perhaps by pointing out facts about it—the final answer is that the Spirit must do so... All texts finally need an interpreter that is no particular interpreter or even all particular interpreters added or averaged together, that is to say, all texts need a true community as interpreter; in the church, Scripture has just such a defender.” Jenson, *The Triune God*, 40.

\(^{103}\) Jenson, *The Knowledge of Things Hoped For*, 181.
an author's intention or a community of first readers' reading is not identical with the texts "themselves" or an "original" import. An author constantly interprets her own writing, before, during and after formulating text. We are not the only ones with a particular hermeneutic and with resultant interpretations of the texts an author produces; he has his own, and these are no more identical with those texts than are ours. Moreover, first readers are just that and no more: they are not pure receivers of meaning but first readers, which is to say, the first to have a chance to impose their hermeneutical prejudices.\textsuperscript{104}

Jenson recognizes that this is a postmodern insight in the footnote appended to this citation, which says that “[if] we were left at this point, we would be with Derrida and company. Absent inspiration, they are probably right about texts and ‘presence.’”\textsuperscript{105} That is, Jenson is arguing that authorial intentions are no more authoritative for determining the meaning of texts than any other interpretation. In the case of the Bible, this view leaves room for the church to have ultimate hermeneutical sway because God speaks through it to explain the divine authorial intention, which is distinct from the human but obviously requiring obedience.

However, while his communitarianism is clearly influenced by the postliberal theory of doctrine, he remains critical of George Lindbeck’s project in two ways. Firstly, he strongly affirms the extralinguistic reference of doctrine; he thinks theology is making assertions about ‘how things really are’.\textsuperscript{106} Secondly, he affirms that while doctrine is a kind of grammar for ‘Christianese’, nevertheless it is a prescriptive grammar,\textsuperscript{107} and it is a grammar which guides the Christian interpretation of everything.\textsuperscript{108} This in turn means the grammar is about reality and not just speech, “since when hermeneutics become universal

\textsuperscript{104} Jenson, "A Second Thought," 395.
\textsuperscript{105} Jenson, "A Second Thought," 395n4.
\textsuperscript{106} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 19n45.
\textsuperscript{107} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 20.
\textsuperscript{108} Jenson, \textit{The Triune God}, 20.
they just so become metaphysics.” Thus, while Jenson affirms communal control over interpretation, this does not lead him to a cultural relativism; rather, it supports his very strong view of catholic dogma as the truth about objective reality.

Another area of theology in which Jenson is deeply indebted to philosophy is his concept of personhood. Building on post-structuralist critiques of traditional Western views of personhood, Jenson argues that the inability of consciousness to perceive itself directly undermines any possibility that the historically perduring self can be identified with that consciousness. Instead, similarly to what postmodern theorists have argued, the self must be understood to be ineradicably constituted in language and history. As he states explicitly:

What brings my experience, in Kant’s sense, together to be my experience is nothing I am by myself, Kant and his successors to the contrary. It is the coherence of the narrative in which I belong and it is the justice of the community of that narrative. Or we may say it is the grammar of the language of that community, in which it tells its narrative. Both as I narrate my life and as I live in community, I must be competent in a language I do not invent: the givenness of a specific language and my induction into it are, in Kant’s proper sense, a transcendental condition of unified consciousness.

Of course, this quote suggests the significance of this philosophical point for Jenson’s position: it is yet another argument for a theological communitarianism. Further, note has already been made above about how this understanding of personhood has been used by Jenson to explain the relation of Christ to the church. That is, Christ is the consciousness or subject, and his body, the church, is the Ego, the historically objective self. This conception of personhood is thus clearly deeply interwoven into his theological method.

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Critical Reception

One brief, but substantial criticism of this overall reading of Jenson comes from the Roman Catholic Richard John Neuhaus. Neuhaus argues that Jenson’s theology and practice actually show he affirms the authority of the church based on private judgment. Neuhaus argues:

...he can entertain a hypothetical and draw from it a conclusion that is in tension with, if not contradiction to, faith in the Spirit’s rule of the continuing community. “If, for example,” Jenson writes, “the decision of Nicaea that Christ is ‘of one being with the Father’ was false to the gospel, the gospel was thereby so perverted that there has since been no church extant to undo the error” (ST I, 17). The entertainment of such contrary to fact hypotheticals is perhaps necessary to maintaining that the very existence of the church is dependent upon theological constructs, a position that would seem to result inevitably in a church of theological speculation rather than the ecclesial “concretion and density and vision” made possible by Jenson’s alternative proposition: “Faith that the church is still the church is faith in the Spirit’s presence and rule in and by the structures of the church’s historical continuity.”

Clarifying exactly what Neuhaus is saying will show where the error of his reading lies. Neuhaus is suggesting, because Jenson takes faith in the church to be a fact that cannot be proven by inference, but must be believed in order for someone to be a Christian at all, that he is also asserting the existence of the church is dependent upon this belief. But Neuhaus is confusing the order of knowledge with the order of being. Jenson’s comments are not about what makes the church persist, as the quotation above makes evident: it is the Spirit which keeps the church faithful, and the role of the individual Christian mind is simply to believe this. It is hard to see how this is Protestant in any strong sense. For Jenson, if the church were to err, Christianity would cease to be true. This is exactly parallel to what the Roman Catholic is committed to in affirming Papal infallibility. That is, if God makes the Pope infallible when he speaks ex cathedra, the possibility that the Pope could commit an error

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113 Richard John Neuhaus, “Jenson in the Public Square: Thinking the Church,” in Trinity, Time, and Church, 247.
when speaking *ex cathedra* would just be the possibility that God does not exist. And explaining Jenson’s persistence as a Lutheran is comprehensible when one takes into account all of these points. He has very carefully defended the possible truth of all the dogmas he believes the Papacy has taught *ex cathedra*, and the truth of all the dogmas the church has accepted. He does not believe, however, that all Christians must submit to whatever the current Pope teaches, and thus he feels free to disagree on matters of theology proper, Christology, ecclesiology, and sacramentology precisely in those areas where he does not believe dogmatic definitions have been made.
Chapter 3
Against Coincidence, For the Commissioned

Introduction

As with Jenson, it is not an easy task to summarize the entire project of Kevin Vanhoozer; this is to be expected, since as with Jenson, Vanhoozer is a sophisticated thinker. Nevertheless, a number of related themes occur in Kevin Vanhoozer’s works that suggest a kind of central driving impetus. Firstly, Vanhoozer has deeply engaged with the fields of hermeneutics, dogmatics, theology, and metaphysics, and in all cases has essentially defended an up-to-date version of Reformed orthodoxy. His project has led him to defend authorial intention as determinative of textual meaning, the ultimate normativity of scripture alone in the church, and a deepened classical theism.

Secondly, Vanhoozer has also been very concerned to incorporate the insights of speech-act theory into his work at many levels. This is obvious in his first major publication, *Is There a Meaning In This Text?*, which uses speech-act theory to situate texts within a larger analysis of purposeful human action in general, grounding textual ontology in human intentionality and communication. However, the use of this philosophy also continues in his later works. *The Drama of Doctrine* applies this understanding of text and communication to a doctrine of scripture and church, arguing that the scriptures are divine communicative acts, and that the church’s being and purpose is to respond to these acts by

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114 The Reformed nature of Vanhoozer’s project regarding scripture is noted by several readers, one example being Timothy W. Whitaker, "The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology," *Christian Century* 125, no. 3 (February 12, 2008): 41.
first letting them be heard, and second by responding in turn with fitting dramatic wisdom to the scriptures in the present context.\textsuperscript{119} And thirdly, though it will not be discussed in this paper in any detail, Vanhoozer’s most recent book on metaphysics and theology proper presents a classical doctrine of God from the perspective of divine authorship, “a convenient shorthand for the notion of verbal communicative action…”\textsuperscript{120}

Thirdly, these two themes express a common concern: an anxiety to maintain the ultimate authority of the communicating God in the church. The theme of communication and speech-activity expresses this insofar as it is deployed in response to recent communitarian hermeneutics, which (in Vanhoozer’s view) ultimately deposit final control over divine communication in the hands of the community.\textsuperscript{121} In contrast, Vanhoozer seeks to maintain the scripture’s (and thereby, from his view, God’s) own voice within community, and not collapse the former into the latter.\textsuperscript{122} The pervasively Reformed nature of his proposal, at the same time, reinforces this point in an obvious way: the Reformation was at least in part, if not essentially, a protest against abuses by community representatives against the consciences of individuals, and for the right of individuals to resist such abuses based on God’s direct communion and communication with all members of the church. This Protestant concern is one that Vanhoozer obviously shares, though he does not always present it in such a negative context; indeed, he elaborately presents it as a positive calling to a purely human but divinely indwelled community of fallible but sincere disciples of the Word.\textsuperscript{123}

Kevin Vanhoozer’s theological method is thus sophisticated and Protestant, an updated version of

\textsuperscript{119} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 180-185.
\textsuperscript{120} Vanhoozer, \textit{Remythologizing}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{121} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 172-176.
\textsuperscript{123} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 361-457.
the *sola scriptura* method of the magisterial Reformers. Following the same order as the last chapter this chapter will outline Vanhoozer’s views on the place of scripture, church and tradition, and reason and experience.

**Scripture**

The term *sola scriptura* has an intrinsically negative tone to it, making a claim of exclusivity of some kind. That is, in some sense “the scriptures only” have a certain property. At the same time, it would be a mistake to think that Vanhoozer’s teaching is just a series of negations, despite his supporting this formula. On the contrary, Vanhoozer’s discussions about the positive traits of scripture are quite extensive and important for understanding his overall position. One clear statement in this “positive” category comes early on in his *Drama*:

> Inspiration means not only that the words (locutions) are God’s but that the word-acts (illocutions) are ultimately God’s. To say the Bible is inspired is therefore to acknowledge its divine authorship, the communicative agency of the triune God.\(^\text{124}\)

One of the basic positive characteristics of the Bible, then, is that it is authored by God. Expanding on this, he explains that it is divinely authored by both Christ and the Holy Spirit. In Christ’s case, this is by means of commissioning his apostles to carry on his own hermeneutical practice (explaining the significance of the OT), with the result that Christ spoke through his unique apostolic ambassadors.\(^\text{125}\) Further, in the case of the Holy Spirit, Vanhoozer explains more precisely exactly what “inspiration” by the Holy Spirit is:

> *Inspiration*, to reframe it in theo-dramatic terms, *is a matter of the Spirit’s prompting the human authors to say just what the divine playwright intended*. Prompting—

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\(^{124}\) Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 67.  
\(^{125}\) Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 196.
urging, assisting, recalling to mind, supplying the right words—is the operative notion, the very thing Jesus assures the disciples the Spirit will do (John 14:26).\textsuperscript{126}

Thus, God authored the Bible both by appointing ambassadors whose words he makes himself responsible for, and by secretly prompting and guiding them to say what he wants.

As would be expected, these statements about the authorship of scripture have direct implications for their authority. One particularly interesting example of this occurs during his explanation of how the Bible relates to the covenant between God and the human race:

\textit{Just as the covenant norms the relationship between God and humanity, so the canon norms the meaning of the covenant.} The canon is a rule and criterion, then, not apart from but precisely because of its place in the divine economy of redemption. Scripture is more than the textualization of revelation; it is an instance of God’s own covenantally oriented communicative action...\textsuperscript{127}

Vanhoozer regards the canonical scriptures as \textit{the} normative explanation of the significance of God’s covenantal activity. Indeed, it is quite simply the “supreme norm” of Christian life and teaching.\textsuperscript{128}

Another closely related feature of scripture in Vanhoozer’s understanding is formal sufficiency.\textsuperscript{129} Describing this attribute, he explains that the scriptures communicate enough of the theo-drama to participate fittingly in it. We cannot know everything there is to know about God by reading Scripture, but we can know \textit{enough} to

\textsuperscript{126} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 228 (emphasis in original). Vanhoozer’s central thesis that the scriptures are divine communicative action is noted in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics," \textit{Pneuma} 25, no. 2 (September 1, 2003): 321.


\textsuperscript{128} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 232.

\textsuperscript{129} Vanhoozer explains in a footnote: “The Vincentian canon does not reject Scripture’s material sufficiency; only its formal sufficiency. The ‘formal’ sufficiency of Scripture means that it needs no external helps to be interpreted correctly. It is ‘self-interpreting.’” Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 156n22. Though he does not render a verdict on Vincent’s canon in this footnote, he affirms on the same page that he does not think the Reformers held to Vincent’s canon, and he clearly agrees with the Reformers on this issue. Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 156n24.
respond—to trust the promises, obey the commands, heed the warnings, sing the songs, believe the assertions, and hope for the ending.\textsuperscript{130}

In other words, he affirms that the canon provides everything needed to respond to God and his deeds in history adequately; no further teaching or supremely authoritative interpreter is required.

With these attributes explained, it will now be easier to explain what Vanhoozer means by the phrase \textit{sola scriptura}. He defines it positively in this way: “Construed positively, \textit{sola scriptura} indicates how the church is to practice divine authority.”\textsuperscript{131} What this means in practice is that the church is to listen to the voice of God communicated in the text of the canon as the final judge in all matters of Christian teaching.\textsuperscript{132} There are indeed other authorities in the Christian life, but no others are \textit{final}: the scriptures are God speaking to the church.

**Church and Tradition**

\textit{Sola scriptura} is a formula which simultaneously implies a view about scripture and a view about the church and tradition. With regard to the latter Vanhoozer says the formula was not a protest against tradition as such but \textit{against the presumption of coincidence between church teaching and tradition}. One might even say that \textit{sola scriptura} was a protest on behalf of the genuine apostolic tradition, whose normative specification is found in the canonical Scriptures.\textsuperscript{133}

Two important points are being made here. Firstly, \textit{sola scriptura} rejects that the contemporary teaching and the tradition of the church must always be in agreement. This

\textsuperscript{130}Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 291 (emphasis in original).
\textsuperscript{131}Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 232-233.
\textsuperscript{132}Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 234.
implies the contemporary church (of any age) is fallible. Secondly, *sola scriptura* specifies that the normative tradition is located in the scriptures, not in post-biblical tradition. A few further citations from Vanhoozer will elucidate what he is saying here more completely.

Firstly, he says:

> It is preferable to view tradition, like the church itself, as an example of what Calvin calls “external means” of grace. Tradition does not produce its intended effect *ex opera operato*; on the contrary, tradition efficaciously hands on the gospel only when it preserves the word in the power of the Spirit. It is an external aid to faith, but not an infallible one. To speak of the ministerial authority of tradition is to espouse not a “coincidence” but an “ancillary” view of the relationship of Scripture and tradition.\(^{134}\)

The significance of his linking the church to tradition here should not be overlooked, as it suggests that the two should be given equivalent authority according to his position. Both the general consensus of the past and that of the present are helpful, but not unchallengeable by scripture. Neither of these consensuses should be presumed to coincide with the meaning of scripture.

Beyond his discussions of this Protestant formula, Vanhoozer also notes directly regarding the authority of the church that it is not that of the judge of doctrine, a role reserved to God speaking in scripture. Rather, the authority of the church is that of a number of human witnesses, some of them even expert witnesses, who of course can ultimately be overruled by the judge who renders the final verdict, though they are an important set of voices to be heard about what the Spirit is saying to the church.\(^{135}\)

It is clear, then, that for Vanhoozer the church and its post-biblical tradition are very much corrigeble. Indeed, he further applies this point to the oldest “creed” in the history of the church, the *regula fide*, explicitly affirming its subordination of the canon to scripture: he suggests that the rule remains open to correction from scripture, and even that the church

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\(^{134}\) Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 233-234.

\(^{135}\) Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 234.
fathers, while believing that it was the correct exposition of scripture, would have given it up if someone had been able to prove it was not a correct exposition. Vanhoozer’s comments on the status of creeds, confessions, and congregational teaching all fall along the same lines. Creeds are confessions of the entire church which summarize the teaching of the bible and of the universal church on the *dramatis personae* of the bible. Confessions (of denominational traditions) are examples of “regional theology”, responding to more-than-just-local circumstances in light of the scriptures and the creeds, but without commanding universal assent. Congregational pastors have the role of directing their congregations in particular contexts in a manner consistent with the universal and regional church’s past ‘performances’ of scripture. There is, then, a descending level of authority for ecclesial confessions, from the *regula* to congregational theology; all of them, though, are subordinate to scripture.

Nevertheless, the positive role given to tradition and the church here should not be overlooked. The church (past and present) has the role of attempting to direct its members in accordance with the scriptures, which is not a meaningless task. Too, as will be even more evident in the section on reason below, Vanhoozer is clear to support a kind of catholicity that involves all individuals being open to other readings of the text besides their own. While this does not place any reading as determinative over the bible, it does allow for a communal attempt at living the text, rather than isolated individuals accountable to no one but themselves.

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136 Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 207.
137 Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 450.
139 Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 456.
140 Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 322.
Reason and Experience

From what has been said already, it might be predictable what Vanhoozer’s position on reason and experience is: i.e., that these sources are subordinate to scripture. In response to the theory of Friedrich Schleiermacher, where revelation is located in the subjective consciousness of the individual, Vanhoozer argues that

[i]t is highly unsatisfactory... to give the impression that adequate theological statements should ever take the form “God to me is...” [sic] All knowledge may begin in experience, as Kant said, but if it ends there too, then we shall have no means to arbitrate conflicting views as to what God is like.

In addition to the problem mentioned here with “experientialist” theology, that is, that it makes arbitration of disagreements impossible, Vanhoozer also suggests that there is a fundamental problem with letting experience set the agenda for theology, “when the contemporary situation and its needs” are given final control over doctrine, as the correlative thought-forms “are invariably inimical to the unique and distinct word that insists on being said, and whose proper idiom is gospel and theo-drama.”

With regards to the “primacy of reason”, Vanhoozer directly addresses Enlightenment rationalism in an article on “Scripture and Tradition”:

Modernity is less a child than a distorted image of the Reformation. The reasons for the Reformers’ scepticism of ecclesial tradition were not those of Enlightenment thinkers. While there may be a formal parallel of sorts (i.e., each rejects the authority of interpretative traditions), material differences remain: the Reformers located authority in a self-revelation of God; Enlightenment thinkers located authority in a rational self.

Of course, this is clearly not a neutral description of the Enlightenment; the replacing of God with human reason as the final authority in theology is obviously a major theological

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142 Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 6 (emphasis in original).
143 Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 253.
144 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Scripture and Tradition,” 152.
problem from the point of view of Vanhoozer’s overall system.\textsuperscript{145} And, indeed, he explicitly states at the beginning of his \textit{The Drama of Doctrine} that while modern theology assumed revelation should be based on reason, the correct approach to prolegomena is for the matter of theology (revelation) to directly inform theological method.\textsuperscript{146}

As a counterpoint to these limitations on reason and experience, however, it is important to recognize the positive place he does give to both in the work of theology. Firstly, he agrees with a kind of reasoning which begins from a position of faith, but is able from there to demonstrably provide the best explanation of all reality, and respond adequately to objections. In other words, belief in the Christian faith is rationally justifiable based on direct experience of its truth (via the testimony of the Bible and the Spirit) and abductive reasoning that serves as confirmation.\textsuperscript{147} Secondly, while it will be given more detail below in the section on Vanhoozer’s engagement with philosophy, it bears mentioning at this point that he agrees with common sense realism and Reformed epistemology when it comes to reason.\textsuperscript{148} That is, he agrees with and even argues for positions which affirm the apprehensibility of reality by the human intellect, a faculty which should be taken (\textit{pace} common sense realism) as basically reliable, though fallible.\textsuperscript{149} This latter qualification is worthy of direct notice, too: Vanhoozer explicitly affirms that part of being rational is being open to criticism, being open to the possibility of being wrong.\textsuperscript{150} And it should not escape

\textsuperscript{145}This aspect of Vanhoozer’s system is noted by Mannion, who recognizes his opposition to correlationism in Gerard Mannion, “The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology,” \textit{Modern Believing} 49, no. 2 (April 1, 2008): 58-59.

\textsuperscript{146}Vanhoodzer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 6n16.


\textsuperscript{148}Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 302.

\textsuperscript{149}Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 302-303.

\textsuperscript{150}Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 303.
notice (as it has not for one reviewer\textsuperscript{151}) that, while Vanhoozer has a very high view of scripture’s authority in the church, his hermeneutical project is a defense of something like the grammatico-historical method, the mainstay of historical-critical scholarship.\textsuperscript{152} Further, Vanhoozer also argues that contemporary experience cannot be rightly overlooked in the theological process, but rather “[a] genuine contextual theology is accountable both to the theo-drama... and to the contemporary situation,”\textsuperscript{153} involving perception which “sees and tastes everything about a situation that is theologically relevant,”\textsuperscript{154} though he makes clear that the context, unlike the canon, does not demand our obedience.\textsuperscript{155} Nevertheless, he affirms that the present context (an adequate circumlocution for “experience” for present purposes) must be respected in the sense that care must be taken to truly understand it.\textsuperscript{156}

Overall, then, it is clear that Vanhoozer regards both experience and reason as subordinate to God’s self-revelation in scripture. Thus, his overall position on the use of scripture could be summarized this way: the scriptures are the unnormed norm in the church, with all other customs and judgments being subject to them.

\textbf{Theological Grounding of Views}

Following the same order that was taken in the section on scripture in this chapter, the first set of arguments that will be outlined are those related to its divine authorship and

\textsuperscript{151} Francis Watson, "Is There a Meaning In This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary knowledge," \textit{Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society} 44, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 746. Vanhoozer’s belief that the scriptures should be interpreted as divine discourse, and as a canonical whole, does not undermine this point, as he believes that interpreting in this manner is required by the (according to him) historical facts that the scriptures are divine, and therefore coherent, discourse.

\textsuperscript{152} On \textit{Is There A Meaning}, 47-48, Vanhoozer summarizes the approach of Calvin and modern critical scholars when it comes to hermeneutics and authorial intention: interpretation is just the search for authorial intention. This is also Vanhoozer’s view, as will be made evident in the \textit{Philosophical Grounding} section below.

\textsuperscript{153} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 314 (emphasis in original).

\textsuperscript{154} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 334 (emphasis in original).

\textsuperscript{155} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 314.

\textsuperscript{156} Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 314.
inspiration. Arguing that the early Christians regarded the Bible as “divine discourse”, Vanhoozer cites Romans 3:2, with its language of the “oracles of God” given to the Jews. Further, he appeals to OT and NT texts which have the prophets and apostles describing words as words from God, giving as examples Jeremiah 1:4-10 and 1 Thessalonians 2:13, which speak of the prophets/apostles words as “the word of God” in some manner, and 2 Peter 3:16, which puts Paul’s letters in the same class as the OT scriptures. In addition, Vanhoozer appeals to Luke 24:45 and John 14:23 to argue that the canon just is Christ communicating in his kingly and priestly offices respectively. Along similar lines, he also argues that Christ commissioned the apostles to be his official representatives (thus, speaking on his behalf) in texts like Matthew 10:40, 28:18-20, and Galatians 1:12, to teach the world about the OT scriptures and the events of Jesus’ life. Finally, in the course of discussing the meaning of “inspiration”, he appeals to John 14:26 and 16:13 as evidence the Spirit prompted the apostles to say what the Spirit wanted them to say.

The second positive aspect of sola scriptura in Vanhoozer’s view is his understanding of scripture as the normative constitutional document of the covenant relationship between God and his people, following the work of OT scholar Meredith Kline, who argues that the bible’s form is that of a suzerain-vassal treaty document. This aspect of sola scriptura is also expressed when Vanhoozer appeals to texts which directly state the foundational nature of Jesus and the apostles, and the latter specifically in their

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157 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 63.
158 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 142.
159 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 63.
160 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 196.
161 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 196.
162 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 196.
163 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 227-228
164 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 228-229.
165 Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 137-139. Kline’s influence is noted on Vanhoozer, Drama of Doctrine, 137n71.
testimony to Christ: Ephesians 2:20, 1 Corinthians 3:10-11.\textsuperscript{166} This is specifically opposed to any idea that the church is the foundation of the canon, and assumes the equation of the authority of Christ with the authority of the canon.\textsuperscript{167}

Finally, Vanhoozer argues that the scriptures are “sufficient”.\textsuperscript{168} Though he does not cite an explicit proof-text for affirming this property of scripture, his argument for it can be inferred. Sufficiency is directly implied by the affirmation the scriptures are the sole final authority for the church. This is evident when he contrasts his own view of doctrine with that of George Lindbeck’s, which he says asserts that “the text is [not] sufficient to convey its own world…”\textsuperscript{169} For Lindbeck, instead, the church must impose sense and unity on the scriptures that they do not have considered intratextually.\textsuperscript{170} Vanhoozer draws the conclusion from this position that “[w]hat ultimately bears authority in cultural-linguistic theology is not the narrative depiction of Christ but the church’s use of this narrative.”\textsuperscript{171} That is, if the Bible only receives a unified sense from the interpretive activity of the church, then ultimately the latter is the authority; a document with no inherent meaning cannot control anything. Thus, Vanhoozer’s arguments for the final authority of scripture are also his arguments for the sufficiency of scripture.

In addition to all the above arguments Vanhoozer also makes one further argument about the authority of tradition. He refers to arguments given by Calvin in an approving way: “Church councils have a provisional, ministerial authority. To give them absolute authority,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{166}{Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 292. Of course, it should be understood that this equation of the apostles with their testimony to Christ is meant expansively: i.e., all of their teaching (including that in written form) is understood as testimony to Christ. This is evident from elsewhere in his work, e.g. where Vanhoozer says directly that “The documents of the New Testament are testimonies to the covenantal arrangement in which both God and humans have a stake.” Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 139.}
\footnotetext{167}{Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 196.}
\footnotetext{168}{Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 291.}
\footnotetext{169}{Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 172.}
\footnotetext{170}{Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 172.}
\footnotetext{171}{Vanhoozer, \textit{Drama of Doctrine}, 172 (emphasis in original).}
\end{footnotes}
says Calvin, is to forget biblical warnings about false prophets and false teachers (Matt. 24:11; Acts 20:29-30; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 4:3; 2 Pet. 2:1)."  

All these texts are also, therefore, part of Vanhoozer’s argument for the fallibility of the church, its tradition, and its decision making bodies.

**Philosophical Grounding of Views**

As with Vanhoozer’s doctrine of scripture, his writing on philosophical themes, especially those related to postmodernism and hermeneutics, are plentiful. One of the most foundational philosophical resources that Vanhoozer draws upon is speech-act theory. This includes the basic insight of this philosophy, expressed seminally by John Searle, that speech should be understood as a type of intentional human action.  

Building further on this foundation, Vanhoozer uses Paul Ricoeur’s work on the philosophy of texts, who suggests that texts are instances of human discourse which contain intrinsic semantic force, i.e., have meaning that is able to affect readers. In addition to Ricoeur, Vanhoozer also calls on the work of Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels to defend the position that textual meaning just is authorial intention: that is, that it is simply nonsense to consider meaning as anything other than what an author intended in writing a text. As he summarizes (part of) their argument:

> The very idea of a meaningful sign or text… requires that one postulate conscious intention. If one saw John 3:16 written in the sand, one would either ascribe these marks to an intentional agent or consider them non-intentional effects. In the latter

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172 Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 234.
case—where the marks are considered to be accidents—they will no longer be words, but only seem to resemble them. There is no such thing as intentionless meanings.  

Filling out the position articulated by Knapp and Michaels, he continues his use of philosophical concepts from Searle, adding his definition of the concept of “intentionality” as just the mind “tending” toward, or being conscious of, some particular thing in some particular way.  

Clarifying further the meaning of the terms “authorial intention” or “meaning” when applied to texts, Vanhoozer also derives from E. D. Hirsch the distinction between meaning (what the text says in itself) and significance (all the relations the text has to external readers, texts, and contexts).  

Moving to Vanhoozer’s discussion of the epistemology of meaning, one of the major sources he appeals to is the work of Alvin Plantinga. More specifically, he draws on the work of Plantinga in defending the properly basic nature of various types of belief (that is, beliefs that do not need to be justified by other beliefs or evidence to be warranted). Plantinga argues that, among other things, belief in the existence of other minds is a properly basic belief, and further that this same categorization also rightly applies to belief in the existence of human intentions.  

Finally, in his discussion of the ethics of meaning (i.e., what obligations readers have toward texts), Vanhoozer appeals to the work of C.S. Lewis, George Steiner, and Jürgen Habermas. With regards to Lewis and Steiner, he agrees that all texts implicitly make an...
ethical demand upon readers to listen and receive before judging,\textsuperscript{179} and that truly ethical reading is one that begins with a struggle to truly listen to the voice of the other in the text.\textsuperscript{180}

Turning to the work of Habermas, Vanhoozer affirms his argument that

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\text{[t]he ideal of dominance-free communication is implicit in every speech act. No one communicates, either in speech or writing, except on the assumption that one will eventually be understood, that one’s discourse will be received as it was intended rather than distorted and made into something else. To act communicatively is to hope that one will not fall prey to interpretive violence.}\textsuperscript{181}
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The connections between these philosophical positions and arguments and Vanhoozer’s position on theological method are fairly easy to trace. The formula of \textit{sola scriptura} presupposes that the Bible is inherently meaningful and that that meaning is in principle accessible by readers. Thus his arguments for the identity of textual meaning and authorial intention, and for properly basic belief in the existence of authorial intentions in texts as well as belief in what they testify, support this position. Vanhoozer’s ethics of interpretation, which say the task of reading is “to preserve [the text’s] ability to say something and to affect the reader,”\textsuperscript{182} obviously supports his critique of communitarian hermeneutical practices where, to use his summary of Stanley Hauerwas’ view, “The Bible does not make sense independently of a church that gives it sense.”\textsuperscript{183} Encouraging the struggle to preserve the voice of the text is itself a protest against the hermeneutical control of the community.

\textsuperscript{179} Vanhoozer, \textit{Is There A Meaning}, 374-375.
\textsuperscript{180} Vanhoozer, \textit{Is There A Meaning}, 375.
\textsuperscript{181} Vanhoozer, \textit{Is There A Meaning}, 400.
\textsuperscript{182} Vanhoozer, \textit{Is There A Meaning}, 383.
\textsuperscript{183} Vanhoozer, \textit{Is There A Meaning}, 379.
Critical Reception

Unlike the case of Jenson above, and that of Williams below, it is more difficult to find significant misreading of Vanhoozer. Nevertheless, I believe Hans Boersma gives a confused reading of some of Vanhoozer’s comments regarding the place of tradition in doctrine in a comparative review of Vanhoozer and Yves Congar. The comments are the following:

The result is that Vanhoozer rather unambiguously embraces the notion of development of doctrine, speaking of the "meaning potential" of the biblical text (DD, 352-53). He introduces the notion of development of doctrine without much fanfare, but its acceptance is surely significant for an evangelical theologian, and it impacts the way in which Vanhoozer frames the notion of sola scriptura. His understanding of interpretation is such that he speaks of the "improvisory play of word and Spirit in new contexts whereby the church seeks to render and respond to the same divine judgments preserved in canonical discourse in new contextual situations and with new-conceptual forms" (DD, 353). We could be forgiven for thinking we were reading Congar rather than Vanhoozer!184

The mistake here is in confusing what is meant by “meaning potential”, and by “development”. On a view of development like John Henry Newman’s, doctrinal development expands upon teachings that were given in “seed” form in earlier eras, a phrasing that sounds a lot like it is the same as the “meaning potential” mentioned by Vanhoozer. But what Vanhoozer means by discovering meaning potential is different. He explains how Bakhtin, the source of the phrase in question, and with whom he agrees about the use of the concept, meant the “meaning potential” of texts to function:

Authority ultimately remains with the canonical text. Bakhtin is unwilling to say that contemporary interpreters necessarily impute to Shakespeare’s works something that was not there when they offer new performances. On the contrary, a good

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performance *discovers* potential meaning that is really there, in the text, though previously hidden.\textsuperscript{185}

Development of doctrine, in this sense, is more like deduction and translation of older words into new languages, than in seeing loose analogies between older teachings and newer teachings, where the former do not require the latter by logical necessity. The implication of this difference is that Vanhoozer’s view of the development of doctrine affirms that the scriptures are intelligible in themselves, regardless of subsequent development, while Boersma’s reading does not recognize this point.

\textsuperscript{185} Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 352. Vanhoozer understands the NT’s interpretation of the OT along the same lines. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 353.
Chapter 4
Theology in the Empty Tomb

Introduction

Rowan Williams’ overall doctrine of revelation seems to regard Christ himself as the ultimate, normative revelation of God; all other facets and media of divine “communication” are human attempts to communicate this revelation in one way or another. The intellectual significance of this revelation is best summarized in Mike Higton’s *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams*:

The Gospel is the message that we are held in a loving regard which we cannot coerce or fight off, and which has no shadow of selfishness about it – no shadow of our being co-opted into somebody else’s strategies, somebody else’s fantasy. And so it is the message that we are set free to see and to accept our finitude, our limitation, our mortality, and to surrender that finite, limited, mortality to the love which upholds us. Because the Gospel assures us that we are held by a love which invites us truly to be ourselves, we discover that we do not need to carve out, fence round, and defend any other kind of space in the world; we do not need to throw up walls to keep out the barbarians. But recognizing and welcoming this Gospel ‘is a hard and frightening task’, and we fight against the ‘pain and disorientation’ of this enlightenment. As Williams puts it in *The Wound of Knowledge*, learning to hear the Gospel calls for a ‘readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless’. By asking us to forget that we ‘have a self to be shielded, reinforced, consoled and lied to’, it calls us to let that old self die.  

Williams sees the scriptures as a whole, and the high points of church tradition (like Nicaea, Chalcedon, and the Reformation, among other things) as essentially pressing this same message upon the church. Contemporary theology, in turn, has the task of asking whether theological proposals are consistent with the vision of humanity given above (in

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188 Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 8-10.
Christ), and with the “hope for shared, unrestricted human renewal/liberation/salvation[.]”

The strong connection between Williams’ theology and his ethics also highlights an important distinctive emphasis in his theology: one of his main concerns, expressed in various ways, is with respecting and loving the other. This means taking time in observing surface reality in people and texts, and not attempting to take a totalizing perspective which reduces others to our own predetermined conceptions of what the world is like. Deep within Williams’ vision is a concern to prevent the abuse and violation of other people, a kind of anti-totalitarianism that applies to everything from ecumenical labours (where Christians ought to work to see the Christlikeness in other visions of the Lord) to politics (where the applications are more obvious). This view of God as the one who loves us and disarms us, and the concomitant ethic especially concerned with opposing human domination, are central aspects of Williams’ project, and they are suffused throughout his views on revelation and hermeneutics.

Moving to the more specific focus of this essay, then, in the three-fold typology that this thesis is using, if Jenson represents a “catholic” method for the use of scripture, and Vanhoozer represents a classical Protestant “sola scriptura” method, then Williams would most closely correspond to a “reason” or “experience” based method.

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189 Williams, On Christian Theology, 27.
190 This will be made evident in the survey below.
192 In Rowan Williams, "Authority and the Bishop in the Church," in Their Lord and Ours: Approaches to Authority, Community, and the Unity of the Church, ed. Mark Santer (London: SPCK, 1982), 99, Williams makes clear, for example, that “naked militarism” is opposed to the Gospel, with the implication obviously being that a Christian politic is a peace-making one.
193 The presence of this vision, and its application both to theology and politics, is noted in Mark D. Chapman, "Rowan Williams," Epworth Review 30, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 11-12.
Scripture

Williams’ views on the Bible can be summed up briefly: it is a document that provides the first human reaction to revelation of God in history. He forthrightly explains that the inspiration of scripture “is not a matter of the Holy Spirit holding a writer’s hand as a book is written; it is the present reality of a divine mediation that makes recognition possible as we now encounter the strangeness of the story.”\(^{194}\) Inspiration, in other words, is solely the work of the Spirit causing recognition of the generative story contained in the scriptures.

Further explanation from Williams about scripture confirms this reading of his view. At the beginning of his essay “Trinity and Revelation”, Williams is clear to rule out two popular views of revelation: the older Protestant and Catholic view of revelation as propositional, and a liberal view which appeals to “some isolable core of encounter, unmediated awareness of the transcendent... .”\(^{195}\) The first denial confirms the reading given above clearly: Williams denies that the scriptures are directly revelation. The second denial will prove important for understanding Williams’ views on reason/experience, and so will be more fully addressed there. Related to the first denial, Williams is clear that the Bible is in tension with itself both within and across the Testaments.\(^{196}\) This means that it cannot function as “a resource of problem-solving clarity, as it might appear to the fundamentalist, an area of simple truthfulness over against the dangerously sophisticated pluralism of a disobedient Church... .”\(^{197}\) It also means that we do not “read with a kind of blind and thoughtless obedience to every word of scripture, as if it simply represented the mind of

\(^{194}\) Williams, *Why Study the Past*, 29.


\(^{197}\) Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 58.
Instead, scripture is fundamentally the direct (i.e. historically primary) witness to the events of revelation. He explains that

[w]e should not know God’s act is liberating and transforming if we did not hear it spoken of in liberating and transformed language, the language of a converted people. In its whole tenor and context, Scripture defines faith for us; what we find to say about faith is to be tested by this norm.

The Bible serves as the example of what it is like to experience and react to the revelation of God in Christ directly; it is therefore our best example of what doing theology should look like.

Williams explains this method in more detail in different places. One application of this point is given in his essay on “The Discipline of Scripture,” where he argues that the conflict between perspectives within scripture itself actually serves as a pattern for how the church can work through its conflicts today:

To bear with the embarrassing past and present of the Church..., even from a stance of protest or a pleading for new directions and commitments, is precisely, I suggest, to have learned what the ‘literal’ reading of Scripture has to teach – that the unity of Christ, unity in the Easter mystery, is learned or produced only in this kind of history, the history of counter-claims and debate.

This is important to note, as it differentiates Williams’ view from the stereotypical liberal approach that moves from inner tensions to a dismissive stance toward scripture. Rather, Williams says that the tensions themselves teach the church something about its gospel and itself. Another conclusion that Williams draws from this view of the relation of scripture to revelation is that we should apply a hermeneutic like that of Luther’s crux probat omnia:

And Scripture is read, then, with that question in mind: how – without gross distortion and selectivity, ‘synchronic’ reconciliations – are we to ‘follow’ the history

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198 Williams, Ray of Darkness, 136.
201 Williams, On Christian Theology, 58.
of Scripture so that the authoritative centrality of the narratives presupposed in
baptism and eucharist appears?\textsuperscript{202}

Even without knowing what Williams has said on the other two sources of theology, it is
obvious that it is the Christ-event that is the ultimate ‘court of appeal’ in Williams’
hermeneutic of scripture.

**Tradition and the Church**

As with scripture, Williams makes both positive and negative comments about the
role of tradition in the life of the church. In a general way, on the positive side, he is prepared
to say that everything in the life of the church that provokes “fresh engagement with Jesus”
can be considered revelation in a sense.\textsuperscript{203} Of course, this actually emphasizes the unique
centrality of Jesus: it is precisely in pointing to Jesus that post-biblical realities can be
revelatory. This does not provide support for a crass kind of *partim-partim* view of revelation
scripture and tradition, nor, as will be made clear below, is it meant to support a Newman-
like “development of doctrine” position, a position which implies an infallible interpreter.

Another positive statement Williams makes regarding the church is that

> A local church is indeed at one level a community to which is given all the gifts
necessary for being Christ's Body in this particular place; but among those gifts is the
gift of having received the Gospel from others and being still called to receive it. Relation with the history of mission is part of the church's identity.\textsuperscript{204}

Along the same lines, he argues that the local church is not constituted only by communion
within itself, but also by mutual service towards the wider catholic body.\textsuperscript{205} Of course,
nothing in this way of explaining tradition requires a concept of an infallible tradition or

\textsuperscript{202} Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 56.
\textsuperscript{203} Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 144.
\textsuperscript{205} Williams, “Rome, Constantinople, and Canterbury.”
church, and the reason for this will be clear below: Williams decisively rejects such a concept.

On the negative side, then, one particularly clear statement Williams makes about tradition refers explicitly to Reformation criticisms of certain concepts of tradition, when it argued that the church is capable of erring, and does not have a secure hold on authority. Yet, he adds, “it did so only to claim triumphantly that the Church’s security lay in this very failure, in the insecurity and un-rootedness which drove it always back to its spring in the Word made broken flesh. Against the self-sufficiency of Christendom is set – rightly and decisively – the cross.” Further expressing this point, in several places he describes church structures above the congregational level as less than infallible. In his essay on the authority of bishops, he says the following about any such church councils: “They are there to serve the authority of the bishop as ‘catholic’ representative in the local church, in his own sphere of action, and in no sense to impose decisions upon him.” He also similarly explains the role of the papacy, arguing that “supra-local structures should not be seen as basically decision-making bodies for the whole Church,” and “thus the papacy could be an indispensable sign of the true catholicity [of] consultative (not legislative) structures in the Church: a ‘council’ which ignored the bishop of Rome would be an extremely suspect assembly – and again, patristic analogies could be adduced for some such formulation.”

Thus, both councils and the papacy are seen by Williams as being non-authoritative structures in the church.

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208 Rowan Williams, “Authority and the Bishop,” 101.

In contrast, Williams grants more authority to bishops. However, even with regards to the bishop, he is careful not to suggest that such a person has authority over the local congregation:

We have already seen that his authority is meaningless independently of what is actually happening and being said; so that it is pretty well superfluous to underline that he cannot properly act in an individualistic way. And again, this requires the development of structures, more or less sophisticated, which guard against his exercising an authority over the Church.\(^{210}\)

More positively, Williams suggests that the authority of a bishop is the authority to conduct the common participation of the local church in the central symbolic ritual of the church, the Eucharist,\(^{211}\) which is a symbol of Christ himself, as displayed in the Gospel.\(^{212}\) The bishop’s role is also to interpret all parts of the church to the others, which, in his view, could involve the tragic necessity of judging some parts of the church as, in the eyes of the bishop, radically out of line with the meaning of the gospel,\(^ {213}\) in which case the bishop would at least “demand of communities and dissident groups with them that they examine with candour whether their professed unity is really a common obedience to the paschal symbol.”\(^ {214}\) Yet none of this, to emphasize again, is meant to suggest that bishops have a kind of unchallengeable authority in the church. Williams’ profound theological reflections on the empty tomb make this point directly. He argues these narratives express the deeper

\(^{210}\) Williams, “Authority and the Bishop,” 103.
\(^{211}\) Williams, “Authority and the Bishop,” 99.
\(^{212}\) Williams, “Authority and the Bishop,” 95-96.
\(^{213}\) Williams, “Authority and the Bishop,” 99.
\(^{214}\) Williams, “Authority and the Bishop,” 99-100. Williams’ comments in Rowan Williams, Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1994) about the practice of excommunication correlate clearly with this: “Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of this sort of discipline, we have to admit that (at least in ‘North Atlantic’ Christendom) we have nothing to correspond to this: excommunication has far too long simply been a penalty, absolving the community from any active work of restoring relations. We cannot use the traditional acceptability of such a practice to modify the Church’s vocation to preserve the sinner’s place in the community.” Williams, Resurrection, 49. The implication here must be that the bishops only have the power to ask the offender to reconsider if they really are obeying the Lord as they claim. Williams, Resurrection, 49.
theological principle of the independence and freedom of Jesus over against the church, such that his authority cannot be absorbed into the church’s.215 Following this logic, he adds regarding the clergy that “their task is to direct attention away from themselves to Jesus, to reinforce the community’s awareness of living under Jesus’ judgment.”216

Reason and Experience

There are two senses in which Williams does not regard experience or reason as having primacy in theology. With regards to experience, he is very clear that a classically liberal view of theology is problematic, specifically because it puts authority in theology in an experience unquestionable by dialogue in history.217 Further, in his 2007 Stuart-Larkin lecture, Williams also clearly disagrees with models of scripture which suggest that “the life of the community is where the Spirit is primarily to be heard and discerned, with scripture an illuminating adjunct at certain points,” a position which he explicitly labels a typical exaggeration of the liberal position.218

Parallel to these statements are Williams’ criticisms of stereotypically “rationalist” theologies. He questions theologies that make “Reason”, understood in the exalted Enlightenment sense, a heteronomous imposition on faith. In contrast, he denies “the myth of an omnipotent and objective faculty, ‘Reason’ in a sort of degenerate eighteenth-century sense, that can discover a passive object called God, and map out what he can and cannot do.”219 Related to this denial of classic Rationalism is a conclusion that the quest for the historical Jesus cannot ultimately compel consensus. That is, following Kierkegaard’s

215 Williams, On Christian Theology, 192.
216 Williams, On Christian Theology, 193.
217 Williams, On Christian Theology, 131-2.
meditations on the difference between recovering knowledge and truly learning about God, Williams argues that “if learning is purely a gift, creating the conditions for its own reception, the god’s reception in time must be anonymous. … [T]he historical events provide the occasion for the change, but the change is not compelled by evidence that anyone might ponder and draw conclusions from.”

Despite these negative judgments on experientialist liberalism and Enlightenment rationalism, however, Williams still affirms significant roles for reason and experience. Starting with the former, he explains that “God calls us as and where we are; and his converting revelation does not make sense for us, does not become intelligible and communicable, utterly independently of the ways in which we now try to ‘make sense’ culturally and intellectually.” He obviously, then, affirms that “reason” in the sense of an obligation to remaining comprehensible by extra-ecclesial culture, is a non-negotiable part of theological method. What he opposes in Enlightenment rationalism is the same thing he opposes in all other ideology: the totalizing claims of an absolute and unchallengeable perspective on reality. This can be jettisoned without problem while maintaining the existence of cross- or trans-cultural standards of coherence.

Continuing with this positive aspect to Williams’ positions on reason, he also recognizes that historical research has a place in coming to understand the ‘real’ Jesus. Firstly, he argues that history can provide some limits to what can be said about Jesus: “there

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221 Atkinson and Williams, “On Doing Theology,” 12; cf. also Williams’ comments in the preface to *On Christian Theology*: “Theology seeks also to persuade or commend, to witness to the gospel’s capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment, and to display enough confidence to believe that this gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thought. This is what I mean by the ‘communicative’: a theology experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment.” Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiv. Williams applies this point to post-liberal theories of doctrine by warning against a kind of ghettoization where the faith-community becomes unintelligible to the wider public. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 35-36
is, just as the early moderns wanted there to be, something to which theological language makes itself responsible, something that can call it to account.”222 Secondly, he argues that history can provide the possibility or occasion of faith.223 This means that historical reasoning can eliminate some false conceptions of Jesus, and that it can provide a witness to the revelation of Jesus. However, to actually achieve faith, something further is required. That something is experience of the life of other Christians. In his aforementioned essay on the historical Jesus, Williams says that

the issue of whether the response embodied in the gospel is an adequate, proper or even compelling one turns out to be an issue of whether we have seen plausible readings in the lives of believers that prompt us to come empty-handed to the gospel witness… .224

By seeing other Christians live their lives, we are exposed to the effects of Jesus in our current experience. In light of those effects, we are able to approach the narrative of Jesus, which makes faith only possible in and of itself, with trust that the figure described there can have the same effect on us.225

From what has been explained above in relation to his views on scripture and the church/tradition, it is clear that Williams regards Jesus directly and uniquely as revelation, divinely revealed truth. He connects this view to theological method in one essay, saying theological proposals are ultimately evaluated by their consistency with the message of

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223 Williams, “Looking for Jesus,” 146.
225 Williams makes comments sometimes which might suggest that he falls into the view he calls the “exaggeration of the liberal position…” Williams, “The Bible: Reading and Hearing.” For example, in one chapter of OCT he writes that “it is inevitable that the tradition about Jesus is re-read and re-worked so that it will make sense of these lived patterns as they evolve.” Williams, On Christian Theology, 25. Nevertheless, in the same chapter, he is careful to resolve this tension by reiterating that the church “refuses to claim the right of self-definition or self-constitution.” Williams, On Christian Theology, 25.
God’s love for all people enacted in the life of Jesus Christ—a “conviction that the lives of men and women are open” to “shared, unrestricted renewal/liberation/salvation”.

Theological Grounding of Views

The action of God in Jesus Christ is the highest authority in the church, as is evident here and in what has been said above. In various writings he lays out different exegetical arguments to make this point. One such example is given in the course of discussing the doctrine of the incarnation, where he outlines its NT origins. In the Gospels and elsewhere, Jesus is depicted as proclaiming and anticipating the restoration of Israel in himself, and after his resurrection he is depicted as having established that restoration in the community formed around him. In being the one who determines membership in Israel, he is its judge, and thereby most fittingly determined the ‘Son of God’ in the resurrection. Immediately after this summary, Williams also cites Acts 4:27-28 (presumably assuming its context) to argue that Jesus has final authority over all people.

To defend his perspective on the role of scripture, Williams points to features present throughout the bible. Firstly, in defense of his claim that the Bible is fundamentally a human response to divine revelation, he implicitly notes the obvious point that texts like the Psalms are response to God, and explicitly argues that other genres like law and history present the story and content of that call in the context of the overall responsive nature of the text. Secondly, he notes that some texts are explicitly in the form of summons (law, prophets, epistles), and others are more subtly so: the biblical narratives are actually written with the purpose of engendering change in their readers, despite not being in the grammatical form of

\[\text{226 Williams, On Christian Theology, 27.}\]
\[\text{227 Williams, On Christian Theology, 80.}\]
\[\text{228 Williams, On Christian Theology, 80.}\]
\[\text{229 Williams, On Christian Theology, 81.}\]
\[\text{230 Williams, “On Doing Theology,” 7-8.}\]
the imperative. Thus, he argues that the bible as a whole is evidently human response to events of divine revelation, directed both toward God and the community.

On the matter of tradition, Williams has argued that churches in general have an obligation to consider the good of the catholic whole, by an appeal to the Pauline literature, and in his message on mother churches, to 1 Cor. 15 and 2 Cor. more specifically. He says that

... the life of the local congregation is founded on something received – not discovered or invented. The assembly of Christ's people, Christ's Body, in this place is the result of the active communication of tradition, in its widest and fullest sense (1 Cor. 15).232

Further, he asserts

The life of the local churches is constituted not only by internal communion, but by the giving and receiving of the gift of the Gospel between them and by the grateful recognition of each other as gifted by Christ to minister his reality to each other (as St Paul insists in II Corinthians).233

In the first case, Williams is clearly appealing to 1 Cor. 15:1, where Paul says that the Corinthians received the gospel from him, which he also received. Thus, the Corinthian church is the result of tradition. In the second quote, it seems obvious that Williams is appealing to something like 2 Cor 8:13-14, where Paul argues the relatively wealthy Corinthians should “supply their need,” (of the Jewish churches) “so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness.”234

As mentioned in the survey above, Williams also regards the Eucharist as authoritative in the church. In the essay on “the Authority of the Church”, he says of both baptism and the eucharist that from the earliest days “the Church has performed certain

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231 Williams, “The Bible: Reading and Hearing.”
232 Williams, “Rome, Constantinople, and Canterbury.”
233 Williams, “Rome, Constantinople, and Canterbury.”
234 2 Cor. 8:14 (ESV).
actions in response to the remembered command of Jesus." Similarly, he claims that the existence of ordained ministry in the primitive church is expressed in the NT witness: in the Gospels (Matthew 16.19; 18.18; John 20.22-3) Jesus appoints the apostles to be “something like judges in the rabbinical courts” expressing the underlying support of the earliest churches for some kind of ecclesial discipline. This understanding of the early church as being formally structured to bring communal self-discipline is confirmed from the Pauline and Johannine epistles, as well as Hebrews.

Williams also gives arguments for some of his more negative claims about the authority of scripture and the church. He appeals to some texts he regards as historically false, and mentions several internal contradictions in scripture, to argue for the fallibility of scripture. For example, the Gospel of Matthew’s condemnations of unbelief, and the book of Revelation’s condemnation of Jezebel and her children, are examples of testimony about what Jesus said which Williams seemingly regards as self-evidently not accurate. Further, he argues that the following tensions present in the Bible are incompatible: the Deuteronomist vs. the Chronicler, especially about David, Solomon, Uzziah and Joash; Ruth and Jonah’s focus on God’s purposes being achieved through his mercy vs. Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s focus on purity; James vs. Paul over justification; and the four Gospels. In the case of the church, one argument for its fallibility has already been mentioned: Williams

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237 Williams, “Women and the Ministry,” 13
238 Williams, On Christian Theology, 260.
239 Williams, Ray of Darkness, 94-95.
240 Williams, On Christian Theology, 54-55.
regards the empty tomb narratives in the Gospels as implying the separation of Christ’s authority from that of the church.²⁴¹

All of the arguments cited above function to ground the various positions Williams took above: the central and ultimate authority in the church is Jesus himself, especially insofar as the meaning of his life is summed up in the Gospel. The continuing practices of the church—the sacraments and the reading of the scriptures—function as symbols of and testimony to that revelation which just is Jesus Christ. The Spirit, in turn, works to conform Christians to the image of Christ, not least by bringing about faith in God.

**Philosophical Grounding of Views**

When it comes to Williams’ engagement with postmodern philosophy, one area stands out as the most significant: his emphasis on the historically situated nature of documents and persons. He learned from several thinkers a “suspicion of suspicion”, a scepticism about ways of thinking that “totalize” the world by claiming a comprehensive view which in reality is reductionistic.²⁴² One thinker in particular which Williams has drawn on in this regard is Wittgenstein.²⁴³ Wittgenstein saw Freudianism (the system of thought of one of Ricoeur’s “masters of suspicion”) as a way of ignoring the surface of reality, the surface that makes it distinct and different, and instead focusing on a hidden subtext which is supposedly the “true truth”. This search inevitably led to simply ignoring parts of reality that did not fit “the theory”.²⁴⁴

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Williams directly makes reference to this discussion of “suspicion of suspicion” in at least two important contexts for the present purposes. Firstly, in the same essay in which he mentions Wittgenstein, he elaborates on how “[t]he religious critique, as formulated by the writers we have been looking at... directs itself against the potentially tragic and inevitable self-and-other diminishing fantasy of abstracting knowledge... from a material history of action... .”\textsuperscript{245} This opposition to totalizing ideology of course connects quite directly with Williams’ understanding of the Gospel: as he was quoted above, “Jesus ’uniquely’ reveals the God whose nature is not to make the claim of unique revelation as total and authoritative meaning.”\textsuperscript{246}

Secondly, giving another application of this same philosophical point, he uses this philosophical concept in his discussion of the use of scripture. In his essay on “The Discipline of Scripture”, Williams argues that “it is ‘diachronic’ reading of Scripture that gives us the ‘interiority’ of the text, and that this interiority is not a point of hidden clarity and security but a complex of interwoven processes... .”\textsuperscript{247} (In context, the processes he is referring to are the various theological conflicts that are expressed in the various parts of the Old and New Testaments which critique each other.) Earlier in the essay, he contrasts his position with the school of ‘canonical criticism’, arguing that

\begin{quote}
[a]ncritical canonical criticism threatens to prohibit or ignore any questions about the meaning that arise from the refusal to take the homogeneity for granted. If this reaction against the literal were to prevail, it would point either to a new totalitarianism of canonical context, understood without reference to history, or to an arbitrary pluralism, in which the idea of a given textual content capable of effectively challenging or changing the reader would be hard to sustain.\textsuperscript{248}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{245} Williams and Higton, \textit{Wrestling With Angels}, 200.  
\textsuperscript{246} Williams, \textit{On Christian Theology}, 105.  
\textsuperscript{247} Williams, \textit{On Christian Theology}, 55.  
\textsuperscript{248} Williams, \textit{On Christian Theology}, 48.
Williams uses this concept of “taking time” and “attention to the surface” in a manner which highlights the plurality and tension in the Bible, and argues that approaches to it which too quickly seek to harmonize the tensions are in fact non-literal and/or arbitrary, not actually appreciating the surface meaning of scripture.

Another significant philosophical idea that has influenced Williams significantly is a related one. That is, he agrees with the postmodern view that human persons are irreducibly social. As he explains:

…being human, being bodily and being a user of ‘signs’ are inseparable. We reflect on ourselves and ‘answer’ our individual and social past by doing things and making things, re-ordering what the past and present world has given us into a new statement of meaning, self-interpretation, and world-interpretation.249

Applying this more specifically, he also proposes that the “history of particular communities becomes, in this perspective, a history of sign-making – in that it is a record of how communities ‘make sense’ of themselves in the words and practices they evolve.”250 In the immediate context of these statements, Williams refers to Fengus Kerr’s book Theology after Wittgenstein as expressing these concepts, signaling once again that Wittgenstein’s philosophical shadow looms heavily over Williams’ theology.251 This view of community as intrinsically defined by signs connects clearly with his use of the concept of “symbol” and “sign” in his understanding of the sacraments, which he argues are the activities definitive of membership in the church.252

One further philosophical influence on Williams comes in the work of Paul Ricoeur. More particularly, he strongly affirms Ricoeur’s conception of revelation: it is “what is

\[\text{249 Williams, On Christian Theology, 201. John Webster notes this aspect of Williams’ view as context for his view of scripture in Webster, “Rowan Williams,” 107-108.} \]
\[\text{250 Williams, On Christian Theology, 201.} \]
\[\text{251 Williams, On Christian Theology, 200. This general point about the influence of Wittgenstein on Williams is pointed out by Hobson in Anarchy, 25-28.} \]
\[\text{252 Williams, “Authority and the Bishop,” 95.} \]
generative in our experience – events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life." Consequently, revelation is most fundamentally seen as directed towards the imagination, proposing new ideas. This conception of revelation is obviously integrated into everything he has said about scripture, the church, tradition, and reason and revelation. That is, revelation is most fundamentally what occurred in the events of Christ’s life, which make new kinds of human life possible. The other sources of theology function as various signs of or responses to those events, used by and brought about by the Spirit.

Critical Reception

Williams is a notoriously difficult theologian to classify into the standard polarity of conservative or liberal. Not surprisingly, because of this, there have been a number of perspectives on the overall shape of his theology, some of them more accurate than others. In terms of readings that disagree with the one given above, in a book review of Williams’ *On Christian Theology*, Robert Jenson argues from a ‘conservative’ perspective that:

A unifying concern, moreover, drives the central essays: distrust of closure. According to Williams, we too readily treat dogmas and other theological propositions as answers to "the essential questions;" whereas true theological thinking seeks instead to be brought into the vicinity of truth by opening and re-opening these questions, by agitating the doubts and conflicts behind accepted answers.

Now, while space prohibits citing all the arguments Jenson uses to defend these theses, one can see even from this chapter that, if one were to focus only on the texts where Rowan Williams expresses the “apophatic” pole of the gospel, one could easily misunderstand him.

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to be affirming that orthodoxy is entirely negative and critical in function. In fact, Rowan Williams seems to directly contradict the reading Jenson has given of him:

It is not that we are given only a method of interpretation by the form of Scripture – a method that, by pointing us to the conflict and tension between texts simply leaves us with theologically unresolvable debate as a universal norm for Christian discourse…  

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It is perhaps disputable how much such a misreading is pardonable, and no doubt Williams is being charitable here. But, regardless, a misreading it is.

On the other end of the theological spectrum, Theo Hobson suggests in a recent book and article that Williams’ theology is actually authoritarian at its base. After citing comments by Williams to the effect that Christian theologians must be answerable to the paschal symbol to be theologians at all, and that Christians experience this symbol in common worship, Hobson argues that the latter point in effect makes it impossible to question the church. 257 In other words:

Williams almost promises that we can directly access Christianity’s foundational symbol, and use it to re-think ecclesiology. But on closer inspection, it seems that one cannot fundamentally question the authority of the church, without setting oneself up as an autopope. 258

But this also seems to be a fundamental misreading of his position. Williams argues that thinkers which do not submit to the central authority in the church, the Gospel itself, cannot be said to be thinking as members of the church; but this is not the same thing as saying they must be thinking in submission to the clergy. He is quite clear that the church is fallible, and that the bishop “…does not have power over the community, far less power over the symbol…” 259 Thus, Hobson’s reading of Williams seems to be a serious misunderstanding.

256 Williams, “The Bible: Reading and Hearing.”
257 Hobson, Anarchy, 40.
258 Hobson, Anarchy, 40.
259 Williams, “Authority and the Bishop,” 100.
Chapter 5
Sola Scriptura Redivivus

Introduction

Having outlined and defended my presentation of Jenson, Vanhoozer, and Williams as good representatives of theologies that normatively prioritize church/tradition, scripture, and experience/reason respectively, I now turn to the more difficult question of which position is best. Before critiquing the arguments provided, however, it will be worth briefly noting positive benefits that each position provides, for though the main purpose of this chapter is a critical evaluation, there are nevertheless good things in each system that should be noted and are worth trying to preserve.

Jenson is very concerned with being self-consciously rooted in Christian dogma when reflecting on the broad range of topics addressed in systematic theology. This is a strength of his theology in that it maintains the distinctiveness of Christian teaching, and thereby strengthens the church against forces working to dissolve it. In terms of the specific issues of this paper, Jenson’s position will require that a great deal of time be taken, and a great deal of deference to the past be given, before any major changes in the interpretation of scripture are made. This can help to maintain the unity of the church, and by extension, help the church to function as a sign of unity for the broader human race, since quick schismatic decisions will be greatly slowed by the communal process required. Further, since the method is based on the dogmas held in common by the main traditions of Christianity, it is intrinsically ecumenical, and thus conducive to church unity in yet another way.

Vanhoozer is very concerned with maintaining the unrivaled normativity of scripture in the church. The benefit of this approach is not hard to imagine, as it has been promoted by
Protestants for centuries: it provides a check against an unaccountable ecclesiastical authority. It allows individuals to use their reason and the Word of God (those two authorities that Luther said he was held captive to) to test the truth of the claims that ecclesial hierarchies make to justify their actions, and thus it permits greater freedom of conscience to lay Christians than higher ecclesiologies do. This is obviously helpful in situations where hierarchies are in fact oppressive or harmful. On a more positive level, the freedom allowed in this understanding permits Protestant churches to adapt more quickly to changing circumstances (see Alister McGrath’s book *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea* for a historical survey of how the idea of *sola scriptura* has been of great benefit to Protestant churches and nations\(^\text{260}\)). In addition, a high regard for the normativity of scripture has the benefit of making the church more distinctively biblical in its thought and practice, which is a way of maintaining the Christian character in the face of centrifugal cultural forces. And, of course (and most controversially), the burden of this essay is to argue that Vanhoozer’s position fits best with the facts, which is an independent benefit, and the most important of all.

Williams is very concerned with resisting the abuse of human beings, and his approach to the problematic has the benefit of preventing such a thing. That is, because the Gospel is that of a God who loves unconditionally, and this implies the acceptance and deep security of all people and thus eliminates the need to control others for our own benefit, the motivation for oppression is removed. This in turn allows us the freedom to allow others to be themselves, both in actions and in words. Further, Williams’ approach grants the space to be open to learning from other people and perspectives (on biblical interpretation, on politics, on sexuality, and everything of importance), which is surely of benefit in the modern era of

globalisation and multiculturalism: provincialism can only create the effect of insular ghettos and stasis in intellectual development. Finally, Williams’ view has a significant strength shared with one of his influences, Karl Barth: it keeps front and center the centrality of the living Christ to the Christian faith, and the importance of living in a way that recognizes this (a point which appears in his many writings on spirituality).

Coherence

The question of the coherence of each thinker has already been addressed in the previous chapters; each chapter gave a charitable reading which maximizes their coherence, and in the final analysis they do seem to be internally consistent. Thus, choosing the best position of the three will have to be done on other grounds.

Correspondence

Given the careful and sophisticated thinking that Jenson, Vanhoozer, and Williams have done on the subject of theological method, it is not surprising that all three have internally coherent views. Therefore, to be able to determine who has the best position, our attention will have to turn to matters of correspondence to the truth, matters of history.

Jenson’s first line of argumentation was a defense of the hierarchical nature of the church from texts in the Gospels, Acts, and the Pastoral Epistles, and these arguments do seem to demonstrate that the NT church was hierarchical in the sense that it regarded Peter especially as its leader (even of the Twelve, in some sense). Jenson brings up one text which does appear to prove there were officers in Pauline churches: 1 Timothy 3:1-8. At the same time, he makes more substantial arguments from this text that are not persuasive. That is, he argues that because this text gives officers authority in the church, this presupposes they have a right to rely on the Spirit to declare what is acceptable. As is clear from Chapter 2 above,
this reliance means in practice that the clergy as a class are promised a guidance of the Spirit guaranteeing their infallibility. But even on Jenson’s view, an individual bishop alone does not have a guarantee that he or she will be speaking the truth just because he or she has the Spirit. It is only the church as a whole that has that guarantee. But then it is possible to have an endowment of the Spirit to guide teaching and yet not be infallible.

Further, in contrast to Jenson’s view of the continuity between the apostles and later bishops, several arguments can be made that suggest there is more discontinuity than he recognizes. Firstly, the NT describes the apostles as foundational: Matt. 16:18, Eph. 2:20, 1 Cor. 15:1-9, Rev. 21:14, Gal. 2:9. Secondly, the NT seems in various places to ascribe a unique authority to the apostles in relation to the church: e.g., Matt. 19:28, 1 Cor 4.19-21, 5:3, 14:37-38, 2 Cor. 10:6, 13:1-4, 10. Thirdly, the NT describes the apostles as plenipotentiaries of Jesus in Luke 10:16, Mark 3:14-15, and Acts 10:41-42. The absence of any continuing succession in the post-apostolic church of an office of “the Twelve” or of Paul’s unique “apostle to the Gentiles” position serves to conform to this data.

Correlative with this distinction given to the apostles, it is likely that NT documents are treated as scripture even within the NT. This is particularly clear in 2 Peter 3:15-16 and 1 Timothy 5:18, but also seems evident in other texts: e.g. in 1 Cor. 2:12-13 and in 1 Cor. 14:37-18, and the purpose statement in John 20:21-23 which describes the Gospel as doing what the Spirit is said to do in, e.g., John 3:3-8 and 14-16. John 14-16 is important in particular, because Jenson’s frequent appeal to the “leading” or “guidance of the Spirit”,

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261 That this text implies Paul is claiming he is going to be the last apostle is argued extensively in Peter R. Jones, “1 Corinthians 15:8: Paul the Last Apostle,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 36 (1985): 11-34.
262 More specifically, I am referring to the language of describing Peter, James, and John as “pillars”.
suggests he is alluding to this text. But the promises given in 14:26 and 16:13 are addressed to “you”, that is, the same group of disciples who have been present in the ongoing narrative since Jesus washed their feet in 13:5, a group explicitly distinguished from all other Christians in John 17.

This reading of the NT is confirmed by the apparent post-apostolic criterion of canonicity: that the apostles had a unique authority historically speaking, and this is what explains the authority of their writings.265 Charles E. Hill’s article, “The New Testament Canon: Deconstructio ad Absurdum?” gives two points which support this criteria of canonicity: the relative disuse of letters like James or Philemon,266 and the early church’s language of “receiving”, “recognizing, or “confessing” the NT documents,267 expresses an acceptance of something the church could not alter, and suggests something like “usage” was not determinative of canonicity. Rather, apostolicity determined canonicity, and this determined usage.

Thus, there are three lines of evidence that supports the apostles having an unrepeatable role in the church: their expressly foundational position, their unique authority, and the unique authority of their writings. This would obviously lead to serious problems for a conception of the episcopal office as a successor tout court to the apostles’ office, and provides a theological basis for something like Vanhoozer’s sola scriptura.

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265 Though only indirectly related, it is significant that this seems to be the same criterion of canonicity that Second Temple Judaism and rabbinic Judaism had for the canon of the OT (applied to OT prophets rather than NT apostles, obviously). In Roger T. Beckwith, The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1985), Beckwith persuasively establishes from primary source analysis that belief in the cessation of prophecy after the latter prophets was widespread in Judaism in the 1C CE. Beckwith, Old Testament Canon, 368-371. This would explain why a book widely recognized as useful and accurate like 1 Maccabees was nevertheless not considered canonical.


267 As examples of this kind of language, Hill cites the following (among others): Irenaeus Against Heresies 3.11.9, 3.12.12; Serapion Hist. Eccl. 6.12.3-6. Hill, “The New Testament Canon,” 118n76.
Jenson has a second major line of argumentation for his ecclesiology, based fundamentally on the NT teaching that the church is the body of Christ. The first argument to be addressed here is that from 1 Cor. 11:17-22. Jenson argues that Paul’s language of “discerning the body” has reference both to Christ’s ecclesial and Eucharistic bodies. However, this does not seem to be the case. One strong argument against a dual-reference reading is that Paul does not say “discerning the body and the blood”, but just the former. The single reference seems to suggest that Paul is referring to the body which is the church. The context of this statement highly favours an ecclesial reference as well: it is clear the sin involved in the Corinthians’ taking of the eucharist is a lack of concern for the poor members in the common meal.

The exegetical mistake on this verse has wide reaching effects, as his *communio* ecclesiology seems to be fundamentally based on it. From his dual-reference view of Paul’s words he draws the conclusion that individual Christians only receive Christ in receiving the church, in receiving the elements. This obviously favours a hierarchical ecclesiology. But if Jenson’s dual reference reading of Paul is incorrect, then there is no reason to assume Jenson’s hierarchical deduction. Jenson also argues, based on this reading and on the unity of God, that the catholic church must be one, and that the church received in the eucharist must be the catholic church, in turn making every local church also the entire catholic church. Bringing in his previous argument that a pastoral office is essential to the local church, he argues that the same must be the case for the catholic church as a whole, grounding a papal office in the *communio* ecclesiology. Frankly, it seems like this argument is based on the fallacy of composition: even if the local church receives the catholic church in the eucharist, it does not follow the local has all the properties of the catholic, or vice versa, and so it does
not follow that the catholic church must have the same hierarchical structure that the local church does.

Another argument Jenson makes for his particular ecclesiology is that the “body of Christ” language of the NT is strictly literal. There are significant problems with this argument. Iiro Kajanto, in his article, “The Body Politic: The History of a Famous Simile”, says the titular simile originated in 4-5C BC Greece, and notes examples of it in Cicero, Seneca, Livy, Dionysius, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, and Florus.268 This suggests the figure of the “body politic” was in widespread usage around Paul’s time. Thus it is far from obvious that Paul’s mere use of the term “body of Christ” for the church must mean it is somehow a literal description of the church. The texts most pertinent to Jenson’s case, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 11-12, could easily make sense if “body of Christ” were read as “society that is subject to Christ”; on the other hand, Jenson is likely incorrect in his reading of 1 Cor. 15’s “spiritual body” of Christ as a reference to the church, as nothing in the text requires this, and such a view does not seem present in the early church. On the contrary, it seems positively contradicted by diverse texts such as Acts 7:56 and Revelation 1:12-20, where the ascended Christ is depicted as still having an anthropomorphic form. Obviously, then, if Jenson’s view of the ‘body’ language in Paul is incorrect, this argument for ecclesial infallibility does not work. If the “body” of Christ is the society of Christ, it becomes logically possible for the society to disobey its head or falsely speak in his name.

Jenson also makes further arguments for this same point, i.e., that when the church speaks, Christ speaks. One text he appeals to for this purpose is Matthew 18:20, with its language of “binding in heaven” what is bound on earth. Another used is Acts 2:17-18 seen

as the fulfillment of Joel 2:28. However, it is not clear that these promises should be understood along the lines Jenson suggests. In both cases, a wooden reading along Jenson’s lines implies something more radical than even he would want: that God speaks whenever any pair of Christians (or even any individual Christian) speaks. It seems highly likely that in both cases some qualification must be intended, and the contexts of these texts support this supposition. In the case of Matthew, the immediate context discusses how to deal with disagreement in the church, and surely Matthew would not have thought it impossible for two sides of “two or three” come into conflict. In the case of Acts, similarly, qualification seems evident in that some people in Acts are singled out as “prophets” or as individuals who “prophesy”. If everyone was believed to be a prophet, however, this would not distinguish anyone and so would be a useless descriptor. More likely interpretations can be given of both passages: in Matthew, Jesus’ presence to “two or three” is probably referring to a heavenly enforcement of (correct) ecclesial discipline, and in Acts, the author is probably suggesting a typological fulfillment of Joel, with this lesser fulfillment being seen in the various charismatic gifts expressed throughout Acts (not all of which were even prophetic).

Jenson appeals to a third set of texts to prove the same point: Rom 8:1-11, 1 Cor 12:4-13, and 2 Cor. 3:17-18 all are said to prove the church is a prophetic community. In fact, however, while these three texts do describe the church as in some way in possession of the Spirit, they do not prove that the church is as a whole a prophetic community. The 1 Corinthians text in particular seems to militate against Jenson’s point: it describes prophecy as one gift among many that some members of the church could have, not as something all members have. Romans 8:1-11 and 2 Cor. 3:17-18 both prove the Spirit is present to Christians in ethical sanctification, but not in such a way that the Spirit’s guidance cannot be

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resisted. Thus Jenson’s proof-texts are not sufficient to prove that the visible church as a whole is irresistibly guided by the Spirit to be correct in its teachings on doctrine and practice.

Another set of texts Jenson appeals to are from Acts and the epistles which describe the church as consisting of various types of prophetic phenomena. On closer inspection, though, it is clear that none serve to prove his distinct position on the communally-prophetic nature of the church. The first set is used to prove that typological parallels are drawn between various figures in Acts and Elijah and Elisha. Of course, it should be evident by now that the fact of individuals possessing such characteristics does not advance Jenson’s position.

The remainder of Jenson’s texts demonstrating the church consists of assemblages of prophetic phenomena can be dealt with more rapidly. In some cases, Acts describes the reception of the Spirit in terms that allude to OT ecstatic seizures. Once again, such phenomena do not directly help prove his specific conclusion about the communally-prophetic nature of the church. Finally, in several other texts, Jenson argues that “leaders of all sorts understood their offices in material continuity with Israel’s prophecy.”\textsuperscript{270} The majority of these actually only refer to Israel’s prophecy itself, but a few do not: 1 Peter 1:11-12, Acts 7:51-52, Hebrews 3:9, and 1 Corinthians 2:4. None of these passages, however, prove that the community as a whole is inspired as such, and so are ultimately unhelpful for Jenson’s ends.

Jenson has several philosophical positions which act to support his theological conclusions, and thus to conclusively respond to him requires also addressing them. The first argument that Jenson makes is a qualified one, but also important. He argues that because

\textsuperscript{270} Jenson, \textit{The Works of God}, 199.
texts are disconnected from their authors, they cannot defend themselves against false interpretation. His qualification is that texts do have an objectivity which can serve to make false interpretations implausible. Once he has added this qualification, his original statement becomes something of a banality: of course, texts do not literally speak, and thus cannot literally defend themselves. But insofar as they have determinate features, they can “defend themselves” in the sense that anyone who can read the text can see those features and use them to defend the text against false readings. This could only avoid undermining his argument if this possibility were restricted ad hoc to the magisterium; but of course, that approach would be arbitrary.

A second argument Jenson uses to support his theological hermeneutics is that the intrinsic meaning of texts are not identical with authorial intentions. His argument for this position is that authors have hermeneutic biases, and that they are constantly using these to interpret their own text in the process of authorship. However, there seems to be a confusion here. It seems difficult to ignore the arguments given by Knapp and Michaels above, that if we do not consider texts to be intrinsically intentional, then the concept of a text is unintelligible. It makes no sense to ask of an unintentional event, such as the tide washing a seashell onto the shore, “what does it mean?” If a string of words on a page are there without the intention of any personal agent, it would be nonsense to ask what they mean. And thus it seems that the point made by Vanhoozer undermines this argument by Jenson: a text’s meaning is just what the author has done in tending to words in such a way that they are constructed with a fixed order. If this is the case, however, then, any doctrine which said that the Bible in itself was “the word of God” would either have to say God somehow was a co-
author of the human words of scripture as they are, or else abandon such a doctrine altogether.

A third argument is that a social context is required for a single person to be unified as such. Jenson’s main argument for this conclusion is that it is impossible by introspection to be directly aware of one’s own consciousness, and so that consciousness cannot be the locus of our unity, and that nothing else could conceivably be a source of unity for a single person, since everything else about a person changes through time. However, even if his argument were granted as correct, it would not require any infallibilist conception of the church, for it is evident upon reflection and in history that individuals can influence change in their societies. All individuals have a relation to a wider society, but it is (or at least can be) a reciprocally transformative one.

One significant exegetical appeal made by Vanhoozer in order to establish the NT writers’ teaching about the nature of the OT, is to Romans 3:2, where Paul says that one privilege of the Jews is that they have been entrusted with “the oracles of God”. These oracles are taken to be co-extensive with the entire OT corpus. A possible objection here might be that Paul does not explicitly identify the oracles about which he is speaking. In response, it should be noted that the Judaism of his day did affirm that the OT as a whole was divine communication. This is evident from many sources, not least Philo’s many references to the scriptures as a whole being the oracles of God,\textsuperscript{271} as well as Rabbinic attitudes toward scripture which sought to preserve it from any contradiction,\textsuperscript{272} and a statement from

\textsuperscript{271} An extensive survey of Philo’s use of this term for scripture can be found in Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, \textit{The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible}, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Phillipsburg: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948), 373-391.
\textsuperscript{272} Beckwith, \textit{The Old Testament Canon}, 284-287.
Josephus in his work *Against Apion*. Thus, given Paul’s Jewish context, and the fact that no qualification is included in the text, Vanhoozer’s reading seems most natural.

In defense of his claim that the writings of the NT are, redemptive-historically, part of the foundational activity of Jesus, Vanhoozer appeals to Ephesians 2:20 and 1 Corinthians 3:10-11. In the latter case, it would be fair to say this text is consistent with Vanhoozer’s view, but it does not require it. This text might just mean that the apostles are foundational to these churches in the sense that they planted them. In the case of Ephesians 2:20, however, a stronger position seems to be required: the apostles are the foundation of the church.

Finally, Vanhoozer also directly draws on the arguments of John Calvin for the fallibility of church councils, appealing to Matt. 24:11, Acts 20:29-30, 1 Tim. 4:1, 2 Tim 4:3, and 2 Pet. 2:1. All the texts suggest that false teachers and attendant apostasy will happen among Christians. And, this implies, if there are no promises about “majorities” remaining faithful perpetually, that there is then no reason to think such defections impossible either. When the texts supplied by Jenson to prove the visible church is promised infallibility were examined, it was seen that no such promises were made. It thus seems that Vanhoozer’s position is the most probable: apostasy on the part of the majority of Christians and/or clergy is a possibility in the church age, according to the NT documents. This point was a major point of contention in the Reformation era, and remains so today, but it does seem that the magisterial Protestants were correct on this matter.

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274 Wayne Grudem, in his *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000) has given a fairly persuasive argument that 2:20 and 3:5 should be understood as referring to “apostle-prophets”, as one group. One argument he gives for this reading is that the message these figures received was that of the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the church age, but elsewhere in the NT this is consistently seen as a message given to the apostles. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 335-337.
Turning to Vanhoozer’s philosophical case, one of the most crucial parts of his repertoire is speech-act theory. As noted, this school of thought argues that speech should be analyzed as a type of intentional human action. It seems difficult to deny this point; as with texts as noted above, it would be meaningless to talk of “unintentional communication” in any literal sense. Communication, to communicate anything at all, has to be meaningful, and for something to be meaningful, it must be produced by an agent capable of meaning something. And, indeed, the insights of speech-act theory have gained wide acceptance, including use by all three thinkers being analyzed in this thesis. The further insights of speech-act theory, such as recognition of the many functions language can serve, is just a result of close analysis of the ways people do actually communicate.

Paul Ricoeur’s defense of the idea of texts having intrinsic semantic force is just another implication of the points that have already been established. That is to say, if communication is possible at all, sounds or images must be capable of being intended by persons to mean things intelligible to other persons. In order for those sounds or images to serve that function, of course, a community must agree to count them as symbols of concepts, and individuals must in fact create those sounds or images in a way perceptible to others. Once they do this, however, these signs are in fact signs, and this means they have they have “intrinsic force”: that is, when people who know the language perceive the signs, they are immediately made aware (by means of background knowledge) of the concept that is being signified.

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275 Stephen Fowl raises an objection related to epistemological questions: “... if the felicity of speech-acts depends on properly observing the socio-linguistic conventions operative in specific contexts, how does one fix the particular context of a literary act in a non-arbitrary way?” Stephen E. Fowl, "Is There a Meaning In This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge," Modern Theology 16, no. 2 (April 1, 2000): 261. The problem with this question is that it seems to miss that one can have a general knowledge of the language called “English”, enough to be able to understand most other speakers of the language, even if one does not have comprehensive knowledge of it. To deny this would be to imply that no communication ever
Another crucial aspect of Vanhoozer’s philosophy is his ethics of meaning, which seem to be correct upon reflection. That is, if the arguments above support the belief that texts are just a form of human communication, then they ought to be treated as what they are. To get to Vanhoozer’s ethical conclusion, one only need ask two questions. Firstly, is it right to lie about what other people have communicated? Of course, this is just an application of a more basic principle: is it right to lie? For most people, this ethical principle is taken as obvious, and no argument will therefore be given for it.\(^{276}\) Secondly, if one misrepresents what someone else said, is the fact that one was careless in reading a valid excuse? Again, the answer seems obvious; if we are going to report what someone said to another person, we need to read what was said with care to understand, first. Thus, if the above case for the nature of texts is correct, these principles would apply to exegesis of such, even though they are not verbal communication from a living person.

If the above analysis of the facts is correct (and the responses to objections given below are sufficient), one further argument can be made to strengthen the case for Vanhoozer’s overall position. That is, if the historical, philosophical, and practical objections to his view have been met, and the historical record seems to display a recognition of the apostles’ (along with the OT documents’) unique and ultimate authority over the church from the earliest days of that church, it would seem \textit{prima facie} more likely than not that such a widespread and early belief was rooted in the origins of the movement. That is, that this position goes back to Jesus himself. The alternative seems less likely, as it would have to imply a widespread and undetected significant shift away from the teachings of the

\(^{276}\) Of course, if someone is not intending to interpret a text, but to use it for some other purpose besides explaining what the author intended, then the obligation to tell the truth about what the text says does not apply.
individual all Christians regarded as the Master Teacher. But if the view does go back to Jesus himself, then all the evidence (historical and subjective or experiential) that suggests Jesus was a trustworthy teacher on religious matters would apply to this specific religious matter, i.e., whose religious teaching the church should be guided by? Then, insofar as Jesus is regarded as trustworthy, so far should Vanhoozer’s view be believed.

Having now completed our historical examination of Jenson and Vanhoozer, the same must be done for Williams’ position. Of the texts examined in his corpus, Williams tends to make allusive appeals rather than refer to explicit chapter and verse references. However, it is not too difficult to infer which texts he is thinking of. Thus, in the following, some “reading between the lines” will be done in order to be able to directly engage with his exegesis.

One of the central claims of Williams’ teaching about revelation is that Jesus is the highest authority in the church. To prove this, he appeals to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in the Gospels and Acts. As this claim is not a matter of contention with Jenson and Vanhoozer, his arguments will not be analyzed.

Beyond Jesus, Williams also affirms there are subordinate authorities, as explained in the previous chapter: e.g., scripture, tradition, the ordained ministry, and the eucharist. One might wonder if positing these as authorities is arbitrary, but he does in fact ground their authority in a principled manner. With regards to scripture, he argues that its presence in the community was common from its earliest days. Again, as this point would not be disputed by Jenson and Vanhoozer, the point will be granted for the sake of argument. Further, Williams gives arguments for and explanations of the authority of tradition, the ordained ministry, and the sacraments, which all subordinate them to the authority of Christ in the gospel. Because
this understanding of these sources does not distinguish Williams from Vanhoozer, whose position is being defended here, they will not be further analyzed.

On the other hand, Williams does argue for an issue central to this thesis: that the church and the scriptures are fallible. The fallibility of the church is something that has already been argued for above, and so the plausibility of his arguments is not essential for the comparative evaluation here. His arguments for his position on scripture are a different matter. Williams is quite clear that the scriptures are not to be taken as directly representing the mind of God; they are not dictated by God, and they are not to be simply obeyed as if they were God himself speaking. This obviously stands in direct contrast to Vanhoozer’s position (though he would not agree with a dictation theory), which this thesis has argued in support of above. In response, it is clear that it would be impossible to mount a full-scale response to every empirical criticism that has been given against the position Vanhoozer represents. And, it must be admitted, this is one of the places where his position is most vulnerable. One of the most common beliefs of all critical scholarship, is that in some sense this conception of scripture is untenable in light of historical criticism or modern moral knowledge. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the specific criticisms that have been lodged by Williams can be responded to, and granted their success, the possibility of the same being done on a wider scale gains more plausibility. Williams’ arguments were the following: the discordance between Chronicles and Kings, Ruth/Jonah and Ezra/Nehemiah, James and Paul, John and Matthew/Post-Paul, and the four Gospels, as well as historical falsehoods in Matthew and Revelation.

Given the disapproval that much of critical scholarship has for classic and contemporary examples of harmonization, some defense can be given here of the practice in
a general way. Craig L. Blomberg has written a helpful article on this issue detailing several important aspects of this topic. Firstly, he explains that in attempting to harmonize, scholars can take into account any of the following: (1) textual criticism, (2) linguistics, (3) historical context, (4) form criticism, (5) audience criticism, (6) source criticism, (7) redaction criticism, and (8) additive harmonization.\(^{277}\) Secondly, he gives examples of scholars using all of these categories to resolve tensions in extrabiblical literature, like the works of Josephus and various biographies of Alexander,\(^ {278}\) demonstrating that harmonization need not be confessionally driven. Of course, it should be acknowledged that it is indeed possible that various humanly produced documents can express irresolvable tensions, and honesty must be maintained at all points. Nevertheless, he correctly points out that all reasonable possibilities, using all the historical tools available, should be considered before imputing such tension to any author, biblical or not.\(^ {279}\)

In light of these points, the apparent theological tension between Ruth/Jonah and Ezra/Nehemiah can possibly be explained. David Daube argues careful attention to the book suggest that the marriage of these two was done in such a way that Ruth stood in as a surrogate for Naomi, so that David was a legal descendent of two Jews, not of a Moabite at all.\(^ {280}\) This is confirmed by 4:17, which explicitly says Obed was born to Naomi. This was intended to be a way to circumvent the problem of intermarriage, suggesting that the book of Ruth wholly agreed with the Deuteronomic laws of exclusion. The contrast between Jonah and Ezra/Nehemiah has a different possible explanation. That is, from Genesis forward in the


\(^{278}\) Blomberg, “Legitimacy and Limits,” 166-173.


canon, there were examples of God-fearing Gentiles who were nevertheless not members of the people of Israel (e.g. Melchizedek, Namaan the Syrian). This category of persons implies that receiving the mercy of God is not coterminous with being Jewish, which removes tension with Ezra/Nehemiah.

With regard to the Paul/James conflict, the New Perspective on Paul has provided a possible solution: when Paul says that no one is justified “by the works of law”, he is referring specifically to works of the Torah, works that distinguish Jews from Gentiles, not good works in general. This eliminates any necessary tension between the two apostles.

The example that Williams gave of tension in Kings/Chronicles and Matthew/Mark can be given a possible solution: the kings are presented more positively in Chronicles because the redactive purpose of the author was to highlight the good in them for the post-exilic rulers to imitate. On the other hand, the Deuteronomist was trying to explain how the actions of the kings led inevitably to exile, and so Kings spends more time focusing on the failings of the monarchs. Similarly, Matthew can be understood as having a similar purpose to the Chronicler, and Mark to that of the Deuteronomist, substituting disciples for kings. The reality of any sincere Christian’s life confirms that there can aspects of belief and unbelief simultaneously present at any given moment or action. Thus, while these synoptic books surely have different theological purposes in highlighting different aspects of the kings’/disciples’ lives, this does not have to imply one presentation is simply right and the other simply wrong.

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283 This is also suggested in Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 755.
The issue of the historical falsehoods in Matthew and Revelation are a different kind of problem. In both cases, people disobedient to God are condemned. Williams does not explain exactly how this is itself evidence of these texts not being truly spoken by Jesus, but it is not very difficult to imagine. If the Gospel message of Jesus enacted God’s disarming acceptance of everybody, such an attitude on the part of Jesus would not make much sense. But it should be noted that statements of universal love, or of the universal scope of Christ’s death, have been interpreted by many traditions and theologians along the lines of a universal offer. And such a view is not logically incoherent: it is possible to love someone in the present, so that you would welcome reconciliation with them if they desired it, but at some future point change one’s desire for reconciliation, perhaps after perpetual rejection of that offer.

Thus, while it is of course disputable that any of these answers to Williams’ objections are correct, and without doubt many more such objections could be raised, still, each of his objections to Vanhoozer’s type of doctrine have been provided with defeaters. It is worth reiterating, at this point, that only a demonstration of possible compatibility in diversity, and not uniformity, is necessary to respond to Williams adequately here.

Williams’ philosophical resources are, in some ways, a combination of those of Jenson and Vanhoozer. In common with Vanhoozer, Williams wants to reject reductionism in hermeneutics. This comes out in his support of Wittgenstein’s “suspicion of suspicion”. Insofar as he wants to give space to the other, to take the time to understand the rich texture of people and texts and not reduce them to preconceived rigid structures as the masters of suspicion did, his points are difficult to oppose. The support for this ethic goes back to the argument given above: it is common sense that lying about people is wrong. Williams of
course applies this point in many ways. One of the most central is in his critique of ideology, and even in his reading of the Gospel as the revelation of God who opposes ideology. The truth to this critique has just been mentioned: it is wrong to do violence to the other by lying about them. And, further, it is right to point out that human beings lack omniscience, and that claims to such a perspective are illicit. He also applies this point to the reading of scripture, and concludes that being non-reductionistic implies not attempting to harmonize the obvious conflicts in scripture. This application of the point is a good one, granted the premise there are strong theological tensions in scripture as he suggests there are. On the other hand, if Vanhoozer is right that scripture has formally diverse, but logically and practically compatible texts, then close attention to the texts would demonstrate their ultimate consistency.

In common with Jenson, Williams strongly agrees with another Wittgensteinian insight: people exist in a web of society and language. This, once again, is one of the central insights of “postmodern” philosophy, and as was explained in connection with Jenson, there are some obvious senses in which it is undeniable. However, unlike Jenson, Williams does not apply this concept to undergird a concept of ecclesial infallibility, and so no comparable critique is required.

Finally, Williams, uniquely in comparison to Jenson and Vanhoozer, emphasizes a generative concept of revelation, following Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur’s view of revelation is unobjectionable when considering what it affirms: that revelation is directed towards the imagination in a way that proposes new possibilities to free agents. But what Ricoeur denies is much more controversial: that revelation is not directed toward the will as heteronomous command. The main argument given for this position seems to be that the contrary view is
intellectually vicious (the pejorative tone of “heteronomous” suggests this), in that reason must defer to revelation on that view. However, this objection assumes that reason and revelation are in conflict, which is itself something highly disputable. A brief argument was given above for accepting Vanhoozer’s system on these matters, and contemporary theologians like Pannenberg, and older traditions like Thomism, have provided highly sophisticated attempts at demonstrating that reason and revelation are consistent, which need to be undermined before this objection can be successful.

Practice

In addition to the test of internal consistency and historical correspondence, there is one further possible means of evaluation: a practical test. In other words: which view is the least difficult to live out?

In the case of Jenson, one significant practical problem is the question of how Jenson’s system deals with the so called “Robber Councils” of the early church. In discussing these councils, Jenson argues that they were indeed heretical, despite being externally similar to the ecumenical councils, and explains that the only way such councils can be known to be heretical is by the fact that church consensus has later discovered them to be so.\(^{284}\) The consequence of these facts, admitted by Jenson, for his overall theory, are worse than he suggests. Fundamentally, the difficulty seems to be that councils are only truly known to be councils in retrospect, but we are not yet at the end of history. There is still future for the church. And this means, at least in theory, any of the ecumenical councils could turn out to be a robber council, if at some point in the future the whole church “discovers” that. Jenson could not respond to this criticism by saying that faith in the Spirit

presupposes the church will not fall into such an error, for he has already affirmed that it has
done so. Thus his method leaves the contemporary church in a position of uncertainty with
regards to the veracity of the magisterium’s teachings. And this problem seems to be a
crippling one: if keeping the church as the ultimate context for interpretation is necessary to
prevent the Bible from ‘falling into pieces’, and yet the present identity of the true church
(the one God speaks through) cannot be known, then it seems that the scriptures must fall
into pieces as Jenson fears.

Vanhoozer and Williams, unlike Jenson, do not predicate infallibility of either church
or tradition. Because of this, the existence of such things as Robber Councils provide no
problem at all for either thinker. Nevertheless, all positions close to the classical Protestant
position are open to one of the oldest charges made against Protestants: that lack of an
infallible interpreter is a recipe for endless schism and disunity in the church, with each
person as his or her own pope. Three points can be made in response to this criticism. First,
regardless of whether a person chooses to be Protestant or Roman Catholic, they are always
going to do so because of their private judgment that their tradition is correct. Every person,
to remain a human being and therefore rational, has to see for themselves why their tradition
is worth believing in. Second, the reality of the visible church is more complicated than this
charge would suggest. That is, an empirical comparison of Roman Catholic (and Eastern
Orthodox) communions and Protestant communions would have to recognize the fact that
disunity and unity exist in both. To deny that there is any disagreement among Roman
Catholics over any issue, or that Protestants have absolutely nothing in common, is surely not
fair. Third, both Vanhoozer and Williams have means within their positions to correct for
overly schismatic behaviour: that is, both affirm the virtue and necessity of being open to
mutual correction, of humility. This is one significant way in which catholicity functions for both thinkers. In being open to correction, an attitude of incorrigible arrogance, the root cause of unjust schism, can be avoided. So, while the problematic consequences of this Protestant view must be recognized, the strength of the objection surely must be kept in context and within reason.

One final practical objection can be lodged against both Jenson and Vanhoozer: that is, it might be suggested that both systems are ultimately oppressive, in that they consider something more authoritative than reason or experience. In the case of Jenson, he could respond that the dogmas established by the church so far preclude oppressive behaviour, and no doubt there is truth to this, if one considers how official dogmas have been interpreted in recent years. However, given the severe practical epistemological problem noted above, there is a problem with this response. That is, it leaves open the possibility that the church consensus will decide in the future that its dogmas actually require what modern people would regard as oppressive behaviour. Within Jenson’s position, there seems to be no non-arbitrary way to rule out this possibility. Vanhoozer has a different way to respond to this charge: he could argue that the Bible, the ultimate authority, is in fact not oppressive. Such an argument would not be unheard of; it has been made frequently by evangelicals from Vanhoozer’s tradition for many years. That is, many exegetical arguments have been given for regarding the Bible as not oppressive to women, minorities, slaves, and other classes of people who have been oppressed in history. Unfortunately, these issues are too complex and specific to be able to enter into them in this essay. Nevertheless, building on what has been argued above, one brief line of evidence in support of this response can be suggested: if, as has been argued above, the Bible presents an internally complementary vision of the world,
then the charter text of liberation in the NT must be the expression of the whole of scripture. That is, when Paul says in Galatians 3:28 that “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” this is just what the whole Bible can be summed up as teaching. It would be difficult indeed to regard that as oppressive. On the contrary: in light of this text, a *sola scriptura* approach to scripture’s authority could wield the Bible as a strong counter-oppressive tool against ecclesiastical attempts to abuse either members or outsiders.

**Conclusion**

On the matter of coherence, all three of the thinkers discussed here seem to pass the test. Robert Jenson represents a Lutheran high-church and communitarian theology which privileges the church as an ultimate interpretive authority over the scriptures, and has coordinated the scriptures, reason, and experience to be subordinate authorities in the use of scripture (and all other sources of theology). Kevin Vanhoozer represents an evangelical Reformed position which regards the scriptures as uniquely authoritative, as ultimately divine discourse; in line with this, he has explained how church, tradition, reason, and experience function as sources subordinate in normativity to the scriptures. Finally, Rowan Williams presents a somewhat idiosyncratic position, ascribing ultimate authority to Christ and the Gospel as encountered directly by reason and experience, and regards the scriptures and the church (along with all other experience and reasoning) to be subordinate to that authority. These positions have all been shown to be internally consistent, and indeed it would be surprising if sophisticated representatives of long-standing traditions were *not* consistent. Regarding correspondence to facts, however, Jenson’s arguments have been shown to either contradict or be underdetermined by the evidence he appealed to, and in
terms of practicability his position seems to contain a serious problem even stated on his
terms. Williams’ positions, on the other hand, seem to be too minimal when compared with
the evidence presented above: i.e., the apostles and their teachings were in reality seen as
more than just symbolic reminders and historical eyewitnesses of Jesus. They were rather
seen, as Vanhoozer suggests, as carrying on the divine communicative action that was
initiated with Jesus, and as carrying his authority.

Given all the arguments above, the conclusion reached here is that Vanhoozer’s
position most adequately corresponds to the evidence we have, not postulating things that are
not evident, and not missing things that are. What, then, can be said to be established by this
essay with regard to the larger issue being discussed here? Obviously, not that the larger
debate over how the scriptures ought to be used, or what should be the highest authority in
the church, is now concluded. Clearly there is still room for disagreement on this, and many
if not all of the arguments presented here could be challenged in various ways. What can be
said with confidence, then? At minimum, the Reformed position represented by Vanhoozer
can still be given a fair defense, even in light of the centuries of criticism that have passed
since that origin, criticism emanating not only from modern historical scholars and
philosophers, but from even more recent postmodern thinkers. Conversely, it can also be said
that the alternative positions, representing the primacy of church/tradition and
reason/experience have significant problems that need to be addressed if they are to be
regarded as preferable to the Reformed position expressed by Vanhoozer. While this may not
be a earthshattering conclusion, it is an honest one, and, I hope, a helpful one. Even so,
having made these cautious qualifications, to the degree that these three adequately represent
not only the positions, but also the supporting arguments, of the more broad approaches they
reflect, a few small steps have been taken toward a greater resolution. And in the search for truth, any steps in the right direction, no matter how small, are worthy of the effort to take them.
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