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Rethinking Postliberal Theology: Comparing and Contrasting Lindbeck and Vanhoozer

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Postliberalism encompasses a developing theological outlook that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and is generally associated with a community of scholars from Yale University. Consequently, it is often referred to as 'the Yale school'. The late Hans Frei and George Lindbeck are arguably the most noted in the field of postliberal theology. However, other prominent scholars include Ronald Thiemann, Garrett Green, Paul Holmer, William Werpehowski, William Placher, Kathryn Tanner, George Hunsinger, Bruce Marshall, Stanley Hauerwas, David Kelsey, and the list is growing.[1] This theological perspective has also been referred to as narrative theology. In general, the postliberal's position is in opposition to that of Rudolf Bultmann (which dominated NT scholarship in the 1970s) and leans considerably in the direction of Karl Barth. Gary Dorrien observes,

> Though postliberals' connections to neo-orthodoxy are not widely touted in postliberal writings, the connections are significant. The postliberal movement is essentially a Barthian project—one that, in certain respects, is more deeply influenced by Barth than American neo-orthodoxy was in its glory days.[2]

William Placher generally agreed with this statement when he said, '[Hans] Frei also got a lot of us excited about reading Barth.'[3]

At the heart of postliberal theology is the premise that biblical understand-

1 A younger group of Yale-trained postliberals now contributing to the development of postliberalism includes Kathryn Greene-McCreight, Serene Jones, David Kamitsuka, Ian McFarlan, Paul McGlasson, Joe Mangina, R. R. Reno, and Gene Rogers. See Gary Dorrien, 'A Third Way in Theology?' in *ChrCent*, (July 4, 2001): 16-21.

2 Gary Dorrien, 'A Third Way in Theology?' in *ChrCent*, (July 4, 2001): 16.

3 William Placher, 'Being Postliberal: A response to James Gustafson', in *ChrCent*,116:11 (April 7, 1999): 390.

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ing must be shaped by the narrative of Scripture rather than by attention to historical context or reliance on propositional truth claims. Postliberals recognize a shift in the thinking process of those living in the after-effects of the Enlightenment, or modern era, to a postmodern thinking process generally shaped by language, culture, and practice.[4] One may conclude that postmodernism is best understood as a philosophical framework in which postliberal theology exists. In other words, postliberal theology is a postmodern approach to a theological understanding of biblical authority, faith, and the credibility of Christian practice based upon the culture and language of Christian tradition and Scripture.

The notion that theological understanding must be understood from within culture and language, rather than being imposed on culture or language, has global significance. This is, after all, the very foundation of the contextualization process prominent in ecumenical discussions.[5] A postmodernist might argue that a postmodern philosophy frees the western mind from the constraints imposed through modernity and, so to say, drives it in the direction of a more global ecumenically-congenial disposition. Postliberal theology—specifically through a cultural-linguistic approach—may be capable of not only bridging the gap between various religious cultures but also helping to communicate the Christian faith to the postmodern mind in a western context.

I Common Threads among Postliberal Theologians

1. Christology

The person of Jesus is the central figure in the biblical narrative. His coming is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, revealed in the Gospels, and featured in the writings of the Acts and the Apostles. To speak of the biblical Jesus is to speak of the One who is a 'present reality'. Hans Frei states,

> Throughout the narrative, and most particularly at the crucial climax of the resurrection,…to know who he is in connection with what took place is to know that he is. This is the climax of the story and its claim. What the [Gospel] accounts are saying, in effect, is that the being and identity of Jesus in the resurrection are such that his nonresurrection becomes inconceivable…however impossible it may be to grasp the nature of the resurrection, it remains inconceivable that it should not have taken place.[6]

For Frei, the Synoptic writers ar-

4 Cf., Kevin J Vanhoozer, 'Evangelical theology in a Post-modern World,' in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 22:1, (January 1998): 5-27, esp. 9.

5 For example, African theologians (e.g., J. Mbiti, E. Oduwu, etc.) maintain that Christianity must find form within an African cosmology while many Asian theologians (e.g., Wonsuk Ma, Hwa Yung, etc.) indicate that the message of Christ in Asia is different from western conceptions and enters a thinking process that is generally antithetical to Enlightenment predispositions.

6 Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 145.

gued that to grasp the identity of Jesus is to 'believe that he has been, in fact, raised from the dead' and, in John's Gospel, 'to think of him as dead is the equivalent of not thinking of him at all'.[7] When Placher was directly challenged to answer if the postliberals were genuinely ready to 'make a stronger historical claim…that God chose to reveal Godself in a unique and exclusive way in a single historical event, [namely] Jesus Christ', he responded with only one word: 'Yes!'[8]

2. Scripture

In recent years, postliberal theology has focused attention on how Scripture functions within the Christian community. Since the Bible is a book for the Christian community, to say that a biblical text is Scripture is to say that the function of the text is to shape, nurture, and reform the continuing self-identity of the church.[9] The Christian believer 'looks' into the biblical narrative and seeks a pattern for normative behaviour—in effect, the reader seeks a standard sense. Kathryn Tanner refers to this standard sense as the 'plain sense' of the text. She states: 'The plain sense of scripture works in a Christian context to form a tradition that is self-critical, pluralistic, and viable across a wide range of geographical differences and historical changes of circumstance.'[10] This 'sense' will not always be the literal sense but will generally be a sense consistent within the story itself as well as consistent within or reasonable to the community of believers reading it. For this reason, postliberal theologians promote the reading of Scripture in community.

3. Less Methodology, More Practical

In general, postliberal theologians have focused less on methodology and more on positive Christian practice. Webster remarks, 'Indeed, one of the chief characteristics of postliberal theology has been its lack of heavy investment in prolegomenal or foundation discourse.'[11] Apparent in many postliberal theological writings is the view that theology is the functional tool for Christian practice rather than a soapbox for critical inquiry. Webster sums up this aspect by stating,

> For postliberal theology, issues of the methods of theology are generally subsumed under discussions of the norms and sources of theology. In their turn, moreover, those norms and sources are located in the practices and traditions of Christianity as a positive religion, and external norms (such as content-independent standards of rationality) or external sources (such as common

7 Frei, *The Identity*, 145, 8.

8 See James Gustafson, 'Just what is "postliberal" theology?' in *ChrCent*, 116:10 (March 24, 1999): 354, and Placher, 'Being Postliberal', 390.

9 David Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999), 89-96.

10 Kathryn E. Tanner, 'Theology and the Plain Sense', in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, Garrett Green, ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 60.

11 John Webster, 'Theology after Liberalism?' in *Theology after Liberalism*, John Webster and George P. Schner, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 57.

> human experience) do not feature very large in its account of the theological enterprise. One important consequence here is that a richer range of intra-Christian sources is brought into play. For example, the spiritual and liturgical traditions of Christian faith have come to enjoy renewed attention in postliberal theology, which has not considered them merely ornamental but rather as an ingredient within Christian self-definition, and thus as offering significant clues to the nature of theological rationality. Like methods and norms, that is, the sources of theology are for postliberal theology more Christianly [sic] specific than humanly generic.[12]

With these issues in mind, attention will now turn to one specific postliberal theologian, George Lindbeck.

II George Lindbeck

George Lindbeck, the Pitkin Professor of Historical Theology (emeritus) at Yale Divinity School, officially retired in 1993. He was born in China in 1923 and his parents were Swedish-American Lutheran missionaries. His main interests have been in historical and ecumenical theology from a Lutheran perspective. However, growing up in a non-western environment and his subsequent selection by the Lutheran World Federation to be a delegate observer to the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) had a profound impact on his theological direction. Since the mid-1960s, he has focused most of his research and writing in the 'context of participation in national and international ecumenical dialogue, primarily with Roman Catholics'.[13]

Lindbeck believed that all standard theological approaches were incapable of dealing with 'intra-Christian theological and ecumenical issues'.[14] Consequently, he set out to formalize an alternative approach to understanding religion and doctrine in his 1984 book, *The Nature of Doctrine*, and in so doing, 'christened a nascent theological movement "postliberal"',[15] and launched the 'cultural-linguistic' methodology into the forefront of theological discussion.[16] The late Hans Frei (1922-1988, a former colleague of Lindbeck's at Yale) described his hermeneutical approach as being like that of Schleiermacher but his dogmatics more like Barth.[17]

12 Webster, 'Theology after Liberalism', 59.

13 George Lindbeck, 'Confession and Community: An Israel-like view of the Church', in *ChrCent*, 107:16 (May 1990): 493.

14 George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 7. (Hereafter referred to as N/D.)

15 Placher, 'Being Postliberal', 390.

16 However, most observers recognize that he could not have developed the distinctive account in *The Nature of Doctrine* without the work of Hans Frei. Kendall remarks that of the two, Frei 'emerged first as having something important and interesting to say with his book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, published ten years before N/D'. See Stuart Kendall, 'Intratextual Theology in a Postmodern World', in *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity*, Terrence W. Tilley, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 93.

17 Hans Frei, 'Epilogue: George Lindbeck and The Nature of Doctrine', in *Theological Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, Bruce D. Marshall, ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 279-80.

1. The Cultural-Linguistic Approach

Lindbeck's theological approach to religion 'in a postliberal age' does not focus on either the facts (truth claims) or the experiences[18] of a particular religion. Rather its focus is on 'the aspects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures'.[19] In this sense, Lindbeck subscribes to a 'cultural-linguistic' approach to religious study and theological process. As Mike Higton notes, Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory

> …seems to Lindbeck to fit well the data of religion, world-wide, and so be a good theory for religious studies. He further argues that it is appropriate for theological use because it enables us to deal with various ecumenical topics [having] to do with the convergence of doctrines without fundamental change on the part of the churches converging, as well as enabling us to do justice to a selection of standard theological claims about doctrine.[20]

Within this framework, church doctrines must be viewed as 'rules'. By equating doctrines with rules, focus is placed on the manner in which doctrines are used, 'not as expressive symbols or as truth claims [like the liberals and the fundamentalists respectively], but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action'.[21] In other words, particular religious expression must be viewed within the culture and language utilized for expression with its doctrines functioning as rules in the same way in which language utilizes grammatical rules to govern its use and give it meaning in a particular context. Higton explains Lindbeck's methodology by stating,

> A church is a community where the Christian idiom is learned through practice. Behaviour within this idiom is rule-governed, although learning to follow the rules is more like learning a skill by internalizing the idiom in a process of apprenticeship and socialization than it is like learning to parrot a set of regulations. The system therefore consists of a 'first-order' (actual performances of particular 'sentences') and a 'second-order' (the grammar by which those sentences are regulated), and Lindbeck keeps a fairly rigid boundary between the two.[22]

By positing postliberal theology within a social science framework, Lindbeck places his theological concern (the validity of Christianity and the need for ecumenical dialogue) into the arena of the secular historians, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and the university religious studies departments.[23] In doing so, he readily acknowledges the tremendous difficulties this poses for theologians because the language of the social science approach to religious experience

18 Lindbeck refers to these as cognitive and experiential-expressive aspects of religion.

19 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 17-18.

20 Mike Higton, 'Frei's Christology and Lindbeck's Cultural-linguistic Theory', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 50 (1997): 85.

21 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 18.

22 Higton, 'Frei's Christology', 83-4.

23 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 25.

was developed within an environment generally antithetical to theological uses.

The secular world-view of religion is uninterested in (if not hostile to) theological or doctrinal application, focusing rather on the observation of religious behaviour (e.g., Tylor, Evans-Pritchard, Eliade, and Geertz) or the underlying motivation for religious behaviour (e.g., Durkheim, Freud, Marx). Lindbeck, however, sees within the language of the secular arena's observation and fascination with religion the most promising method of bridging the ever-widening gap between the (fundamentalist and evangelical) propositionalists and the (liberal) experiential-expressivists. As Lindbeck states, he is attempting to 'untie intellectual knots by intellectual means'.[24]

It should be also noted that the social science approach is largely a construct of anthropological, sociological, and philosophical studies.[25] Kevin Vanhoozer notes that Lindbeck is particularly indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and to Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology.[26] I would argue that what he has suggested is essentially a religious theory rather than a doctrinal position. It would not be surprising to see a new addition of Daniel Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*,[27] revised and renamed *Eight Theories of Religion*, with the inclusion of a survey of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theory.

Nevertheless, working through *The Nature of Doctrine* is a tedious and arduous task. Frei held the opinion that unless the reader rigidly kept in mind the ecumenical hopes of Lindbeck, the theory as a whole lacked value. He stated,

> Without the absolute priority of that Christian-ecumenical reality, without its reality, forget the 'rule' or regulative approach, forget the cultural-linguistic theory—forget the book.[28]

Commenting on Frei's response, Vanhoozer remarks that Lindbeck's writing approaches the point of being 'unintelligible' as he winds his way through the social maze of proof for a cultural-linguistic approach to theology.[29] Vanhoozer's comment may not necessarily suggest that Lindbeck's theory is unfounded or ill-logical, but only to say that it requires a Herculean effort to unravel its mysteries. Notwithstanding, Lindbeck deserves credit for writing something that has sparked so many responses and has gained a measure of recognition and critique not only in theological journals, but even among the more secular academy of religious studies.

Many works have been published

24 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 16.

25 Vanhoozer notes that Lindbeck is particularly indebted to Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and to Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 10. Cf., Stuart Kendall, 'Intratextual Theology in a Postmodern Word', in *Post Modern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. by Terrence W. Tilley (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 92-93.

26 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 10 n. 30.

27 David Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

28 Frei, 'Epilogue', 278.

29 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 28.

in an effort to decipher *The Nature of Doctrine*, of which several will be cited in this analysis. However, a careful reading of Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, which was written ten years before *The Nature of Doctrine*, may demonstrate that Lindbeck built upon theological notions more clearly published by Frei. In fact, I would argue that the essence of what Frei wrote to the theological community Lindbeck has repackaged—in a sense—for the university religious studies community along with some of his own particular additions. What follows is a brief summation of his theory.

2. Intratextual Methodology

According to Lindbeck, intratextual hermeneutics interprets extratextual realities through the lens of the biblical text, rather than translating the biblical messages into extrabiblical languages. From this premise, Lindbeck states, 'It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.'[30] In other words, understanding the story within the biblical text enables understanding about the world outside the biblical text. Consequently, the Bible serves as a lens through which to see and understand the outside world. In the process of reading the biblical story and understanding what it means within the story, the reader, so to say, reads his/her own biography into the story.

From this perspective, the contemporary world is explained by the biblical text (the lens) rather than the other way around. The call of the biblical narrative is, so to say, *to come into my world and gain understanding about yours*; and not *to take me into your world in order to understand mine*. As Kendal states, 'The relationship of the text to the world is the key for postliberal, intratextual theology.'[31] One might say that postliberal theology seeks to understand the grammatical rules of 'the language game' found in the central and distinctive characteristic of the Christian forms of life.[32] However, Kendall adds a cautionary note by stating,

> Lest it be thought that such an approach is necessarily conservative, it must be noted that rules are not always simply given in a preexisting framework. They may emerge as the language game is played and lived out in a form of life. As Wittgenstein put it, 'And is there not also the case where we play and make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them as we go along' (Wittgenstein 1958:83).[33]

3. Rule Theory and Doctrine

As noted earlier, Lindbeck recognizes doctrinal statements to function as 'communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action'.[34] He illustrates this supposition by focusing on beliefs and practices that are considered essential (ontological) to the religious identity of the group under consideration.[35] Specifically looking at

30 Lindbeck, *N/D*, 118.

31 Kendall, 'Intratextual Theology', 91.
32 Kendall, 'Intratextual Theology', 92.
33 Kendall, 'Intratextual Theology', 92.
34 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 94.
35 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 74.

the Christian faith, Lindbeck identifies three regulations, or rules, that must be followed for its proper understanding and expression.

> First, there is the monotheistic principle: there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. Second, there is the principle of historical specificity: the stories of Jesus refer to a genuine human being who was born, lived, and died in a particular time and place. Third, there is the principle of what may be [inappropriately] called Christological maximalism: every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first [two] rules. This last rule, it may be noted, follows from the central Christian conviction that Jesus Christ is the highest possible clue (though an often dim and ambiguous one to creaturely and sinful eyes) within the space-time world of human experience to God, i.e., to what is of maximal importance.[36]

These rules were not only formulative in the early church, but all three were 'clearly at work even in the New Testament period'.[37]

The development of the Trinitarian and Christological beliefs over the first four centuries of the church that encapsulated the orthodox position is a direct result of what Lindbeck called 'the joint logical pressure' of the 'rules' noted above. These (and other rules) were recognized from reading both the Scriptures (OT) and the writings of the Apostles (NT) and the manner in which these guiding rules were practically experienced in the early church. In other words, the rules inherent in the text and the community's understanding established the 'form of life'. The text and its common sense understanding constrained Christians, according to Lindbeck,

> … to use available conceptual and symbolic materials to relate Jesus Christ to God in certain ways and not in others. Docetism, Gnosticism, Adoptionism, Sabellianism, Arianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism were each rejected because they were felt in the concrete life and worship of the Christian community to violate the limits of what was acceptable as defined by the interaction of these three criteria.[38]

Alternatively, recognizing doctrines as rules within divergent Christian circles or religious faiths may also function as a means to promote ecumenical dialogue, although, as Lindbeck rightly admits, 'the proof is far from rigorous'.[39] Assuming that doctrines can be compared to rules, it then becomes necessary to distinguish whether a practical doctrine is unconditionally necessary or conditionally necessary.

Within a Christian context, Lindbeck suggests that some practical doctrines, such as loving God with all one's heart and loving one's neighbour as one's self ('law of love') are unconditionally

36 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 94.

37 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 94.

38 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 95.

39 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 73. Later, Lindbeck reiterates this difficulty again by saying, 'Admittedly the practical difficulties of verifying the existence of such a consensus may be insuperable' (101).

necessary. Other doctrines, such as Christian participation in war may be regarded as conditionally necessary. It is not possible to envision Christian community that is not required to fulfil the 'law of love' but there have been instances in which the community interpreted its involvement in war (or a war effort) differently from what it has in times past.

From this example, it is possible to accept that unconditionally essential doctrines are always permanent while conditional doctrines may be permanent or temporary, and as such, may be reversible (to a new position without necessarily abandoning the validity of the former position) or irreversible (with no return to the former position). An instance of this reversible/irreversible aspect may be seen in the Christian view of slavery, which at one time was accepted as normative but now, in light of historic changes, is deemed irreversible. In contrast, historic church views of war have been conditional and reversible depending on the specific occasion and time.

One final classification of doctrines proposed by Lindbeck is to view them as neither conditional nor unconditional, 'but simply accidentally necessary'.[40] A Christian community may look at some doctrinal practice with an objective eye and come to the conclusion that its particular approach or methodology may just as easily follow that of another group as to follow its own tradition (such as driving on the left in Great Britain or driving on the right in the U.S.). However, since the community is already deeply established in a particular tradition, practical change is considered pointless or even impossible. Lindbeck suggests that post-biblical liturgical developments, such as Sunday worship services and Christmas celebrations, might serve as examples.

III Vanhoozer's Evangelical Alternative

Kevin Vanhoozer is the Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. His return to the faculty at TEDS in 2012 marks his second return to the campus since his original stint from 1986-90. Theologically, Vanhoozer identifies himself as a Presbyterian and Calvinist in persuasion who was troubled by the apparent lack of doctrinal understanding pervading today's evangelical churches across North America. For him, doctrine is an essential aspect to 'understanding and truthful living'.[41] The emergence of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic theology of doctrine served as the impetus for the development of his own canonical-linguistic approach.

Although he remains committed to his theological roots, his research challenged him to rethink his self-avowed stanch position 'on the matter of Scripture's sufficiency' and led him to 'assign a more positive role to the notions of "tradition" and "improvising"'. As a result, he feels that his contribution to the theological conversation at hand roots the theological task 'more firmly in Scripture while preserving Lindbeck's emphasis on practice'.[42] The

40 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 86.

41 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, xii.

42 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, xiii.

culmination of his work in *The Drama of Doctrine*, his fourth monograph, earned the *Christianity Today* 2006 Book Award for the best book in theology. Since his work is so keenly tied to Lindbeck's, it appropriately serves as a foil for deliberation in this paper.

In *The Drama of Doctrine*, Vanhoozer recognizes that the cultural-linguistic and canonical-linguistic approaches are 'cousins' in that both agree that meaning and truth are critically related to language use.[43] However, the latter approach maintains that the normative use is ultimately not that of the church's culture (whether in a clerical or popular sense) but of the biblical canon. He goes on to say,

> The supreme *norm* for church practice is Scripture itself: not Scripture as used by the church but Scripture as used by God, even, or perhaps especially, when such use is *over against* the church….Canonical-linguistic theology attends both to the drama *in* the text—what God is doing in the world through Christ—and to the drama that continues in the church as God uses Scripture to address, edify, and confront its readers.[44]

His concern is essentially two-fold. First, if church culture and language are not constrained by the biblical text, then they will inevitably drift. Without a pre-determined self-submission to the biblical narrative, a cultural-linguistic methodology will collapse in the same manner in which modernity's 'truth is found within' notion has collapsed. The centre of the believing community cannot be the community itself; otherwise, it possesses no objective standard and cannot provide 'the missing link between right belief (orthodoxy) and wise practice (orthopraxis): *right judgment* (orthokrisis)'.[45]

Nevertheless, Vanhoozer's contribution may not solve the weakness of Lindbeck's methodology in practical terms. Even he admits, 'Authoritative Scripture still has to be interpreted'.[46] As Vanhoozer develops his methodology, he inevitably recognizes problems associated with moving biblical interpretation to some idealized fixed point outside the church's community and tradition. For example, the notion that biblical interpretation is a public event and, as he states, 'open to all', is often a most unfortunate consequence of the Protestant Reformation. Without a consensus of interpretive meaning, the culture and language of the believing community ceases to be a unified community—being transformed instead into a field of individuals with no culture and language linking them together.

Vanhoozer concedes, 'Critics of *sola scriptura* typically make much the same point. To locate divine authority in a list of books does not resolve but exacerbates the problem inasmuch as the canon itself cannot stave off the conflict of interpretations about its meaning.'[47] It goes without saying that although the canon is fixed, interpretation of that canon is not. Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic methodology does

43 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 16.
44 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 16.
45 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 30.
46 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 122.
47 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 123.

not seem capable of resolving this dilemma.

His second concern is that Lindbeck does not offer a clear process as to how the church overcomes the apparent weakness of correcting the identity of the Christian community in its culture and language (if and when needed) without specifying an objective guide to stand over that culture and language. In fact, Lindbeck argues that church doctrines (teachings from the Scripture implemented into practice) shape Christian culture and language in a manner similar to the way grammatical rules affect language. Learning the language enables the believer to participate in the form of life.

Vanhoozer clarifies this notion by stating, 'For Lindbeck, language and culture function *as the socially mediated web or mosaic of belief* that serves as the means and measure of doctrinal knowledge' (italics original).[48] From this perspective, a person's beliefs and their interpretive framework are dependent on the community in which a person is situated.

Vanhoozer believes this approach places the biblical text at the wrong end of the process when he states that 'the authority of Scripture—God's communicative action—is relegated (demoted!) to the role of one voice among many'.[49] For Vanhoozer the interpretive framework for the church must be canonical before being communal.[50] Furthermore, Vanhoozer wonders whether Lindbeck's position may be a form of 'ecclesial expressivism' similar in perspective to the experiential-expressivist position Lindbeck attributes to modern liberals.

IV Evaluating the Cultural-Linguistic Approach

A definitive strength of the cultural-linguistic approach is the emphasis it places on the biblical narrative and the community's reading of Scripture. For Lindbeck, the culture and language of the Christian faith is expressed or revealed through Scripture. The 'hinge pin' of the cultural-linguistic methodology is the unique manner in which the church—past and present—utilizes the biblical text. For example, the church discovers its identity, so to say, in reading the story of the Bible and, from that reading discerns, learns, and teaches how Christian believers are to behave and act. This fundamental element promotes the church's reading the Scriptural narrative in community and is the guiding principle of narrative theology.

Narrative theology has developed quite significantly since the 1970s. There are divergent streams of thought within narrative theology making it impossible to say that all narrative theologians subscribe to the same notions or have the same particular interests. The most notable division within the narrative theological stream took place during the 1970s and 1980s between theologians at Yale University (e.g., Frei, Lindbeck, Hauerwas, Kelsey) and the University of Chicago (e.g., Ricoeur, Tracy, Hartt, and McFague).[51]

48 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 294.

49 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 294.

50 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 294.

51 Gary L. Comstock, 'Two Types of Narrative Theology', *JAAR* 55:4 (1987): 688.

Since that time, others have contributed to the narrative 'dialogue', many of whom were students at either institution or who were influenced by such.[52]

At that time, as Gary Comstock remarks, those from Yale were generally 'antifoundational, cultural-linguistic, Wittgensteinian-inspired descriptivists' while those from Chicago were 'revisionist, hermeneutical, Gadamerian-inspired correlationists'.[53] In other words, narrative theology typically generated from the Yale school insisted that the biblical narrative must set the boundaries for what can be said and done in theology. A focus on 'truth claims' was not of primary importance since that was a matter of faith and a practical outcome within the Christian community. Comstock's describes their approach in this manner:

> Theology ought to be a descriptive and regulative enterprise. It ought to tell us what Christians historically have done and believed, help us to think about what Christians today should do and believe, and then stop before it oversteps the limits of the confessing community. It should not aspire to be a public, 'rational' enterprise; we should not expect from it apologetic arguments.[54]

In contrast, theology from the Chicago school viewed the biblical narrative as *a* starting point, but not *the only* starting point for theological reflection. Other narratives (even from other faiths) along with historical evidence and philosophical writings must be considered in assessing the 'truth claims' of the Bible. Within this stream of narrative theology, extratextual material is critical in justifying the claims of the Bible.

In spite of the difference between these two streams, one issue unites both camps: the biblical story provides the language necessary to shape the culture of the Christian community. It is within this understanding that Lindbeck applies his notion of intratextuality and rule-theory. An adequate understanding of the story contained within the narrative of Scripture begins with the reader entering the biblical world and allowing the language of the narrative to provide not only the meaning of the text but also meaning for the life of the reader.

The community of believers is deeply impacted when the emphasis of biblical study and the theological process is centred on the biblical narrative. In this sense, 'It is the text…which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text'.[55] Consequently, the theological process begins and ends with the Christian community's reading and use of the biblical story. Its story is the community's story.

The advantage of an intratextual hermeneutic is that it allows the meaning to be immanent or inherent in the text. Lindbeck argues that 'Meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it'.[56] For example, the proper way to determine what the term 'God' signifies is to understand how the word

52 Consider Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), esp. 85-7.

53 Comstock, 'Two Types', 688.

54 Comstock, 'Two Types', 695-6.

55 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

56 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

or concept is used within the story and how it consequently shapes reality and experience. According to Lindbeck, typical conservative and liberal approaches alike sought to establish its propositional or experiential meaning *first* and then moved to 'reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly'.[57] Beginning with an already developed definition of any word, concept, or theological position—that is a presupposition—employs an 'extratextual' methodology and may alter the intratextual meaning intended within the story.

For Lindbeck, an intratextual approach enables meaning to flow from one generation or culture to the next. The manner in which the church uses Scripture to shape its form of life makes this possible. The church community not only possesses the text—the story—but it also has a history with the story. As the story is read and internalized, it shapes the community's culture. In this way, the story of the Bible, though static, does not remain static but becomes the story of the community.

The story of the community shares commonalities with previous generations in many ways while at the same time developing in new cultural ways consistent with the narrative. Even Vanhoozer recognizes this benefit when he states: 'The cultural-linguistic turn characteristic of postliberal and other types of postmodern theology is a salient reminder that theology exists to serve the life of the church.'[58]

The intratextual method described by Lindbeck does not fix meaning only to the original time and circumstance, but by bringing the community of believers into the biblical world, allows the 'story of old' to be a contemporary story over and over with amazing continuity. This observation only exemplifies the necessity of the Christian community's commitment to reading the biblical story. If a community of believers fails to read the story of the bible—the narrative given—choosing rather to reduce it to a series of propositional truth statements or to transform it into a series of symbols representing something other than what is inherent in the story, the result will be the loss of the community's identity as the people of God.

Although I would argue that the benefits of Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic approach are positive, especially in light of the manner in which a narrative or intratextual approach brings a fresh impetus to the believing community reading the Scripture, there is a potential hazard for the cultural-linguistic approach. Lindbeck's theory hinges on the culture and language of the Christian community's use of Scripture. The authority of Scripture finds its place only as the church appropriates or utilizes its teachings. Emphasis is placed on the manner in which the believing community, the church, uses Scripture.

In this schema, authority is centred in church tradition and interpretation rather than within the canon of Scripture itself. Vanhoozer considers this particular aspect the Achilles' Heel of Lindbeck's postliberal approach to theology and offers an alternative through his canonical-linguistic method.

57 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 114.

58 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 16.

V Summary and Analysis

At the heart of postliberal theology is the premise that biblical understanding must be shaped by the narrative of Scripture rather than by attention to historical context or reliance on propositional truth claims. Lindbeck maintains that all standard theological approaches were incapable of dealing with intra-Christian theological and ecumenical issues. His twin concerns of ecumenical discussion and the communal importance of the Christian community led him to formalize an alternative approach to understanding religion and doctrine and, in the process, coined the phrase 'postliberal' and introduced the cultural-linguistic methodology. His theological approach did not focus on either truth claims or on the experiences of the Christian faith, Rather he focused on the manner in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures.

Within this framework, church doctrines function as rules. By equating doctrines with rules, focus is placed on the manner in which doctrines are used, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims but as community rules guiding daily behaviour. In this sense, Lindbeck subscribes to a cultural-linguistic approach to religious study and theological process. Within this context, intratextual hermeneutics interprets extratextual realities through the lens of the biblical text, rather than translating the biblical messages into extrabiblical languages. For Lindbeck, understanding the story within the biblical text enables understanding about the world outside the biblical text.

A definitive strength of the cultural-linguistic approach is the emphasis it places on the biblical narrative and the community's reading of Scripture. The advantage of an intratextual hermeneutic is that it allows the meaning to be inherent within the story as well as enables meaning to flow from one generation or culture to the next. Whereas Frei's emphasis was on the biblical narrative specifically, Lindbeck focuses the manner in which the believing community, the church, uses Scripture thus allowing the original story to be a contemporary story over and over with amazing continuity. Consequently, authority is placed in church tradition and interpretation rather than within the canon of Scripture, allowing the theological process to begin and end with the Christian community's reading and use of the biblical story.

Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach is, in many ways, synonymous with Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic view. Both require the believing community to read and develop meaning from the text. The main point of difference concerns the nature and status of interpretative frameworks and their relationship to interpretative communities.[59] Furthermore, he maintains that his canonical-linguistic methodology does provide the philosophical or theological safeguard necessary to ensure that the biblical canon remains the guiding principle for church culture and language. He summarizes his argument by stating,

> To think of the church as the context within which Scripture becomes canon appears plausible in terms of history and sociology, but it is theologically inadequate. It is

59 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 294.

> not the church's use but the triune God's use of Scripture that makes it canon. That the church recognizes the canon authenticates the church rather than the canon, which needs no ecclesial approval to be what it is: the Word of God. Canonicity is the criterion of catholicity, not vice versa. This insight also marks the definitive break between the canonical-linguistic approach and its cultural-linguistic counterpart.[60]

The obvious difficulty with his claim is that it is hard to prove and, as such, is necessarily a claim of faith. In practical terms, God does not use Scripture, at least, not in the same manner as the believing community. The community uses Scripture to understand itself. Ultimately, it is the community that must determine what God is saying through Scripture and how God might be using Scripture to guide the community. Vanhoozer's methodology could benefit from Lindbeck's by recognizing that theology is ultimately a local event, deriving meaning from within the community's experience and not from the canon itself.

Both methods bring something of worth to the hermeneutical table, but not without their respective difficulties. Perhaps what is required is for each method to function in cooperation or even dialectically. Constructing a method that emerges from the conflation of Lindbeck and Vanhoozer is beyond the scope of this paper but certainly bears continued contemplation.

60 Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 149-50.