Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

'Moving beyond' Scripture to theology—Towards a 'Mere Evangelical' Account

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I find myself at a decisive point—*after* witnessing significant damage within the German evangelical community and *before* starting doctoral studies. Although these seem to be rather diverse categories for locating oneself, they both share the topic of this essay: theological method. For it is theological method (or maybe more the lack thereof) that I hold personally responsible for a good portion of the calamity I sense within German evangelicalism in particular, and more broadly in evangelicalism as a whole.

While I have not personally suffered these calamities too much myself, too often I find the state of evangelical churches to be frustrating. One way of describing the cause of such frustration is to refer to the state of doctrine: it seems to me that doctrine was first overemphasized (middle of the twentieth century), then ignored (end of the twentieth century), and today we have to deal with churches consisting of individuals who on the one hand have no theological training, but who, on the other hand, make strong *theological* claims. How does one live in a community that consists of such individuals? With frustration, I guess, and with the hope that not too many calamities result from it.

In view of all this, I have come to believe that evangelical theology in general must catch up in various ways, particularly in the area of theological method. In his *Theological Method—A Guide for the Perplexed,* Paul Allen identifies five key issues of theological method, which he addresses under the following headings: philosophy (for instance, the relationship between theology and philosophy), criteria (most importantly the determination of valid criteria to make theological claims in the first place), sources (the Bible, experience, tradition and reason), ontology (seeking to answer the question of what the nature of the theological task is) and procedure (for instance, answering the question of which procedure actually follows from a given

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theological method).[1]

It may be granted that theological method is a rather unpopular field within theology, and Allen readily identifies a number of reasons for this. For some, theological method would be too far removed from the content of theology (which they would consider to be of higher importance). For others, theological method would be too philosophical (and less 'divine', somehow), or simply boring.[2] At the same time, Allen argues that reflection on theological method since the middle of the twentieth century has not yet yielded satisfying results.[3]

Similarly, but with an explicitly evangelical perspective in mind, Allister McGrath has addressed the quest for a proper theological method by pointing to the theological approaches of Wayne Grudem and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, both of whom professors at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois back in 2000. Grudem was well known for his *Systematic Theology*,[4] while Vanhoozer was recognized for his studies in hermeneutics and the 'meaning of meaning'.[5]

McGrath drew attention to some issues with the theological approach of Grudem, especially claiming that Grudem's *Systematic* treated biblical passages 'as timeless and culture-free statements that can be assembled to yield a timeless and culture-free theology that stands over and above the shifting sands of our postmodern culture.'[6] Vanhoozer, on the other hand, proposed a different approach to theology, focussing on communication, hermeneutics, prolegomena, and doctrine.

Now, for almost two decades Grudem has produced more systematic works that seem to be aiming for application both in church and society, while Vanhoozer has pursued studies on the foundations of mere evangelical theology as such.[7] While I am certain that both Grudem and Vanhoozer share the same ultimate goals with their work, I believe that they exemplify different approaches to theological method.

So in the *first* section of this paper I will interact with Grudem's work to analyse the theological method he demonstrates. I will conclude that his work seems to be carried out under a specific assumption and with a specific method. I will conclude further that both the assumption and the method are valuable, yet not without danger. Ultimately, I will conclude that there is a case to be made for further reflection on theological method.

In my *second* section, I will survey Vanhoozer's work regarding the development of doctrine as a case of theological reflection, with the aim of laying a foundation for further studies

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1 Paul L. Allen, *Theological Method—A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark International, 2012), 4.

2 Allen, *Theological Method,* 1.

3 Allen, *Theological Method,* 1-2.

4 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology—An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

5 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a meaning in the text?—The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

6 Allister McGrath, 'Evangelical Theological Method—The State of the Art', in *Evangelical Futures—A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 30.

7 I will address some examples in the course of this essay.

in theological method in general, and hence the development of (evangelical) doctrine.[8]

I The Case for Theological Reflection

In this section, I present an analysis of Grudem's theological method and praxis. I deliberately say 'an' analysis, since I do not claim that this analysis is complete regarding everything that should be said. However, I believe that this analysis proves the claim that informs the following section (ie, the survey on a case of theological reflection), which is that evangelicals need to invest more into their theological method.

1. On Grudem's theological method

Grudem's flagship volume, *Systematic Theology—An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, has now been in print for over two decades. It is, I believe, among the most popular introductions to theology in the evangelical realm. Beyond the US, it is in use in many countries around the globe.[9] There are also courses available based on it, among them audio- and video-format. Now, as any other popular textbook, Grudem's *Systematic* has a foundational impact on the shaping of the evangelical community—pastors, teachers and laypeo- ple start to think theologically, in this case, within a rather reformed framework. However, my concern here is not Grudem's explicit positions like the trinity, or election, but rather the less obvious theological method which he exemplifies throughout his work.

With John Frame, Grudem holds that systematic theology is 'any study that answers the question, "What does the whole Bible teach us today?" about any given topic.'[10] Grudem goes on to claim that this 'definition indicates that systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarizing their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe about each topic.'[11] I think it is safe to say that this very definition already represents Grudem's first principle of theology.

However, Grudem goes on to address the issue of theological method in this introductory chapter (he always never applies the term, but rather asks 'how then should we study systematic theology?').[12] Grudem names six methodological items: prayer, humility, reason, the help of others, by collecting and understanding all the relevant passages of Scripture on any topic, and praise.[13]

Now, while I do believe that Grudem applies all his six items in his own work, it appears to me that 'collecting and understanding all the relevant passages of Scripture on any topic' is the most traceable, and therefore the most

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8 For now, I am using the terms 'development of doctrine' and 'moving beyond' (i.e., moving beyond Scripture to theology) interchangeably.
9 In fact, Grudem's *Systematic Theology* has recently been translated into German and is, for instance, the standard textbook also at the Martin Bucer Seminary, where I myself teach.

10 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 21.
11 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 21.
12 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 32.
13 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 32-37.

formative tool throughout his work. This becomes evident in the first part of *Systematic Theology*, where Grudem outlines the doctrine of the word of God. Here he surveys 'four characteristics of Scripture', of which the second and fourth are of importance for my argument.

The second characteristic of Scripture is clarity: Can only Bible scholars understand the Bible rightly? Grudem offers this definition: 'The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it'[14] Grudem has addressed the clarity of Scripture more recently by referring back to the time when he wrote his *Systematic Theology*:[15] Despite the critique of some evangelical scholars, who would think that one needs much more research in commentaries, historical theology and so forth, he concluded

> that to do such original research thoroughly for all the topics in theology would take several lifetimes. And yet I did not believe that God would require several lifetimes of work just to learn or to teach what he wanted us to believe.[16]

It seems, then, that Grudem gives the reason for what I termed his 'first principle' above: his approach of systematizing passages of scripture is *possible* for the individual.

The fourth and final characteristic of Scripture then is its sufficiency: Is the Bible enough for knowing what God wants us to think or do? Here Grudem states:

> The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.[17]

In this chapter, there are two following sections, both identified with a 'proposition'.

Proposition (1) reads: 'We can find all that God has said on particular topics, and we can find answers to our questions.'[18] The claim here not only seems to be ontological (i.e., that Scripture would provide all the answers), but also explicitly pragmatic (i.e., Christians can focus on Scripture and collect all relevant passages *rather than on all writings of Christianity*).[19]

Proposition (2) reads: 'The Amount of Scripture given was sufficient at each stage of redemptive History.'[20] As with the first proposition, the claim here is pragmatic: At a given time in history, the individual had the means to know what he or she had to know. And again, the argument for Grudem's reasoning for his method is that it is possible for an individual.

Overall, a central underlying assumption is that theology is developed from God's *communication* for human's

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14 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 108.

15 Grudem had prepared the paper for the John Wenham Lecture in 2009 (Cambridge, England).

16 Wayne Grudem, 'The Perspicuity of Scripture', in *Themelios*, 34 no 3 Nov 2009, 290.

17 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 127.

18 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 128.

19 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 128.

20 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 129.

application. Now, it is hard to take issue with this assumption. However, it is also not true that Grudem's actual work is inherently reductionist as some have claimed, because he does, for instance, apply other elements in his theological enterprise—elements such as reason, tradition, experience at times. The problem seems to be, however, that he does not make the overall process *transparent*.

However, in the next subsection I will show that this is not only a problem for the student who might conclude that turning to Scripture is basically everything Grudem does, but that a lack of transparency is at times also a problem for Grudem's theological praxis in itself.

2. On Grudem's theological praxis

a) Example 1: Theology proper

My first example of Grudem's theological praxis comes also from his *Systematic Theology*, of which the second part is dedicated to theology proper. Here in the first chapter Grudem addresses the issue of the existence of God: how do we know that God exists?

There are three major sections: humanity's inner sense of God, believing the evidence in Scripture and nature, and then the traditional 'proofs' for the existence of God. One must recognize, however, that there is no biblical reasoning for these very headings that Grudem develops. That is a real problem, since it is Grudem's outline that eventually determines the train of thought, not the passages of Scripture to which he refers. I found that John D. Morrison had pointed out this problem earlier, when commenting on Grudem's

work on theology proper, and in particular with regard to the Trinity.

Morrison explained that Grudem's expressed method is, again, to go directly to relevant texts and to then summarize 'the clear biblical teaching on the Trinity'. But does Scripture make direct statements concerning the Trinity as classically formulated? Scripture is explicitly handled by Grudem as though a Trinitarian doctrinal summary comes immediately off the surface of Scripture and not also through the soteriological-hermeneutical conceptualization as created (properly, I believe) by the history of interpretation. But implicitly Grudem assumes Nicaea in all scriptural summaries and only then alludes to theological controversies in order to show what to avoid.[21]

Grudem is said to be applying historical concepts as an *a priori* framework of interpretation. This procedure would not represent a problem if done properly, but Grudem's claim on his theological method does not address this issue. One could argue that a lack of transparency is due to the fact that *Systematic Theology* is an introduction. Even then I would see the danger of using a problematic example regarding the applied theological method.

b) Example 2: Gender

However, I would like to turn to a second example for Grudem's theological praxis, which I find in his *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth.* The first two chapters are foundational for the approach of the entire 850-page book.

21 John D. Morrison, 'Trinity and Church: An Examination of Theological Methodology', in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 40 no 3 Sep 1997, 449.

In the first chapter, Grudem argues for his 'Biblical Vision of Manhood and Womanhood as created by God': man and women are equal in value and dignity, but would have different roles (as is the case in the Trinity). Chapter two addresses the 'Biblical Vision of Manhood and Womanhood in the Church'. Here Grudem develops the themes of chapter 1 more for the context of the church. He concludes that there are roles in a church that are clearly forbidden by Scripture, yet there are roles that are clearly permitted. Grudem then proposes a spectrum ranging from what is clearly forbidden to what is clearly allowed, arguing it needs 'wisdom' to determine, which roles along the spectrum would be permitted in a given situation.

It is clear then, that Grudem sees the need for 'moving beyond' Scripture, and that 'wisdom' is the proper tool for such a move. Yet how this move *via wisdom* is to be made is not explicated. Furthermore, it appears to me that the very spectrum Grudem proposes could be challenged once it comes to theological method.[22]

c) Example 3: Politics

As a third and final example I refer to some of the reviews of Grudem's more recent book, *Politics According to the Bible*. Here Grudem lays out what he understands to be basic principles of scripture regarding politics. In the major part of this 600-page volume he addresses specific issues, such as family, economics, national defence and so

forth. Now, David McIlroy argues that the general approach, as well as the initial chapters, for that matter, is very commendable: 'He is to be commended for his commitment to the relevance of the Bible to contemporary political questions. There is much useful material in the opening four chapters.'[23] However, McIlroy also offers 'serious criticism', focusing on Grudem's scepticism regarding climate change, lack of interaction with other commentators in the field and the lack of a consistent hermeneutic. McIlroy states:

> Grudem does not deploy a consistent hermeneutic. … Grudem's book identifies for European Christians the selective readings from the Bible upon which Republican Christians in America rely in support of their positions. However, Grudem has not allowed the biblical perspective on the priorities of relationships, love, justice and mercy to result in a radical critique of the values of his culture and as a result has merely found support in the Bible for positions he had already decided to adopt.[24]

In a similar fashion, Bart Bruehler argues that the greatest weakness of this book is 'its lack of exegesis and hermeneutical reflection'[25]—exegesis

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22 For the sake of argument I will state that I do not take issues with Grudem's position on biblical man- and womanhood in itself.

23 David McIlroy, 'Politics according to the Bible—a comprehensive resource for understanding modern political issues in light of Scripture,' review in *European Journal of Theology*, 21 no 1 2012, 81.

24 McIlroy, 'Politics according to the Bible', 81.

25 Bart Bruehler, 'Politics according to the Bible—a comprehensive resource for understanding modern political issues in light of Scripture', review in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 47 no 2, Fall 2012, 203.

is limited, his applications of both Scripture and theological concepts are subjective at times, and the choice of biblical passages 'very selective' in certain cases.

Likewise, Peter Sanlon fears that 'the book assumes a reductionist view on the nature of the Bible and how we move from texts in it to the advocation of cultural change in a fallen world'.[26] He continues: 'Repeatedly Grudem states a political view aligned with the libertarian right and then backs it up with a Bible verse. This is taken to demonstrate the said view as biblical'.[27]

Sanlon identifies several major instances and also more generally, he claims that Grudem is selective in his choice of biblical passages. Although he applauds several of Grudem's positions as well as the general interaction between state and church as welcome, overall he finds 'Grudem's book wanting both exegetically and hermeneutically'.

3. Conclusion

While some critics claim that Grudem applies a reductionist method by interacting with Scripture entirely 'on his own', I hold that Grudem at times does apply a more complex method for 'moving beyond' than he claims to do. This should be the case: given the scholar he is, Grudem naturally applies certain methods from an advanced standpoint with a particular goal in mind.

However, some tendencies are troubling. For one: doubtlessly Grudem made major contributions in important areas of evangelical theology (see, for instance, my second example of Grudem's work above—gender). Nevertheless his research method seems to fall short. His work lacks transparency of when and how he applies which tool (see my first example above—theology proper), and in some cases he falls short in establishing convincing theological proposals (see my third example above—politics).

Secondly, while I share Grudem's conviction that Scripture must be accessible to every believer in a sufficient way, this does not necessarily mean that an individual must be able to develop a systematic theology on his or her own. Since these are actually two different things, Grudem's argument for what I termed his 'first principle' earlier is not convincing.

Thirdly, Grudem's work creates a problematic pattern for the innumerable students of his work. It seems to me that an uncritical student may be inclined to follow either one of two problematic trails: accepting the positions Grudem holds, or applying the method of 'collecting and understanding all the relevant passages of Scripture on any topic' on his or her own, coming up then with a subjective yet normative (!) 'theology'.

In any case, I believe that further study in theological method is necessary. For if theological method is at least an issue in the work of Wayne Grudem, it definitely is a problem in several local churches. These local churches are the real stages for the

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26 Peter Sanlon, 'Politics according to the Bible—a comprehensive resource for understanding modern political issues in light of Scripture', review in *Themelios*, 36 no 3 Nov 2011, 593.

27 Sanlon, 'Politics according to the Bible', 539.

calamities I referred to in my introduction. It is here that naïve biblicism results in simplistic proof-texting, leading to simplistic theologies and worldviews, and thereby challenges the unity of these churches and the sanctification of individual lives.

Therefore, I claim that there is a case to be made for further theological reflection. I will start with that work in the following section.

II A Case of Theological Reflection

There are many ways to start a conversation on 'moving beyond' Scripture to theology from an evangelical perspective. However, at this time I find the work of Kevin Vanhoozer the most appealing for various reasons. This is why I present my attempt of a survey on his case of theological reflection in this second section.

1. Vanhoozer on 'moving beyond'—up to 2015

Rhyne R. Putman has recently provided a comprehensive overview on Vanhoozer's theology.[28] Putman's published dissertation does not refer to Vanhoozer, hermeneutics or theological method in general, but it deals more specifically with the development of doctrine. Since his dissertation was published in 2015, I will survey Vanhoozer via Putman first, and present a survey of Vanhoozer's related works after 2015 in the following subsection.

Putman starts by locating Vanhoozer's approach of 'moving beyond' in the larger context of Vanhoozer's work by laying out the development of Vanhoozer's normative theological hermeneutics.[29]

Putman briefly touches on Vanhoozer's dissertation (1985), published in 1990 as *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*. Secondly, he addresses Vanhoozer's major work, *Is there a Meaning in this Text?* (1998), then his collection of essays on theological method up to 2002, published under the title *First Theology.* He gives some more room to *The Drama of Doctrine* (2005), which would be the most comprehensive exploration of the relationship between hermeneutical theory and theological method.[30]

With Daniel Treier, Putman identifies a new period in Vanhoozer's work within the *Drama*.[31] For Putman, the relevant point in the light of our concern is Vanhoozer's approach of following Scripture, by 'making *theological judgment* patterned after biblical texts'.[32] For 'it is not enough simply to understand the grammar, background, and meaning of a text. Interpreters must strive to understand the authorial discourse, but they must *put Scripture into practice as well*.'[33]

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28 Rhyne R. Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine—Evangelicalism, Theology and Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

29 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 176-184.

30 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 179.

31 My personal impression that proposing 'something new' here is similar to the attempt to relate modernity and postmodernity to each other—and in case of Vanhoozer's work, I think there are overall more indicators for great continuity.

32 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 181, italics his.

33 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 181, italics his.

This approach is unfolded further by Putman in his second section where he characterizes the Canonical-Linguistic or theo-dramatic theological method as 'a means of going beyond the written word of Scripture in a way that is faithful to the spirit and direction of Scripture'.[34] Here Putman offers some important summaries on Vanhoozer's concern for 'moving beyond' Scripture:

> Canonical-linguistic theology … is an ongoing means of developing habitual, practical wisdom grounded in the canon or Scripture. This notion of theology practical wisdom stems from the Augustinian distinction between *scientia* (knowledge) and *sapientia* (wisdom), between knowledge and wisdom. For Vanhoozer, theology must be both *scientia* and *sapientia*, concerned first with biblical exegesis and doctrinal content of Scripture (*scientia*) and then with cultivating practical judgment based on Scripture for contemporary settings (*sapientia*). The canon must guide the church's action, but to do so, the text must move from the past into the present. The canonical-linguistic approach, then represents a new, favourable evangelical approach to doctrinal development.[35]

Vanhoozer's approach would clearly differ from approaches such as principlizing, second hermeneutics, or trajectory hermeneutics.[36]

Regarding Vanhoozer's method of developing doctrine, Putman traces two major sources: the impact of Bakhtinian Dialogism and the concept of theodrama in the work of Urs von Balthasar.

With regards to the Bakhtinian Dialogism, Putman defines Dialogism with Susan M. Felch:

> Dialogism insists on the priority of two or more persons who remain distinct from one another. Thus, it is not words *that* communicate, but we *who* communicate in interactions that require, as a minimum, the irreducible community of two.[37]

For the development of doctrine, this approach is crucial. The relationship between Scripture and tradition is not in dialectical synthesis between biblical texts and contemporary philosophical or cultural thought. Rather, doctrinal development grows out of an ongoing exchange occurring between new interpreters in new settings and the human-divine authorship of the Bible.[38]

Four dialogical terms of Bakhtin would be foundational for Vanhoozer's model of doctrinal development: Polyphony (the concept of multiple voices in one document), chronotope (indicating the intersection of axes as spatial and temporal), great time (referring to the growing importance of important works over time) and creative understanding.[39] Creative understanding is the most important, since theology is not a creation *ex nihilo*, but rather the setting forth of what is already in place.[40]

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34 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 184.

35 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 185-6.

36 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 184, fn.

37 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 188, italics hers.

38 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 188.

39 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 188-202.

40 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 193.

With regards to the concept of theodrama, Putman addresses the overarching theatrical metaphor of the Swiss Roman Catholic Urs von Balthasar, proposing dramaturgical categories (author, actor, director, role, action and so forth). His five-volume cannot be addressed in this paper. Yet Putman summarizes Vanhoozer's difference from Balthasar by pointing out that Balthasar 'focuses on the dramatic content of Christian doctrine', while the focus of Vanhoozer's 'canonical-linguistic approach is on the performative nature of doctrine itself.'[41]

While there are numerous terms from theatre, it is probably the concept of improvisation that is most important for Vanhoozer's doctrinal development. Hence, 'Theology's ongoing task is training to think about the world biblically and cultivating a gospel-oriented *phronesis* that aids in faithful improvisation' of the biblical theo-drama in new contexts.'[42] Vanhoozer—as Putman—is quick to address concerns and misunderstandings which can easily derive from the term of improvisation in the realm of theology. Yet there are many issues of life which are not addressed specifically by Scripture, and these may function as examples for instances, in which 'moving beyond' (and thereby improvisation) is without alternatives.

2. Vanhoozer on 'moving beyond'—2015 and following

Vanhoozer has recently published several works that are related to the development of doctrine. As far as I can see, there are two books and two articles of special importance. I will first survey all of them very briefly, and then attempt to summarize some major contributions specifically to the quest of moving beyond.

a) Overviews

The first book is *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture—A Mere Evangelical Account*, co-authored by Daniel J. Treier (2015). I have summarized the argument elsewhere a little more closely;[43] so here I can outline the two parts of the book. Part one proposes a 'mere evangelical agenda': what is the basis of evangelical theology, and how should it be structured?

Vanhoozer and Treier discuss how to apply the 'material' and the 'formal' principles of protestant theology (i.e. the 'Gospel of God and the God of the Gospel' for one, and Scripture for the other). After addressing ontology and epistemology, Part Two relates this agenda more to the current praxis of evangelical theology. It argues that wisdom must be the nature of evangelical theology (chapter 3). Vanhoozer and Treier then address theological interpretation as a means for doing justice to such a nature (chapter 4), and relate both within the church (chapter 5) and the academia (chapter 6).

In 2015 Vanhoozer also published an essay of some relevance with the title 'Scripture and theology—On 'prov-

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41 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 197.
42 Putman, *In Defense of Doctrine,* 199.

43 Michael Borowski, 'Of Mirrors and Men—Surveying a Trajectory for "Moving Beyond" from Scripture to Theology', in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Apr2017, Vol. 41 Issue 2, 127-130.

ing' doctrine biblically'.[44] In this piece, he calls for a 'biblical' theology, proposing a way forward by following 'the way the biblical words go':[45] One must appeal to the diverse discourses of the canon of Scripture by giving credit to the individual kind of discourse at hand. He concludes that—as exemplified in the way Jesus referred to Scripture—the task of the theologian is proof-texting,[46] but a kind of proof-texting of a 'higher order'.[47] In this higher order, one sets forth 'the way the words go' rather than finding individual passages of Scripture to back up propositional claims.[48]

Then in 2016, Vanhoozer published his book entitled *'Biblical Authority after Babel—Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity'*. Here he addresses the challenge of what he perceives as 'interpretational anarchy' by referring to Allister McGrath's stance of Christianity's 'dangerous idea'. According to McGrath, 'Protestantism took its stand on the right of individuals to interpret the Bible for themselves rather than being forced to submit to "official" interpretations handed down by popes or other centralized religious authorities.'[49]

According to McGrath, this approach is dangerous, for because of it Protestantism is not only highly adaptable –it is also out of control.

Following Graeme Goldsworthy and Herman Bavinck, Vanhoozer argues that the five Protestant *solas* represent 'what we might call the *first theology* of mere Protestant Christianity.'[50]

Firstly, *Sola Gratia* can be understood as the framework of biblical interpretation (chapter 1). Secondly, *Sola Fide* would be the antidote to epistemological scepticism, namely epistemic trust (chapter 2). Vanhoozer sets the authority of the Bible (*Sola Scriptura*) in context (chapter 3), for instance in its context to tradition. *Solus Christus*, then, refers to Christ—yet what is reality in Christ cannot be separated from the church, which is why Vanhoozer addresses both the authority and the responsibility of the royal priesthood, the (local) church (chapter 4). Finally, with *Soli Deo Gloria,* Vanhoozer calls for a celebration of the diverse, yet united catholic church (chapter 5).

Vanhoozer concludes that the *solas*, taken together, provide a powerful *first theology* for the local, and therefore for the catholic church.

In addition to these three work, there is also an important essay published in 2016, asking 'May we Go Beyond what is written after all?'[51] Here Vanhoozer addresses the principle and the pattern of 'moving beyond'. He comments on the use of creeds and

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44 Kevin Vanhoozer, 'Scripture and theology—On "proving" doctrine biblically' in: Mike Higton and James Fodor (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015).

45 Vanhoozer, 'Scripture and theology', 148.

46 Vanhoozer, 'Scripture and theology', 154.

47 Vanhoozer, 'Scripture and theology', 154.

48 Vanhoozer*,* 'Scripture and theology', 155.

49 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel—Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 3.

50 Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 27, italics his.

51 Kevin Vanhoozer, 'May we Go Beyond what is written after all?' in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (London: Apollos, 2016), 747-793.

confessions as potential examples of 'moving beyond'. His programmatic proposal for following biblical directions includes imitation, imagination and improvisation.

b) Systematization

In the foregoing overview I could only give a brief idea regarding Vanhoozer's recent work. However, in the following I present an initial idea for the systematization of Vanhoozer's four contributions surveyed above: What are major aspects of his proposal to 'move beyond' Scripture?

I hold, then, that *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture* represents the general agenda for evangelical theology, and that the first part in particular highlights core-elements for doctrinal development. In the first chapter, Vanhoozer and Treier indicate that in some way biblical theology does not start with the Bible, but with the reality of which it speaks—they literally anchor evangelical theology in the triune God and the cross of Jesus Christ.

With the second chapter, Vanhoozer and Treier relate the ontological considerations regarding 'what is in Christ' to their epistemological theory: the gospel of God is witnessed in Scripture, which thereby mirrors the reality 'in Christ', and of which also the church is a part. The overall task of theology, then, is to help the church to understand the story of salvation, its reality, and the place of the church within it.

These are very general outlines. To be more specific, the task of evangelical theology is to 'set forth' the gospel. It seems to me that for this 'setting forth' Vanhoozer stresses in 'Scripture and theology' the various types of biblical discourse. He depicts four quadrants in a diagram of two axes (proposition/statement and narrative/story on the horizontal and spiritual/ideal and earthly/literal on the vertical axis). The four quadrants—principles, images, testimony and data—are all different aspects of what Scripture is,[52] and dealing with them (or setting them forth) must do justice to the nature of each particular discourse.

Having established this approach as the pattern, Vanhoozer explicates three ways of 'moving further along the grain of what is written':[53] *imitation* (that is, walking in Jesus steps), *imagination* (for instance, by locating oneself in the bigger story), and *improvisation* (that is, acting in accordance with the pattern of Scripture in a given situation).[54] While these ways are not 'methodological operations as much as means or cultivating good habits of evangelical … judgment',[55] one can still determine the *fittingness* of given attempts for 'moving beyond' by applying the criteria of canon sense (i.e., by locating oneself in the divine drama), catholic sensibility (i.e., by taking into account the apostolic tradition) and contextual sensitivity (i.e., by translating into a given cultural situation).[56]

However, the task of putting doctrine into praxis is yet an integral part of the doctrinal task. In sum, Vanhooz-

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52 Vanhoozer, 'Scripture and theology', 151.

53 Vanhoozer, 'May we Go beyond what is written after all?', 777.

54 Vanhoozer, 'May we Go beyond what is written after all?', 777-784.

55 Vanhoozer, 'May we Go beyond what is written after all?', 777.

56 Vanhoozer, 'May we Go beyond what is written after all?', 788-790.

er's essay 'May we Go Beyond what is written after all?' seems to be the contribution among the four that interacts best with these comparatively practical issues.

The task of setting forth the gospel (and, one might add, performing it!) is given to the local church—a church that might be on the edge of living in interpretational anarchy and doctrinal chaos. Vanhoozer covers these challenges specifically in '*Biblical Authority after Babel*'. Nevertheless, the church is required to exemplify the *ecclesia semper reformanda*, most evidently by applying the five *solas*, and thereby demonstrating 'that the glory and genius of mere Protestant Christianity is "mere evangelicalism".'[57]

Conclusion

I get the strong suspicion that Kevin Vanhoozer is (still) following the lead of Bernhard Ramm, who named five areas relevant for sound 'moving beyond': Scripture, the inner structure of evangelical theology, cultural climate, the God-world-relation, and Linguistics/Philosophy of language/ communications. I believe that this is an approach worth further following, especially regarding Scripture, evangelical theology and the God-world-relation. I believe such work is worthy to be pursued. I hope it will ultimately help to limit the doctrinal chaos, doctrinal illiteracy and doctrinal apathy within some of our local churches— and the calamities that go with it.

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[57] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 217.