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Kevin J. Vanhoozer. *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xix + 539. \$130.99, hardcover.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer in *Remythologizing Theology* has given us another blockbuster of a book, rich in depth and in creativity, which will keep theologians reflecting on it. His task is not a simple one. He undertakes to use God's communicative action, in Christ and in Scripture, as a starting point in order to deepen and refine our understanding of God's being, his relation to the world, and his relation to human beings within it. He focuses particularly on the issue of whether and in what sense God has "passions." Is God affected by human action and how does he respond to it?

As in his previous writings, Vanhoozer is reflective about his method of approach. The title of his book, *Remythologizing Theology*, already shows that he will interact with Bultmann's (and Feuerbach's) challenge of demythologizing. How can we speak about God acting in the world and in relation to human beings without falling into "mythology"? And what counts as "mythology"? Vanhoozer proposes a middle way between extremes.

On one extreme we have Feuerbach and Bultmann. Feuerbach claims that all talk about divine action is "mythological," in the sense that it projects into an external, supernatural sphere the internal meanings that we find in human action. "God" is whatever we conceive of as ideal within humanity, projected into external, superhuman dimensions. Bultmann offers a slightly less extreme version of demythologizing. He too construes the Christian story in the Bible as "mythological" discourse that must be translated into anthropological discourse about human living, either in authenticity or inauthenticity. According to Bultmann's construal, God can "act," but only within the sphere of human personal subjectivity, in an existential "encounter."

On the other extreme, people can interpret the Bible as if divine action were real and at the same time literally on the same level as human action. God is converted into a superman, virtually a finite figure, but more powerful and more knowledgeable than man. This mode of thinking is idolatrous. And it seems to confirm the accusations of Feuerbach, that in practice "God" becomes nothing more than idealized man. God as superman is really the flip side of Feuerbach's theory of projection. The main difference is that Feuerbach sees the illusion, while the person who projects a superman does not.

Vanhoozer proposes a middle way, namely the categories of plot and drama, that is, *mythos* in the sense of Aristotle, not in the sense of Greek myth. He proposes using drama, plot, and human communicative action as a model or analogical starting point, but with full realization that we must beware of merely projecting our own ideas to construct theology. God must speak, and does speak, in Christ and in Scripture. His communicative action shows who he is and how we should speak about him. We avoid idolatry and upward projection of our own ideas. Rather, God, the "Lord of projection" (p. 12), projects in his speech who he is.

There is ambiguity in this focus on communicative action. Does it mean that we take into account everything that the Bible says, since it is God's word? Or does it mean that we focus on those parts of the Bible that describe God as acting communicatively? For the most part Vanhoozer seems to mean the latter. That decision makes it harder for him, since one key resource in forming a doctrine of God is biblical statements that focus on who God is, not just on what he does. For example, 1 Timothy 1:17 describes God as immortal and invisible, the only God. Why not start there?

Having made his decision, does Vanhoozer see his choice as offering only one perspective on a larger body of teaching? I think so. But could readers misunderstand his choice as a claim to set forth the unique key to understanding God? Vanhoozer's claim that God is "being-in-communicative-act" too easily sounds like a unique key. The question is important, because it influences whether we construe Vanhoozer's work as an enrichment of classical Christian theism (a perspective) or a revision of it (the

definitive advance that will displace it). In particular, does "personalist" language about dialogical action displace rather than supplement "causal" language found not only in classical theism but in Scripture?

Vanhoozer's book has an introduction, a conclusion, and three main parts in between. The introduction delineates the task of "remythologizing" and the way in which it responds to Bultmann's demythologizing. Then Part I, "'God' in Scripture and theology," draws attention in its first chapter (Chapter 1) to a variety of biblical passages in which God speaks and interacts with human events. Vanhoozer challenges us to engage these and other biblical texts seriously and to ask what are their implications for how we think and speak about God. He is advocating that we respond faithfully to rich, multidimensional textures of biblical speech, rather than construct a kind of watered-down, generic philosophical theism.

Chapters 2 and 3 proceed to examine how modern theology has attempted to construe the nature of God and the relation of God to the world, pointing out along the way deficiencies of various theological stances in comparison with the richness of biblical language. Philosophical versions of theism project upward to God from an abstract concept of perfect being. Panentheism and "kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology" project upward their preference for relationality and vulnerability, according to which they postulate that God limits himself in the act of creation. Neither of these views gives full weight to God's own description of himself in Scripture.

Part II, "Communicative theism and the triune God," develops Vanhoozer's positive proposal, using biblical language about God's communicative action as its starting point. This Part focuses on the nature of God. With this Part, Chapter 4 focuses on the one God who communicates. Chapter 5 focuses on the role of the distinct persons of the Trinity in acts of communication. Part III, "God and World: authorial action and interaction," focuses on God's relation to the world. These parts are difficult to summarize, because of their richness. Vanhoozer maintains the absoluteness of God in relation to his creation, and also God's full ability to interact with and respond to human action and the larger creation. He affirms the creator/creature distinction, the robust character of God's acting and speaking in redemptive history, and his covenantal relation to human beings. All these aspects get unpacked with reference to trinitarian communication. The Father speaks the Word by the Spirit. He authors the universe. He speaks to human beings and responds to their speech in accord with his Lordship and the steadfastness of his character. The work of Christ incarnate is the climactic work, but not the only work (p. 203). God is covenantally concerned for human beings, but is not "subject to" passions in the sense of being overwhelmed or losing control.

Vanhoozer's own commitments lie with evangelical Reformed theology. He rejects as deficient open theism and panentheism. Vanhoozer affirms the divine authority of the Bible: the Scriptures are "divine discourse" (p. 27); "the Bible is the plumb line for right Christian speech about God" (p. 8). He affirms the importance of God speaking and not merely acting in history (p. 24). He affirms the efficacious, irresistible character of effectual calling, and uses it as a model for understanding more broadly God's communication with human beings (p. 371). Vanhoozer positions himself over against Karl Barth and Radical Orthodoxy within "the covenantal account of Reformed theology" (p. 68). He dedicates the book to his teacher, John Frame (p. xix).

These affirmations place Vanhoozer in the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy. But Vanhoozer undertakes to discuss the issues with people comprising a broad theological spectrum. Many of these people have little patience with what they regard as a premodern, outmoded commitment to the divine authority of Scripture. How does one address such people?

I will focus the rest of my discussion on this key question, partly because it constitutes one area where Vanhoozer exercises the most creativity and where his book offers fresh resources.

Given the breadth of his readership, Vanhoozer has good reason to start out with a discussion of

Bultmann's demythologizing. Bultmann in his program launches early into a discussion about what modern man cannot be expected to accept any longer. Bultmann has hold of a profound issue. Real submission to God's word is anathema to modern man. Bultmann finds a way around the anathema by proposing a hermeneutically guarded, carefully controlled use of Scripture to support the freedom of autonomous man. Modern man will not surrender his autonomy easily. A book that too early and too obviously proclaims God's rejection of human autonomy will be closed without reading, or thrown against the wall. We can compare Vanhoozer's task to the task of Stephen's speech in Acts 7. Do not say everything at the beginning. Keep the people listening long enough to build a case.

So what will modernist readers make of Vanhoozer's book. Vanhoozer has ringing affirmations about Scripture as divine discourse. But so does Karl Barth. The issue has become tricky, because it depends on what one means by one's Scripture-affirming rhetoric. Many things that Karl Barth says are indeed true, if the reader permits himself to take these individual affirmations within an orthodox context.

Vanhoozer's book contains language that is healthier than Barth. Vanhoozer's covenantal emphasis implies that God makes definite commitments and is not "free" to be the opposite (p. 216). Vanhoozer's mention of the pre-existence of the Word indicates that he does not collapse divine revelation into the incarnation (p. 52). Human beings are saved by faith, not by ontological participation in humanity (p. 69). God speaks in many and varied fashion, not just in the incarnation (p. 207). The emphasis on divine redemptive action in time gives significance to historical time.

But in its introductory section the book may still run the danger of giving the modernist reader too much of an impression that it is in harmony with key modernist assumptions. For instance, given Bultmann's invocation of science, do we leave modern science as it is? At the beginning, the book is not so clear: "The approach to be set forth in these pages does not require that one turn one's back on contemporary science" (p. 23). "Turn one's back" is a rather ambiguous expression. Does Vanhoozer mean merely that science, like all human endeavors, shows positive insights by virtue of common grace? Does he mean merely that he is not requiring us to throw away technological fruits like radios and electric lights? Maybe.

Whom is he opposing? Young earth creationists? But they too believe in common grace and in the value of electric lights. Perhaps Vanhoozer just wants to get on with his discussion without engaging too many issues at once. But his reassurance about science can be misused. It can unfortunately suggest to modernist readers that some positions need not be considered. We reject them by methodological fiat, not by exegesis. Our modern "knowledge" has the power to specify beforehand, before we engage in exegesis, that the Bible will not be allowed to challenge what we "know" to be true. The Bible is muzzled before we start reading it.

For many a reader within the broad spectrum of modern theology, science has become sacred. Modernists may worry about the idolatry of consumerism. But deeper idolatries within the citadel of science often go unperceived. Then modernists conclude that theological discourse, whatever it may be, must fit into the boundaries already determined by a scientific worldview. Persons and personal relationships and God himself have to be pasted onto an already well-defined lower-level edifice. For example, it may be claimed that we can allow no miracles in the impersonalist realm of scientifically conceived time and space, but only miracles in the inner life of the free personality. Certainly that is the way many scientists themselves want it. The Kantian dichotomy remains in place, the dichotomy between the alleged impersonalism of scientific phenomena and scientific law on the one hand and the personalism of human action on the other hand.

Vanhoozer's early attempt to map out a space for personal action (pp. 4-5) is likely to be misconstrued. He appears to contrast employment with *theoria* and scientific explanation (pp. 6-7). This contrast can be construed in a Kantian sense, as a contrast between free personality and rational

scientific explanation. Vanhoozer will then be construed as having positioned all his work of emplotment--his whole book--squarely within the realm of Kantian free personality. Yes, modernist theologians may still allow talk about creation and providence and even miracle, but once a Kantian framework is assumed, all such talk belongs purely to the subjectivist, personalist sphere. It has no impact on the world of science.

A book that proposes to set forth a doctrine of God cannot afford to put science to one side, because God's relation to the world, not merely his relation to human beings, must be thought through. Unless this thinking involves a reformation of science, it remains ghettoized. Later on, Vanhoozer seems to promise something radical: "... taking what God was doing in and through Christ as the 'metadrama' in whose light we come to understand everything else" (p. 29); "what the Bible says ... resists, overcomes, and recasts the general framework [of philosophical hermeneutics]" (p. 221). Here we have a call to radical rethinking, even transfiguration of thought, which by implication may include science. Unfortunately, Kantian readers are capable of taming even this language. They can interpret the new understanding as a subjective experience only, a personal interpretation alongside the necessarily impersonalistic understanding of modern science.

Vanhoozer has a similar difficulty when he talks about language. In a sense language is even more a problem for his book than science, because language and communication are central to Vanhoozer's project. Communicative action is the principal "model" that he uses to explicate who God is and what he does. But if this communicative action is to serve as a model, it is important how we conceive of it.

Vanhoozer certainly wants to say that God must take the initiative to present and explain himself in his own terms, and that we must submissively adjust our own understanding when we read the Bible. He opposes many of the features of modern theology precisely because they listen too little to Scripture and instead project upward an idea of God on the basis of human notions.

But sometimes the book's choice of expressions leaves ambiguities. At an early point the book seems to concede that language starts out as merely human. Then, at a subsequent point, we have to do something special to make it reach the divine: "... we must rely on what MacKinnon calls a 'system of projection' in order to speak of what transcends space-time human experience" (p. 10). "For we have no choice but to project concepts drawn from human experience onto God. At the same time, God's 'wholly otherness' reminds us that one-sided conceptualizations do not tell the whole story" (p. 20). Vanhoozer's book in its discussion of metaphors for God indicates that the literal and the familiar are what belongs to the human plane, while anthropomorphism applies to God as a figurative extension of this original literal meaning (pp. 61, 63). "God co-opts human language and concepts" (p. 64). "The voices of the prophets and the apostles in and through whom the divine playwright speaks co-opt everyday language for holy service" (p. 80).

Commendably, Vanhoozer wants biblical language to be allowed to function as language controlled "from above": "There is a difference between defining theological categories on the basis of human experience (anthropomorphic projection from below) and defining them on the basis of the role God accords them in service of his word" (p. 64). Vanhoozer's intentions move in the right direction. But can he undo the damage that *has already* been done? Readers who dream of autonomy assume that they know well enough what is human and what is literal and familiar and what belongs to "space-time human experience." They know what language is, they think, what dialogue is, what communicative action is; and they know that these are wholly human.

The book says that "God co-opts human language and concepts" (p. 64). The word *co-opt* is unfortunate. It suggests a deviation from an original use and an original design. By implication, the original use and design belong to man, and apply only to "everyday" things under the sun. God's use of what is human is a deviation, an appropriation of tools that properly speaking belong in everyday life.

The description of co-option is in tension with the fact that language by God's design naturally and *normally* extends to God speaking to man and both God and man speaking about God, angels, and whatever else they care to speak about. "Co-option" does affirm divine authority; unfortunately it can also suggest the introduction of strange or deviant meanings. And depending on how people construe the "deviation," it can throw the Bible into a so-called "holy" sphere that removes its relevance to public life. The Bible comes to be regarded as about *Geschichte* and not *Historie*, about theology proper and not about Paul's cloak left at Troas (2 Tim. 4:13), about intimate personal relationships and not about the sphere of Kantian phenomena under the hegemony of science.

Instances that leave open a door to Kantianism can be multiplied. For example, Vanhoozer intimates that "human concepts" are not "adequate for the task," that is, the task of conceptualizing God (p. 99). But by implication, it appears that these very concepts *are* adequate for the horizontal task in which "our other metaphysical categories apply" to ordinary "entities." It sounds as though the difficulty arises only when we raise our sights to think about God rather than analyzing the world. Such a loose formulation suggests a dichotomy between language about God and language about the world. Language about this world is unproblematic, unmysterious, and submissive to our autonomous mastery; only language about God is problematic.

Admittedly, in the context Vanhoozer is rightly protesting against philosophical reasoning that hopes to reach God by starting with a conceptual analysis of "being." But the wording of his protest unfortunately allows misunderstandings. It does not make it clear that the philosophical route fails to reach the true God, not because God is unreachable through "human concepts," but because philosophical speculation systematically suppresses the knowledge of God, who inescapably reveals himself in the very warp and woof of every bit of personal thinking, language, dialogue, and action, including the concept of "being." The concept of "being" already everywhere presupposes an analogical relation and an authority-structure that relates God the creator to the beings that he created. Created beings testify to the creator. And human beings know it (Rom. 1:19-21). The difficulty lies not in the alleged finiteness and limitations of "concepts," but the sinfulness of our suppression and our idolatrous exchange of the truth for a lie (Rom. 1:25).

Vanhoozer says, "God indeed appears in language, not as the object of human representation, but precisely as a speaking subject: one who *does* things with language" (p. 100n87). The object/subject dichotomy in this formulation corresponds temptingly to the phenomenal/noumenal distinction in Kant, and the closely related distinction between impersonal science and personal subjectivity. Taken at face value, Vanhoozer's formulation spells an end to genuine knowledge of God and to pre-Kantian theology, because God cannot be an "object" that we as humans "represent," that is, about whom we think rationally. This claim, of course, is utter nonsense, and completely at variance with Vanhoozer's desire to submit to the Bible.

The next pages in the book suggest that by "object" Vanhoozer means a *manipulable* object, an object that we can master. That is a welcome correction. But this formulation still allows that we can manipulate other objects--just not God. God is different. How will modernists read it? Apparently, we can have autonomous thinking in the sphere of objects of scientific study. God is "wholly other" in comparison with such objects. In the minds of modernists, the formulation does not work free from Kantian presuppositions. Vanhoozer makes things worse by adding that this short formulation of his is "the main burden of my constructive proposal in Parts II and III" (p. 100n87). At this point, contrary to his intentions, his rhetoric allows his later constructive proposal to be swallowed up by his readers' Kantian presuppositions.

Vanhoozer goes on to quote approvingly from Jean-Luc Marion, "that the unthinkable enters into the field of our thought only by rendering itself unthinkable by excess, that is, by criticizing our thought" (p. 101). Such language affirms a kind of transcendence, but it is a Kantian transcendence,

where God is "the unthinkable," the one who surpasses the capacity of theoretical reason. By contrast, the transcendence of the biblical God implies his power to make himself known, so that people think rightly about him. It should be obvious that people in the Bible think about him all the time. And ordinary believers today can do so freely, without looking over their metaphysical shoulders to make sure they are submitting to Kantian boundaries.

Despite unfortunate formulations, Vanhoozer does not intend to be hermeneutically docetic. What he appears to be affirming at one point may be surpassed later on. His early discussion of the use of metaphysics concludes with hints that may imply transfiguration of metaphysical concepts, rather than a denial of knowledge (p. 105). He emphasizes that God speaks and acts in history. He emphasizes the particularity and multigenre character of the Bible. But is this "history" real history or only a subjectivized personal perspective? And is the language that we use about "theo-drama" real language, or language fitted into a special religious compartment, because God cannot be expressed by man--cannot be an "object"? If the reader does not get off on the right foot in understanding language used "for holy service," he can misunderstand the whole book and project it into a Barthian *Geschichte*.

In addition, the language of co-option undoubtedly suggests a movement from man to God. God adopts language that originally belongs purely to the human, horizontal sphere. This view of divine speaking sounds to modernist ears like a kind of adoptionism in the sphere of biblical language. It corresponds, in fact, to adoptionism in the sphere of Christology. I am confident that Vanhoozer wants neither biblical adoptionism nor christological adoptionism. But his way of describing divine speaking as co-option opens the door to adoptionism in the sphere of biblical discourse. It wrongly concedes the point that at its origin human language and concepts are purely human, and therefore the Bible has to be fit into the pre-existing mold. God co-opts the bricks that he finds already lying around at the construction site. Such a presupposition leads easily to christological adoptionism, both because Christ as the Word of God is analogous to the Bible as the word of God, and because one can infer that Christ incarnate is for practical purposes subject to the alleged constraints of purely human language, purely human concepts, and purely human communicative action. Or if not adoptionism, we get Nestorianism or panentheism. One way or another, already-existing concepts of humanity get the better of the theo-drama.

What is needed? We could wish that the book had built into its beginning a robust doctrine of God, creation, providence, and general revelation, as a foundation for understanding human language, the nature of personal action, and the nature of "concepts." In fact, it is difficult to see how Vanhoozer could have constructed such a beginning, because his audience would have simply rejected it and closed the book. Vanhoozer has chosen to take, as it were, a long way around, by developing a doctrine of God gradually, over the course of the book, after setting his methodological course in the introduction.

Unfortunately, a sound doctrine of God requires the transfiguration of the modernist understanding of methodology. I fear that modernist readers will not see it. They will never undertake this transfiguration, because the modernist version of methodology will already have swallowed whole the doctrine of God and positioned it safely within the Kantian sphere of subjectivist personal action and interaction. Or rather, the transfiguration will not get done because would-be autonomy as a religious desire is an ultimate commitment. It trumps all other agenda and all other claims to truth. The only remedy is to repent. And intellectuals find it hard to repent of intellectual autonomy. God's saving power must work humility.

How does the playing field look once we have a doctrine of creation and revelation? In fact, all human experience includes experience of God's presence, or, in Vanhoozer's preferred terminology, God's "self-presentation" in general revelation. This experience of God is utterly "familiar." God's presence and God's action accompany (typically by *concursum*) all experience of human agency, human

kings, human fathers, human speech acts, human drama, human concepts. There is no alleged "literal" level that does not already and always include God's self-presentation. Therefore, the alleged literal level is not merely literal but analogical. Human concepts cannot do anything except think God's thoughts after him. In particular, we think God's thoughts after him when we think about human authorship and communication.

Human experience also includes suppression of the truth of God's self-presentation. So our so-called human concepts are not innocent. They manifest both divine self-presentation and human suppression. They imitate God's thinking and they twist away from it. God does not "co-opt" language and concepts that are simply there. He uses what is already his by design. Within human minds, concepts are corrupted by human sin but nevertheless still testify to God, whom human suppression is unable to escape.

God speaks according to his unlimited sovereignty, not by "co-opting" structures from which we have previously been able to excise his self-presentation. The difficulty is not the finiteness of structures, but the sinful corruption of clear divine speech (Gen 1:3; Ps. 33:6, 9) and clear "self-presentation" within general revelation. God's speech, remaining what it always is, namely the Word who was in the beginning, becomes what it was not, namely specific speech expressing Lordship over creatures by the power of the Holy Spirit. God calls humans into existence by his decree and continually sustains their actions and thoughts through commands that specify each particular (Heb 1:3).

But by itself general revelation does not provide deliverance from human rebellion. Vanhoozer is right to concentrate on redemptive history, and on Christ as the climax and center of that history. We are to seek Christ--the Christ of Scripture and no other--in order to renew our knowledge and be delivered from the captivities of theological delusion. Vanhoozer has chosen not only a healthy way, but the only way. This one way must have its proper effect on the starting assumptions of theological methodology.

In a footnote Vanhoozer has a significant affirmation that our speaking is an image of God's speaking (p. 65n129). We could wish that readers saw the consequences. The principle of imaging needs to be invoked in order to transfigure the assumptions of would-be autonomous modern man about language and personal action. If the transfiguration took place, it would destroy the modernist project for retaining autonomy, because it would have shown autonomy to be an illusion from the beginning. There are no resources to build autonomy, either in language, or in the concept of personal action, or in drama, or in science.

Vanhoozer's book announces that it is going to use "resources" (p. xiii) from linguistics, philosophy, and the like. I take it to mean that it will use fruits of common grace, transfigured by a Christian understanding. But modernists will construe it, I fear, to mean resources that are dug out by autonomous man and that presuppose the rights of autonomous man. Some of these modernists may generously allow God to co-opt human language, whether it refers to personal action, plot, drama, science, or language itself. But that co-option is always bounded by what they suppose they already know in their autonomy. Religious language is only one language-game defined within the bounds of autonomy. They will then take this extra language that God gives us in the Bible, and use it as the plumb line for religious talk and theology. But they know all along that at its root their autonomy is safe, because God cannot restructure the nature of persons and human will and science without violating the very nature of humanity and the world. For example, we must make space for historical criticism. According to this view, whatever Scripture means, it *must* mean within the bounds of autonomy. That is the base line of the modernist (and postmodernist) hermeneutical project.

If you challenge the base line, you will be misunderstood. Or, if you manage to make the true distinctiveness of your position understood after a fashion, the natural man will dismiss it as folly (1

Cor 2:14). At least you will not get stoned like Stephen. You will simply be dismissed as a retrograde. Vanhoozer foresees the possibility: he anticipates voices saying that theology has "been there, done that" (p. xv). Once he makes it clear that his approach means "back to something more like classical theism" (p. 176), the modernists are likely to become restless. When he leaves Kant and other philosophers behind (p. 188), their concerns are likely to mount.

Vanhoozer is highly creative, to be sure. And so he may retain the ears of his modernist listeners for awhile. Will they be persuaded, by the grace of God? Or will they eventually realize that his kind of creativity is not the kind they want? From a modernist point of view, future creativity cannot undo the fundamental advance of the Kantian epistemological revolution, which has (allegedly) shown us the necessity of autonomy and of placing theology within the bounds of autonomous personal subjectivity.

Vanhoozer himself decisively rejects all *a priori* autonomous human frameworks for doing the theological task: "they [those who prioritize a framework] generate a notion of divinity not governed by the specific contours of God's being and action, which then serves as the frame for positive theological teaching" (p. 172, quoting John Webster). But will Vanhoozer's modernist readers understand his commitment? Will they not rather choose to understand his words in their own way?

Modernists of a Kantian kind might say that they agree with him. They might say that they too wish to avoid the idolatry of upward projection of human concepts. They are not presupposing any particular "notion of divinity," since they believe that God is not an "object" of theoretical reason. They are not advocating any positive "notion," that is, any positive concept. Rather, they are simply clarifying the Kantian limitations of human thought within which any reception of scriptural "revelation" must operate. Within the sphere of free personality, the modernists may allow us to characterize Scripture as the medium for God speaking. But once such speech is received, it is received by human minds, whose essence is autonomy. Vanhoozer himself, they think, must presuppose these same limits, because without them Scriptural language is unintelligible.

These same issues come to a particular focus when Vanhoozer discusses divine sovereignty and human freedom in Chapter 7. Let us consider Vanhoozer's exposition. He desires to deepen the classical Reformed account of divine sovereignty by using his communicative model. He appeals to a fully trinitarian understanding of God's communication, according to which God the Father's call is not only informative (by presenting the gospel and Christ himself to the hearer's view) but persuasive. The power of persuasion belongs focally to the Holy Spirit. God through the Holy Spirit does not annihilate human hearts and wills, but persuasively changes them. The call of God is effectual, irresistible, and "divinely determined," (p. 384), "*not because it bypasses our hearts and minds but precisely because it opens and illumines them*" (p. 383, italics original). These points are useful, though within Reformed tradition they are not completely new.

Vanhoozer hopes to deflect the objection that he anticipates from modernist views: "a personal God cannot *cause* humans freely to love him back" (p. 383, italics original). His reply is that the objectors confuse "instrumental" with "communicative" action--in effect, confusing force with persuasion (p. 383). Again the distinction is useful, because God's interaction with human beings fits their nature and is richer than his interaction with rocks. Yet the word *persuade* has built-in limits. It suggests a conversation in which the recipient is in full control of his normal rational powers and is using them effectively. He still has his natural rights of judgment. He must weigh and sift what is said. He is in charge of how he evaluates it. Or if he is not, the "persuasion" amounts to hoodwinking and propagandistic manipulation.

By itself, the word *persuade* says too little about the radical nature of regenerative change through the Spirit. Why not speak of the fact that God "made us alive" "when we were dead" (Eph 2:5)? Why not? It ruins the mutuality of the interlocutors. Not everything has the characteristics of the mutuality of dialogue, which Vanhoozer places to the fore (p. 284). There is also the monergistic divine

command that creates (2 Cor 4:6). Vanhoozer understandably wishes to avoid the mechanistic connotations that he fears may belong to the word *cause*: "God is not a chemical but a personal agent" (p. 134). But mechanical action can be distinguished from divine personal monergism and determinate control, as well as distinguished from dialogical interaction. God is always personal, whether or not human agents actively cooperate with his actions.

Moreover, even though Vanhoozer's emphasis on persuasiveness may be appealing, his reply to his objectors is not convincing *on their terms*. For many modern people, the crux of the matter lies in whether the human recipient has a genuine choice in responding to God's regenerative power. Modern man has a sense of "freedom" such that freedom requires the possibility of refusal. The recipient must make up his mind. This modernist view might perhaps concede that within the sphere of "religious" language we can speak of the fact that the Lord opened Lydia's heart (Acts 16:14) in an existentialist encounter, and that she did in fact believe. But according to modernist assumptions it was also possible that she might not have believed. Her response to God's persuasive communicative action, to be a "real" response, had to involve a choice determined decisively and ultimately exclusively by her and *not* by divine determination. The modernist may say that he is dutifully grateful for God's helping power, God's "persuasiveness"; but he retains the autonomous freedom to accept or reject God's help. According to a modernist view of freedom, Vanhoozer's language of "irresistibly yet non-coercively" (p.383) does not succeed in describing anything real.

Vanhoozer precedes his discussion of effectual call with a complex discussion of authorship in which he interacts at length with Mikhail Bakhtin (pp. 305-337). Bakhtin contrasts two kinds of authorship. A "monological" author like Tolstoy has literary characters who are little more than mouthpieces for his own views. By contrast, a "dialogical" author like Dostoevsky has characters whose lives and dialogues embody several points of view. Vanhoozer clearly prefers the dialogical conception as an analogy to God, because God interacts communicatively with the human beings he has created. At the same time, Vanhoozer recognizes that when we consider God as creator we must go beyond Bakhtin. The question is, "How?" The danger here is that, having set up the playing field by a discussion of human authorship, Vanhoozer leaves it open to his readers to project the dialogical framework upward to God rather than allowing God through speaking in Scripture to tell us what his "authorship" is like.

Vanhoozer in his crucial chapter does discuss examples from Scripture. But the particular examples that he chooses never address the question of whether Lydia's or other human responses are "divinely determined." Vanhoozer asserts that they are, but he needs additional verses and additional arguments to refute alternative interpretations that would understand Lydia and other examples in terms of a libertarian concept of human freedom. Moreover, unless he fills out his picture, Vanhoozer leaves serious holes. God, he says, is irresistibly persuasive in converting those who become believers. But how do we understand their subsequent sins? Does irresistibility fit here? And if God does *not* persuade some unbelievers, how if at all is such a result compatible with irresistibility? Does an instance of nonpersuasion leave the unbeliever outside God's determinate plan for the middle of history?

The issue that tests people's souls is whether God determines sinful human actions. Vanhoozer raises the issue by discussing the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (pp. 339-342). But he does not put it to rest. We confront a painful fork in the road. If we say yes, that God does determine sinful actions, we immediately lose the entire modernist camp. If we say no, we ruin the meaning of God's sovereignty. Many events within the middle of history involve sins and their consequences. However we may try to disguise it, if we refuse divine determination here, we make God into a finite being who is doing the best he can, given uncontrollable circumstances set in motion by sin. We find ourselves back into the kind of "self-limitation" of God that Vanhoozer has rightly rejected. We also destroy the saving value of the crucifixion, which depends on God's plan, not merely human purposes: "whatever your hand and

your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:28).

Moreover, the concept of God as author rather than cause does not yield an immediate resolution. Everyone agrees that God is *not* the author of sin. So what do we say? Is there some other kind of divine predestination? One possible answer is to say that God is primary cause, while human sinners are secondary causes. But Vanhoozer's book has avoided causal language. Or we could say that God is the author of the human characters and their actions, but, as with the crucifixion his purposes are good while theirs are evil and reprehensible? The book does not answer. Without an answer, we have no clear teaching on God's sovereignty or on the cross of Christ.

In dialogue with Bakhtin Vanhoozer discusses authorship in a way that makes the author virtually sovereign in his creation of a character and sovereign in his consummating evaluation of the character as a whole, yet leaves open the issue of sovereignty in the middle, in the development of the story. Once created, the characters are, as it were, turned loose, and an author with integrity will not violate the characters that he has made. But this prohibition of "violation" can be understood in more than one way. Vanhoozer opens a big hole for modernist readers when he assures us that God "brings about a change in the world without violating natural law or human freedom" (p. 371). Will his readers understand "natural law" and "human freedom" according to concepts rooted in Kantian human autonomy?

Can we "solve the problem" of divine sovereignty and human freedom? Some of the choice of language in Chapter 7 runs the danger of superficially giving the impression that the issue is resolvable. Vanhoozer claims that his objectors are confusing instrumental with communicative action (p. 383). One may hope that this explanation helps. But is it a full "solution"? Vanhoozer's discussion of mystery shows that he knows it is not. But autonomous objectors will not be satisfied unless they can eliminate mystery.

It is interesting to consider other resources in Scripture, complementary to those that Vanhoozer invokes. We have already mentioned Ephesians 2:5. In addition, Scripture anticipates objections based on human freedom: "You will say to me then, 'Why does he [God] still find fault? For who can resist his will?' " (Rom. 9:19). Paul offers a dialogical response: "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" (Rom. 9:20). This is dialogue of a sort. But it is not the sort with which autonomous man is comfortable. It has its own rhetoric, shaped to bring human submission by crushing at its heart the impulse of autonomous desire.

Romans 9 goes on with more words designed to humiliate autonomous man: "Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?" (Rom 9:20-21). Paul's (and Jeremiah's) analogy with clay and pots uses exactly the kind of instrumental causal language that Vanhoozer has avoided.

To be sure, theologians are right to point out various distinctions between human beings and clay pots, and to acknowledge that any comparison between humans and inanimate objects must affirm dissimilarities as well as similarities. But with all these legitimate qualifications, we still confront an interesting choice of language in Romans 9. It leads to awkward questions. Did Paul deal ham-handedly with the issue, and lose a golden opportunity to give a more enlightened answer to the objector? To put a point on it, should he not have said, "No, you have misunderstood me. God's control over the world and over human beings is not at all such as you suppose me to be advocating. You have misunderstood the subtleties of authorship. I, like you, genuinely affirm 'natural law' and 'human freedom' and agree that all God's actions will not violate these realities, but will rather take the form of another modality"? I think not.

There are mysteries and subtleties enough to amaze us all. But those mysteries unfold only to those who first of all have abandoned their claim to autonomy and have had crushed out of them the

objector's voice. Among the wonderful multitude of ways and genres in which Scripture conveys to us the wisdom of God, Romans 9 is one, and has its divinely appointed role in crushing autonomy. God reverses the arrogant concern to protect autonomous human freedom by asking, "Has the potter no right ...?" We would do well to remember this text if we usually employ only more pleasant-sounding expressions to affirm human "freedom."

Vanhoozer's book has done many things well. I am haunted by the concern that, in the desire to communicate winsomely to modern theologians, it may have failed to be clear. It contains ambiguities. Starting with these, modernists may understand it as a reinterpretation of classical theism within the bounds of a Kantian dichotomy between dialogically free personalities and impersonal causation. That is the risk that arises when one chooses rhetorical modes that mesh with modernism. If modernist theology has shown itself capable of misunderstanding God himself as he speaks in Scripture, it is capable of misunderstanding Vanhoozer's book.

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