Theology as Performance: Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s Dramaturgical Take on Doctrine

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Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine.

Every Palm Sunday, I remember a particular celebration I attended at St. James’s Episcopal Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The congregation was composed of social activists, academics, and evangelicals who had joined an economically and ethnically diverse community living around Porter Square, a working-class neighborhood located about a mile away from Harvard. I was just starting to learn what it meant to be an Episcopalian, and St. James’s seemed tailor-made to both comfort and challenge me.

The celebration took place sometime in the late 1980s, in the midst of a late-winter snowstorm. The celebrant made the decision to disregard the weather, and to lead the entry procession outside the church and around the block. We lined up at the back of the church, ready to wave our palms and sing, “All Glory Laud and Honor.”

The doors of the church opened, and a cold, stiff breeze immediately greeted us, bending the palms in our hands and snuffing out the torches the acolytes were carrying. I looked around and noticed that many members of the procession were underdressed—one man was wearing thick socks and Birkenstock sandals, which seemed to provide little protection from the grey slush that covered the sidewalk. Nonetheless, we processed around the entire block, singing and waving our branches as best as we could.

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Our performance of the Palm Sunday liturgy was far from flawless. Our singing of the hymn fell out of sync, and we fell into smaller groups huddled together. We returned to the warmth of the church wet and discombobulated. Nonetheless, this celebration stays in my mind as an “authentic” celebration of the feast day—more “real” than any other I have celebrated. The bitterness of the weather, the determination of the congregation, the courage and fragility of our faith in a forbidding world, the proclamation of Jesus as our Lord and King—all seemed to be perfectly expressed by the procession of imperfect saints like us.

One of the great strengths of Kevin Vanhoozer’s *Faith Speaking Understanding* is that it helps us unpack the theology embedded in this celebration. Though flawed, our procession was a faithful performance of the stunning proclamation of Jesus as Lord. Indeed, without this performative element, we cannot understand, or fully express, the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ.

Theology, for Vanhoozer, is fundamentally a performance—not an archival and textual exercise, but a proclamational and missional enterprise whereby the truth of Christianity is embodied and reiterated in a new context. Drawing from Hans Urs von Balthasar, Vanhoozer writes that theology is “theodramatic,” that is, it concerns the actions and achievements (dráō) of God (theos) in history and today:

> At the heart of Christianity is not merely an idea of God but rather God’s self-communicating words and acts. The gospel is not a universal truth but an announcement of God’s saving work in Christ. . . . The aim of Christian theology is not merely to add to our stockpile of theoretical knowledge but to cultivate disciples who can display the mind of Christ in every situation. Knowledge is static, but wisdom—lived knowledge—is dynamic and thus dramatic. . . . The notion that the Christian life is a drama in which I have a role to play, with other believers, gives renewed urgency to everyday discipleship. (pp. 20–21)

Within this theological scheme, doctrines are dramatic interpretations—a script containing the plot and narrative arc, set designs, dialogue and stage directions, and so on, of a production. Doctrines draw deeply from, but are not to be equated with, scripture, which is the
faithful and inspired *transcription* of the prior performances of God and the people of God. Scripture is not a blueprint to be slavishly followed or historically reenacted, because part of the drama of a production is its placement in a new context (p. 24).

Following Vanhoozer’s account, the celebration of Palm Sunday that I attended at St. James’s was more faithful than, say, a performance that strives for historical accuracy, such as we might find in films like *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) or *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Further, for Vanhoozer, the drama he has in mind is not a traditional Broadway production like *Hamilton* (2016) in which an audience is entertained by paid professionals, but the theater of the avant-garde, in which the binary between performer and audience is broken down so that the actors and audience become equal participants. “Disciples are not onlookers who keep a safe distance but witnesses who stake their lives on the good news that the triune God is actively at work in all situations. . . . What the church needs now are not passive spectators but active participants, actors who can follow doctrinal directions” (p. 27).

Vanhoozer draws from recent work in performance theory and practice to inform his understanding of God, the church, and the world from a variety of perspectives. The merits of his approach become particularly clear when viewed from the vantage point of the “experience economy” operating in the contemporary cultural context of North America—cultural terrain that he covers with ease. In a marketplace that sells not products, but the experience they convey, the emphasis on encounter and interaction in Vanhoozer’s approach is, he argues, tailor-made to help the church “get its message across” in a more interactive and dynamic way.

There are gems in Vanhoozer’s book. Many of them appear almost in passing as he unpacks his topic. Standing behind his work is his previous writing in communication theory found in *The Drama of Doctrine* (Westminster John Knox, 2005) and *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Zondervan, 1998) among many other publications. In this work, however, the sum of that scholarship has now been recut and appears in crystallized form. As such, it is highly accessible and seems especially fitting for the “pastor-theologians” he addresses as his primary audience.

For example, early on he notes that his approach requires a starting point in theology that does not rest with statements or claims of
God’s essences or attributes. “To know truth, goodness, and beauty, one has to do more than think about the concept of perfect being,” he writes. “Instead, one must begin with the claim that the Son exegeses the Father” (p. 38). Of course, standing behind this claim is a long theological tradition exemplified, in complementary ways, by Barth and von Balthasar. But his arrangement of the argument—the contrast between proceeding by way of the analogia entis and by way of the analogia fidei—has poetic economy. Further, positing an exegetical relation between the Son and the Father reveals how our own exegetical practice might be, and already is, a Spirit-filled, holy performance of the presence of God.

Vanhoozer’s understanding of discipleship is another gem. Discipleship is fundamentally performative and guided, he argues, by the missional goal of presenting Christ to the surrounding culture—a performance recognized as such by the commitment of the actors, who also regularly invite others to participate in their production. Disciples, in this sense, are like the costumed volunteer interpreters found in Colonial Williamsburg, who are convincing not because of the authenticity of their dress or their dramatic skill as actors, but by their accumulated “passion and knowledge” regarding the historical village they help come to life. As “living museums,” the volunteers are part of an “interactive theater,” a group that “shares three things mutually and in abundance: trust, play, and joy” (p. 184). In the same way, mutatis mutandis, so should disciples be—committed individuals whose work and witness is characterized by a welcoming and celebratory collaborative intimacy.

On the whole, Vanhoozer’s project is liberating, particularly for those in the Reformed tradition, which seems to be his primary church audience. In this tradition, doctrines are primarily regulative, rather than generative; similarly, liturgy is placed under the primacy of the word. In such a theological milieu, it is easy to see his contribution opening up new avenues for worship and witness.

For those of us coming from a theologically broad tradition that emphasizes liturgy, his work will be highly useful but also—at points—puzzlingly rigid. For example, Vanhoozer’s account of the doctrine of the Trinity is essentially a reiteration of the standard Calvinist scheme. Vanhoozer avoids the determinism inherent in a form of this doctrine that sees all existence as stemming from God’s immutable “decree.” However, his own dialogical take on this doctrine—that the Father
and the Son enter into a “pact of salvation,” which also has a long history in Reformed thought—is just as static. Precisely because it was made before the beginning, as it were, in eternity, this doctrine scripts a dramatic performance with fixed roles that leave little room left for improvisation. As such, Vanhoozer renders Jesus’s ministry on earth as a mere replication of an eternally fixed script rather than a performance that was, like our own life performances, full of dramatic tension. This seems, ironically, to take the energy out of the most important performance ever made—the performance of Jesus’s own passion, which the faithful people of St. James’s Church did, in their own way, as faithfully as they could, by the grace of God.
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