



Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom

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"As a professor of theology, I teach required courses in systematics to prospective pastors," writes Vanhoozer. "Some of these aren't convinced that theology will be relevant to their ministries. I wrote the book to show how theology contributes to the well-being (bene esse) and flourishing of the church's worship, witness and wisdom. I think of this book as 'close up' theology: an exhibition of how theology may be brought to bear in concrete instances and on concrete issues in which the church is currently engaged."

"Standing in the Breach" Between Theology and the Life of the Church

Theology exists to serve the church. Its vocation is to help people think, imagine and understand how all areas of life relate to the God of the gospel made known in the Scriptures. Theology ministers understanding by setting forth the biblically attested meaning of the words and deeds of the triune God, inviting all those with eyes and ears to understand to participate in what the Father, Son and Spirit are doing in the world to make all things new. Theology thus helps disciples fulfill their vocation to be "little Christs": saints who know how to embody the mind of Christ everywhere, at all times and to everyone.

Theology exists to serve the church, but the sobering reality is that many churches are not particularly inclined to accept theology's help. Indeed, some churches avoid all deliberation about doctrine like the plague. After all, doctrine divides, and in any case who is in a position to know which doctrinal position is correct? These churches would rather keep the conversation going than arrive at a conclusion. At the other end of the spectrum are churches in which the doctrinal watchword is not *relative* but *absolute*. The challenge here is to relate frozen doctrinal formulations to a changing cultural climate. The way forward is to cultivate minds and hearts characterized not only by evangelical fidelity but also by convictional civility, hermeneutical humility and Christian charity.

Despite both its skeptical detractors and its too-certain supporters, theology at its best is the worshipful, witnessing and wise art and science of faithful understanding, and its sole purpose is to edify the church's worship, witness and wisdom. Theology's special remit is to love the truth of Jesus Christ with mind, heart, soul and strength in order to make straight the way of life in Christ. The chief way that theologians respond to their mandate is to reflect on what God has said and done provisionally in the history of Israel and definitively in the history of Jesus Christ. Theology, then, is an exercise in creative fidelity (or faithful creativity), where new ways of articulating understanding are accountable both to the magisterial authority of prior canonical texts and to the ministerial authority of catholic interpretive traditions.

In a previous collection of essays, *First Theology* (also published by InterVarsity Press), I attempted to navigate my way through the postmodern challenges confronting the academy, especially in the humanities. The humanities share with biblical studies and theology an interest in hermeneutics: how to understand textual meaning and interpretation. The various chapters of *First Theology* represented my best efforts to explain how God, Scripture and hermeneutics – in their humanity and divinity – come together in the pattern of theological authority and comprise a three-stranded prolegomenal cord. This collection is different (I had to resist the urge to title it *Second Theology*). The focus here is not on theories of

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interpretation debated in the academy but on the practice of biblical interpretation that makes up the life of the church. Each of the essays begins with a real-life issue on the borderlands of church, society and academy and then searches for understanding – a way for the community of faith to live this understanding out. With the exception of the introduction, chapter five and chapter eleven, all these essays were originally delivered orally, and though I have revised them (and added footnotes), I have tried to preserve their less formal tone.

In this book I attempt to “stand in the breach” (Ezek 22:30) between theology and the life of the church, theory and practice, knowledge and obedience – not simply to occupy space but to fill it by creating connections. The overall concern is to rehabilitate a biblically invigorated imagination as a means and mode of doing theology – or rather, as a key to healing the breach between knowing, feeling and doing as well as the distance between Scripture and the church’s contemporary situation. When captive to Christ, the imagination is the capacity to envision all of reality as related to God the Father in the Son through the Spirit. And to the extent that the vision of a God-so-loved-world orients all of life, it is a capacity that is as practical as it is theological.

We can go further. If what disciplines the imagination is first and foremost verbal rather than visual, then we can say that theological imagination is a mode of faith, a way of believing *without* seeing (Jn 20:29) and, as such, comes not from fanciful speculation but rather from the hearing of the biblical word (Rom 10:17). Having said that, this book is not primarily a theoretical reflection on the nature of imagination. There are some theoretical reflections (and some attempts at definition), but ultimately the vision must be caught, not simply taught. To that end, many of the chapters show the biblically grounded, theologically formed evangelical imagination at work, exhibited in concrete scenes of Christian life, where contemporary culture confronts the church with new problems and opportunities.

Theological understanding of the Bible involves learning to think not simply about but *along* the biblical texts, making sense not only of various propositions but also of the various scenes – the things that happen or are said – that comprise the drama of redemption and give those propositions their sense. This imaginative theological appropriation of Scripture encourages church members to indwell these texts in new contexts: the story of Israel and the early church is our story too. The truth that doctrine spells out also demands to be done: to be staged in city gates and suburban tracts alike by actors who embody the meaning of the divine play. This too is evangelism, and discipleship. Theology exists to preserve the integrity of the church’s worship, witness and wisdom alike.

– Taken from the preface