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Direct correspondence to: **Attn: Editor, *Southeastern Theological Review***
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
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Vanhoozer responds to the four horsemen of an apocalyptic panel discussion on *Remythologizing Theology*

Kevin J. Vanhoozer
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Introduction

There is no higher academic compliment than sustained critical attention, so I must begin by thanking my four interlocutors, not only for their willingness to persevere to the end (of my book, that is), but also for the way in which they have engaged its argument. I am also pleased by the evangelical diversity of the panel: from Trinitarian and analytic to Southern Baptist and emerging theologians. The lot of a respondent is not always a happy one. One can either summarize the argument, and risk boring those who have read the book (no danger of that here, I think!), set out systematically to expose the nakedness of the author (and risk losing a friend), or simply use the opportunity to talk about something else in which one is more interested. All four panelists have avoided these common pitfalls. Even more remarkable: I do not feel the need to spend most of my time correcting misrepresentations of my position. This is an encouraging sign. For years I have taught my students first, to interpret people as charitably as they can, and only then to interpret them as critically as they see fit. The panelists have largely succeeded in doing just that, which means that I can give most of my attention to their important substantive questions.

This conversation is all about bearing faithful witness: to what I have written, yes, but more importantly to what I have written about: "the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim. 1:17). I therefore refer to my conversation partners as the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" (c.f., Rev. 6:1-8) not because they are harbingers of the Last Battle, but because what is ultimately at stake in this discussion is God's self-revelation. To speak well of God is the theologian's most important mandate, and also the most difficult. I have therefore prayed over this book more than any other. Even so, I do not for a moment think that I have mastered the territory. On the contrary: "I came, I saw, I stammered..."

Fortunately for me, this is not a court session. I am not officially on trial (as far as I know). At the same time, one who seeks to give faithful witness in word and deed to the living God is, in one sense, *always* on trial, for it is the theologian's vocation to give sound and discerning testimony to God's works of love and words of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

Fred Sanders

And so to the first paper. Reading Fred Sanders's beautifully written response was like going to the dentist. This analogy works only if you know something about my dentist. He is extremely competent, yet his probing is the gentlest imaginable. He sees what he needs to see without inflicting any discomfort – and he typically tells me that everything is fine. In other words, I very much enjoyed my time in Dr. Sanders's dentist chair. There are many wonderful lines I could cite, but perhaps my favorite contrasts what I say about the God who can speak but not suffer (i.e., the God of communicative theism), which I commend, with "the one who cannot really speak, but can't help but suffer" (i.e., the God of kenotic relational panentheism), which I criticize.

Paul Ricoeur, the subject of my doctoral work, typically had two standard ways of responding to people who commented on his work. The polite, non-committal response, was "Thank you. You have contributed to my self-understanding." Sanders's piece does this for me, especially in the paragraphs where he unpacks the method in my remythologizing madness. To hear Ricoeur tell it, his thought developed haphazardly, through a series of detours where each new book would take up a problem leftover from the previous one. (I can relate). Ricoeur therefore reserved his second response for those select few essays that were able to display the coherence of his thought better than he could himself. Sanders's paper does this for me.

I like the way Sanders contextualizes my project. It's true: John Robinson would be horrified to see a Cambridge University Press academic theology book waxing enthusiastic about a voice from heaven. Perhaps this is an appropriate occasion to recount the story of my one encounter with the Bishop of Woolwich. It was in 1978. I was a religious studies major as an undergraduate at Westmont College, and he had been invited to speak on campus. I won the student lottery to pick him up at LAX and drive him back to Santa Barbara. In preparation for the eighty-mile ride, I read his *Honest to God*, and much else besides. I was fully prepared to show him the error of his Tillichian ways, and I had ninety minutes in which to do it. We met at the airport without incident, but his request to sit in the backseat as we arrived at the parking lot did not bode well. Apparently the good Bishop was not entirely confident that the Ground of our Being could ensure his safety on the California freeway system. Not to worry: he could not escape from my clutches so easily. I was resourceful; I had a rear-view mirror. So, once we entered the freeway I settled into the slow lane, cleared my throat, and asked my first question. I cannot now recall exactly what it was about, but his answer is seared in my memory: "I'm sorry, I need to save my voice for the lecture." And that was that. True story—honest to God!

In truth, I suspect Robinson was being less than totally honest. To the extent that his book was successful, it depended on borrowed theological capi-

tal. Indeed, a great deal of what contemporary theologians have to say about God is insufficiently grounded insofar as they deny that God communicates in actual words. I do not understand how contemporary theologians find it possible to speak of a forgiving God unless they can also affirm a speaking God. How else could we know that God is a forgiving God unless God first says, "I forgive you"? All this to say that Fred's framing of my book is exactly right.

And I think, or at least I hope, that he is right in his three main points: that I have (finally!) moved beyond method to matter; that I pay attention to what Scripture says and how it says it; that none of this makes sense without the Trinity (though the better book to read on this latter subject is surely Fred's *The Deep Things of God*).

Fred identifies my "primary doctrine": *that God communicates*. Yes, this is my first theology, and a clear example of how one's theological method is shaped by one's concrete material theological convictions. Note: "communicating" means "making common." In my book I argue that God shares not only his thought (i.e., in revelation), but also his very life (i.e., in redemption). If I focus on communicating, it is because this is what God does with words, including the words of Scripture, and supremely by means of his living Word: God makes common or shares his light, life, and love with those who are not God. *That God communicates* was the key concept that justified the use of the theatrical imagery in *The Drama of Doctrine*, the explicit focus of *First Theology*, and the implicit assumption of *Is there a Meaning in this Text? Remythologizing Theology*, however, pauses to interrogate the premise itself: what must God *be* in order to do what the Bible depicts him as doing (i.e., communicating)? I agree with Sanders's spin on my project: It is a communicative variation on a classical theistic theme. He is also right to observe that one of my main motivations was to confront the "new orthodoxy"—that is, the emerging coalition of kenotic relational open and panentheistic theologians—just as the main motivation for writing *Is there a Meaning* was to take on the more virulent strains of postmodern hermeneutics. Theology is always occasional, situated in particular contexts, even when it has systematic ambitions.

Finally, Sanders correctly sees that a focus on God's communicative action—which I also treat under the rubric of "authorship"—means attending not only to what God says but how God says it. I am grateful for the extended quote from George Steiner, which bears out my preference of the theist Dostoevsky, buried in a Christian graveyard, over the Moral Therapeutic Deism of Tolstoy, who was "borne to his grave in the first civil burial ever held in Russia." Fred is also right to highlight how much my unpacking of the logic of divine authorship owes to John Frame (to whom I dedicated the book) and his theology of Lordship.

John Franke

I turn now to John Franke's paper. Franke and Sanders agree about the centrality of the notion of divine communicative action. Yet Franke is less comfortable with the notion that God's communicative agency is *the* formal and material principle of theology. More on that in a moment. Let me begin with Franke's claim that *Remythologizing Theology* "is decisively devoted to methodological considerations." Decisively. Devoted. This makes it sound as if I worship at the shrine of methodology. I am therefore disappointed that Franke does not see the decisive, devoted turn to the subject matter of theology that Fred has identified. John is calling my "conversion" into question! In my own personal narrative, I view *Remythologizing Theology* as a kind of prequel to *Drama of Doctrine* that sets forth the doctrine of God on which my proposal about the nature of doctrine depends. Of course, this does not affect, or soften, the force of his substantive question: am I really intending the model I am proposing to eclipse other approaches to God? Before answering, I need to unpack the question. Franke is rubbed raw by what seem to him to be "the pretension of either/or metaphysical assertions about God." He suggests that if I were more attuned to Scripture, I would realize that the principle of accommodation ought to make us wary of such overarching assertions. John here raises some of the most fundamental challenges every theologian has to face: how to move from the first order biblical discourse (i.e., *mythos*) to second order theological discourse (i.e., *logos*), and whether or not to construe this second order discourse as metaphysical. Unlike Franke, I do not see accommodation as a threat to speaking truly (and even ontologically) of God but rather its enabling condition. We would be in real trouble as theologians charged with speaking of God if God himself had *not* stooped to speak into our situation via ordinary human language! But he has, and seeking understanding of what God has said is intrinsic to the theology's task.

It is one thing to say that human beings lack the capacity to know God. Our native intellectual and moral resources are finite, and can take us only so far. It is quite another thing to suggest that language itself somehow blocks the way to the knowledge of God because of its inherent creaturely limitations. Yes, human users of language are fallen; need it follow that language *per se* is so corrupt as to be unable to signify God? I do not see why it has to. Franke himself admits that God truly reveals himself despite the creaturely nature of the appointed communicative medium, whether human language or Jesus' humanity. Yet he concludes that the glass is half-empty—language is subject to "inherent limitations"—whereas I see it as half-full, that is, able analogically to refer to the way God is.

It's all in the book of Hebrews, which explains that it is precisely in his humanity that the Son is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint [*character*] of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). Hebrews 1 also tells us that the Son is the final definitive word in a series of earlier words. And we know from

John 1 that the Son is the Word of God that was with God and was God from the beginning (John 1:1-2). This Word made flesh, who in turn speaks words to others, is himself the embodied personal communicative activity of God; there is nothing here to suggest that Jesus' humanity or human language limit his ability truly to reveal and mediate God. Indeed, I would argue that the sufficiency of language is implied by the sufficiency of Scripture.[1]

To be fair, Franke does not question God's ability to reveal truth as much as our ability to receive it in unadulterated fashion. Must the quest for understanding be a quest for a single model, he wonders? Do I intend the model of God that I propose in *Remythologizing Theology*—what I variously term *communicative theism* or *Trinitarian dialogical theism*—to be the *only* right way of thinking about God, to the exclusion of all other models and, if so, how do I handle the patent *contextuality* and *plurality* that characterize both the biblical text and theological tradition? These are entirely proper, and extremely challenging questions, and Franke poses them pointedly. Here I stand; I cannot shirk them.

On the one hand, it does not initially sound right, to my ears at least, to say that there can be many ontologies of God. God is one. Is that simply one model among others? God is love. Is that simply one perspective among others? Relatedly: does God suffer change as a result of what happens in the world? There are only so many ways that one can think God's reality in relationship to the world: pantheism, Deism, theism, and panentheism. Does Franke think that more than one of these models can be true at the same time, or is he basically a theist who wants me to allow him some pluralistic breathing room within this one model? (I suspect the latter.) Is God triune (three persons in one nature) and, if so, must God's triunity be part of every Christian's confession? It seems to me that there can be only one right answer to such questions.

On the other hand, as Aristotle famously commented, "Being may be said in many ways."[2] That is, we can speak of being in terms of several different kinds of categories (e.g., substance, quantity, quality, relation, etc.). Something similar pertains to God: God is one, yet there are many things we can, and must, say (e.g., that God is love, merciful, just, etc.). Some formulations of divine simplicity (the doctrine that each of God's attributes is essential to

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[1] On the sufficiency of Scripture, see Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[2] This, at least, is how many philosophers refer to his statement. The actual wording is "That which is may be so called in several ways." (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, *Books Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon* [trans. Christopher Kirwan; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993], p. 1).

God's being) maintain that each divine attribute is a perspective on the whole of God's being.[3]

Back to Franke's concern: do I believe that my book sets forth the one true description of God's being? Do I want my model of God's being-in-communicative-act to eclipse all other models? Or, am I open to other ways of thinking about God's being and God's relationship to the world? The short answer is that I view my proposal as a retooling, not a displacement, of classical theism, and that I think that *Christian theism may be said (i.e., expounded) in many ways*.

In speaking of "retooling" Christian theism I mean to call attention to the new concepts (e.g., authorship; communicative action) I suggest for doing the work of thinking about God and the God-world relationship. Indeed, they are not wholly new, though the way I deploy them may be. To use John Frame's term: I am offering communicative act as a "perspective" on God's being.[4] Like the divine attributes, it is one way of regarding the whole of God's being. To speak of perspectives is to acknowledge what I think Franke wants me to acknowledge, namely, that I am a finite creature who sees in part. I cannot see everything at once, as God does. At the same time (and here Franke may disagree), I want to claim that what I see through my perspective is true not only for me, but also for everyone, inasmuch as my perspective discloses an aspect of God's reality. It is the truth, and nothing but the truth, though not the *whole* truth.

The whole truth, or what God saw fit to reveal of it, is inscribed in the order of things and the *ordo salutis*, as described in the Scriptures. What God knows—God's perspective, as it were—is the white light of absolute truth. What we have in Scripture, a plurality of human perspectives, is the divinely inspired refraction of this light—a canonical coat of many colors. Each of these canonical perspectives gives us access to a particular aspect of God's truth and reality. Franke will shout "Huzzah!" when I say that it takes a plurality of canonical perspectives fully to render theological truth.[5] This is my working assumption: that systematic theologians need to attend to the variety of authorial voices, forms of biblical discourse, and theological perspectives in Scripture.

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[3] So John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), pp. 225-30.

[4] For the genesis of Frame's understanding of perspective, see his "Backgrounds to my Thought," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame* (ed. John J. Hughes; Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), pp. 12-13. See also Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism" (2008), available at http://www.frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/.

[5] For Franke's own position, see his *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009).

I do not concede the point that the exegete is more biblical than the systematic theologian simply because the latter works with abstract constructions. On the contrary: theologians too clarify the grammar of the text, though on a deeper level. Wittgenstein once wrote: "*Essence* is expressed by grammar. Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar)."[6] Implied in what we say about things is what we think these things *are*. *I believe that our grammatical analysis of biblical discourse is theologically incomplete until we have spelled out its ontological implications*. Hence the project of remythologizing theology, which is nothing more or less than spelling out the ontological implications of God's almighty loving communicative acts.

The canon is a manifold witness to a *unified*, and *ordered*, reality. Ontology is about discerning this deeper order of reality, the *grammar* of things. I do not claim that the notion of being as communicative act exhausts what can be said about this grammar, but I do think I am parsing things correctly. I therefore wonder whether Franke inadvertently short-circuits the move from exegesis to theology, and hence faith's search for understanding, by exaggerating the inadequacy of second-order theological discourse to its subject matter.

I agree with Franke about the pretension of metaphysics if by "metaphysics" we mean a ready-made set of categories that we impose on Scripture. There are numerous examples of theologians doing this. It is all too tempting to ride the categorical coattails of whatever metaphysic happens to be the most fashionable. The aim of remythologizing, however, is the countercultural way of deep exegesis and theo-ontology. The task is to mine the Bible's own categories, or categories strongly suggested by the Bible, in order to unpack the ontological implications of what Scripture says about God.

Does Franke get me right? Not if he thinks that my abiding interest is in philosophical issues and prolegomena. On the contrary: I think the matter of theology must determine its method. Faith seeks understanding by conceptually elaborating the ontology implicit in biblical discourse. Am I proposing my approach as the only way to speak well of God? No, because though I believe that God's being and knowledge are absolute, I also believe that God's being may be said in many ways, that there are a variety of canonical perspectives that highlight this or that aspect of God's being. At the same time, I do think that the communicative variation on classical theism that I propound perceives something truth about God's being, and consequently that versions of kenotic relational theism and panentheism are wrong. Mine is a perspective that is open to other canonical perspectives, but not indefinitely so.

Theologians must avoid absolutizing any one canonical or categorical perspective. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge legitimate conceptual gains and theological insights. I am therefore troubled at the thought that African theologians (or anyone else!) might ignore the Nicene insight that the

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[6] *Philosophical Investigations* 3rd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), p. 116

Son is *homoousios* with the Father. Yes, the term is Greek, and it reeks of ontology (it means "of the same substance"). Nevertheless, it is a true perspective on the nature of the Godhead and the identity of Jesus Christ. We should no more despise or relativize *homoousios* just because it is culturally situated than we should relativize Newton's Second Law of Motion—$F = ma$ (force = mass x acceleration)—just because he was a seventeenth-century Englishman. Truth is truth, whether it concerns physics or metaphysics, regardless of its point of origin.

Scripture shows God to be a communicative agent. I therefore believe that what I say about divine ontology is true. That God is a communicative agent is not the only thing one can say about God, however, just as there are other things to say about force than what Newton says in his Second Law. As Newton's Second Law holds good for people in twenty-first century Guatemela and Tibet as, so what I say about God's communicative agency, to the extent that it gets the ontological grammar of Scripture right, is true for everyone, everywhere, and at all times. Again: it is the truth, but not the whole truth of the matter of God's being.

As to Franke's second issue, concerning the pastoral function of a remythologized theology, I have time for a brief response only. He raises a legitimate concern, though the specific issue of homosexuality may not be the best illustration. As far as I am aware, there is nothing about my view of Scripture that lends itself to be co-opted by the GLBT community. I have written essays on homosexuality and transsexuality elsewhere.[7] In general, I argue that the purpose of doctrine is to minister reality and direct the church in the ways of fitting participation in this reality. The reality in question, of course, is the new creation the Father is bringing into being in the Son through the Spirit. Because I view Scripture as divine discourse, I give pride of place to Scripture's renderings of reality. So, when the Bible says that God created humanity men and women, I take this as normative for the created order. Doctrine thus directs men and women to participate fittingly in the biological sex to which they have been cast as actors.

Steven Wellum

It is a special delight to be able to respond to Steve Wellum's paper. Steve was a student of mine in the 1980s, and I recognize the same inquisitive, careful, and sustained probing in today's response that I saw in his earlier work. I am particularly pleased to see that Wellum has mellowed in his middle-age: my writing no longer frustrates, but only annoys him. The good news is that he declares my book "thoroughly orthodox and evangelical." Phew! But seri-

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[7] See, for example, my "Always performing? Playing new scenes with creative fidelity: the drama-of-redemption approach," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (ed. Gary Meadors; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), pp. 151-99.

ously: Wellum here shows himself to be the model reader, one who works hard to get things right before he points out things he thinks are wrong.

Wellum raises two interconnected methodological issues concerning the place of Scripture's literary forms in my theology and my general use of Scripture. First, he wonders whether I exaggerate the significance of literary genre. Like me, he is happy to admit that we need to pay attention to literary form for the sake of interpretation and determining the author's illocutionary intent. But he is not at all sure that they have any other significance than as a means to an interpretive (and propositional?) end. For my own part, I think that the forms of biblical discourse do more than provide packaging for theological content. The challenge is to specify what this "more" involves, a point to which I shall return below.

Wellum objects in particular to my claim that canonical diversity leads to and legitimates theological diversity. Where Franke does not see enough plurality, Wellum sees too much. We need here to proceed cautiously: too much what, exactly? The first thing to be said is that I am careful to locate diversity on the level of vocabulary (e.g., metaphors) and concepts, not the more fundamental judgments that underlie them (e.g., ontological judgments). A second preliminary observation: diversity is not the same thing as indeterminacy or contradiction. To be sure, there is a certain tension in saying that the same basic theological judgment may be rendered in more than one set of concepts, some of which catch certain nuances better than others. But we need only think of the various metaphors to describe the saving significance of Jesus' cross to see how canonical perspectives generate theological perspectives. It appears that Franke is reacting to the boldness of my speech about God (he's making ontological claims—how dare he!), and Wellum to its humility (he's not claiming absoluteness for his claims—so why bother?).

I concede Wellum's point: Scripture itself does not often call attention to its literary forms. For example, when Matthew uses Exodus, he does not seem to be concerned about the poetics of biblical narrative. On the other hand, when Jesus in Luke 4:12 cites Deuteronomy 6:16 "You shall not put the Lord you God to the test" to rebut Satan's use of Scripture (Ps. 91:11-12 "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you"), he is doing more than using one revealed proposition to trump another. He is tacitly inserting these texts into a larger (canonical) form, the narrative or drama of redemption. The real issue is not whose proposition is truer (they're both canonical), but their place and function in the broader story (about Jesus' messianic mission). Even the devil uses revealed propositions—and dissembles (c.f., Jas. 2:19). It is not, therefore, that Satan says what is patently false, but rather that his discourse lacks fittingness. Satan's discourse displays bad form. And this is the salient point: to speak well of God we must attend both to form and content, for form is a leading indicator of fittingness.

Form is also an ingredient in "rightly handling [*orthotomeo*] the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). It is through the various literary forms of Scripture, including stories and histories, that the divine authorial imagination shapes our view of God, the world, and ourselves, thus forming us to be those who can make right judgments concerning fittingness. The patterns of communicative action in canon rule the disciple's judgments about rightness (*ortho*), in all its forms: right deliberating about truth (the orthodoxy of the head); right doing of the good (the orthopraxis of the hand); right desiring of beauty (the orthopathos of the heart). In all three cases, Scripture is useful, and authoritative, for training in covenantal fittingness. I agree with Abraham Kuyper: the reason we have so many kinds of genres in the Bible is so that God's word can strike all the chords of the human soul, not just the intellectual.

I have not worked out a full-fledged theology of literary forms. My fullest discussion these issues to date is "Love's Wisdom: the authority of Scripture's form and content for faith's understanding and theological judgment."[8] Paul Ricoeur has gestured towards what Steve is asking for in his essays "Biblical Time," "Naming God," and "Interpretive Narrative."[9] One of Ricoeur's line in particular continues to intrigue me: "Not just any theology can be wed to the narrative form." How much more is this the case with a theology wed to history, apocalyptic, wisdom, prophecy, law, and gospel!

Wellum also has some material questions—simple underhand pitches such as: how and why did Adam fall? how and why did Satan fall? Why not ask me to fix the economic downturn while you're at it? Joking aside: when Steve asks such questions, which ultimately concern divine communicative agency and the non-elect, he aims at what may seem the Achilles heel of my entire proposal. In speaking of a "dialogical" or "communicative" theism, am I not putting God into the position of helplessly having to wait for humans to respond to his overtures? Does God "fail" in his communicative action if and when his addressees choose not to respond in faith and obedience? Is God really all that he is in his communicative action in this case as well? Wellum acknowledges that I gesture towards this issue in relation to the hardening of Pharoah's heart (pp. 339-41), which is mentioned ten times in the book of Exodus alone, but in general he thinks my use of Scripture is "fairly sparse." If so, it is only because exegesis is so demanding and involved, and because I did not want to make a long book even longer. (For the record, a quick glance at the Scripture index to *Remythologizing Theology* shows that I refer to Scripture some 600 times and cite fifty different books of the Bible).

As to the issue itself, the argument of the book makes it clear that I affirm divine sovereignty in a way that I hope Calvin would endorse. And, though I employ the idea of dialogue (because Scripture so often depicts God

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[8] *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5 (2011), pp. 247-75.

[9] All three essays may be found in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

relating to human creatures in this way), I am careful to insist that the conversation is asymmetrical. God is in control of the conversation from first to last, and works his will effectually according to our communicative natures. As to the exegetical issue, I have dealt with Wellum's question about God's apparent "failed" communicative action and his charge about sparse exegesis in a recent essay "Divine Deception, Inception, and Communicative Action" on Ezek. 14:9, "I the Lord have deceived that prophet."[10] The challenge I set myself there was to explain the verse in light of what I argue in *Remythologizing* about God being all that he is in all that he does, and says. How are we to think about God's apparent communication of something false? I wrestled mightily for thirty-four pages with this passage, not least because it is a kind of exegetical stress fracture in the hip of Reformed theology. The stakes were high: divine trustworthiness—and the argument of my book! In one section, I explicitly address a communicative variation of the problem of evil: "the argument from communicative neglect." In a nutshell: if God's being is communicative activity and if God is true (both premises to which I say "Amen"), then is God not obligated to speak truth to everyone everywhere at all times? And if people deny the truth, does it follow that God's communicative action has misfired? The bulk of the article is exegesis. I look at divine deception in its immediate and then canonical context, and then examine six explanations of what God is doing in deceiving (e.g., God deceived only those who deserve it). I then present my own interpretation, the long and short of which is that God speaks truth, though hard-hearted sinners (and false prophets) distort that truth and so deceive themselves. God "causes" the false prophet to be deceived, then, by speaking truth to one whose heart and mind are unable rightly to receive it. In the process, God demonstrates his communicative righteousness. God is never truer, or more trustworthy, than in sovereignly proving a false person false.

I had no room in *Remythologizing Theology* to spend thirty-four pages exegeting a single text. By necessity I had to take certain things for granted. Wellum thinks that I ought to come clean: "What he should say is this: 'I am assuming the exegetical and biblical-theological work of Reformed theology and my task is to make sense of it and to theologize about it by employing new analogies.'" I now thus publicly declare: "I am assuming the exegetical and biblical-theological work of Reformed theology and my task is to make sense of it and to theologize about it by employing new analogies." There: now I feel much better...

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[10] In Michael Allen (ed.), *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), pp. 73-98.

Oliver Crisp

Wellum's concern about the conspicuous absence of apologetics in *Remythologizing Theology* is best discussed in conjunction with Oliver Crisp's paper, which makes a similar criticism. If Wellum was aiming at my Achilles' heel, Crisp targets my Achilles' spine: the alleged absence of epistemological backbone. Wellum worries that I do not give enough—or any?—reasons why my readers should (a) accept the canonical Scriptures as fully reliable and (b) accept Christianity as true. Crisp shares the same concern, cleverly suggesting that I am hoisted by my own anti-Feuerbachian petard. I see the speck of projectionism in my opponent's eye, but I do not see its beam in my own. Stated pointedly: what prevents my book's claims from being purely fideist, a mere declaration of what I happen to believe about God? What, if anything, do I need to do in order to convince others that my own account of divine self-communication is more than a clumsily devised myth? It's a good question.

Before I answer it, however, let me make a few preliminary points. First, Crisp claims that my work "is arguably the most sophisticated postmodern evangelical theology on offer today." This is a rather backhanded compliment, coming as it does from an analytic theologian. Can anything epistemologically good come out of postmodern Paris? The Anglo-American analytic industrial complex tends to think not. However, I want to know why Crisp thinks I'm postmodern. What exactly is it about my work that merits the qualifier "postmodern"? At the risk of being impertinent, I venture to suggest that Crisp could here do with greater clarity and analytic precision, though to be fair, I think I know what he has in mind, and this brings me to my second point.

Crisp has to ask if I am still a "five-point Alvinist," because Alvin Plantinga is an epistemological foundationalist while I appear to hold to some kind of postfoundationalism. The problem here is semantic, and can be fairly easily cleared up (I take full responsibility for any misunderstanding). The simple explanation is that I accepted Plantinga's objections to classical foundationalism, and his proposed positive alternative. Plantinga argues that it is rationally acceptable (warranted) to believe in the existence of God without evidence, proof, or even argument (because belief in God is "properly basic"). Initially, this seemed to be a kind of Calvinist postfoundationalism. In retrospect, however, I acknowledge that Plantinga prefers to describe his Reformed epistemology as a version of foundationalism. Understood in Plantinga's way, then, I too am happy to call myself a "modest" or "chastened" foundationalist. And I am therefore delighted to accept Crisp's proposal that belief in Scripture as normative is a properly basic belief (I say as much in *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*), especially if this lets me escape, Houdini-like, from the Problem of Projection. But does it?

I certainly do not want to be heard as arguing on Feuerbach's behalf. I wonder, however, if we can exorcise his spirit as easily as Crisp wants to. It is an attractive argument: Feuerbach cannot be right because, in fact, the actual doctrines of the New Testament (Crisp mentions the Incarnation) are not what we would expect in light of our cherished human values. In other words, the doctrines of the New Testament, especially Incarnation and atonement, do not resemble or have the feel of projected ideals. Feuerbach's story, Crisp summarily concludes, is thus "likely to be extremely unconvincing." But to whom? I know students at the University of Edinburgh who rejected their faith after reading Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*. And, interestingly enough, Feuerbach does provide a rather provocative account of the Incarnation, which for him is all about the supreme value of self-giving love. I do not find his interpretation convincing, but others do. The salient point is that the project of "proving" or "grounding" Christianity proves to be a hostage to fortune: there will never be enough evidence to convince those who insist on suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Arguments may persuade heads, but not hearts. They certainly cannot produce faith, which is not ours to achieve, but the Lord's to give.

Don't get me wrong. Apologetics was my first undergraduate love, and perhaps the reason I initially chose to double-major in religious studies and philosophy. I studied all the approaches—evidentialist, rationalist, presuppositionalist. As a missionary in France after college, I met a German philosopher studying at the Sorbonne. For months, I would spend every Friday evening in his apartment where we would argue about Christianity into the wee hours of the morning. I would then return home and stay up another hour or so transcribing what I could recall of the evening's dialogue. Apologetics was a great romantic adventure: I was a knight of faith, laying siege to the modern Teutonic mind. After several months, we ran out of topics. My friend acknowledged that I had given decent responses to his many defeaters, and that he had no further objections. I was ecstatic: "So you're a believer now?" I asked. "No," he said. "Even though I cannot give you a reason, I still cannot believe."

I view my theological vocation first and foremost as one of edifying the church by helping people of faith to seek, and find, understanding. What method I have follows from my subject matter: God's triune communicative action. I begin by trying to make sense of the testimony of the prophets and apostles: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1).

Canonical-linguistic theology begins with what most Christian theologians down through the ages have taken as givens: that God communicates not only truth but life; that the biblical texts are what they by and large claim to be, namely, set-apart human writings arising from a divine commission that, in God's grace, are ingredients in the economies of revelation and redemp-

tion; that the purpose of God's self-communication is to bring about communion in Christ Jesus. This is simply historic Christian faith. I begin with it; I do not argue to it. Does this make me irrational? By no means! Rationality on my view involves four things: first, believing what I am told. Testimony is a reliable belief-forming mechanism unless there is good reason to think otherwise. Can I prove that there was indeed a voice from heaven? Probably not. Am I warranted in believing it nevertheless? Yes, because 2 Pet. 1:16-17 tells me that the first Christians did not follow cleverly devised myths but were eyewitnesses of Jesus' majesty, for, says Peter, "we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain." Second, I am willing to subject my beliefs to critical testing. Third, I try to practice the intellectual virtues. Finally, I use transcendental arguments that show why theological presuppositions are necessary. Indeed, *Remythologizing Theology* is in one sense an extended transcendental argument: unless we presuppose the reliable testimony of Scripture to God's communicative action, we will be unable to speak well of God.

Conclusion

Both Crisp and Wellum refer to the apparent vulnerability of my appeal to divine discourse. What is the grounding, where is the defense? Let me say two things by way of a final response.

First, theologians should never back down when either reality or rationality is the issue. What is in dispute is how best to speak and think about reality. I am not averse to giving evidences as part of an overall strategy, but theological argumentation ultimately requires more. What more? In personal correspondence Crisp mentioned that he had, like Captain Ahab, traversed the seven seas in search of the great White Whale of my epistemology, but all he could find were a few minnows here and there. Well, he missed two good fishing ponds. One, an article on "Theology and Apologetics," is out in the open (in the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*[11]). The other, "The Trials of Truth: mission, martyrdom, and the epistemology of the cross", is a bit harder to find.[12]

Both essays make clear that my key apologetic categories are less epistemological than *martyrological*: staking knowledge and truth claims is ultimately a matter of bearing faithful witness, of enduring any and all critical tests, epistemological and existential alike. The operative concept, I believe, is *faithful witness*, and the paradigmatic faithful witness is Jesus Christ, God's personal

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[11] *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (ed. Campbell Campbell-Jack and Gavin J. McGrath; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) pp. 35-43.

[12] In Andrew Kirk and Kevin Vanhoozer (eds.), *To Stake a Claim: Christian Mission in Epistemological Crisis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) pp. 120-56 (and subsequently republished as ch. 12 in my *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002]).

truth claim made flesh. Like Jesus, we bear faithful witness when we speak the truth in love and act out love in truth. When we formulate and live out Christian truth claims, and accord them epistemic primacy, all other truths will fall into their proper place. The canonical Scriptures provide the fiduciary framework for making one wise unto salvation and for forming godliness.

What I am after in theology and apologetics alike is sapience: holy wisdom. A sapiential apologetics is a defense of the whole Christian way, truth, and life that we undertake, as individual disciples and corporately as church, by bearing faithfulness witness in word and deed, at particular places and at particular times, to the truth and character of God. What apologists need to defend is not simply the existence of God but the *wisdom* of God displayed on the cross. This involves a willingness to endure all kinds of critical testing: physical, spiritual, historical, as well as philosophical. Bearing faithful witness involves a willingness to adopt a cruciform pattern of life. Arguments alone are not enough: the church needs to live out the truth of Jesus Christ and participate, in the power of the Spirit, in the drama of redemption. It is hard to argue against a loving community. Apologetics is a species of martyrdom, and ultimately a matter of (you guessed it) communicative action.

Why begin with divine discourse? The second thing I want to say by way of response is that Scripture itself repeatedly starts here, with a call to the people of God to hear, hearken to, and heed God's word. God calls Adam, Abraham, Moses and the prophets, and finally the apostles. In every case the mandate is to listen to, understand, and do what God says. And with this thought we return as well to my opening comments about the convergence of my theological method with the subject matter of theology.

While there are surely other ways of starting the subject matter of Christian theology, one particularly fruitful way is to speak of God in communicative action. Yes, God has spoken in various ways and at diverse times and climactically by his Son (Heb. 1:1-2), but all these ways are species of God's communicative action.[13] Even revelation is not as large a category as communicative action. Note, too, that redemption as well is a kind of communication, whereby God shares with finite creatures, in Christ through the Spirit, his own eternal life. The concept of communicative action is all-embracing, and reminds us that the triune God shares (i.e., communicates) his light, life, and love in many ways. Communicative action also embraces Scripture itself inasmuch as it not only transmits information but also serves as a rich medium by which God interpersonally relates via his promises, commands, warns,

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[13] "The Word of God which we hear in the Holy Scriptures derives from and reposes on the inner Being of the One God; and that is its objective ground, deep in the eternal Being of God, upon which our knowledge of God rests. In his own eternal Essence God is not mute or dumb, but Word communicating or speaking himself" (T. F. Torrance, "Knowledge of God and Speech about him according to John Calvin," in his *Theology in Reconstruction* [London: SCM, 1965], p. 88).

consoles, etc. All of the things God does in Scripture are types of communicative action intended to establish and govern right covenantal relations for the sake of communion.

Why begin with divine discourse? Because "in the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1), and because the word of God is the singular enabling condition of theology. Of course, remythologizing theology—the attempt to think God and God's thoughts after God's self-presentation in Scripture—is only the first step in the broader project of *recontextualizing* the knowledge of God. The goal of Christian theology is eminently practical and pastoral: to equip and edify the people so that they can speak well of God, and live well towards God and one another. In the final analysis, theology exists to help the church demonstrate the wisdom and truth of Jesus Christ in its corporate life. Theology directs the church faithfully and fittingly to live out, in a variety of cultural contexts, the truth and character of God communicated in Christ and the canonical Scriptures that attest him.