

**Biblical Authority After Babel.
Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of
Mere Protestant Christianity**

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016

270pp with Bibliography and Indexes.

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D.Th., author of *Paul Ricoeur &
Living Hermeneutics. Exploring
Ricoeur's Contribution to Biblical
Interpretation* (2016); *From Evolution
to Eden. Making Sense of Early Genesis*
(2015), and many other books.

In the midst of challenging debates today over the potential liabilities of the Protestant Reform (schism, skepticism, chaos), Vanhoozer's book attempts to rescue Protestantism from its critics through an examination and retrieval of five Solas. He argues that these teachings are the key to unlock the door to reclaiming the best of Protestant Christianity. I must say that I'm not entirely sure why this work is titled as it is, since biblical authority is clearly not its *main* topic. At any rate, what we do have here is of interest and pertinence for the church. You may agree or disagree, or find yourself not fully in one camp or the other concerning the Protestant Reformation, but whatever your conclusions are it should be acknowledged that this book is another well researched volume from the lively pen of Vanhoozer, a fine scholar who approaches his work with passion, lucidity, and rigor.

The informative Introduction to the book (thirty pages) deals in particular with questions concerning a possible *crisis* caused by Protestantism: which interpretation of the biblical text is correct? whose theological authority is primary? and

what is the church? and then offers responses shaped into various *retrievals*: the Solas; the priesthood of all believers; and church unity, which attempt to give weight and value to the position Vanhoozer holds concerning his notion of a 'Mere Protestant Christianity.' The core of this book is centered on *defending* the Protestant Reformation of the past and *retrieving* it for the present. We now turn to explore how the author attempts to accomplish this.

The first chapter examines 'Grace Alone.' Vanhoozer begins with an assessment of what the Protestant Reformers meant by *Sola Gratia*. For them God was a God of grace and grace was revealed through Christ and the cross. The author then turns to explore the 'ontology' and 'teleology' of grace. The *ontology* of grace, Vanhoozer suggests, is to be found in the Triune God – God's 'being' is primary and out of this comes what he refers to as the 'self-communicative action' of God, which comprises 'light, life and love' and results in the gift of salvation. The *teleology* of grace points to a lasting 'communion' with God via the church as the 'house' that God builds and will sustain. Lastly, Vanhoozer engages the thorny issue of grace and authority – who decides what biblical meanings are appropriate and which interpretation, out of many possibilities, carries authority? His responses to these questions are thoughtful and challenging. He then posits four theses in concluding the chapter that aim to highlight a biblical hermeneutics for 'mere Protestant Christians.'

Chapter two investigates 'Faith Alone.' Vanhoozer argues that the Protestant Reformation saw *Sola Fide* as the neces-

sary response to the works of the law for salvation in Christ. Faith is the essential and a believer receives salvation through faith as a gift of God. But who's to say the Reformation and more generally Protestantism has come to the right conclusions on matters of faith? The author appeals to *philology* and *pneumatology* as two dimensions of authority that lead in the Protestant direction. Prior to developing this further, Vanhoozer first briefly discusses what turn out, in his opinion, to be three unhelpful strategies (Medieval Allegory, Modern Historical Criticism, and Postmodern Pragmatism) for how faith, philology, and understanding are connected. Building off the *failure* of these approaches, he returns to and suggests a recasting of the authority issues through Protestantism and its retrieval of Scripture, which he argues will lead to a 'right' understanding of faith, interpretation, and authority. What Vanhoozer refers to as 'the principle of authority' is now addressed with three questions in mind: 1) What authority? 2) How does it relate to rationality? 3) What role does it play in interpretation?

- 1) Vanhoozer places the Triune God at the center of authority. This amounts to the authoritative voice of God communicating through the biblical text as God's own speech.
- 2) Such authority, Vanhoozer contends, is related to rationality. He appeals to the Holy Spirit and various philosophers, including Polanyi, Zagzebski, and Plantinga, and theologians, including Webster and Lindbeck to make his case.
- 3) For Vanhoozer this means that 'faith alone' is not a license for interpreters to use the biblical text in any way they like, but rather rationality and it

numerous aspects must be connected to faith and the authoritative text. According to Vanhoozer, when this orientation for interpretation is acknowledged, it will curb and set aright the interpretative free for all often associated with the Protestant Reformation.

The chapter concludes with restating that Divine authority comes from Divine authorship; God's 'rightful say-so' in the Bible. Whether Vanhoozer equates these two too closely in his zeal to defend 'mere Protestant Christianity' is a question that his readers will have to reflect on carefully. The author then adds four more theses that aim to solidify his retrieval of *Sola Fide*.

Chapter three addresses 'Scripture Alone.' *Sola Scriptura* is, according to Vanhoozer, perhaps the most 'challenging' sola to retrieve. Many begrudge its usefulness, while others suggest it is at the root of doctrinal chaos and church divisions. Vanhoozer refutes these charges. He argues that all too often interpreters take this sola without the rest and this is where much misunderstanding arises. The author calls for an *integrated approach* that relates the solas to each other and suggests that this will help us to understand *Sola Scriptura* as one piece of a bigger theological dynamic. As in his previous chapters, he begins with an overview of the Reformers' position. Vanhoozer contends that Scripture alone was not understood to mean that it was the only source for theology, but that it was the 'primary authority.' Thus, the traditions or teachings of the church were relevant, but not thought of as infallible, since this authoritative stance belonged to Scripture alone. Interpretive authority, according to Vanhoozer and his interpre-

tation of the Reformers, rests in Scripture and because Scripture interprets Scripture it is its own authority. In addition this, the author argues there are several other aspects connected to the Protestant notion of *Sola Scriptura*. Vanhoozer highlights clarity: God's self-communication is clear and this is far more trustworthy than the church or a subjective point of view; and sufficiency: Scripture is sufficient for the use God has for it. He then moves from here to an insightful discussion of Scripture and tradition and to a further development of the issue of biblical authority. Vanhoozer brings the chapter to a close with four additional theses that intend to defend his arguments on *Sola Scriptura*. There are a couple of questions and reflections that I would like to raise at this point.

How can the Bible have authority after Babel or better, I'd wager we might want to ask: how does the Bible have authority, not merely after Babel, but at all? Unfortunately, Vanhoozer never really responds to these types of questions. He seems to assume, rather than argue, that God exists and that the Bible *is* the Word of God and thus authoritative. It's fine, for example, to say that 'Scripture interprets Scripture' or that the biblical text is like a 'musical score' or the 'voice' of God is revealed in Scripture or the Bible is the 'final' authority for theological assessment. Surely, these are valuable ways of speaking if one assumes that the Bible is authoritative. But none of these 'speech acts' in itself is an argument for establishing that authority. In effect, it seems likely to this reviewer at any rate, that the biblical text cannot be deemed 'authoritative' on its own. That is, the Bible should be placed into a *dialogue* with other informers, notably the *natural world*, in order to consider its reliability or vulnerability with respect to its claims.

For Vanhoozer, theology (extracted from the Bible) is always in charge. But surely this is an unfortunate reductionism on his part. What's in charge depends on what one is talking about. When it comes to God and the world, for example, scientific views must be taken into consideration. Theology cannot go it alone. Thus, instead of one informer, we are in need of a *multiplicity of informers* that are to be put into dialogue with each other in order to achieve a more holistic explanation of the subject at hand, as we hopefully move towards optimal understanding.

In chapter four Vanhoozer considers *Solus Christus*. Christ alone, for the Reformers, was the conviction that it was only Christ who could open the way of salvation between humanity and God; he was the mediator and fulfilled the three offices of: prophet, priest, and king. In addition to being saved by Christ alone, believers are offered communion with God in Christ and union with each other. This notion of *unity* leads Vanhoozer to develop a section on Christology and Ecclesiology where he strongly argues for a Protestant Reformation view of a distinction between Christ and the church. It is Christ alone, not the church and Christ, where salvation is found. Building off these two major themes, Vanhoozer explores what for him is a major point of mere Protestant Christianity: the royal priesthood; the priesthood of all believers. In his view, the Protestant Reform never intended this to mean that everyone can be their own interpreter of the biblical text and that all interpretations are equal. Rather, Luther and others, according to Vanhoozer, were standing against the thought and practice of the Roman Catholic Church that assumed that its clergy was spiritually superior to lay people. Following this exposition there is an

extended discussion of the keys of the Kingdom and a valuable comparison of the views of Catholicism and Protestantism on this topic. Vanhoozer concludes with four additional theses.

The final chapter is *Soli Deo Gloria* – to God alone the glory. This last sola is portrayed as the essential ingredient for the previous four. Vanhoozer begins with the debate over the Lord’s Supper and the division this brought about in the Protestant Reformation. He builds off this to develop a broader discussion of church unity and denominationalism. Unity is crucial and is related to the core of the gospel. Denominations are acceptable when they make room for various views and differences among believers where *legitimate* disagreement would be welcome without shattering unity. Vanhoozer continues with a brief but useful overview of how church unity in diversity might find a way forward. What might be viable strategies for a growing unity? Do we have a possibility of standing within a tradition and outside at the same time? Vanhoozer responds, ‘yes,’ embracing a both/and perspective. He argues that not all differences bring about division and goes on to give a picture of what something like this could look like. Everything the church is should be devoted to the

glory of God. Taking time and engaging in dialogue is a good start, but Vanhoozer has more suggestions about how the church can be complete in Christ. The chapter comes to a close with four final theses.

The valuable Conclusion to the book summarizes the author’s arguments on each of the five solas, while also responding to three Protestant weaknesses: ‘core doctrines, visible unity, and interpretive authority.’ Vanhoozer offers several reflections on a way forward. Further, as has been argued at numerous points, he deeply believes that the Protestant Reformation did not loose ‘interpretive anarchy upon the world,’ or is it ‘responsible for the pervasive pluralism that bedevils society, the academy, and the church.’ Whether or not his arguments are persuasive, the reader will have to decide. I’d wager the book is a worthwhile read, but the question of biblical authority remains, I suggest, still dangling and thus unresolved.

A final caveat. Throughout the book Vanhoozer uses proof texts from the Bible, either following the Reformers, or from his own expertise as a *systematic* theologian. In both cases the reader should be aware that there is no exegesis of the biblical text in this volume.