

## The Value of Speech Act Theory for Interpretation

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Several years ago, a student informed me that parts of the Bible are neither errant nor inerrant. This was part of his report on Speech Act Theory. How can parts of Scripture be neither errant nor inerrant? By putting “the semantics of biblical literature on the [allegedly] surer ground of a speech act philosophy of language,”<sup>1</sup> which is what some evangelicals are doing these days. Stivers selects Nicholas Wolterstorff, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Nancey Murphy as three notable advocates of speech act theory.<sup>2</sup> Since speech act theorists do not necessarily agree with one another on all points, for practicality purposes this paper will focus on only one person, Kevin Vanhoozer, who seems to have wielded the widest influence in circles that I am familiar with.

Caneday endorses Vanhoozer's canonical-linguistic approach as superior to Grenz and Franke's cultural-linguistic method because Vanhoozer bases his theological method on the Bible.<sup>3</sup> But is this a blanket endorsement of Vanhoozer's use of speech act theory? I think not. It is just an improvement over Grenz and Franke.

Goldsworthy expresses some optimism about an evangelical use of speech act theory, but reserves final judgment until further evaluations come in.<sup>4</sup> Allison investigates the impact of speech act theory on the issue of inerrancy-infallibility without the intention of evaluating it or embracing it.<sup>5</sup> He concludes that all speech acts can be classified as inerrant or errant except for directives, because one cannot know whether or not the world will conform to words of a command, warning, or request.<sup>6</sup>

The response of the scholarly world of philosophers and linguists to speech act theory has thus been mixed. As an exegete who is neither a philosopher nor a linguist, I offer an evaluation of speech act theory from the standpoint of the results that it yields.

### Speech Act Theory as Relates to Inerrancy

Speech act theory as applied to written materials views the Bible as a collection of divine-human speech acts. After disposing of the evangelical concept of propositional revelation espoused by such as Carl Henry and the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Vanhoozer offers the following:

The model we would like to propose has the distinct advantage of being palatable to common

<sup>1</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Forms,” in *Hermeneutics Authority and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 103

<sup>2</sup>Dan R. Stiver, “Felicity and Fusion: Speech Act Theory and Hermeneutical Philosophy,” *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology: Reason, Meaning and Experience*, eds. Kevin Vanhoozer and Martin Warner (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 146.

<sup>3</sup>A. B. Caneday, “Is Theological Truth Functional or Propositional? Postconservatism's Use of Language Games and Speech-Act Theory,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, eds. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 156.

<sup>4</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity, 2006), 215-16.

<sup>5</sup>Gregg R. Allison, “Speech Act Theory and Its Implications for the Doctrine of the inerrancy/infallibility of Scripture,” *Philosophia Christi* 18 (Spring 1995):19 n. 41.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 14.

sense. This model tries to explain how ordinary literature works rather than seek to ‘perfect it by putting it into some other form.’ What we have in mind is a variation of the ‘speech act’ theory of language—which was fathered by J. I. Austin and brought to conceptual maturity by John Searle.<sup>7</sup>

He continues,

Austin distinguished three components of the total speech act: (a) the *locutionary act* “is roughly equivalent to ‘meaning’ in the traditional sense,” (b) the *illocutionary act* is what we do *in* saying something, and (c) the *perlocutionary act* is “what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading.”<sup>8</sup>

Vanhoozer also emphasizes the importance of genre in interpretation. Following C. S. Lewis, he points out the richness of various genres in formulating various biblical discourses:

He [i.e., Lewis] suggests that two biblical passages may not be inerrant in exactly the same way; that is, not every biblical statement must state historical truth. Inerrancy must be construed broadly enough to encompass the truth expressed in Scripture’s poetry, romances, proverbs, parables— as well as histories.<sup>9</sup>

Vanhoozer’s preference for the term “infallibility” over “inerrancy” is clear when he makes “inerrancy” a “*subset* of infallibility.”<sup>10</sup> He supports this preference by noting, “When exegetes examine the total speech act situation, it will be seen that biblical texts are often more concerned with effective communication rather than scientific precision or exactness.”<sup>11</sup>

Where he seems to go out of bounds is in his view that narrative sections may be fictional. He uses Jesus’ illustration of the prodigal son. He asks the question, “Is every sentence of the Gospels ‘true’? This question errs in ignoring the total discourse act context and literary form. Is it ‘true’ that ‘A certain man had two sons’?”<sup>12</sup>

Yet his illustration of the prodigal son does not illustrate fiction in narrative literature. The factual part is that Jesus actually spoke the illustration; that is the substance of the narrative, not that a certain man had two sons. Inerrancy pertains to the historical account of what Jesus did. Nothing is fictional about that.

He further supports his preference for “infallibility” with this reasoning:

To say, then, that speech acts are infallible is to say (1) that the speech acts satisfy the

<sup>7</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture’s Diverse Literary Forms,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 86. Vanhoozer would apparently look askance at any insitutional statement of faith, because it puts biblical truth in propositional form rather than leaving it in its biblical form. Since biblical inerrancy is a doctrine derived from propositional revelation, he prefers to view it as a subpoint of biblical infalibility.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. (emphasis in the original)

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 95 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 95; cf. *ibid.*, 382 n. 213.

necessary formal conditions for the *successful* performance of a particular illocutionary act (i.e., the speaker sincerely believes that he is justified in what he is saying) and (2) that the speech acts *correspond to reality* in a manner appropriate for their particular illocutionary mode.<sup>13</sup>

Reconciliation of his position with traditional (substantival) views of inerrancy is questionable:

Our proposed rejuvenation of the concept of infallibility set forth here preserves the substance of the above-mentioned definition of ‘inerrancy’ and at the same time puts the semantics of biblical literature on the surer ground of a speech act philosophy of language and literature that does fullest justice to the notion of ‘not liable to fail.’ Our understanding of infallibility is thus in profound agreement with earlier statements of inerrancy (i.e., the Ligonier statement and the Chicago statement) even while moving beyond them.<sup>14</sup>

By “moving beyond” the Ligonier statement and the Chicago statement, he has redefined “inerrancy” to mean “infallibility” in the broader sense of “not liable to fail.” The Ligonier and Chicago statements were intended to point out precision and exactness of the Bible’s subject matter, not the success of the writer’s intentions, as Vanhoozer contends.

Later, he pursues the subject more:

[I]s mine an approach that assumes that the truth of the Bible is a matter of its correspondence to historical fact? Not necessarily. On the contrary, I have argued that literary genres engage with reality in different ways, with other illocutionary forces besides the assertive. This, to my mind, represents a decisive parting of the ways, for it means that not all parts of Scripture need be factually true.<sup>15</sup>

On this point, he tries to distance himself from fundamentalists:

In their zeal to uphold the truth of the Bible, fundamentalists tend to interpret all narratives as accurate historical or scientific records. In the previous chapter, however I distinguished between a literalistic interpretation, which operates with a theory of meaning as reference, and a genuinely (*sic*) literal interpretation which reads for the literary sense and operates with a theory of meaning as communicative act.<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere, he writes,

Fundamentalists believe that the biblical narratives accurately (i.e., empirically, physically, historically describe what actually happened), even when this includes understanding creation

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 101 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>15</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 424-25.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 425. Cf. *ibid.*, 305-15.

in terms of six twenty-four hour days.<sup>17</sup>

This, he says, is unsatisfactory because a reader must take into account the illocutions as well as the locutions.<sup>18</sup> Illocutions take into account the author's intention as understanding the OT through the eyes of the NT<sup>19</sup> even if it involves a *sensus plenior*, i.e., "on the level of God's gathering together the various partial and progressive communicative acts and purposes of the human authors into one 'great canonical Design.'"<sup>20</sup> That, of course, wreaks havoc with literal interpretation as dispensationalists understand the meaning of "literal."

### **Speech Act Theory As Relates to Dispensationalism**

Vanhoozer becomes very specific in decrying dispensational interpretation.

The second way in which eschatology raises questions about fundamentalist interpretation is more subtle. It has to do with the fundamentalist tendency to resist figural interpretation and with their insistence that passages about Israel concern the physical nation Israel and never the church. The hermeneutics of dispensationalism is insufficiently sensitive, I believe to the literary sense of the text (in this case, to the literary genres of prophecy and apocalyptic).<sup>21</sup>

In the area of eschatology, he insists that the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" forbids interpreters from reaching conclusions about the future or, for that matter, even the past or present: "[E]schatology puts into question a fundamentalist (foundationalist) epistemology that aspires to absolute truths and objective certainties."<sup>22</sup>

Vanhoozer continues, "There is an eschatological tension that must not be ignored, a tension that prohibits us from thinking that the truth—the single correct interpretation—is our present possession."<sup>23</sup>

### **Speech Act Theory and Single Meaning**

Vanhoozer writes, "The interpretive monist contends that there is one single correct interpretation of a text that readers everywhere, regardless of their context or method, should acknowledge as valid and true. It may appear that the present work advocates interpretive monism, and in a sense this is true. However, much depends on the way one defines monism."<sup>24</sup> In other words, he professes to subscribe to the traditional grammatical-historical principle of single meaning.<sup>25</sup>

Yet he attempts to wiggle out of his professed acceptance of monism. He does it in several

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 307.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 310-11.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 309.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 314.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 429-30.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 429.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 416. "Monism" is a viewpoint or theory that reduces all phenomena to one principle.

<sup>25</sup>See my discussion of "The Principle of Single Meaning," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 141-64.

ways. He wants to distinguish his position from postmodernism or deconstructionism by writing,

As we will see in due course, my version of monism, like the realism that begets it, leads not to a totalizing oneness but to a critical and multifaceted unity. A naive monism that too quickly identifies one particular interpretation with the single correct interpretation (a regulative ideal) falsifies the complexity of texts. . . . First, there is a plurality of authorial intentions. No one denies that there are a number of possibilities for what a given author might have intended in a particular text. Indeed, the monist sees his or her task as reducing the number of possibilities to the most likely one. As we have seen, however, literary acts are complex and can be described as ‘doing’ things on various levels. With regard to Scripture, however, the case is even more complicated. Aquinas acknowledges God as the author of the literal sense, but he adds that God can use the referents to mean something too. Hence ‘what it means’ is as much a matter of providence as propositions. God can say any number of things through ‘what the text says.’ Even those for whom the author’s intention is an interpretive norm, then, must continue to reckon with plurality.<sup>26</sup>

Then he attempts to distinguish between plurality and pluralism:

One should not confuse evidence of plurality with evidence for pluralism. Plurality describes the complexity of the interpretive situation; pluralism prescribes a certain attitude towards it. Pluralism is an ideology that sees mutually inconsistent interpretations as a good thing. I believe, on the contrary, that pluralism is, as an ideology, a bad thing.<sup>27</sup>

His definition of pluralism apparently associates with the system of deconstructionism. One gets the impression that by inventing antonyms he is trying to create a distinction between his position and postmodernism.

### **Speech Act Theory and Meaning-Significance**

Vanhoozer devotes extended space to E. D. Hirsh’s definition of meaning and significance,<sup>28</sup> and apparently accepts his distinction between meaning and significance.<sup>29</sup> Yet his defense of finding meaning in the biblical text is garbled in subsequent discussion. He labels himself as a Pentecostal when he writes,

On the other hand, *I affirm a ‘Pentecostal plurality,’ which maintains that the one true interpretation is best approximated by a diversity of particular methods and contexts of reading.* The Word remains the interpretive norm, but no one culture or interpretive scheme is sufficient to exhaust its meaning, much less its significance.<sup>30</sup>

He clarifies his position: “Just as many members make up one body, so *many readings may make up*

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 417.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 418.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 74-79, especially 77.

<sup>29</sup>Traditionally spoken of as “interpretation” and “application.”

<sup>30</sup>Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 419.

*the single correct interpretation.*”<sup>31</sup> He adds further,

[I]nterpretation of the Fourth Gospel, it might take several (many?) interpreters to articulate it too? A critical hermeneutic realism, highlighting as it does the multileveled nature of literary acts, should lead us to expect that the single correct meaning may be richer than any one interpretation of it. Yes, the Spirit is the Spirit of unity, but this unity is both a gift and a task. It is a *vital* union, a harmonious union of many voices, not a unity of unison. It is a dialogical rather than a monological unity. It is, in short, an ethical unity—a unity of love—that welcomes legitimate differences without seeking to reduce them to uniformity.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond this he says, “The Spirit, in other words, discloses the significance of the (past) Word of God as it relates to all times. Vitality—the Spirit’s enlivening of the letter—requires us to read not only for meaning but for *significance*, or, to be more exact, for one multilayered meaning and for an abundance of significance.”<sup>33</sup>

Quite clearly, Vanhoozer merges meaning and significance into one entity: “The Spirit’s leading readers into all truth is a matter of nurturing a Pentecostal conversation about the correct interpretation of the Word’s past meaning *and* present significance,” . . . “Interpretation remains incomplete without an appreciation of a text’s significance, its meaningfulness,” . . . “Significance just is ‘recontextualized meaning.’”<sup>34</sup>

His explanation clearly violates traditional principles of grammatical-historical interpretation which insist on a clear distinction between interpretation and application. Note the words of Milton Terry:

In all our private study of the Scriptures for personal edification we do well to remember that the first and great thing is to lay hold of the real spirit and meaning of the sacred writer. There can be no true application, and no profitable taking to ourselves of any lessons of the Bible, unless we first clearly apprehend their original meaning and reference. To build a moral lesson upon an erroneous interpretation of the language of God’s Word is a reprehensible procedure. But he who clearly discerns the exact grammatico-historical sense of a passage, is the better qualified to give it any legitimate application which its language and context will allow.

Accordingly, in homiletical discourse, the public teacher is bound to base his applications of the truths and lessons of the divine Word upon a correct apprehension of the primary signification of the language which he assumes to expound and enforce. To misinterpret the sacred writer is to discredit any application one may make of his words. But when, on the other hand, the preacher first shows, by a valid interpretation, that he thoroughly comprehends that which is written, his various allowable accommodations of the writer’s words will have the greater force, in whatever practical applications he may give them.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 420 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 420-21 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 421. We see here the speech act a close similarity to the “complementary” hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism (cf. Thomas, “Progressive Dispensationalism,” in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 361-63).

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 421, 422, 423.

<sup>35</sup>Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (reprint

### Speech Act Theory and Divine-Human Balance

Speech Act Theory places heavy emphasis on human inability to receive communication accurately. Vanhoozer has difficulty with traditional evangelical use of “propositional revelation.” He speaks of

three disparate views regarding “biblical propositions”: “(1) conceptual-verbal communication in general (Henry, Pinnock), (b) declarative sentences or statements (Clark), and (c) meaning-content—conveyed by sentences—that is true or false (Nash, Lewis, Obitts). While all three positions are agreed as to the general thrust of ‘propositional revelation’ (viz., that revelation discloses truth in a cognitive manner), significant discrepancies remain as to the *nature* of biblical propositions, discrepancies that affect one’s reading of Scripture and subsequent theological method.<sup>36</sup>

With a fixation on the “discrepancies” of human interpretation, he notes, “A thoroughgoing acknowledgment of Scripture’s divers forms better helps us to understand the *humanity* of Scripture, without surrendering the notion of divine authorship.”<sup>37</sup>

With human frailties in mind, he continues,

We have seen that the Bible is *eminently human*—not in the sense that it errs, but in the sense of communicating to ordinary people in ordinary language and ordinary literature. In this way, the whole person, not only the intellect, is addressed by Scripture. As the apparent weakness of the incarnate Son of God was actually an essential factor in His accomplishing of God’s redemptive purpose, so the apparent weakness of the incarnate biblical texts—their ‘humanity’—is an essential ingredient in their fulfilling of God’s revelatory purpose.<sup>38</sup>

At this point, one remembers the recent departure of Peter Enns from Westminster Theological Seminary,<sup>39</sup> whose views on incarnational inspiration were expressed in his *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Baker, 2005) and whose services at Westminster were terminated because of those views.

Vanhoozer, however, is more circumspect than Enns in expressing his views that the Bible is a human book and consequently sometimes has erroneous information. He expresses the human limitation thus:

A little lower than the angels, we humans know only in part, through the glass of language, darkly—not because of some defect in language but because of our unseeing eyes and unclean lips. One should never be too casual, therefore in claiming understanding. When it comes to interpreting texts, honesty forbids certainty. Human knowing, of books and of the Book of

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of 1885 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1947), 600. Cf. also Brian A. Shealy, “Redrawing the Line Between Hermeneutics and Application,” in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 165-94.

<sup>36</sup>Vanhoozer, “Semantics of Biblical Literature,” 59 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 79 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 92 (emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup>“Passages,” *Christianity Today* (September 2008): 16.

Nature, is mediate and approximate. Here Christians agree with chastened postmoderns.<sup>40</sup>

Most clearly, however, he supports the humanity of scriptural authorship in his discussion of historical accuracy. His position on this is clear:

Second, is mine an approach that assumes that the truth of the Bible is a matter of its correspondence to historical fact? Not necessarily. On the contrary, I have argued that literary genres engage with reality in different ways, with other illocutionary forces besides the assertive. This, to my mind, represents a decisive parting of the ways, for it means that not all parts of Scripture need be factually true.<sup>41</sup>

He criticizes fundamentalists on this point:

A picture of meaning holds fundamentalists captive. This picture equates the meaning of a text with its referent, that is, with its empirical or historical correspondence. It is this essentially *modern* theory of meaning and truth that generates literalistic interpretations where all parts of the Bible are read as though the primary intent were to state historical facts. Whereas Bultmann dehistoricizes historical material, fundamentalists may historicize unhistorical material.<sup>42</sup>

On this score, he also questions the accuracy of biblical accounts: “In their zeal to uphold the truth of the Bible, fundamentalists tend to interpret all narratives as accurate historical or scientific records.”<sup>43</sup> That position raises questions about the certainty of a text’s meaning:

And yet—there is no question that the bond between word and world has become problematic. On the one hand, in a fallen world language no longer infallibly does what it was designed for. There is no question of returning to the innocence of Eden. Cartesian certainty, an absolute knowledge grounded in the knowing subject, is neither possible nor Christian.<sup>44</sup>

He shares a view of uncertainty with pluralism,<sup>45</sup> otherwise known as postmodernism. He views certainty as a product of pride manifest most often in fundamentalism.<sup>46</sup> Such pride to him is the opposite of the hermeneutics of humility.<sup>47</sup> He values deconstructionism (i.e., postmodernism) for its

<sup>40</sup>Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 207.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 424-25.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 426 (emphasis in the original). By implication, Grant Osborne labeled me as one who lacks hermeneutical humility when I asked him to name one evangelical whose historical-critical analysis of the Synoptic Gospels did not dehistoricize those Gospels at one point or another (*JETS* 43/1 [March 2000]).

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 418. Speech act theory shares the characteristic of uncertainty with the broader field of Modern Linguistics of which it is a part (cf. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 201-3, 226-29, 230-32). Cf. also Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 256-59.

<sup>46</sup>Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 463.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*



contribution in checking hermeneutical pride.<sup>48</sup>

He advocates “a hermeneutics of humility *and* conviction. We must hold these two aspects together in a constructive tension. Emphasize one without the other, and you quickly fall prey to one or the other of the two deadly interpretive sins.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, keeping a balance between “I can’t be sure” and “I am absolutely certain,” with more emphasis on “I can’t be sure.”

### Where Speech Act Theory Leads

The end product of Speech Acts Theory is clear. Vanhoozer applies to himself certain labels that are indicative of the mood or movement with which he has chosen to identify himself. Three of those are postpropositionalist, postfoundationalist, postconservative:

My aim in what follows is to propose what an evangelical theology with a *postpropositionalist* Scripture principle, and with one ear cocked to the postmodern condition, should look like.<sup>50</sup>

What I here call the canonical-linguistic approach is my shorthand term for an approach that could also be described as *postpropositionalist*, pluralistic, phronetic, Protestant, and *postfoundationalist*.<sup>51</sup>

The present approach is *postconservative* theology because it transcends the debilitating dichotomies between referring and expressing, between propositional and personal revelation, between God saying and God doing, precisely by focusing on the Bible as a set of divine communicative acts. . . . The approach is *postconservative* in that it maintains there is something in the text that is both indispensable and authoritative, namely the divinely intended meaning.<sup>52</sup>

In so doing, he has joined the ranks of the emerging church mood or movement. Justin Taylor notes the kinship of such proponents when he enumerates of titles for their passion as “postconservatives, reformists, the emerging church, younger evangelicals, postfundamentalists, postfoundationalists, postpropositionalists, postevangelicals.”<sup>53</sup> He names Stanley Grenz as postconservatism’s Professor, Brian McLaren as its Pastor, and Roger Olson and Robert Webber as its Publicists.<sup>54</sup>

Unfortunately, Vanhoozer is given a clean bill of health in a chapter written by Caneday in the book introduced by Taylor.<sup>55</sup> Apparently, Caneday had not evaluated Vanhoozer’s leanings carefully.

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 464.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 466.

<sup>50</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 69 (emphasis added).

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 75 (emphasis added).

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 76 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>53</sup>Justin Taylor, “An Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of This Book,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, eds Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 17-18.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>55</sup>Caneday, “Is Truth Functional or Propositional,” 137-59.

In gaining a closer familiarity with postconservatism, I have been struck by similarities of this movement to unjustified recent attacks on nineteenth-century Princeton theologians and their emphasis on the precision of Scripture, even their alleged invention of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, a doctrine derived from propositional revelation. Led by Ernest R. Sandeen, others such as J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, G. M. Marsden, James Barr, Mark Noll, Allister McGrath, Donald Bloesch, and John M. Hitchen have expressed disagreement with the inerrancy doctrine because of its attributes too exacting an accuracy to the Bible.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

From our brief survey it appears that speech act theory in its attempt to answer postmodernism has conceded too much ground to postmodernism. In its subtleties it has become a stumblingblock—an agent of deception—to correct interpretation rather than a help. Its value for interpretation is negative because it appears to be leading many younger evangelicals astray.

In emphasizing the communicative act, the theory has relegated the substance of the Bible's subject matter to what is at best a minority role. Yes, action in the Christian life is of utmost importance, but that action needs a solid propositional basis if it is to continue and be thoroughly biblical and consistent. The shallowness of the recent emerging church movement evidences that fact.

Speech act theory has sometimes been proposed as a supplement to principles of grammatical-historical hermeneutics, but it is actually a distortion of those principles. Such a theory could be characterized as a grammatical-historical-philosophical-linguistic approach to the Bible, but any time one adds to grammatical-historical principles, he distorts them. Evangelicalism today is rich in such "add ons." As a result, we will continue to find new "-isms" popping up all over the landscape.<sup>57</sup> Dispensationalists must limit themselves to the principles of grammar and the facts of history in their interpretation of the Bible.

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<sup>56</sup>See my article "The Nature of Truth: Postmodern or Propositional," *TMSJ* 18/1 (Spring 2007): 3-21.

<sup>57</sup>Some of the "-isms" that have already cropped up in evangelicalism are Progressive Dispensationalism, evangelical feminism, Liberation Theology, intertextuality, the New Perspective on Paul, Open Theism, and Theonomy.