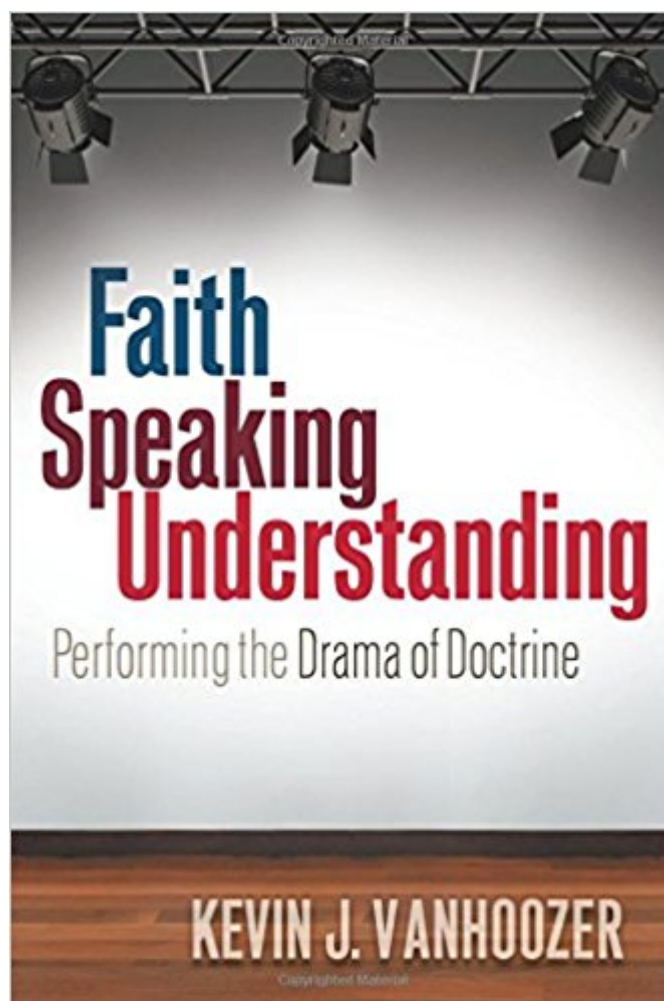


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# Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing The Drama Of Doctrine



## Synopsis

In this volume, highly esteemed scholar Kevin Vanhoozer introduces readers to a way of thinking about Christian theology that takes the work he began in the groundbreaking 2005 book, *The Drama of Doctrine*, to its next level. Vanhoozer argues that theology is not merely a set of cognitive beliefs, but is also something we do that involves speech and action alike. He uses a theatrical model to explain the ways in which doctrine shapes Christian understanding and forms disciples. The church, Vanhoozer posits, is the preeminent theater where the gospel is "performed," with doctrine directing this performance. Doctrines are not simply truths to be stored, shelved, and stacked, but indications and directions to be followed, practiced, and enacted. In "performing" doctrine, Christians are shaped into active disciples of Jesus Christ. He goes on to examine the state of the church in today's world and explores how disciples can do or perform doctrine. Written in an accessible and engaging style, *Faith Speaking Understanding* sets forth a compelling vision of what the church is and what it should be doing, and demonstrates the importance of Christian doctrine for this mission. Disciples who want to follow Christ in all situations need doctrinal direction as they walk onto the social stage in the great theater of the world. The Christian faith is about acknowledging, and participating in, the great thing God is doing in our world: making all things new in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Doctrine ministers understanding: of God, of the drama of redemption, of the church as a company of faithful players, and of individual actors, all of whom have important roles to play. In an age where things fall apart and centers fail to hold, doctrine centers us in Jesus Christ, in whom all things hold together.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Rooted in acute theological intelligence, pervaded by a conviction that faith and the practices of faith are inseparable, and written with verve, Faith Speaking Understanding is a work of alert and engaged Christian reflection which will attract wide consideration." — John Webster, Chair of Divinity, St. Mary's College, University of St Andrews, Scotland

"This book is a model of doing theology in the service of the church. Building on his well-known construal of theology as theodrama, Vanhoozer presents the church as the theater of the gospel, a place where observers are participants and where theology and ethics, contemplation and action, surrender and obedience, and James and Paul are no longer enemies but allies. A wonderful theological essay by a brilliant evangelical thinker." — Timothy George, founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

"This is vintage Vanhoozer — highly intelligent, wonderfully resonant, almost painfully true to the gospel and to life in the church. Vanhoozer often addresses other theologians: this time he addresses everybody who cares about following Jesus. Faith Speaking Understanding is mighty and prophetic, but, like Jesus, it is full of grace as well as truth. Brilliant work!" — Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., author of Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists

"With his extraordinarily imaginative energy, Kevin Vanhoozer's Faith Speaking Understanding builds on his equally energetic The Drama of Doctrine to help us see how doctrine, like stage direction, helps us live truthfully to the Gospel. Without fail, Vanhoozer vivifies the fundamental convictions of Christians by articulating their dramatic character. I suspect this is a book that will soon be deemed a classic." — Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert T. Rowe Professor Emeritus of Divinity and Law, Duke Divinity School

**Key Selling Points:** Follow-up to highly regarded work, The Drama of Doctrine  
Uses a theatrical model to demonstrate that theology is something that must be practiced, not just a cognitive process  
Argues for the importance of Christian doctrine for the church's mission  
Written by a well-respected theologian in the field

One of the most pernicious heresies in the church of our time is old fashioned Greek dualism which separates faith and action. This dichotomous thinking, however, is inconsistent with the biblical understanding where faith and action are inseparable. Jesus and his half-brother, James, both rail

against hypocrisy, defined as a separation of faith and action. Authentic Christian faith requires action. In his book, *Faith Speaking Understanding*, Kevin Vanhoozer argues for a new look at the theatrical understanding of faith and action because Christians must both speak and do.

Vanhoozer argues that Christians must both speak and do in pursuing authentic discipleship (19). The theater provides an interesting way to live out the doctrine of the church because an actor must not only speak a part but also act it out which may at first seem unnatural but with practice may become instinctive, like learning to ride a bicycle or swim. Like a good actor will focus not on displaying an emotion, but really feeling it, the good Christian must put on the "mind of Christ."

Vanhoozer uniquely emphasizes the role of sound doctrine in discipleship. Like a good actor must learn his lines, doctrine guides discipleship and avoids the trap of adopting a "performance mentality." Sound doctrine is part of teaching people how to keep the faith and applying doctrine (or theology) to their daily lives (xiii-xiv). They learn by applying this doctrine in life, hence the special need to act it out. Vanhoozer sees scriptural interpretation playing a key role in theology. He writes:

"To be a follower of Christ is to be a follower of Scripture in all three senses of: 1. To understand the meaning of what Christ says in Scripture, 2. To respond to his instructions with obedience, and 3. To go after Christ or along the way of Christ."

(1) He sees the history of the church as virtually the same thing as the history of biblical interpretation (2). Vanhoozer describes his book with 9 statements. It is about (1) being biblical, (2) theology, (3) church doctrine, (4) the Gospel of Jesus Christ, (5) life, (6) the reign of God, (7) the church, (8) public theology, and (9) reality (4-9). He writes in two parts where the first part lays out his theater model and the second part offers a detailed proposal for how it should work (9-10). The remainder of part 1 of this review will examine Vanhoozer's theater model while part 2 will focus on the details of how it works. Vanhoozer offers four reasons for merging doctrine and drama, two intrinsically difficult topics:

1. The subject matter of the Bible is inherently theodramatic, saying what God has said and done in history.
2. The language of the theater offers images and concepts to bridge the theory/practice dichotomy.
3. The purpose of theology is to cultivate disciples where knowledge is static, but wisdom is lived knowledge which is dynamic and dramatic.
4. Every Christian has a role to play (20-21)

This last point is critical. The uniqueness of the church as a theater is that the audience is invited into the play and helps to determine how the performance is played out. Vanhoozer writes:

"disciples obey the truth and the gospel when they take hold of what they behold and let the drama of the Christ serve as the metanarrative or control

story of their own lives. (40) In other words, in this drama spectators do not remain spectators. And doctrine allows “disciples to fill empty spaces and empty moments with redemptive speech and action.” (47) Kevin Vanhoozer is a Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, Illinois. His degrees are from Westmont College (BA), Westminster Theological Seminary (M.Div.), Cambridge University, England (PhD). This book, *Faith Speaking Understanding* (2014), is designed as a more readable and pastoral version of an earlier book, *The Drama of Doctrine* (2005), which lays out a theological defense of the theater model. For reviews of other books by Vanhoozer, see the list of references below.

References

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 1998. *Is There a Meaning in This Text: The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Vanhoozer, Kevin, J. 2005. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

Vanhoozer, Kevin, J. and Owen Strachan. 2015. *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

This book is a more readable reworked version of Vanhoozer’s previous longer explanation of what he calls “theodrama” in his book *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (2005). The author declares his purpose in the Introduction, “This is a book about learning doctrine for the sake of acting out what is in Christ: call it the drama of discipleship. Nothing in the world is more important than this project: living to God with one another in Christlike ways in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3) (1). In this introduction, the author describes the metaphor of the local church as “Living Bible” (vii). There are only two parts: “Before the Curtain Rises: On Theology and Theater” and “Faith Showing Understanding: How Doctrine Makes Disciples and How Disciples Do Doctrine.” Vanhoozer proposes the theatrical metaphor as a more helpful handmaid to theology than less life-oriented philosophy. He states that what he calls “theatrical language” means “helping disciples to see how doctrines do not merely state the truth but also encourage one to live and lean into it, to do the truth (John 3:21; 1 John 1:6) (25). In this reviewer’s opinion the greatest value of Vanhoozer’s approach is to see discipleship and doctrine together as a part of the great drama of redemption as revealed in the canon of Scripture. As he explains, “Disciples are not mere storytellers but story-dwellers” (29). This is not a book that is simply read but must be thought through in each part. It is filled with

concise and powerfully presented theologically practical statements. One example is, "Fitting participation requires what we might call dramatic consistency, theodramatic coherence, for the whole into which everything else fits is not other than the history of Jesus Christ, the concrete embodiment of the wisdom of God" (147). Think that one through. His presentation of the canon of Scripture in five major acts is a help to seeing the drama of redemption and the disciple's participation in this drama. Vanhoozer does not explain how the sapiential literature fits into Act 2 "The Election of Abraham/Israel (Gen. 12-Mal.)" but that may be asking too much in a shorter version of his more developed work mentioned in the beginning of this review. Theodrama is a helpful way of seeing theology in a new light. However, one must constantly be careful of conforming Scripture to an accompanying model. I believe that Vanhoozer does this but one must always see which of the two is ultimate.

Vanhoozer captures the 3 dimensional aspects of Christian life by demonstrating the reality that theology, if done properly, requires deep and constant meditation on Scripture, combined with a commitment to improvise ways that we can enact and demonstrate its truths in our contemporary context. This can only be done faithfully with a strong "catholic sensibility" which is a commitment to learn from the history of the church as it has done this. Very helpful stuff in here.

Putting together doctrine and theatre, seemed to be impractical to me, but Vanhoozer has proven how similar they actually are and the benefits of this view.

One of the most holistic, comprehensive theological works I have ever read.

Wonderful book!

Great read!!

This review is mainly to point out that the other reviewer seems to have a defective copy, rather than the book itself being defective. My copy of Faith Speaking Understanding is clear and the darkness of the font does not deviate from other books in any obvious way. I expect to thoroughly enjoy this book, but since I haven't read it yet, I cannot comment on whether that expectation will become a reality. Simply put, do not allow a misprinted copy impede you from buying this work.

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