

**Reflections on the Proposal Presented by Kevin Vanhoozer** (*Ward Consultation, Chicago 2004*)

*Kevin Vanhoozer's proposal is described in the documents found at this web site. It is impossible to capture the conversations initiated by Dan Treier and Lynn Cohick (co-facilitators). The following presents a personal reflection on what Kevin's proposal. Linda Cannell*

Our group comprises leaders from every continent, several countries, various organizations, and different disciplines. Our diversity presents the twin challenges of hearing the other and responding in ways that assist the processes of understanding, without presuming that agreement is necessary. Trying on this new coat of ecclesiology as drama was both stimulating and difficult. We struggled with terms: Is it director, pastor, or leader? Is it a model or metaphor? We worked to understand what is characteristic of this way of thinking.

Is the executive role or office of the pastor (allowing for the use of the word in our English Bibles) a western invention, i.e., something that the Scripture never intended? Does the idea of the theo-drama free us to think of the role of leaders in fresh ways? Is the leader more appropriately seen as the Holy Spirit? Perhaps, at this point, Kevin's statement that we are all actors, that there may be no audience, is significant. This brings to mind observations of New Testament scholars such as Walt Liefeld and Gordon Fee who stress that the appropriate role for the leader is to lead from among B and that the priesthood of all believers (including the pastor/leader) is not a peripheral doctrine. On the matter of "there *may* be no audience," the point was made that perhaps the Triune Godhead is the appropriate audience. Another noted that unbelievers can be actors in the theo-drama.

Is it a metaphor or a model? Does it help to think of Kevin's proposal as a different way to approach *theological method*. In other words, the theological method of theo-drama allows one to embrace that which another theological method characterized by the propositional finds difficult or impossible to accept (e.g., cultural diversity, mystery). Kevin has described himself as a post-propositional theologian. In other words, if I interpret him correctly, he is offering a corrective to what is, for many of us, an inadequate structure or framework for thinking about matters that Scripture holds are significant or critical to life and faith. For generations we have attempted to make lists or advance tightly reasoned theories to *govern* faith. What I see Kevin offering us is a way of apprehending where it is impossible to put God and, therefore, truth in a box. A drama invites diversity in interpretation, mystery, relationship, holism; all these factors are characterized by risk for many evangelicals.

Kevin said that he was offering a way of thinking about the church and its mission in the world. Kevin Giles, New Testament scholar, searched through the metaphors in the New Testament for that one big idea which would encompass all other descriptors and settled on community. Does Kevin's proposal render this effort inadequate or incomplete? Or, is this an illustration of the different ways in which two disciplines approach the same problem? If I've heard him rightly, Kevin's effort theologically is to offer not a description but a method or way of thinking to help us apprehend the complexity of the church. Inevitably, there are multiple perspectives on the usefulness of his proposal. One participant referred to the tendency of some to create analytical systems as the default tools for understanding (to observe through

the faculty of reason alone) because “feeling” or the aesthetic tends to be suspect. Schleiermacher, often derided by evangelicals because of his use of feeling in relation to theology; actually described the role of feeling as something much richer than simple emotion. He offered that his use of feeling was more like a thick cognition (my term not his) or a holistic understanding. Really look at the sobering painting *Guernica*; listen to Mahler’s symphony for a 1000 voices; live with a child who is discovering how to use language; experience worship where we feel the Holy Spirit is truly present. When these experiences move us at the deepest levels of our being, encompassing senses, cognitive understanding, and response, that is the feeling that undergirded theology for Schleiermacher. What Kevin offers is a way of thinking that is more than rationalization at its least productive; and more than one-dimensional.

Dan Treier suggested that the drama metaphor may be expressing a more basic model of God’s design for human life in community. Speech is an action; thinking and feeling, too, are actions; speech and thinking and feeling also inform or shape action both personally and then corporately before a watching world. The element he introduced is the formation of wisdom that rightly integrates speech, thinking and feeling. Then the question becomes, Are some forms of thinking or speaking particular to leaders or can some forms of speaking and thinking only be learned *from* others? Can wisdom be taught? Or can it only be learned? Does the notion of wisdom render the tension some feel between formal and nonformal modes of theological education a moot point? To what extent does Kevin’s notion of the theo-drama and Dan’s stress on the importance of wisdom lead us to learning rather than teaching? (“What if education were about learning?”) To interpretive communities rather than individual positions? To Jesus Christ rather than system?

Following the group conversations a number of points emerged. I offer points that struck me as important or interesting: Ecclesiology must accommodate diversity. Add to this assertion the complexity of the ways in which different cultures view the church. Ecclesiology must allow for the richness of cultural response. Ecclesiology must accommodate an eschatological openness. Following this, ecclesiology must embrace the questions that Jesus himself raised. Ecclesiology as drama allows for multiple sources of critique from the world and from the congregation itself. Can we accept this critique as a stimulus to growth? What sort of practices would emerge from ecclesiology viewed as drama? What does leadership development become when ecclesiology is viewed as dynamic or dramatic? Does ecclesiology, in reality, serve as a filter rather than a direction, a tool to help us assess our cultural baggage?

On the matter of a “functional ecclesiology,” (distinguishing between abstract theologizing and the actual nature and function of the *ecclesia*) one group reached a consensus around the idea that it is probably more productive to build from what is already understood. The task, then, is to help people move toward clarity about what they understand. In relation to this task it was observed that there is an explicit theology (what is preached and taught) and an implicit theology (what people actually believe). What is inherent in ecclesiology that helps us bridge this gap? What do these observations suggest about the importance of the *ecclesia* as the context for the development of the *whole* people of God? If the whole people of God is the audience for theological education, then what should be the nature of theological education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?