

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the concept of meaning in current proposals of theological interpretation. Theological interpretation seeks to come to terms with the biblical texts as sacred scripture and to offer hermeneutical strategies for the interpretation of the texts as such. These strategies derive from the interpreter's understanding of the concept of meaning, which is deduced either from the supposed nature of the texts and their authors or from the function of the texts in religious communities. Thus, approaches to theological interpretation become debates between ontological and pragmatic strategists.

Stephen Fowl and Kevin Vanhoozer have embraced the term "theological interpretation" for their separate projects, but their ideas of what "theological interpretation" is and how "meaning" is a part of it differ greatly. I describe their respective concepts of meaning and conclude the following: 1) while Fowl rightly moves against the strictures of dichotomous modes of thinking and reinvigorates the interpreters' appeal to the interpreting community, he too easily dismisses the usefulness and the viability of the concept of meaning; and 2) while Vanhoozer rightly moves against the relative nature of deconstructive modes of interpretation and rescues the notion of authorial intention from both authorless postmodernists and psychologizing modernists, he too easily restricts the concept of meaning to authorial intention alone.

I argue that a more holistic concept of meaning, one that can be described with triadic terminology reclaimed in part from 1) Austinian speech act theory via James McClendon and James Smith, and 2) the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, allows theological interpreters to understand their craft not so much as a discovery of intentions or the creation of interests but as a conversation in which truth is mediated. Mediation, I contend, is the most theologically and philosophically cogent conceptualization for meaning, as well as the most useful image to describe what emerges in the theological interpretation of scripture—a conversation that takes place within the Christian community over an indefinite amount of time.

[323 words]