From speech acts to scripture acts: the covenant of discourse and the discourse of covenant

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After Pentecost
Language and Biblical Interpretation

Edited by
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From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts

The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of the Covenant

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Introduction: Language in Jerusalem and Athens

A word is dead
When it is said
Some say.

I say it just
Begins to live
That day.
Emily Dickinson

'Know thyself'. Socrates' demand that philosophers reflect on what it is to be human has been taken up by many in other disciplines as well. It is possible to study the functions of humans considered as biological organisms (physiology) as well as human emotional and mental dysfunctions (psychology); the actions of individuals in the past (history) as well as the behavior of various human groups (sociology). The study of human language is similarly interdisciplinary. It can be studied by linguists, cognitive psychologists, historians, logicians, philosophers — and, yes, theologians. If the third-century theologian Tertullian was correct in defining a 'person' as a being who speaks and acts (which is not so very far from what a philosopher, Peter Strawson, would say about individuals some seventeen hundred years later), then it may well be that we have to treat both topics — language and humanity — together.

To study language, then, is to touch on issues involving a whole world and life view. Some approaches to the study of language’s origin and purpose, for
example, presuppose that human existence and behavior is best explained in terms of Darwinian evolution. In their highly regarded work on linguistic relevance, for instance, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson suggest that human cognition is a biological function whose mechanisms result from a process of natural selection: ‘Human beings are efficient information-processing devices’. For Sperber and Wilson, language is essentially a cognitive rather than communicative tool that enables an organism (or device) with memory to process information. On the other hand, George Steiner claims, on the basis of his experience of transcendence in literature, that ‘God underwrites language’. Such disparate analyses should give philosophers pause. They also raise the question as to whether Christians should not approach the study of language from an explicitly Christian point of view. Such, however, is the intent of the present article: to reflect on language from out of the convictions of Christian faith.

Craig Bartholomew has recently called for those interested in the theological interpretation of Scripture to clarify just how the relation of philosophy to theology bears on biblical study. Here we probably do not want to follow Tertullian’s suggestion, stated in the form of a rhetorical question, that Jerusalem (theology) has nothing to do with Athens (philosophy). We would do better to follow Alvin Plantinga’s advice to Christian philosophers not to let others – people with non-Christian world-views – set the agenda, but to pursue their own research programs. What is needed, he says, is ‘less accommodation to current fashion and more Christian self-confidence’. Indeed. Why should Christian faith be excluded from the search for understanding when other faiths – including modernity’s faith in instrumental reason, empiricism and naturalism – are not?

Christian theology takes faith in the revelation of Jesus Christ, attested in the Scriptures, as its ultimate criterion for judging what is true, good and beautiful. While not at all turning our back on the results, assured or not, of modern learning, it is important to acknowledge that all of us, Christians and non-Christians alike, come to the data with interpretive frameworks already in place. The present essay approaches the ‘data’ concerning language and interpretation with an interpretive framework largely structured by theological concepts. Instead of excluding considerations of Christian doctrine from my inquiry, I intend to make explicit use of them. This is not to turn one’s back on philosophy, but to let human reason be guided and corrected by Christian

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1 Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 46.
2 Ibid., 173.
3 Steiner, *Real Presences*.
4 Bartholomew, ‘Philosophy’.
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doctrine, and by the language and literature of Scripture itself. Only by first conducting ‘theological investigations’ of language and literature in general can we then come to discuss, with philosophy, the task of interpreting Scripture.

The most fruitful recent development for the dialogue about language between philosophy and theology is undoubtedly the emphasis on language as a species of human action: speech acts. Examining what people do with language represents a fascinating case study for the broader dialogue between philosophy and theology. Of course, the idea that humans do things in speaking was well known to the very earliest biblical authors, even without the analytic concepts of speech-act philosophy.

The present essay evaluates the extent to which speech-act philosophy approximates and contributes to what theologians want to say about language. This is not to say that speech-act categories will dominate the discussion. On the contrary, we will see that Christian convictions concerning, say, divine authorship, the canon and the covenant, will lead us to both modify and intensify the typical speech-act analysis. My goal is to let the ‘discourse of the covenant’ (e.g., Scripture) inform and transform our understanding of the ‘covenant of discourse’ (e.g., ordinary language and literature).

The first, and longer, part of the chapter explores what I shall call the ‘covenant of discourse’; a philosophy and theology of communication. My hope is to achieve a certain consensus about language and understanding based on a strategic appropriation of certain philosophical concepts that will be amenable to Christian biblical scholars and theologians.

In the second part of the chapter, I turn to the ‘discourse of the covenant’, that is, to a consideration of the Bible as written communication. Dealing with the canon – a complex, intertextual communicative act – will lead us to modify and develop our understanding of how biblical language works in ways that again go beyond typical speech-act theory. However, the benefit of using speech-act categories to describe the divine discourse in Scripture will also become apparent. Throughout the essay I examine not only what speech acts are, but the implications for looking at language as a form of human action as well, particularly for the sake of interpretation. Here too the leading theme of covenant proves helpful, insofar as interpretation is largely a matter of fulfilling one’s covenantal obligation towards the communicative agents, canonical or not, who address us.

The conclusion highlights what follows from our analysis for biblical interpreters. It is not insignificant that the leading categories for describing interpreters – witness, disciple – are drawn from the language of theology. For nothing less will do in describing our properly theological responsibility to hear, and to understand, what God and neighbor are saying/doing when they address us. The series of theses running throughout the argument summarize the main claims and seek to provide the contours for the ‘mere communicative
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hermeneutic'. My hope is that they begin to articulate an emerging consensus regarding the theological interpretation of Scripture.

I. The Covenant of Discourse: Speech Acts

'Tis writ, 'In the beginning was the Word.'
I pause, to wonder what is here inferred.
The Word I cannot set supremely high:
A new translation I will try.
I read, if by the spirit I am taught,
This sense: 'In the beginning was the Thought.'
This opening I need to weigh again,
Or sense may suffer from a hasty pen.
Does Thought create, and work, and rule the hour?
'Twere best: 'In the beginning was the Power.'
Yet, while the pen is urged with willing fingers,
A sense of doubt and hesitancy lingers.
The Spirit comes to guide me in my need,
I write, 'In the beginning was the Deed.'

Goethe, Faust

Goethe, of course, did not have the advantage of having read Austin or Searle, or for that matter, me! We can therefore forgive him for not having Faust write something like the following:

The mystery of the sign I now have cracked;
'In the beginning was the communicative act.'

Much of what I wish to say about the significance of speech acts for contemporary interpretation in general, and for interpreting the Bible in particular, is implicit in these lines from Goethe's Faust. They also have the merit of directing our attention to Jesus Christ in such a way that Christ becomes, as Bartholomew puts it in his article, 'the clue to theology and philosophy ... the clue to the whole creation'. Communicative action, as I understand it, indeed takes up and integrates the four possibilities for translating logos that Faust considers: word, thought, power, deed. For, as we shall see, word-deeds involve both thought (propositional content) and power (illocutionary force).

To begin with, Goethe roots our thinking about speech acts in theology – Trinitarian theology, to be exact. Faust is, after all, translating a text about the incarnation of the Logos. His successive tries at translating logos, taken together,

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Bartholomew, 'Philosophy'.
suggest that the Word is God's-being-in-communicative-action. This approximates Karl Barth's Trinitarian analysis of divine revelation in terms of revealer-revelation-revealedness. God communicates himself – Father, Son, and Spirit – to others. In terms of communication theory: the triune God is communicative agent (Father/author), communicative action (Son/Word), and communicative result (Spirit/power of reception). I shall suggest in due course that the canon too may be considered a species of divine communicative action.

Goethe in this passage also sets us thinking about the relation of God's speech act – the Logos – to the words of Scripture. Interestingly, John Macquarrie, in his own free rendering of John 1:1, suggests the following translation: 'Fundamental to everything is meaning'. The question that needs to be asked here is whether the incarnation alone exhausts the divine speech, or whether Scripture itself may be legitimately considered a divine speech act of sorts.

A new interdisciplinary consensus?

For the past fifteen years I have been exploring the potential of viewing language and literature in terms of speech acts. I have been heartened by other wayfarers from other disciplines who have since joined the pilgrimage towards the promised land of a communicative hermeneutic. In May of 1998, participants representing five theological disciplines met in Cheltenham, England, to think together about how speech-act philosophy might afford the conceptual resources with which to meet the contemporary crisis in biblical interpretation. The discussion that follows attempts to set forth these conceptual resources, as well as their philosophical, and theological, basis.

7 Barth, CD I, 1.
4 Macquarrie, 'God?', 400.
3 The earliest effort was 'The Semantics of Biblical Literature'.
10 The disciplines, and their representatives, were philosophy of religion (Nicholas Wolterstorff), Old Testament (Craig Bartholomew), New Testament (Anthony Thistlethwaite), biblical theology (Francis Watson), and systematic theology (Kevin Vanhoozer).
11 Some readers may want to know what, if any, advances the present essay makes on my Is There a Meaning in This Text? The new elements include: a 'missional' model of communication; a more consistent use of the concept of covenant, and the concomitant notion of imputation; a reinvigorated, if not entirely new, defense of the priority of illocutionary acts; and a new argument, based on an analysis of biblical covenants, for seeing a greater continuity between oral and written discourse than is often the case in contemporary philosophy and literary theory. Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, there is an almost complete absence of the term 'meaning'? 
Why speech acts? First, because thinking in terms of speech acts approxi­mates the way in which the Bible itself treats human speech. Moreover, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has demonstrated, speech-act categories have the potential to help us appreciate what it means to call the Scriptures God’s Word. For me, however, the most important contribution speech-act philosophy makes is to help us to break free of the tendency either to reduce meaning to reference or to attend only to the propositional content of Scripture. Viewing texts as doing things other than representing states of affairs opens up possibilities for transformative reading that the modern obsession with information has eclipsed. Finally, speech-act philosophy commends itself as perhaps the most effective antidote to certain deconstructive toxins that threaten the very project of textual interpretation and hermeneutics.

I am under no illusions about the difficulty of achieving such a consensus. Speech-act theorists themselves are divided over, say, the relative importance of intentions (Grice) over conventions (Searle). The challenge is to specify the most important commonalities – the greatest common denominator, as it were – without diluting the remaining significant differences. So, while we can agree on certain basic presuppositions and principles, some significant differences may persist.

Where do we agree? In my opinion, there is considerable agreement about the following points: 1) We use language to do more than picture states of affairs. None of us believe that the sole point of language is reference or representation. We affirm that language is transformative as well as informative. Hence we are interested in the pragmatics as well as the semantics of language. 2) We reject the idea, rampant among some postmoderns, that meaning and reference are radically indeterminate, as well as the related idea that the author is ‘dead’ or irrelevant to the process of interpretation. 3) We agree that action, rather than representation, should be the operative concept, and that this entails certain rights and responsibilities on the part of authors and readers. In particular, we see the promise as the paradigm for what is involved

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12 In his chapter elsewhere in the present book, however, Thiselton misleadingly associates me with those who see meaning in terms of reference, largely because I used the phrase ‘single determinate meaning’. Let me take this opportunity, then, to state that what I think is determinate is the whole communicative act. ‘Single’ and ‘determinate’ were intended to shore up the notion that what fixes the meaning of a text is what the author said/did, and that this does not change at the behest of the reader. ‘Single determinate meaning’ is shorthand for the realist’s intuition that the author’s intentional action, however complex, is what it is, and cannot be changed by interpreters at a later date. Moreover, determinate communicative acts often have presuppositions, entailments and implications that preclude our viewing interpretation in terms of ‘endlessly wooden replication’ of a single propositional content.
speech acts approxi-
mately in speech action. Moreover, as categories have the pur-
poses of God's Word. Speech-act philosophy thus reduce meaning to Scripture. Viewing 
God's Word as a kind of information has perhaps the most threaten the very 
construction such a consensus. The relative importance of 
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of interpretation. 3) We 
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for what is involved 
in speech action (though in the present work I put forward covenant as an alter-

4) We reject the idea, again rampant among some postmoderns, that 
readers are free to manufacture, or to manipulate, textual meaning in order to 
serve their own aims and interests.

Where do we differ? Two areas come to mind. 1) Some think that speech-
act analysis is most helpful in understanding particular parts of the Bible - for 
instance, Jesus' parables, or Paul's preaching (Thielson). Others use speech-
act theory in order to recover the notion of authorial discourse and to open up 
opportunities for reading the whole Bible as divine discourse (Wolterstorff). Still 
others, while not denying the preceding points, see speech-act philosophy as 
contributing categories for a full-fledged interpretation theory that resonates 
well with properly theological themes (Vanhoozer). The continuing discus-
sion thus concerns whether biblical interpreters should be concerned to 
develop specific strategies for reading Scripture in particular (special her-
menteics) as opposed to applying biblical and theological insights to inter-
pretation theory in general (general hermeneutics). 2) There is also some 
difference over the role of the interpretive community's response and audi-
ence reception of a text. One symptom of this difference may be seen in the 
various ways we appreciate (or not) the potential contribution of Ricœur's 
hermeneutic philosophy.13 Wolterstorff explicitly criticizes Ricœur's theory 
of 'textual sense' interpretation, whereas Thiselton explores Ricœur's (and 
Jauss's) suggestion that the meaning of a literary work rests upon the dialogical 
relation between the work and its audience in each age. The question this 
rises for biblical interpretation pertains to the mode, and time, of God's speak-
ing: are God's speech acts in Scripture once-for-all, or does God speak anew in 
each present reading (and, if this is so, does God say the same thing or some-
thing different on different occasions?).

My purpose in what follows is to develop some of the leading themes, 
philosophical and theological, of a hermeneutic of communicative action in 
order better to display what lies at the core of this emerging interdisciplinary 
approach. By no means is speech-act philosophy the queen of the hermeneutic 
sciences, however. How could it be? It was developed in order to deal pri-
marily with oral, not literary, discourse, and quite apart from any concern for a 
specifically Christian view of persons or language. So, while speech-act phi-
losophy has formulated some key insights and concepts, I shall feel free to make 
use of other theories (e.g., relevance theory) and concepts (e.g., imputation) as 
well. The aim is to sketch a model - and it will be no more than a sketch - of 
what we might call, after C.S. Lewis, 'mere hermeneutics'.

13 I shall later cast this disagreement in terms of the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions and in terms of their relative roles in interpretation and understanding.
Anatomy of communicative action

In order to succeed in some inquiry, says Aristotle, one must ask the right preliminary questions. The overall goal of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar is to address, and resolve, the contemporary crisis in biblical interpretation. Given this goal, I believe the right preliminary questions concern language and communication. What is language? What is communication? These questions are philosophical inasmuch as they pertain to basic concepts—concepts that lie behind, and often govern, the actual practice of interpretation. My strategy in what follows is to explore what I take to be the best answers to such questions, where 'best' is defined in terms of experiential and logical coherence, comprehensiveness, and compellingness on the one hand, and in terms of 'fittingness' with Scripture and Christian tradition on the other.

Language vs. speech

Most theories of linguistic communication have been based on a 'code' model, where language is the code and communication a matter of encoding and decoding messages. On this view, words are signs that represent thoughts; encoded thoughts. The main problem with this model is that it is descriptively inadequate, for several reasons: 1) some of the information conveyed is not actually encoded; 2) understanding involves more than decoding linguistic signals; and 3) words do more than convey information. The code theory leaves unexplained the gap between the code and the meaning that is actually communicated by the language. Mere mastery of a sign system is no guarantee of understanding.

Far more adequate are descriptions of language use or 'discourse' (the technical term for language in use). Of course, not just any use is in view. Repeating 'The rain in Spain . . .' for the sake of improving one's English accent is not yet discursive. (For the same reason, standing on a hermeneutics textbook to reach the top shelf counts as a use, but not as an interpretation, of a text.) Let us define 'discourse' as 'what someone sometime says to someone about something'.

Ricœur makes an important distinction between semiotics (the science of the sign) and semantics (the science of sentences). A sentence, or speech act, is not simply a larger sign but an entity of a completely different order. A sentence is the smallest unit of language that can be used on a particular occasion to say something; it is more than the sum of its semiotic parts and requires a level of description all its own. For Ricœur, this distinction between

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12 Ricœur, Interpretation Theory, 6–7.
13 We may here note a parallel between the self and the sentence: each is what Peter Strawson calls a 'basic particular', that is, an irreducible concept that cannot be explained by something more basic (see my Meaning?, 204).
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semiotics and semantics 'is the key to the whole problem of language'." The
distinction thus deserves closer inspection.

A simple example shows how the linguistic meaning alone of a sentence­
long discourse falls short of encoding what a speaker, S, means when she says:
'Coffee would keep me awake.' There is no problem breaking the code of this
sentence. The language is clear and stands in good syntactical order. The infor­
mation conveyed is that coffee, presumably the caffeinated kind, has an acceler­
ating effect on the human nervous system. But what does the discourse - the
use of the sentence on a given occasion - mean? Decoding the language is not
enough. We need to know something about the circumstances of the dis­
course. Consider two different scenarios where S is asked 'Would you like
some coffee?': 1) S is studying for an exam late at night and is struggling to stay
awake; 2) S has finished studying for an exam and would like to retire early in
order to be fresh for the exam the following morning. In the first case, the
meaning of S's statement 'Coffee would keep me awake' is 'yes'; in the second
instance, 'no'. What this example shows is that communication involves more
than linguistic encoding; it involves, in ways that we have yet to specify, the
broader, unencoded circumstances of someone's use of language.

Communication: The design plan of human language

Words alone have at best only meaning potential. Human languages should
not be thought of as free-floating sign systems that enjoy an autonomous exis­
tence from their users. Even a dictionary simply reports the common usages
associated with a given word. Hence, to study a language apart from studying
what language users do with it is a hopeless enterprise.

The philosopher William Alston advocates what he terms the 'Use Princi­
ple': 'An expression's having a certain meaning consists in its being usable to
play a certain role (to do certain things) in communication.' A language,
then, is a vehicle for communication. He claims that 'Interpersonal communi­
cation is the primary function of language; its other functions, for example, its
use in the articulation of thought, are derivative from that.' By 'speech act' or
'discourse', then, let us refer to language-in-communicative-use.

Using language to communicate is not an arbitrary happening. I have else­
where argued that the 'design plan' of language is to enable communication
and understanding. " Here, then, is our first working thesis, a thesis that arises
from a theological conviction:

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16 Ricœur, Interpretation Theory, 8.
18 Ibid., 155.
19 Cf. my Meaning?, 204-7.
1. **Language has a ‘design plan’ that is inherently covenantal.**

Language is a divinely given human endowment and serves as a crucial medium for relating with God, oneself, others and the world. For the moment, my focus is on interpersonal communication. My hope is that certain developments in recent philosophy will help us better to understand what we believe about language on the basis of our Christian theological convictions.

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**A missional model of communication (theology)**

The sender-receiver model is well known in communication studies. According to this model, a source (speaker, author) encodes a message into a linguistic signal (speech, text) that serves as the channel which conveys the message (through air, across time) to a destination (listener, reader) who receives the message by decoding the signal. What light, if any, might theology have to shed on debates about the nature of language and communication? While I certainly do not think that everything in our world is a ‘vestige of the Trinity’, I do think that in this case there is something more than an interesting analogy. The doctrine of the Trinity, I shall argue, stands not as an analogy but as a paradigm to human communication.

The triune God is an eternal communion of divine persons. Presumably, there is some ‘communication’ between Father, Son, and Spirit – the so-called ‘immanent’ Trinity. Nevertheless, I propose to develop a theological understanding of communication on the basis of the ‘economic’, not the immanent, Trinity. The economic Trinity is the technical term for the way in which the triune God progressively reveals himself in history. The economic Trinity is the name for God in communicative (and self-communicative) action. We can thus state our second thesis:

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2. **The paradigm for a Christian view of communication is the triune God in communicative action.**

The so-called ‘missions’ of the Son and Spirit, authorized by God the Father/Author, bear a certain resemblance to the ‘economy’ of the ‘sender-receiver’ model of communications. They represent God’s attempt to reach out to human others in truth and love. The Son is God’s ‘mission’ to the world, as is indicated by the words of Jesus in John 17:18, ‘As you have sent me into the world . . .’. Jesus’ mission, at least in part, was to give to his disciples the words the Father had given him (Jn. 17:8). At the core of Christian theology, then, is the theme of the *word sent*.

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Irenaeus believed that the Father’s work was two-handed: the Word provides form or shape (content); the Spirit provides animation and movement. ‘Sending’, then, lies at the very heart of Christian thinking about the triune God. And, in a biblical passage that largely accounts for my appreciation of speech-act philosophy, we read God declaring, through the prophet Isaiah, that his word, like rain, is sent to nourish and enliven life on earth: ‘so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it’ (Isa. 55:11). If every piece of human discourse similarly aims at accomplishing something, then it follows that every statement is a ‘mission statement’.

Does the notion of missio entail the code model of communication? That depends on whether the ‘Word’, to return to Faust, is conceived exclusively as ‘thought’ (e.g., information) or as ‘power’ and ‘deed’ as well. From the perspective of theology, the mission of the Son – God’s ‘sending’ his Word to earth – should be seen in terms of acting, not encoding. For the sending is not simply a conveying of information, but a conveying of God’s very person (i.e., a conveying of one’s communicative as well as informative intentions). For what God purposed in sending the Son (and later, the Holy Spirit) involved much more than conveying information. The purpose of the sending of God’s Word was as much transformative as it was informative. Indeed, the Gnostics (and others since then) erred precisely at this point, in thinking that salvation was indeed only a matter of knowledge. If that were the case, then information alone could indeed save us. But it is not the case. By communicative action, then, I have in mind the many kinds of missions on which verbal messages are sent.

**Communication as intentional action**

The missional model of communication, together with the design plan of language, encourage us to think of discourse in terms of intentional action. Humans typically conceptualize human behavior in intentional terms. Robert Gibbs, a cognitive psychologist, adopts the ‘cognitive intentionalist premise’: ‘people’s experiences of meaning are fundamentally structured by their inferences about the intentions of others’. 21 Gibbs believes that there is empirical evidence that demonstrates how human beings are cognitively ‘hard-wired’ to look for intentions in human linguistic, artistic and cultural products. Just as babies know to focus on their parents’ faces and eyes, so listeners and readers attend to embodied intentions. ‘People use words to convey to each other first and foremost their communicative intentions, not the semantic meanings of the words or the unconscious causes that might underlie such intentions.’ 22

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21 Gibbs, Intentions, 326.
22 Ibid., 42.
Here again we see how one’s view of language is mutually conditioned by one’s view of what it is to be human. From a Christian vantage point, human beings are neither mechanical automatons nor free spirits, but embodied agents. Christians reject the modern picture of the sovereign subject who enjoys mastery over language and the postmodern picture of the victim of systemic socio-economic or political forces who is more bespoken by than an active speaker of language.23

The subject of intentionality is far too complex to discuss thoroughly here. Yet it is far too important a subject to ignore, either. For what an agent does is ontologically and logically tied to the concept of what the agent intended. It follows that understanding is a matter of recognizing the agent’s intention, for it is the intention that makes an act one thing rather than another. Whether a slap on the back is a greeting, an attempt to save someone from choking, or a congratulatory rather than an aggressive gesture, all depends on the intent with which the act was performed. On my view, then, authorial intention returns—not as a feature of psychology so much as an irreducible aspect of action. Intentions are embodied in a material medium, enacted via bodily movement or by saying something.

One popular, though misleading, view of intentions is to identify them with an agent’s plans or desires ("I intend to be there on time"). What an agent plans to do and what an agent actually does are two different things, however. It is perhaps the failure to preserve this distinction, more than anything else, that accounts for the demise in current literary theory of the concept of authorial intention.

Only the concept of intention enables us to view actions as more than mere bodily movements. When we say that someone gives, or attacks, or borrows, or protects, we are not merely describing bodily movements but intentional actions. Similarly, only the concept of intention enables us to view words and texts as more than mere material marks. Only the concept of authorial intention enables us to specify what the author is doing in using (e.g., tending to) just these words in just this way.

The so-called death of the author is actually a form of the worst sort of reductionism, where communicative acts and intentions are stripped away from the text, leaving an autonomous linguistic object. This is similar to reducing the wink—a communicative act in its own right—to the blink, that is, to a minor (and meaningless) bodily movement. If we ignore the intention—that factor that accounts for the unity of an action—we lose the act itself: no intention, no wink. Now, each stage of the physiological process of winking—the neural firings, the muscular contraction—could be described

23 For a fuller account of how human beings are communicative agents in covenantal relation, see my 'Human Being', esp. 175–83.
separately, but no one stage is the location of the intention, or the wink. ‘We murder to dissect.’ Failure to ascribe intentions thus results in ‘thin’ descriptions. Descriptions are ‘thin’ when they must rely on lower-level concepts like ‘neural firings’ rather than higher-level, intentional categories like ‘flirting’.

It is important to locate the cause of the text at the right level: neither at the infrastructure (the sign system) nor at the level of the superstructure (the prevailing ideology), but at the level of the completed act, the level to which the author was attending. It is vitally important to resist ‘eliminative semiotics’: the tendency to reduce meaning to morphemes in motion. Intention cannot be reduced to the non-intentional without losing the phenomenon of action itself. The author’s intention is that intrinsic factor that constitutes an act as what it is. A speech act, then, is the result of an enacted communicative intention.

Relevance
A relative newcomer to the scene of communications studies, relevance theory, has made several helpful contributions towards helping us understand communication in terms of intentional action. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson write: ‘To communicate is to claim an individual’s attention: hence to communicate is to imply that the information communicated is relevant’. According to Sperber and Wilson, communication is less a process of encoding than it is ‘a process of inferential recognition of the communicator’s intentions’. Communication succeeds when the audience is able to infer the speaker’s meaning from her utterance.

Relevance theory builds on insights into the dynamics of conversations associated with the philosopher Paul Grice. Grice’s basic idea is that once a piece of behavior is identified as communicative, it then becomes reasonable to assume that the communicator is trying to make herself understood. What a speaker says is evidence of the speaker’s communicative intention. Hence the ‘cooperative principle’: make your conversational contribution such as is required for accomplishing its particular purpose in the particular situation in which it occurs. For instance, ‘be as informative as required, but not more so’.

From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts
Relevance theory tries to answer three questions: what did S intend to say? What did S intend to imply? What was S's intended attitude towards what S expressed and implied? In many cases, the linguistic meaning of a speech act, by itself, fails to communicate what the speaker means. Grice's cooperative principle, together with its four maxims, help addressees make sense of a communicative act whose linguistic meaning appears irrelevant or ambiguous. The sentence 'Coffee would keep me awake' appears, on the surface – that is, with regard to its linguistic meaning only – to say something about the effect of caffeine on the human organism.\(^\text{27}\) A literalist might reply: 'I didn’t ask you whether it would keep you awake, I asked if you wanted some.' Such a reply fails to draw what Grice calls an *implicature* from the original speaker's answer. Grice suggests that when hearers are confronted with a discourse that appears to be irrelevant or uninformative, and which therefore violates the cooperative principle, they must derive the intended message ('No thanks, I don’t want any coffee') from their understanding of the broader situation in which the conversation takes place. An important question for biblical interpretation is whether there is a counterpart of the 'cooperative principle' for written discourse.

According to Sperber and Wilson, communication concerns the conveying of relevant information. On their view, the purpose of communication is to alter the 'cognitive environment' – the set of assumptions a person is capable of representing conceptually and which are accepted as probably true – of the addressee. To communicate successfully, they believe, we need some knowledge of the other's cognitive environment. As Van Leeuwen puts it elsewhere in this volume, 'human communication presupposes existence in a *shared*, meaningful world ... with enculturated contexts of meaning that enable receivers of a language act (including book or text) to infer meaning that is relevant to their existence or situation'.

Every piece of discourse, merely by being expressed, makes a certain claim upon our attention. By addressing us, a speaker manifests her intention to modify our cognitive environment in some way. Simply to say 'Hi!' modifies the addressee's cognitive environment by making her aware of the speaker’s presence. We assume that what is said is relevant and that we will benefit from the effort it takes to process the information. The 'presumption of relevance' is that the level of cognitive effects – the communicative pay-off, as it were – is never less than is needed to make the discourse worth processing. In other words, the cognitive effort of understanding must never outweigh the

\(^{27}\) For an extended analysis of this example, see Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 11, 16, 34–35, 56.
what did S intend to say? attitude towards what S meaning of a speech act, S. Grice’s cooperative make sense of a comment or ambiguous. The surface – that is, with about the effect of ca­ nightly: ‘I didn’t ask you heard some.’ Such a reply original speaker’s answer. discourse that appears violates the coopera­ tion. ‘No thanks, I don’t under situation in which about the ‘presumption of rele­ Vents.’

communicative action as locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary

On one level, speech-act philosophy corresponds admirably with the missional model of communication as intentional action. Indeed, the very title of J.L. Austin’s seminal lectures, *How to Do Things with Words*, conveys his intention to move us beyond the picture of language as essentially a vehicle for transferring information (the ‘FedEx’ model of communication). Speech acts, as Austin and others have pointed out, have other agendas than transmitting information.

This is not the place to develop a full-fledged theory of speech acts. There are many such accounts. Suffice it to say, by way of introduction, that most speech-act theories distinguish three distinct aspects or dimensions of what we do with language.

Concerns the convey­ ing a person is capable of – of the we need some knowl­ when it elsewhere existence in a shared, meaningful that enable one to infer meaning that is

makes a certain claim on our behalf that we will benefit from the speaker’s desire to say ‘Hi!’ modifies our awareness of the speaker’s intention to make us aware of the speaker’s intention to make something happen, as it worth processing. In that, it never outweighs the

Cognitive effects of understanding. We shall return to relevance theory in due course.28

28 Jürgen Habermas makes a similar point about what we might call the ‘presumption of rationality’. Every competent speech act must meet three validity conditions: it must be true (e.g., it must represent something in the external world); it must be truthful (e.g., it must sincerely express the speaker’s intentions or inner world); it must be right (e.g., it must fit appropriately into the context of the social world). These three conditions together make up the presumption of communicative rationality.

*From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts*
If analytic philosophy conducts an anatomy of communicative action, then the notion of illocution must be judged to be its heart. Interpretation is essentially a matter of identifying and specifying illocutionary acts: what speakers and authors have done in tending to their words as they have. Hence:

3. ‘Meaning’ is the result of communicative action, of what an author has done in tending to certain words at a particular time in a specific manner.

Philosophy comes into its own as far as biblical interpretation is concerned when it trains its analytic sights on illocutionary acts. Accordingly, I shall have recourse on more than one occasion to William Alston’s recent work on illocutionary acts. I shall also try to deepen Alston’s account by considering illocutions from the biblical-theological perspective of the covenant. For the moment, suffice it to say that Alston has produced what is probably the single most complete apology for viewing meaning in terms of illocutionary acts. To be precise, he defines sentence meaning in terms of illocutionary act potential. A sentence’s having a certain meaning consists in its being usable to play a certain role (to do certain things) in communication. The meaning of ‘Jesus is Lord’ is that one can use it to confess that Jesus is Lord. It has this potential because of its propositional content, with ‘Jesus’ as subject and ‘Lord’ as predicate, and because its utterance enables the speaker to assume a certain stance towards that proposition – in this case, an ‘assertive’ stance.

Searle, Alston and Wolterstorff all take promising to be a, if not the, paradigmatic speech act. ‘My doing A in the future’ is the content of my promise. Yet identifying this concept does not exhaust what is done in promising. To promise is to lay an obligation on oneself with regard to some future action. Alston and Wolterstorff in particular emphasize the agent’s assuming a normative stance towards the content of that promise. In other words, in uttering a promise the speaker assumes responsibility for the conditions for its satisfaction. Making a promise, then, alters one’s normative stance; one is now responsible for doing something for which one was not responsible before making the promise. In Alston’s words: ‘An utterance is most basically made into an illocutionary act of a certain type by virtue of a normative stance on the part of the speaker’. Assuming a normative stance means that one becomes liable to judgments of appropriateness and rightness. What a speech act counts as depends not only on the words used, but also on the intersubjective situation (the circumstances, conventions, rules, etc.) that render language usable.

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From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts

Perhaps the purest examples of how people do things with language are what Searle terms 'declaratives' and Alston 'exercitives'. These speech acts are 'verbal exercises of authority, verbal ways of altering the "social status" of something, an act that is made possible by one's social or institutional role or status'. The crucial fact here is that an utterance only brings something about if the utterer has the appropriate authority and makes his utterance in the appropriate circumstances. Examples of such 'exercitive' speech acts would be 'You're fired!' and 'I now pronounce you man and wife'. Another important example, recently examined by Ricœur, is that of the pronouncement of a judicial sentence: 'I sentence you to life imprisonment.' 'Sentencing' is, for Ricœur, the place where the universality of law and the particularity of life-situations meet, and hopefully issue in wise, and just, judgment. The point here is that these communicative actions involve much more than a linguistic code or the sheer meaning of words. They involve communicative agents taking responsibility for what they do with their words.

From communicative action to covenantal relation

Communicative action is essentially an interpersonal affair. There is thus a fourth, overarching, dimension to communicative action: the interlocutionary. Let us call an interlocutor - either an agent or recipient of communicative action - a communicant. Interestingly, even J.L. Austin, a philosopher, had an inkling of the covenantal dimension of illocutions, for he wrote 'Our word is our bond'. Thiselton has helpfully drawn attention to biblical material on the rights and obligations associated with human speech. Of course, in the context of Scripture, as he rightly points out, these 'rights' are not something that attach to autonomous individuals, as in Enlightenment thinking, but appear rather in the context of covenants with others and with the Other: 'covenantal obligations presuppose a network of relationality which has a different basis from that of "rights" for an isolated, orphaned self who is not even "the sojourner-guest within the gates".'

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25 Ibid., 34.
26 Ricœur insists that the purpose of the judiciary is to ensure that words win out over violence, justice over vengeance (The Just, ix). Later, in the same work, he draws attention to a certain parallel between the trial and the process of textual interpretation. The analogy is apt, for as I argue below, interpreting the meaning of a text is essentially a matter of ascribing intentional action to a responsible agent.
27 Austin, Words, 10.
28 Thiselton, in Lundin, et al., Promise, 217. Thiselton also remarks that Cartesian individualism predisposes us to overlook the interlocutionary dimension. For an illocution usually makes a claim not only of relevance, but also of something else, on the listener.
Whereas Thiselton pays special attention to covenantal promising, I tend to see all communicative action in covenantal terms. Philosophers are generally more comfortable speaking of cultural and social conventions than covenants. However, only if we allow our theological convictions to deepen philosophy at this point by invoking the design plan of language will a more Christianly adequate description of communication, as a species of covenantal action, be possible. Communicative privileges and responsibilities are best seen in a covenantal framework. Language is a divinely appointed covenantal institution. Hermeneutics, as the discipline that aims to understand the discourse of others, presupposes an interactive, interlocutionary self that exists only in relation to others. What we need to see is that all discourse is a form of interpersonal, communicative – which is to say, covenantal – action. The parties to the covenant of discourse – the communicants – are essentially two: speaker and hearer, or alternately, author and reader.

The ‘who’: Speaker/author

Deconstruction, it has been said, is the ‘death of God’ put into writing. The death of God is nothing less than the death of the Author of history. If there is no God, then ultimately history has no meaning, for the course of events would no longer represent God’s communicative action but a meaningless, because impersonal, sequence of cause and effect. Similarly, texts, bereft of human authors, would be radically indeterminate for the simple reason that we could not identify what illocutionary act has been performed. Texts without authors would be mere entities, as devoid of meaning as the marks the waves leave upon the sand. Why? Because meaning is the result of intentional (illocutionary) action, not a natural event. There is verbal meaning only where someone means, or has meant, something by using particular words in a specific context in a certain way. The death of the author thus leads to hermeneutic non-realism and to the suspicion that meaning, like God, is merely a projection on the part of the reader/believer. Neither hermeneutics nor theology can afford to follow Feuerbach’s suggestion that what we find – God, meaning – is actually only a projection of ourselves.

The theological response to deconstruction is to stress ‘the providence of God put into writing’. The missions of the Son and Spirit, not to mention the mission of the Word of God spoken or written (Isa. 55:11), is an outworking of divine providence. Now human authorship is a (pale) reflection of divine authorship. Created in the image of God, humans have been given the ‘dignity

31 For the sake of economy, I shall refer to agents of communicative action, be it oral or written discourse, as ‘authors’.
32 See Garcia’s excellent article, ‘Can There Be Texts Without Historical Authors?’.
33 For a fuller analysis of this point, see my Meaning?, ch. 2.
of communicative agency’. Humans are communicative agents in covenantal relation, creatures able to enter into dialogical relations with others and, to a certain extent, with the world. To be a communicative agent means that one has the ability to set a language system in motion and so bring about an act of discourse.

Think of the author as a historical agent whose action is fixed in the past. What one communicates or does with words depends both on the historical circumstances of the act and on the state of a particular language at a given place and time. In order to make sense of p-a-i-n, for instance, we need to know whether an author was doing something in English or French. Unless we can associate texts with historical authors, they have potential meaning only. The historical aspect does not exhaust the nature of the author’s agency, however. The author is also an aesthetic agent who structures his or her text in order to make the communicative act more effective. But we can go even further. The author is a moral agent who interacts with others in what he or she says and does. Authors of narrative, for instance, do not only tell stories, but also instruct people in right living, or give hope to the needy, or warn the unrighteous of the fate that awaits them. Finally, the author is a religious agent who, in relating to his words in a certain way (‘Let your yea be yea, and your nay, nay’), either fulfills or fails his God-given responsibilities in the exercise of his tongue. In other words, the way we relate to our everyday discourse, as well as to the discourse of others, will prove us to be either faithful and true, or untrustworthy liars. (The same religious quality pertains, as we shall see, to interpreters too.)

We saw earlier that illocutionary acts involve authors taking normative stances towards the content of their acts. To promise is to undertake to fulfill certain obligations, and hence to make oneself responsible. I now want to generalize this point by suggesting that the author is the one to whom certain illocutionary acts can be imputed. Imputation is the operative concept, for it has to do both with the capacity to act and with the related notion of responsibility for action. It is also a notion that has an interesting pedigree, both in philosophy and in theology. Kant distinguished persons and things precisely in terms of imputation: ‘A person is the subject whose actions can be imputed to him ... A thing is that to which nothing can be imputed.’ Imputation names, in Ricœur’s words, ‘the idea that action can be assigned to the account of an agent taken to be its actual author.’ The core of the concept of imputation is the attribution or ascription of an action to its author. The Latin putare implies calculation (computare), a kind of bookkeeping as to who has done what. The metaphor of a balance
book, at the limit the Book of Life (Rev. 20:12), underlies the idea of ‘being accountable for’.

Being an author, then, carries certain responsibilities. Yet every person who speaks is an author – that is, a communicative agent. Again we see the confluence of the two themes of language and personhood. It is important to recognize, however, that authors are not only agents, but also patients, in the sense of those to whom something is done. For, once the communicative act is complete, its author can do no more. We may here recall relevance theory’s insistence that every speech act is a tacit request for someone’s attention. Authors must ‘suffer’ the reception of their works, including the possibilities that no one will pay attention, or that some might pay the wrong kind of attention. What we have said about the author’s agency needs to be balanced, then, by an acknowledgment of the author’s passivity. The author is both an active agent and a passive ‘other’ – a significant, signifying, ‘other’. The covenant of discourse works in both directions: the author is responsible for her action; the reader is responsible for her response to the other and the other’s act.

The ‘what’: Word, speech or text act
To this point, I have compared language use with action. Speech is both a ‘doing’ and a ‘deed’. ‘Communication’ can refer both to the process and to the product, both to the action of communication and to the completed act. The attempt to say just what a communicative act is may be helped by reversing the polarities in order to think of action as a form of speech. For actions have speech-act attributes: in the first place, the doing of an action corresponds to the locution. Secondly, actions have propositional content (e.g., ‘S performs act y on the ball’) and illocutionary force (e.g., kicking). Finally, actions may also have perlocutionary effects (‘S scores a goal’).

Alston helpfully shows how illocutions ‘supervene’ on locutions. One can only perform an illocutionary act on the basis of locutions – words, sentences – though illocutions cannot be reduced to locutions. The same propositional content, say, ‘Jesus’ walking on water’, can be attended to in different ways, and these different ways – asserting, asking, advising – determine the ‘direction of fit’ between our words and the world.

A text, then, is a communicative act with matter (propositional content) and energy (illocutionary force). Genuine interpretation, to stick with the

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39 Alston’s analysis is slightly different. For him, the ‘content’ of an act includes object and performance: ‘kicking the ball’. With regard to illocutionary acts, this means that, for Alston, the content of the act includes both its propositional component and its illocutionary force. For Searle (and usually me), ‘content’ refers primarily to the propositional component of the illocutionary act. In my view, the difference is largely terminological, though it ought to be kept in mind.
From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts

analogy, conserves textual matter and energy; deconstruction lets it dissipate. It does not follow from the fact that a text is a determinate communicative action that there is only one correct way to describe it. Opinions as to what an author did may, and should, change as we come to a deeper understanding of the author’s language and circumstances, but this is not to say that the author did something that she had not done before. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that authors may intend to communicate complex, multi-layered intentions. There is an instructive dialogue in the opening pages of *The Hobbit*. The scene is Gandalf’s first visit to Bilbo Baggins:

‘Good Morning!’ said Bilbo, and he meant it …
‘What do you mean?’ he [Gandalf] said. ‘Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not, or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?’
‘All of them at once,’ said Bilbo. ‘And a very fine morning for a pipe of tobacco out of doors, into the bargain.’

A bit later Bilbo uses the same locutionary act with a very different illocutionary intent:

‘Good morning! We don’t want any adventures here, thank you!’
‘What a lot of things you do use Good morning for!’ said Gandalf. ‘Now you mean that you want to get rid of me, and that it won’t be good till I move off.’

Bilbo’s first ‘Good morning’ performs more than one illocutionary act. Well and good. I would say that, in this case, his single determinate meaning was, in fact, compound rather than simple. If need be, I would be prepared to abandon the term ‘single’, though I think it is still implied in the really important qualifying term ‘determinate’.

What is at stake in the foregoing is the status of the literal sense. The foregoing analysis suggests the following definition, which is also my fourth thesis:

4. The literal sense of an utterance or text is the sum total of those illocutionary acts performed by the author intentionally and with self-awareness.

There are many ways to study discourse, but not all are germane to the task of describing communicative action. Genuine interpretation is a matter of offering appropriately ‘thick descriptions’ of communicative acts, to use Gilbert Ryle’s fine phrase. A description is sufficiently thick when it allows us to appreciate everything the author is doing in a text – that is, its illocutions.

Typically, historical-critical commentaries describe either the history and process of a text’s composition or ‘what actually happened’. According to the
traditional 'picture theory' of meaning, the literal sense would be what a word or sentence referred to. On my view, however, the literal sense refers to the illocutionary act performed by the author. The important point is that the literal sense may require a fairly 'thick' description in order to bring it to light. For Ryle, a thin description of, say, a wink would be one that offers a minimal account only ('rapid contraction of the eyelid'). The description is thin because it omits the intentional context that alone enables us to see what someone is doing. Much modern biblical scholarship, in so doing, yields only 'thin description'. Text criticism gets bogged down on the locutionary level; historical criticism is obsessed with reference. The matter and energy of the Gospels is largely lost by historical-critical commentaries. The most important thing we need to know about a text, I submit, is what kind of communicative act(s) it performs and with what content.

The 'wherefore' and 'whereto': Reader
All speech acts, we declared, are mission statements, words on a mission: to accomplish the purpose for which they have been sent. That purpose, according to relevance theory, is to alter the addressee's cognitive environment in some way. The 'whereto' of communicative action is the reader; the 'wherefore' of communicative action is the reader's transformation (at a minimum, this means the reader will entertain a new thought).

Authors often wish to accomplish something by their discourse. The author of the Fourth Gospel, for instance, wants to elicit the reader's belief that Jesus is the Christ by telling Jesus' story. The question is whether this extra effect - eliciting belief - should count as part of the author's communicative action. I think it should not. Alston is right: an illocutionary act may well produce perlocutionary effects, but it does not consist in such effects. The only effect that properly belongs to the author's illocutionary act is understanding - the recognition of an illocutionary act for what it is. Sperber and Wilson agree: 'For us, the only purpose that a genuine communicator and a willing audience necessarily have in common is to achieve uptake: that is, to have the communicator's informative intention recognized by the audience'. In a neat reversal of Augustine's formula 'Take up and read', we can say that understanding is a matter of reading and taking up (the illocution).

R.A. Duff, a philosopher of law, defines intention as 'acting to bring about a result' and distinguishes it from both desire and foresight. A desired consequence is like a perlocution; an unforeseen consequence is more like an accidental effect. G.H. Von Wright similarly uses the term 'result' for results that are conceptually constitutive of an action, and 'consequence' for those further

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40 Sperber and Wilson, Relevance, 161.  
41 Duff, Intention.
would be what a word sense refers to the illocutionary point is that the literal brings it to light. For the that offers a minimal the description is thin enables us to see what in so doing, yields only the locutionary level; matter and energy of the illocutions. The most important kind of communicative actions on a mission: to. That purpose, accord- cognitive environment in the reader; the ‘where-formation (at a minimum, their discourse. The author’s reader’s belief that Jesus is whether this extra effect – communicative action. I act may well produce effects. The only effect is understanding – the rec- and Wilson agree: ‘For a willing audience nec- to have the communica-ence’. In a neat reversal of y that understanding is a as ‘acting to bring about insight’. A desired consequence is more like an acci- term ‘result’ for results that consequence’ for those further entailments that an action produces. The distinction, then, is between what is intrinsic and extrinsic. A result is what occurs in the performance of an illocutionary act (‘he confessed that Jesus was Lord’). A consequence, on the other hand, is an event that may or may not follow from the performance of an action (‘he made me feel unspiritual’). The main point is that consequences are not intrinsic, but extrinsic, to actions.

Understanding is a matter of recognizing an author’s illocutionary act for what it is. A communicative act succeeds in the illocutionary purpose for which it has been sent simply by virtue of its being recognized. Communication succeeds when the speaker’s communicative intention becomes mutually known. The reader need not believe or obey what is said in order to under- stand it. The reader’s role in the covenant of discourse is nothing less than to seek understanding. Our anatomy of communicative action has led us to a fifth thesis, a thesis of decisive importance for the task of biblical interpretation, as we shall see below:

5. Understanding consists in recognizing illocutionary acts and their results.

Communicative action, however, often produces consequences other than understanding. Strictly speaking, these are not part of the illocutionary act that we have argued is the true object of understanding. Of course, there is nothing to stop a reader from inquiring into such unintended consequences. There is something that should stop us from calling such inquiries ‘interpretations’, however, and that is our analysis of what communicative action just is.

Communicative action can be ‘overstood’: readers can respond to texts other than by inferring illocutionary acts. There are often good reasons for overstanding. Gibbs, for example, cites the example of Jules Verne’s The Mys- terious Island, often thought to be a pro-Union and pro-abolitionist noveL Yet many contemporary readers, sensitive to the ways in which ideologies can affect people at a deep level, detect lingering evidence of racism in Verne’s work: ‘The book appears antiracist when read in terms of Verne’s intentional meanings, yet racist when read from a more contemporary viewpoint’. Similar remarks have been, of course, made about the Bible with regard to sexism. While judgments of political correctness may be appropriate, however, it is important not to rush to judgment too quickly. The first step is to identify what has been done; only then is one in a position to evaluate the action. Indeed, not to identify what an author has done risks doing the author violence. This underscores the importance of the reader, who is not merely a

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42 See Von Wright, Explanation and Understanding.
43 Gibbs, Intentions, 267.
passive but an active recipient of an author’s communication. To engage in communicative action – to make the communicative-covenantal presumption – is to hope that one will not fall prey to interpretive violence. This is simply the Golden Rule put into hermeneutics. “To be understood is in itself a source of joy, not to be understood a source of unhappiness.” Readers have an obligation to recognize an author’s illocutionary act for what it is.

The citizen of language
Let us briefly gather up the results of our anatomy of communicative action before going on to discuss the implications for interpretation and for our understanding of the communicative action in Scripture.

Throughout this discussion, I have assumed that the most interesting facts about language all pertain to how humans use it to perform certain actions. That our views of what language is are tied up with our views of what it is to be human should by now be taken as a given. It is no accident that Alston’s analysis of illocutionary acts led him straight to the notion of speakers’ rights and responsibilities. Inherent in the very notion of speech acts is the idea of a speaker to whom acts may be imputed. Examining language in philosophical perspective directs us to the topics of human action and responsibility; theology deepens the analysis by viewing human action and responsibility in covenantal terms. Authors have an obligation to fulfill the responsibilities that they inevitably assume in performing their illocutionary acts. Readers have an obligation to seek understanding: to recognize illocutionary acts for what they are.

A communicant – either author as active agent or reader as active recipient of communication – is necessarily a partici-pant in the covenant of discourse. Communicants enjoy what we might call, after Pascal, the dignity – the privilege and the responsibility – of communicative action. Pascal himself marveled at the dignity of causality with which God has endowed the human race. Like God, we are able to bring about new things. Communicative action – the ability to transform the cognitive environment – is no less marvelous. The privilege of communicative action is that we have the capacity to take initiatives in the world with our words and hence have the capacity to make a difference.

The image of the covenant brings to light yet another dimension of the language-humanity relation: the social. Searle defines language as a rule-governed form of human behavior. I have been at pains to show that these rules are moral as well as simply grammatical. But there is a political dimension, too. Speakers are neither sovereign subjects of language as a manipulable instrument (the modern error), nor slaves of language as an ideological system.
communication. To engage in non-covenantal presumptive violence. This is to be understood as in itself a sin. Readers have an interest in what it is.

of communicative action and interpretation and for our own perspective.

the most interesting facts are about the capacity to perform certain actions. Our views of what it is to be human are informed by the idea that Alston's analysis of speakers' rights and speech acts is the idea of a language in philosophical and responsibility, theological and responsibility in the language of communicative action. The dignity of the communicant in the covenant of discourse. Indeed, what I have called the covenant of discourse spells out what it is to live justly in the city of language. Citizenship names the way an individual belongs to a polis. Citizens of language are communicants in the covenant of discourse. Indeed, what I have called the covenant of discourse spells out what it is to live justly in the city of language (discourse). We now turn to consider what good citizenship in the city of language means when it comes to interpretation.

Interpretation and communicative action
The model of communication I have been sketching assumes not merely a cooperative principle (so Grice), but also a 'covenantal principle' of discourse. What follows from our anatomy of communicative action for the practice of interpretation? Let the sixth thesis serve to anticipate the ensuing argument:

6. Interpretation is the process of inferring authorial intentions and of ascribing illocutionary acts.

Interpretation and illocutionary ascription
I agree with Alston that to understand a speaker is to know what illocutionary act she was performing. To interpret a text is thus to ascribe a particular illocutionary act, or set of acts, to its author. To interpret a text is to answer the question, 'What is the author doing in her text?' Interpretation involves coming up with appropriately 'thick' descriptions of what an author is doing that go beyond the locutionary level (e.g., 'he uttered a sentence' or 'he spoke with a French accent') to descriptions of relevant communicative, which is to say illocutionary, action ('he confessed Jesus is Lord').

Guessing what an author wanted or planned to do in a text is not yet interpretation. Such a guess, in fact, may have little or nothing to do with what an author has actually done. No, what needs to be described is what the author was actually attending to — performing intentionally, with the appropriate skill and with self-awareness — in doing things with words.

In the final analysis, interpretation is a matter of justice: of correctly ascribing what illocutionary acts have actually been performed. Interpretation is a matter of judging what an author has said/done in his or her words. The idea of inferring intentions from completed acts suggests a certain parallel between the process of textual interpretation and the judicial

Ricœur, The Just, xv.

process of a court trial. The basis of the analogy should now be plain: both have to do with *imputing intentions to agents justly*. In the case of textual interpretation, of course, what are imputed are not criminal but communicative, or, to be exact, *illocutionary* intentions.

*Interpretation and illocutionary inference*

The hard work of interpretation is largely a matter of inferring illocutionary intent from the evidence, which includes both the primary data (the text) and secondary considerations (context). For example, the information transmitted by the locution 'Wet paint' is one thing; the illocution – 'Do not touch' – is quite another. For simpler communicative acts like a 'Wet paint' sign, we infer the illocution almost automatically, based on our appreciation of the situational context.

Relevance theory emphasizes the importance of inferring authorial intentions, too: 'According to the inferential model, communication is achieved by producing and interpreting evidence.' It is not simply a matter of decoding linguistic signs (e.g., locutions). Nor is it simply a matter of observing the effects of communicative action (e.g., perlocutions). No, interpretation must go on to determine which inferences as to the speaker's communicative intention would confirm the communicator's presumption of relevance. Recall the statement 'Coffee would keep me awake'. What should be inferred about the communicative act that supervenes on this locution depends entirely on the non-linguistic context of the utterance. It is not enough to know the dictionary meanings of the terms used in the sentence; one must know why just these words were used in just this way in just this circumstance. As Sperber and Wilson write: 'The coded signal, even if it is unambiguous, is only a piece of evidence about the communicator's intentions, and has to be used inferentially and in a context.'

Speech-act philosophy and relevance theory coincide at the point where the addressee has to *infer* what illocutionary act has been performed in a particular utterance. To return to the metaphor of the trial: one way to determine an agent's intent is to cross-examine her. Authors are not physically present, of course, to respond to our interrogations, but this need not prevent us from putting our questions to the text. Normally these questions take the form of hypotheses; we ask ourselves whether an author could have meant this rather than that. Our hypotheses are put to the test precisely by being brought to the text. Those hypotheses that can account for more aspects or features of the communicative act have more explanatory power. Interpretation thus works through abduction, that is, by inference to the best explanation. An

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47 Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 2.
48 Ibid., 170.
interpretation is acquired by inferring illocutionary data (the text) and information transmitted on - 'Do not touch' - is a 'Wet paint' sign, we infer appreciation of the situation. Inferring authorial intention is achieved by as is not simply a matter of merely a matter of observing. No, interpretation and communication is achieved by as is not simply a matter of merely a matter of observing intentions. What should be inferred depends entirely on not enough to know the circumstance. As Sperber and vidigas, is only a piece has to be used inferen-}
associate this dimension of communicative action (see below), remain largely on the margins of theories about discourse. Happily, Alston’s recent discussion provides help, and not a little light, in the discussion concerning the proper role for the reader’s, or for that matter the interpretive community’s, response to communicative action.

The real question is whether perlocutionary acts are essentially strategic rather than communicative. Aiming to produce an effect on the reader other than understanding, or other than by means of understanding, counts as strategic, not communicative, action. An emphasis on perlocutions can become pathological: 1) by aiming to produce effects on the reader independently of illocutions; or 2) by defining illocutions in terms of the effect produced on the reader. Interpreters must bear in mind the following two mandates: 1) do not think of communication in terms of perlocutions only; and 2) do not think of perlocutions as dissociated from illocutions. The danger lies in thinking about communication, and interpretation, in terms of effects produced on communicants. The seventh thesis puts perlocutions in their proper place:

7. Aiming to produce perlocutionary effects on readers other than by means of understanding counts as strategic, not communicative, action.

Austin himself thought that ‘it is the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions which seems likeliest to give trouble’. Stated as simply as possible, Austin was not sure whether the (perlocutionary) effect should be deemed an essential part of the (illocutionary) act. Anticipating our discussion of textual interpretation, we can see that Austin’s initial confusion has grown exponentially; today, there are many critics and theorists who think of meaning in terms of the effect a text has on a reader (e.g., the reader’s response).

For Alston, the distinction is clear-cut. It is the difference between having performed an action and being understood to have performed that action. What we have here is a variation on Berkeley’s idealism: not ‘to be is to be perceived’, but ‘to act is to have been perceived to have acted’. But perhaps the distinction is not so solid. For as communication theorists remind us, communication is not a one-way street. We do not know if we have communicated until we

51 Austin, Words, 109.
52 E.g., Fish, Text?, equates textual meaning with the reader’s response. A similar confusion may lie behind the ‘functional equivalence’ model of Bible translation that Van Leeuwen so competently interrogates and critiques elsewhere in this volume. Philosophers who tend to define illocutions in terms of perlocutions include Paul Grice, ‘Meaning’, and Stephen Schiffer, Meaning. For a fuller presentation of Alston’s refutation of these views, see his Illocutionary Acts, ch. 2.
receive the appropriate feedback. To this, Alston replies yes and no: if you didn’t hear or understand my question, then yes, on one level my communicative purpose has been frustrated. But – and this is all-important – it does not follow that I didn’t ask you.

Alston posits a hierarchy of supervenience in which the ‘higher’ depends on, but cannot be reduced to, the ‘lower’, and in which the ‘lower’ cannot by itself do what is done at the ‘higher’ level. Such hierarchical ordering is familiar to scientists: cells depend on atoms and electrons, but the properties and behavior of the cell cannot be reduced to, or explained in terms of, atoms and electrons. No, cells supervene on atoms and require their own set of explanatory concepts. Similarly, illocutions supervene on locutions. Requesting someone to pass the salt is something we do in doing something else (e.g., saying ‘Please pass the salt’). My asking depends on, but cannot be reduced to, my uttering.

Applying the same reasoning, Alston argues for an asymmetrical dependence of perlocutionary acts on illocutionary acts. To use the concepts just defined, this means that perlocutionary acts supervene on illocutionary acts. Acts are illocutionary when they pertain to what we are doing in speaking; acts are perlocutionary when they pertain to what we are doing by speaking. So perlocutionary acts can be based on illocutionary acts, but not vice versa. Now, communication can take place even where there are no perlocutionary effects; on the other hand, ‘if no IA [illocutionary act] is performed, there is no (linguistic) communication, whatever effects one brings about on another person’.53

Humans relate to one another in various ways. It is possible to get people to do things other than by communicating with them. I can get a person to leave the room, for instance, by pushing him out the door. This brings about an effect on the ‘addressee’ of my action, but it is not, strictly speaking, a perlocutionary one, for the simple reason that it does not supervene on an illocutionary act. The same effect would, however, be perlocutionary if the person left as a result of my saying, ‘Please leave’. Less straightforward, but still easily handled, is the case of my using a mere locution to get someone to leave. The sheer physical quality of an utterance (e.g., ‘Boo!’) may produce the desired effect. Clearly, however, this is an instance of strategic rather than communicative action.

Neither Alston nor I are indifferent to the effects produced on communicants. Indeed, most of us communicate with one another not solely for the purpose of having our illocutionary acts recognized, but for purposes that go beyond understanding. We want to modify cognitive environments in order to modify the natural or social environment. We say ‘Clean up your room’ not
because we want to be understood, but because we want our addressee’s room to be cleaner. Yet their ulterior effects are grounded in the content of our illocutionary acts. And our acts are what they are whether or not they produce perlocutionary effects. Though the distinction may still strike some as technical, the significance of maintaining it will perhaps come to light in our discussion below of the relation of Word and Spirit in interpreting the Christian canon.

Thiselton’s work on 1 Corinthians is apt. He draws a contrast between Paul’s apostolic ministry, which is largely illocutionary (e.g., testifying to Jesus Christ) with his Corinthian opponents, who wielded the instrumental (and ultimately manipulative) power of rhetoric:

I distinguish between ‘illocutionary’ speech–acts, which depend for their effectiveness on a combination of situation and recognition, and ‘perlocutionary’ speech–acts, which depend for their effectiveness on sheer causal (psychological or rhetorical) persuasive power.54

Here we may recall the importance of the author’s assuming a normative stance. Many speech acts (e.g., marrying people by saying ‘I do’) depend upon the identity and status of the speaker. Paul’s proclamation of the cross – preaching the gospel – is directly tied to his status as an apostle, as ‘one sent’ to perform a particular communicative action.

If all truth is only a species of rhetoric, as some postmoderns and apparently some first-century Corinthians believed, then all illocutions become perlocutions. Paul stakes his own apostolic ministry ‘on illocutionary promise, not on perlocutionary persuasion’.55 I take it that Thiselton is arguing that Paul’s discourse transforms his readers not by manipulating them, but rather by virtue of his testimony, which is as much to say by his meaning (e.g., illocutions), not by sheer manipulation (e.g., perlocutions).

Manipulative uses of language – by authors who employ deceitful rhetoric and by readers who impose their own interpretations alike – constitute a violation of the covenant of discourse.56 I do not wish to be misunderstood on this point. There is nothing wrong with perlocutions, or with communicative acts having a perlocutionary dimension. What I do resist is the attempt to produce effects on readers via language use that seeks to by-pass the content of illocutionary acts.

54 Thiselton, Corinthians, 51.
56 Thiselton forcefully argues that self-personhood is obscured, if not lost, by the postmodern assumption that all language use is essentially manipulative. The close correlation once again between one’s view of language and one’s sense of self should not be overlooked. See his Interpreting God, esp. part 1.
II. The Discourse of the Covenant: Canonical Action

I have devoted the bulk of the present essay to thinking philosophically and theologically about language as communicative action, to *general* questions about language rather than to specific questions about biblical interpretation. This is not the place for a full-scale treatment of biblical hermeneutics. However, I do want to suggest a few ways in which my 'mere communicative hermeneutic' may be stretched towards the theological interpretation of Scripture. To what extent does the model of the text as communicative action with communicative intent need to be modified when that text is the Christian canon, the ensemble of texts that comprise the Old and New Testaments?

From 'promise' and 'sentence' to Gospel and Law

The promise is, as we have seen, the paradigmatic speech act for philosophers such as Searle and Alston. Thiselton has rightly called attention to its centrality in Scripture and in Christian theology as well. Fully to appreciate the discourse of the covenant, however, requires us to deal with both promising and sentencing.

**Communicating the covenant**

Genesis recounts the beginnings of many human institutions: marriage, the family, work. These are not merely social, but *created*, institutions: God-ordained orders intended to structure human experience every bit as much as those other divine orders, space and time. For our purposes, however, perhaps the most important institution initiated by God is that of the covenant. In speaking, God commits both himself and his addressees to certain obligations. In short: God establishes a personal relationship with men and women by communicating covenants. Subsequent communicative acts of God also take the form of covenants: to Noah (Gen. 9:8); to Abraham (Gen. 15:8); to David (2 Sam. 7). Promising and sentencing are constitutive of the covenant Yahweh instituted with Israel as recounted in the book of Deuteronomy.57

The *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 ('Hear, O Israel') is a solemn summons to covenant fidelity.58 What is called for is not just any readerly response, but the specific response of obedience. The promise that God will bless obedience is accompanied by a divine sentence: 'But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and

57 See Gordon McConville’s essay elsewhere in this volume, especially the section on ‘Deuteronomy and Speech-act Theory’.
58 Cf. Snodgrass, ‘Reading’, on the importance of a hermeneutics of hearing/doing.
overtake you' (Deut. 28:15). The subsequent 'Deuteronomistic' history of Israel is largely the history of how Israel responds, or fails to respond, to the word of the Lord. The role of the prophets is largely that of 'prosecutors' of the covenant. The prophets are the ones who bring the Lord's case against Israel for having violated the covenant document.

C. H. Dodd spoke of the 'two-beat rhythm' of salvation history, comprised alternately of judgment and grace, law and gospel – in short, the sentence and the promise. This two-beat rhythm reaches a crescendo, of course, in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For in Jesus Christ himself – God's Word made flesh – there is a 'Yes' and 'No'. The cross of Christ fulfills the sentence; the resurrection fulfills the promise. In this sense, we could say that Jesus Christ is God's illocutionary act. We may note in passing that only God has the authority to assume the normative status of one who pronounces acquittal on sinners. 'Justification' – the sentence of acquittal – is also a divinely given institution, and is (justifiably!) regarded by Protestants as one of the best divine illocutionary acts.

Oral or written covenant? From speech to Scripture acts

It is now time to consider a potentially fatal objection to the use of speech-act categories in biblical interpretation. It amounts to the claim that, to cite Ricoeur, 'With written discourse ... the author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide'. More radically, the objection is that the written text enjoys semantic autonomy both from its original author and from its original situation. The text, in other words, is independent – cut off – from the communicative agent who produced it and from the circumstances that provided the setting for the communicative action. Clearly, if this objection can be sustained, we will need to revisit everything we have previously said about the centrality of illocutionary acts for interpretation.

What does philosophy have to say about the oral-written distinction? Interestingly, there is evidence in Ricoeur's own work that the distinction is not as hard and fast as the quotation above suggests. Most importantly, Ricoeur continues to see writing as a species of discourse: something said by someone to someone about something. To be precise, a text is 'discourse fixed by writing'. I see no reason why writing should lead us to omit the phrase 'by someone'. Ricoeur is happy to speak of meaningful human action as a text, so why can we not see texts as meaningful actions? Indeed, upon closer inspection it is clear that Ricoeur wishes to avoid both the intentional fallacy and the 'fallacy of the absolute text': 'the fallacy of hypostatizing the text as an authorless entity'. Often overlooked is Ricoeur's acknowledgment that discourse fixes

100 See Ricoeur, 'Model'.
From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts

not only the locutionary but the illocutionary act. Ricœur knows that one cannot cancel out this main characteristic of discourse – ‘said by someone’ – without reducing texts to natural (e.g., non-intentional) objects like pebbles in the sand. It remains a mystery, however, how texts can be considered discourse if they are indeed ‘cut off’ from their authors. Wolterstorff has amply demonstrated the incoherence of the notion of ‘textual sense’ interpretation, so I need not pursue the point here. Instead, I wish to pursue a different, more properly theological, argument in favor of conceiving texts as communicative acts.

Let us consider the book of Deuteronomy. All the illocutionary features of the covenant that God instituted orally with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are preserved in writing in the Book of the Covenant delivered by Moses and ratified by the whole nation of Israel. Elsewhere in this volume, Gordon McConville makes the important point that the words that instituted the covenant at Horeb and then Moab are finally deposited in a book, the Book of the Law (Deut. 28:58). Others have argued that the very structure of Deuteronomy is patterned after the ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties. The significance of this parallel is that many Hittite treaties included a provision for the treaty’s inscription. The fact that the Tables of the Law are written on stone signals their author’s insistence on the permanence of the discourse.

According to Deuteronomy, the Book of the Covenant, precisely as written discourse – text – functions as a standing witness against the nation of Israel (Deut. 31:26). The law is sealed in the ark of the covenant, and it was to be written on stone at the threshold of the Promised Land as a permanent reminder of the blessings and curses associated with the covenant (Deut. 27). As such, the text of Deuteronomy calls not for ‘wooden repetition’, but rather for continual decision, for or against its illocutions. Directives (laws) must be obeyed; commissives (promises) must be trusted.

The covenant, as a written document, continued to have potency, but only when the people attended to it. Time and again, the kings of Israel neglected to read and obey it. The notable exception is King Josiah, during whose reign the Book of the Law was found. Josiah’s reader-response was immediate and drastic: he tore his clothes (2 Kgs. 22:11), not because this was the intended perlocutionary effect, but because Josiah realized that the Law was a divine directive that had been disobeyed. A similar response, this time on the part of the whole community, is recorded in Nehemiah 8: mass weeping. These passages attest to the determinate content and the binding force of the written
covenant. We may therefore conclude that written texts preserve the same illocutionary act potential as oral discourse. If we can take this point as settled, we may now turn to consider whether the biblical canon has features that distinguish it from other types of written discourse.

**Anatomy of canonical action**

Do the categories of speech-act philosophy apply to the task of biblical interpretation? While sentences are the basic tools for performing illocutionary acts, they can become part of something more complex, just as other basic actions (hammering, sawing, drilling) can become ingredients in a more complex act (building a bookcase). Texts are just *communicative acts of a higher order*. The question now becomes: are there specific illocutionary acts that emerge only on the level of the text, and perhaps only on that of the canon? And, if there are, should they be seen as instances of God's authorial discourse? Before turning to the level of the canon, however, let us examine first what takes place at the level of the individual books of Scripture, at the level of the literary whole. We can then proceed to examine what might emerge at the higher levels of 'testament' and 'canon'.

Consider how one might describe some of the acts that comprise writing a Gospel: 1) he gripped the pen and moved it in straight and circular motions; 2) he formed Greek characters; 3) he wrote the word 'theos'; 4) he said 'a virgin shall conceive'; 5) he quoted from Isaiah 7:14; 6) he said Jesus' birth fulfilled Old Testament prophecy; 7) he narrated the events surrounding Jesus' birth; 8) he confessed Jesus as the Christ. Some of these descriptions pertain to illocutionary acts; some do not. We need not rehearse those distinctions here. The claim I am now making is that some of Matthew's illocutions can only be inferred from his discourse taken as a literary whole.

**Ascribing generic illocutions**

'Every piece of writing is a kind of something.' Each literary genre does something distinct, and is hence able to affect one's cognitive environment in a different way. Specifically, each major genre enables a distinct way of engaging reality and of interacting with others. The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin views genre not merely as a medium of communication, but as a medium of cognition. Different literary genres, he contends, offer distinct ways of thinking about or experiencing the world. In this respect, forms of literature function like metaphors—they are models, indispensable cognitive instruments for saying and seeing things that perhaps could not be seen or said

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65 Gabel and Wheeler, *Bible as Literature*, 16.
66 Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*. 
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texts rather than sentences. Accordingly, we need a supplement to Austin:
'how to do things with literature'.

Let us test Bakhtin's hypothesis on narrative. What do narratives do that
others kinds of literature do not, and perhaps cannot? Mary Louise Pratt argues
compellingly that narratives perform the unique act of displaying a world.76 In
narrative, the place of propositional content is taken by the plot. Susan Lanser's
The Narrative Act appeals to speech-act theory as providing a valuable aim in
studying point of view, that is, the author's perspective on the world displayed
in the text.77 What Wolterstorff and Alston have shown to be the case with
speech acts thus applies to text acts too: authors do not simply display worlds,
but in displaying also take up some normative stance towards these worlds
(e.g., praising, commending, condemning, etc.). In Lanser's words: 'Much
like the biblical parable, the novel's basic illocutionary activity is ideological
instruction; its basic plea: hear my word, believe and understand.'78

What we may term a generic act – an illocutionary act performed on the
level of a literary whole – is the unifying act that orders all the other acts
that comprise authoring a piece of written discourse. Take the book of Jonah.
It is only when we consider the text as a unified whole that we can discuss what is
going on at the literary level. What is the author doing besides 'telling a story'?
At the level of the literary whole, it is harder to maintain that the author of
Jonah was primarily making truth claims about certain forms of sea-life that
swim in the Mediterranean. Interpretations that never rise above the level of
reported events are not thick enough. Genuine interpretation involves ascrib-
ing illocutionary acts to authors. I believe the author to be satirizing
religious complacency and criticizing ethnocentrism.79 The illocutionary act of 'satiriz-
ing' emerges only at the literary level, that is, at the level of the text considered
as a completed communicative act. Note that to describe this generic illocution
is to describe the communicative act that structures the whole text.

The example of satire in Jonah illustrates my thesis: some things that
authors do only come to light at the level of the text considered as a whole. To
identify a text's literary genre is the first step to determining what the author
was doing. We simply would not appreciate what Jonah is doing – ridiculing

67 Pratt, Theory.
68 Lanser, Narrative Act.
69 Ibid., 293.
70 It is striking that, by the end of the book, everyone has repented – the king of Nineveh, the people of Nineveh, even the beasts of Nineveh – save one: Jonah. Jonah stands for those Israelites who had become complacent about their covenant privileges and responsibilities. Indeed, Jonah goes so far as to accuse God of being excessively merciful! As to Jonah himself, he is portrayed as feeling more concern for a plant than for a people (see Jonah 4).
religious ethnocentrism – apart from considering the text as a whole. Note that the literal sense of Jonah is the sense of his literary act: satire. The moral should be clear. Biblical interpreters would do well to ascertain what kind of literature (which literary genre) they happen to be interpreting. Literary genres are relatively stable institutions, and this stability creates the possibility of a shared context between author and reader: a shared literary context.

The main point is that some of the author's illocutionary intentions only come to light at the level of the literary whole. Going beyond Alston's analysis, then, I maintain that we should recognize generic illocutions: the narrative act, the parabolic act, the apocalyptic act, the historical act, the prophetic act, etc. In other words, the major forms of biblical literature each have their own characteristic illocutionary forces: wisdom ('commending a way'); apocalyptic ('encouraging endurance'); prophecy ('recalling covenant promises and obligations'), and so on. To describe and ascribe generic illocutionary acts, then, is to say what an author is doing in his text considered as a whole.71

**Canon illocutions?**

So much for the diversity of canonical acts. What communicative act, if any, unifies the canon as a whole? Is a 'testament' a genre? Should we think of the canon as a genre unto itself or as a space wherein the diverse literary genres, like elements of a Hittite treaty, interact and affect one another? Or are there new illocutionary acts that emerge only at the canonical level? The question is whether there is perhaps an even higher level of illocutionary action at the canonical level.

I agree with the literary critic Charles Altieri that 'texts are best viewed as actions performed on a variety of levels for our contemplation'.72 Take, for example, the many things done in making a covenant: the Lord of the covenant identifies himself ('I am Yahweh'); the Lord recounts the history of what he has done for his vassals ('who brought you out of Egypt'); the Lord stipulates what he will do for the people and what they will do for him ('I will be your God, and you will be my people'); the Lord lists blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience ('You will keep possession of the promised land'; 'You will lose possession of the land'); the Lord makes provisions for passing on the covenant to the next generation (e.g., through its inscription). Each of these illocutionary acts is performed throughout Scripture; yet all are also ingredients of a larger, testamental, illocutionary act: covenanting.73

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71 Note that generic illocutions supervene on illocutions at the sentence and paragraph level.


73 Interestingly, Austin included 'making a covenant' in his original list of illocutionary acts.
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From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts

Brevard Childs argues that the canon was intentionally shaped so that it
would function authoritatively for future generations in the believing com-

unity. The unity of the whole follows, Childs thinks, from its consistent

witness to Jesus Christ. I welcome his emphasis on reading each part of Scrip-
ture in its larger canonical context, but I doubt that Childs has given a sufficient

warrant for the practice. I agree with Paul Noble, who argues that Childs'

approach tacitly depends upon and actually requires an explicit affirmation of
divine authorship. Indeed, Childs' claim that the meaning of biblical texts can
be arrived at only in the context of the canon as a whole 'is formally equivalent
to believing that the Bible is so inspired as to be ultimately the work of a single

Author.'

This brings us closer to Wolterstorff’s proposal about dual-author dis-
course. I propose to take such a view as a given, and to move on to a consid-
eration of how the divine authorial intent in Scripture may be discerned. The
concept of divine authorship is, of course, miles away from the notion of the
'death of the author'. This is as it should be. A Christian view of language and
literature will have nothing to do with 'the death of God put into writing' and
everything to do with 'the providence of God put into writing'. The main
claim to be advanced here is that God is doing providential things in his Scrip-
ure acts. The divine intention does not contravene, but supervenes, on the in-
tentions of the human authors.

8. To describe a generic (or canonic) illocution is to describe the
communicative act that structures the text considered as a unified
whole.

There are two complementary senses in which I wish to affirm the canon as
God’s illocutionary act. First, there is divine appropriation of the illocutions
of the human authors, particularly at the generic level but not exclusively
there. For example, God still uses the book of Jonah to satirize religious
ethnocentrism. (Indeed, the message of Jonah is as relevant today as ever). Yet
God may also be doing new things with Jonah and other biblical texts by virtue
of their being gathered together in the canon. Could it be that certain illocu-
tions only come to light when we describe what God is doing at the canonical
level? More work needs to be done in this area, but for the moment let me
offer the following as possible candidates for the divine canonical illocutions:
instructing the believing community; testifying to Christ; and perhaps most
obviously, covenanting.

Noble, Approach, 340.
75 I am happy to consider the locutions too as a product of divine discourse, as tradi-
tional theories of inspiration maintain, but this is not the focus of the present essay.
Scripture acts: Transforming cognitive (and spiritual) environments

God’s word will not fail to accomplish the purpose for which it was sent (Isa. 55:11). Just what kind of purpose did Isaiah have in mind: illocutionary or perlocutionary? Is the Bible really a divine communicative act if readers fail to respond to its illocutions and perlocutions? Is the Bible the Word of God written or does it only become the Word of God when God takes up the human words and does something with them? Opinions differ. Everything hinges on whether we wish to include the reader’s response (illocutionary uptake, perlocutionary effect) in the definition of communicative action.

Karl Barth appealed to the Holy Spirit as the ‘Lord of the hearing’, and suggested that it is only when God freely and graciously takes up the human words that the Bible becomes the Word of God for a given hearer. Is the Bible God’s Word? Barth and evangelicals have been at loggerheads on this issue for decades: ‘is’; ‘is not’. Can our anatomy of communicative action move us beyond the impasse? I think so.

On my view, Barth is partly right and partly wrong. He is wrong if he means to deny that God performs illocutionary acts in Scripture. He is right if one incorporates the reader’s reception of the message into one’s definition of ‘communicative act’. Communication, we may recall, can connote both senses: the act of communicating, or the completed communication, including its reception. Human authors, of course, lack the ability to make their readers understand, much less to guarantee the intended perlocutionary effects. There is nothing human authors can do to make sure their recipients ‘get it’. God, however, has no such limits: the Spirit is the ‘Lord of the hearing’. The Spirit is the energy that enables the Word to complete its mission. My proposal, then, is to say both the Bible is the Word of God (in the sense of its illocutionary acts) and to say that the Bible becomes the Word of God (in the sense of achieving its perlocutionary effects).

Does not my proposal tie God down to the texts? Does it not compromise God’s freedom? No, for God’s freedom is the freedom to initiate communicative action and to keep his word. Once God makes a promise, however, he is obliged to keep it, not from some external force, but because God’s Word is God’s bond. 76 Neither is it any part of my suggestion that, just because God’s promises are often progressively realized, so that the ‘content’ of his promising shifts. For instance, God’s promise to the Israelites to raise up a king became, at a later time, a promise to set up an eternal messianic throne. Treier therefore wonders whether God might perform different illocutionary acts with the same locution. This is an excellent query to which I cannot do justice in this short space. Given more time, I would want to explore two lines of response. First, I would suggest that God’s promises (and other illocutions as well) are ‘semenial’; that is, they contain implicitly the grounds for their later

76 My colleague Dan Treier has pointed out to me that God’s promises are often progressively realized, so that the ‘content’ of his promising shifts. For instance, God’s promise to the Israelites to raise up a king became, at a later time, a promise to set up an eternal messianic throne. Treier therefore wonders whether God might perform different illocutionary acts with the same locution. This is an excellent query to which I cannot do justice in this short space. Given more time, I would want to explore two lines of response. First, I would suggest that God’s promises (and other illocutions as well) are ‘semenial’; that is, they contain implicitly the grounds for their later
discourse is fixed in writing, we can somehow 'possess' God’s Word or master it. On the contrary, one does not 'possess' or 'master' warnings, promises, commands and so forth. We are rather in the situation of Ezra: in reading Scripture we are confronted with a word that seeks to transform, indeed to master, us.

A final objection. Does not this identification of Scripture with God's illocutionary acts demean Christ as God's Word? Again, no, because what Scripture is doing – particularly at the canonical level of communicative action – is *pointing to Christ*, offering appropriately 'thick descriptions' of his meaning and significance for Israel and the church. Is this not what Luke implies: ‘And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself’ (Lk. 24:27)? It is precisely through responding to the various illocutions of Scripture – belief in its assertions, obedience to its commands, faith in its promises – that we become 'thickly' related to Christ. Indeed, we cannot have the intended effect – union with Christ – apart from the content of Scripture’s illocutionary acts (e.g., telling a story; making a promise; pronouncing pardon, etc.).

Sperber and Wilson define relevance as the property that makes information worth processing. On these terms, must we not conclude that, of all words that can be heard, the gospel is the most relevant? Information is relevant, we may recall, when it modifies one’s cognitive environment. Well, the gospel does this, and much more. In the first place, instead of making manifest a set of assumptions (so Sperber and Wilson), Scripture manifests Christ, the revelation of God and the hope of glory. Just as significant is the fact that the gospel modifies not only cognitive environments, but spiritual environments as well. It is not only that Scripture gives new information, but that it radically transforms the very way we process information. What ultimately gets communicated through the canon is the way, the truth and the life.

* (Continued) * development, a development that would be more continuous than discontinuous. Think, for instance, of God’s promise to Abraham in Gen. 12:3, ‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’. The second, and perhaps more promising, line of response is also more complex. Essentially, it has to do with the *eschatological* nature of God’s speech. The first coming of Christ recontextualized the previous divine discourse, just as the Christian canon recontextualized the OT. However, Christian readers of the canon all share the same situation, eschatologically speaking: we live between the first and second comings of Christ. Subsequent to the coming of Christ, then, God’s discourse partakes of the same ‘already/not yet’ eschatological tension as does the Christian life itself. What God is saying to the church in the twenty-first century, then, will largely be in continuity with what he said to the church in the first. I am referring, of course, to the divine illocutions. The perlocutions of the divine discourse will indeed be different, but as I have consistently argued in this essay, perlocutionary effects are not intrinsic to communicative action.
Biblical interpretation and canonical action: Whose action is it?

Perhaps the most important question we can ask of the canon is: whose act is it? If interpretation is a matter of ascribing and inferring communicative intentions, to whom do we ascribe the illocutions?

Interpretation after Pentecost: Which voice? Whose tongue?

After Pentecost, just what difference, if any, does Pentecost make for biblical interpretation? What is the Holy Spirit’s role in God’s triune communicative action? Many Christian traditions affirm the ‘inspiration’ of the Scriptures. The Westminster Confession of Faith, for instance, accords supreme authority to ‘the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture’. Much depends on how we parse this phrase: ‘the Spirit speaking’. There are, at present, two approaches to interpretation that risk confusing divine communicative action – the Word of God – with the communicative action of the interpretive community: 1) performance interpretation, where the reader assumes the role of the author, and 2) perlocutionary interpretation, where the illocutionary act is by-passed or eclipsed in favor of achieving a predetermined effect other than understanding. Of interest here is how each approach has been brought to bear on biblical interpretation, and how each makes a tacit appeal to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Ricoeur, as we have seen, announces the semantic autonomy of the text from its original author. Yet the text remains discourse. So whose discourse is it? Jorge Luis Borges’ story ‘Pierre Menard’ wonderfully illustrates the problem I have in mind. The story is about a twentieth-century French critic, Pierre Menard, who has written, word for word, several chapters of Cervantes’ Don Quixote. On the locutionary level, Menard has simply replicated Cervantes’ act. Yet Menard does not want to merely repeat the seventeenth-century meaning (what Cervantes had in mind), for that is too easy! Instead, he wants to produce the same text but with an entirely different meaning. This is an excellent example of what Wolterstorff calls ‘performance interpretation’. The basic idea is this: in performance interpretation, we read the text as if we had written it. There is no law against doing that, of course, if one fancies conducting that kind of experiment (e.g., ‘what would I have meant if I had authored Ulysses or The Lord of the Rings or 1 Corinthians?’).

There is no law against such performance interpretation, but neither is there any understanding. For once the attempt to infer the communicative intentions of the author is abandoned, so is the means for a meaningful encounter with the ‘other’. This is deeply to be regretted; it is difficult to learn or grow or be transformed when one is in dialogue only with oneself.

Stanley Grenz works an intriguing variation of the above. He suggests that ‘the Spirit speaking in Scripture’ refers to the Spirit’s illocutions, but these are
action is it?

For its part, however, the hermeneutic question is: whose act is it? Is it the communicator's act, or the hearer's? What is it that the interpreter is to make of the Scriptures? Does the supreme authority reside in our own understanding? Or does it reside in the Word of God, or the Holy Spirit's communicative action? The question bears on how we parse various approaches to the interpretation of texts. For Ricoeur, the two approaches to interpretation are: 1) perlocutionary act of the author, and 2) illocutionary act of the human interpreter. The performance interpretation that now counts is that of the Spirit. Grenz views the Bible as the instrumentality or vehicle through which the Spirit speaks. He is clear that the authority of Scripture 'does not ultimately rest with any quality that inheres within it as such (for example, its divine authorship or inspired character)'. So the Spirit's speaking is not to be equated with the Spirit's authorship of Scripture. What, then, does it mean to say 'the Spirit speaks'? Grenz answers: 'Obviously, when we acknowledge that the Spirit speaks through the Bible, we are referring to an illocutionary, and not a locutionary, act.'

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He considers Wolterstorff's account of authorial discourse, only to reject it. The Spirit does not appropriate the authorial discourse, says Grenz, but rather 'the biblical text itself'. What kind of illocution does the Spirit perform? Exegesis alone, while relevant, cannot answer this question. At this point Grenz's analysis shifts somewhat awkwardly, from a grudging concession that the original meaning of the text is not wholly eclipsed, to what he is clearly more interested in: the Spirit's perlocutionary act of creating a world.

Because Grenz abandons the authorial discourse model and embraces Ricoeur's premise that the text takes on a life of its own, he has difficulty specifying just what illocutionary acts the Spirit performs. Indeed, the only illocutionary act Grenz actually ascribes to the Spirit is speaking: 'The Spirit performs the perlocutionary act of creating a world through the illocutionary act of speaking ... by appropriating the biblical text as the instrumentality of the divine speaking.' Speaking, however, is not an illocutionary act! So it is not at all clear how 'speaking' simpliciter can produce perlocutionary effects.

The Spirit can, of course, work through many diverse means to accomplish his sanctifying work (e.g., creating the new world 'in Christ'). The crucial question, however, is whether the Spirit performs this work independently of Scripture's illocutionary acts. Grenz's account fails to explain how we can infer, and to whom we should ascribe, what illocutionary acts have been performed. Consequently, he leaves unanswered the fundamental question of how Scripture's actual content is related to the Spirit's accomplishing his further, perlocutionary, effects.

77 Grenz, 'Spirit', 358. 78 Ibid., 361. 79 Ibid. 80 Ibid., 365. 81 It may be that Grenz does intend to say that the Spirit performs specific illocutionary acts, but if so, it is not clear how these acts are related to the actual propositional content, and illocutionary force, of the appropriated human discourse.
The eclipse of biblical illocutions: Reading for formation

There is much to admire in Grenz’s article. I agree with his overall vision that the Spirit leads people to reconceive their identities and world-view by means of the interpretive framework found in Scripture that recounts the eschatological event of Jesus Christ. I even agree with his fundamental premise that the Spirit’s perlocutionary act is to ‘create a world’ (though I explain it theologically in terms of the Spirit’s ministry of the Word, and philosophically in terms of perlocutions supervening on illocutions). Yet at the same time I am troubled by his analysis, both for philosophical and for theological reasons.

First, the philosophy of speech acts. As we have just seen, Grenz mistakenly identifies the Spirit’s illocutionary act as ‘speaking through Scripture’. But ‘speaking’ per se is not an illocutionary act. Illocutionary acts have to do with what is done in speaking. Moreover, it is the peculiar role of narratives to display a world. This is an illocutionary, not a perlocutionary, act. It is, to quote Susan Lanser, the distinctive narrative act. Second, as regards theology. The Spirit does indeed perform perlocutionary acts; no disagreement here. Yet the Spirit does so only on the basis of the concrete textual illocutions (the content!) of Scripture. The Spirit’s creating a world, then, is not a new illocutionary act, but rather the perlocutionary act of enabling readers to appropriate the illocutionary acts already inscribed in the biblical text, especially the narrative act of ‘displaying a world’.

There is a second contemporary approach to biblical interpretation that fails to see the importance of illocutionary acts. It is an approach that focuses on a particular perlocutionary purpose of Scripture — namely, spiritual formation: ‘The aim of reading Scripture, to build up Christian faith and practice, should always order decisions about which methods and approaches to adopt’. This is a laudable aim, and essential to the piety of the church. But is it an interpretive aim? I do not dispute the aim of spiritual formation. However, I do resist letting this intended perlocutionary effect run roughshod over Scripture’s communicative action. Spiritual formation can be the aim, but not the norm, of biblical interpretation. The norm must remain the author’s illocutionary intent. Once again, the problem arises from the confusion between illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects. To proceed too quickly to perlocutionary effects is to run the risk of making the illocutionary content hermeneutically dispensable.

It is, of course, important that Christians read the Scriptures for the sake of

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82 In Alston’s words: ‘The issuing of an utterance with a certain content can itself have effects, and so the production of those effects can supervene on that content presentation. But a content cannot attach to the production of an effect by an utterance, so as to make that effect production to be what carries that content’ (Alston, *Illocutionary Acts*, 31).
83 Ayres and Fowl, *(Mis)reading*, 528.
84 See my ‘Body Piercing’.
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are in a position to understand how God's word accomplishes the
purpose for which it has been sent. It accomplishes this purpose because the
Spirit accompanies it, speaking not another word but ministering the word
that was previously spoken. The Spirit is nothing less than the efficacy of the
Word. In short, the Spirit renders the word effective by achieving its intended
perlocutionary effects. The point that must not be missed, however, is that the
Spirit accomplishes these effects not independently of the words and illocu-
tions but precisely by, with and through them. Hence our penultimate thesis,
directed primarily, though by no means exclusively, to the task of biblical
interpretation:

9. The Spirit speaks in and through Scripture precisely by rendering its
illocutions at the sentential, generic and canonic levels perlocutionarily
efficacious.

Here, then, where we might least expect it, we see a certain convergence
between philosophy and theology with regard to language and the word. The
asymmetrical dependence of perlocutionary on illocutionary acts defended by
Alston has a theological counterpart in the idea that the Holy Spirit proceeds
from the Father and the Son – the celebrated Filioque ('and from the Son').
Perlocutions 'proceed' from locations and illocutions, but not vice versa.
Uttering a content can have effects, but a content cannot attach itself to the
production of effects. Though Alston does not use the term, I think it is fair to
say that he believes in the illocutioque ('and from the illocution').

My argument does not depend on a particular version of the Filioque. The analogy
with illocutions and perlocutions would work equally well if one adopted alternative
suggestions such as 'from the Father through the Son'.
This surprising convergence of illocutioque and Filioque does not prove anything. It is inadvisable to draw general conclusions about the philosophy of language from Trinitarian theology, nor should one formulate one's understanding of the three Persons on the basis of an analysis of speech acts. Such has not been my intent. Instead, I have sought to reinforce insights gained from one discipline with insights gained in another, all the while looking for places where philosophy might approximate our theology, and where theology might adjust our philosophy. Alston's insistence that perlocutions depend on illocutions does support our contention that biblical interpreters should seek to infer illocutionary content before seeking to achieve perlocutionary effects. This is also, I believe, how the Holy Spirit works through biblical interpretation to form the people of God: not by producing effects unrelated to the text's communicative action, but precisely by ministering the divine communicative action, in all its canonical unity and variety.

10. What God does with Scripture is covenant with humanity by testifying to Jesus Christ (illocution) and by bringing about the reader's mutual indwelling with Christ (perlocution) through the Spirit's rendering Scripture efficacious.

Conclusion: The Covenant Community

Theories about language affect human practice, communication and interpretation alike. What we say about language affects what we think about ourselves. Throughout this essay I have assumed that using language is a covenantal affair. I have adopted what we might call the presumption of covenantal relation. This goes beyond the presumption of relevance. The latter states that implied in every speech act is the claim that it is relevant. The covenantal presumption states that implied in every speech act is a certain covenantal relation, namely, a tacit plea, or demand, to understand. Language itself cannot make this demand upon us. Language, considered in the abstract, holds no rights. No, the presumption of covenantal relation stems from the fact that we are obliged to do justice to the words of a communicative agent in order to do that person justice. Here we may invoke Lévinas's notion that the face 'speaks'. The 'face' says 'Do not kill', and stands for the infinite obligation we have towards our neighbor. Similarly, the 'voice' in the text says 'Hear me', and stands for the obligation we have towards our neighbor, as good citizens of language, to understand what that person is saying and what that person is doing in her saying. Interlocutors therefore 'always share at least one common goal, that of understanding and being understood'.

86 Sperber and Wilson, Relevance, 268.
The church is an interpretive community, a people of the book. As such, it is a covenant community in both of the senses employed in this essay. The church is first of all a community oriented to the discourse of the covenant, the Christian Scriptures. Yet the church should also be a community that cares about the covenant of discourse in general. For, as I argued at the outset, language is a divinely ordained institution with its own divine design plan.

In conclusion, let me highlight three features that I believe should characterize members of the covenant community.

- **Covenant keepers** - we must keep the covenant of discourse, the bonds that language forges between two persons, between person and world, and between human persons and God. We must be promise-keepers and truth-tellers. But we must also be active listeners. For this is the only way to be peace-keepers in the covenant of discourse. There are many forms of violence, but readers must especially be wary of interpretive violence. We must resist imposing our own interpretations on the discourse of others. We must resist ascribing intentions to authors where there is no evidence of that intent, and we must be honest enough to recognize authorial intentions where there is adequate evidence of such. We must cultivate what I call elsewhere the 'interpretive virtues': those dispositions of the heart and mind that arise from the motivation for understanding.

- **Witnesses** - 'Do not bear false witness.' To me, this is the categorical imperative of hermeneutics. To bear false witness — to say that the author is doing something in a text that he or she did not do — is to subject an author to a form of violence. Reductionist approaches — thin descriptions — are similarly distorting because they fail adequately to attend to what the author was in fact doing in a text. Theirs is the sin of omission, of not telling the whole truth. Willful misinterpretation is a violation of the other. Those who participate in the covenant of discourse are thus obliged to bear true witness. Indeed, this is essentially what interpretation is: bearing witness to the meaning of the authorial intentions enacted in the text. This is why it is important to attend to the history of interpretation. God has spoken to previous generations through his Word, and we need to know what God said to them as well as to the original readers. Indeed, it may be that God speaks to us in Scripture by way of the tradition of its interpretation. This would only be the case, however, if previous generations had rightly discerned God's canonical action in Scripture.

- **Disciples** - Let us not forget Goethe's cautionary tale. Faust's error was to think that interpretation was something confined to one's study, that interpretation was a matter of knowledge only, quite separate from virtue
Kevin J. Vanhoozer

and spirituality. Yet every text contains not merely information but an implicit call: ‘Follow me’. The vocation of the interpreter is to respond to that call and to follow at least until one reaches understanding, and perhaps further. Just as we indicate our understanding by saying ‘I follow you’, so we indicate our understanding of Scripture when we start to follow in its way. The privilege of biblical interpretation – the Protestant insistence on the priesthood of all believers – finally leads to the responsibility of hermeneutics: to the call to become not masters but ‘martyrs’ on behalf of meaning, not only hearers but doers, and perhaps sufferers, of the Word.

‘In language man dwells.’ Well, Heidegger was almost right. The true end of the covenant of discourse and the discourse of the covenant is indeed a kind of dwelling – or better, a mutual *indwelling*. The Bible simply calls it *communion*: we in Christ; Christ in us. I am referring, of course, to the supreme covenant blessing: life with God. Perhaps this blessing will one day be realized without benefit of language. Until then, however, humans are embodied persons who have to walk and talk with one another to have fellowship. It is noteworthy that God is depicted as walking and talking with man in the garden – before Babel, and before Pentecost. For language is not only a medium of communicative action; it is arguably the most elastic, variegated and powerful medium of interpersonal *communion* as well. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word ... dwelt among us’.

**Summary of Theses**

1. Language has a ‘design plan’ that is inherently covenantal.
2. The paradigm for a Christian view of communication is the triune God in communicative action.
3. ‘Meaning’ is the result of communicative action, of what an author has done in tending to certain words at a particular time in a specific manner.
4. The literal sense of an utterance or text is the sum total of those illocutionary acts performed by the author intentionally and with self-awareness.
5. Understanding consists in recognizing illocutionary acts and their results.
6. Interpretation is the process of inferring authorial intentions and of ascribing illocutionary acts.
7. Aiming to produce perlocutionary effects on readers other than by means of understanding counts as strategic, not communicative, action.
8. To describe a generic (or canonic) illocution is to describe the communicative act that structures the text considered as a unified whole.
9. The Spirit speaks in and through Scripture precisely by rendering its illocutions at the sentential, generic and canonic levels perlocutionarily efficacious.

10. What God does with Scripture is covenant with humanity by testifying to Jesus Christ (illocution) and by bringing about the reader’s mutual indwelling with Christ (perlocution) through the Spirit’s rendering Scripture efficacious.

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