

Ben Best

Welcome to Defragmenting, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity. Reading and interpreting the Bible is always more, never less than simply applying the correct principles. That's because the scriptures are unlike any other writing, and that they are God's words to his people. In his book, *Mere Christian hermeneutics*, transfiguring what it means to read the Bible theologically, Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer writes, Biblical interpreters are answerable not only for the correctness of their reading, but for the way they respond to what they read and to the one who's saying it. In this episode, he joins Dr. Keith Plummer to discuss his book and what truly faithful biblical integration looks like. Let's join their conversation now.

Keith Plummer

I am pleased to welcome Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer to Defragmenting. He is research professor of systematic theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. To call him prolific is the height of understatement. He's the author or editor of over 20 books including, *Is there a meaning in this text? The Drama of doctrine?* *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor's Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine*, and his latest, which I asked him to talk with me about today, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically*, published by Zondervand Academic. Hosting Dr. Vanhoozer is especially meaningful to me because he is one of my teachers. I had the pleasure and privilege of studying with him at Ted's, first as an MDiv student, and then some years later as a doctoral student when he was my dissertation supervisor. For your mentorship, encouragement, and example, Kevin, I am I'm immensely grateful. And for you making time for this conversation, I'm likewise grateful. So thank you and welcome.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Thank you, Keith, for making me, your teacher, look so good. We're proud of what you've done over the years, first the pastor, now the professor. That's what we're after at Trinity, training people who can serve the academy and the church.

Keith Plummer

Well, I remember a conversation that we had in Roling Library when you said, The church needs translators. I've never forgotten that you were talking about the need for someone to interact with the scholarship and also be able to translate that to the life of the church. And that has been a guiding vision for me. So I am very grateful.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Good. Well, again, great to be with you.

Keith Plummer

Thanks. It has been very good to see the reception the book has received since its relief, even from biblical scholars. For a systematic theologian to produce something that is lauded by Old and New Testament scholars is no small feat. So congratulations on that.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Look, I've been working towards that aim for over 20 years.

Keith Plummer

Well, it's good to see it come to fruition. When we think of a text on biblical hermeneutics, our minds immediately go to principles of interpretation, methods of interpretation. But that's not quite what you're after with mere Christian hermeneutics. What are you hoping to accomplish in it that is not what we regularly think of when we think about books on biblical hermeneutics?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yeah, that's a perfect place to start because you're right, and it's important to have the right expectations when you come to a book, otherwise you're going to get frustrated and complain. So my book does discuss methods from time to time. I call them exegetical tactics. But really, it's about the goal of reading, the theological strategy we have with coming to scripture. I think one question that a hermeneutic text should ask, and often doesn't get asked is, what are you reading the Bible for? I think our purposes for reading should align with God's purposes for giving us the word in the first place. So the typical textbook asks, what is God saying? That's a great question. But I'm asking, why is God saying that? And what response is God hoping to elicit from what he says?

Keith Plummer

On that point of response, you mentioned the idea of answerability. Say a little bit more about what you mean by that.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yeah. So we're not just observing what words are doing on a page. I mean, we do that. In the inductive Bible study, observation, close observation is really important. But we don't want to be

so focused on what the words mean and what we're observing that we forget these are the means by which God is speaking to us. And that puts us in a very different posture. I actually read a hermeneutics textbook once that said, and I think this is a word for word quote, Dead authors aren't saying anything. They have no rights. Can you imagine reading the Bible with that picture in your mind? So then you, the reader, are the operator on a dead text. Well, the Book of Hebrews who says the Bible is living and active, and that means I have to pay attention because I'm being addressed. I need to listen well. And so that may not be what most hermeneutics texts we're most interested in, but it seems to me to make all the difference.

Keith Plummer

Yes. I think it might be fair to say that a lot of times, most hermeneutics books are assuming those things, but not articulating them. And what you're doing is saying, Well, this is where we need to really start.

Kevin Vanhoozer

I think that's a fair point. Biblical hermeneutics books, most of them probably assume the Bible is God's word. But again, if you direct people's attention to grammar and syntax and vocabulary, it's easy to forget why you're doing that. And again, I think this is borne out in the fact that, as you mentioned in your first comment, biblical scholars and theologians are approaching the text in different ways. They have different, not just preliminary, but priority questions they want to bring to it.

Keith Plummer

Yes. You at one point in the book say, Scripture requires more than parsing verbs, more than intellectual assent to its propositions, more even than application of its moral principles, there is nothing personal or demanding about data processing. Every divine speech act, indicative, interrogative, and imperative alike, poses a tacit question to the reader, namely, how will you respond to what has been said and to the person who has said it?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yeah, and as you read that back to me, even though that's my own words, I find them challenging again, because you can't just write that as I did. You have to live it, right? And so every time I open scripture, I hope I remember what I said there.

Keith Plummer

Well, I want to come back to those ideas, but let's talk a little bit about the title. Louis shows up in a number of places in the book, and anyone familiar with him will recognize some allusion to his mere Christianity. What is the meaning of mere in mere Christian hermeneutics?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Well, you're a good reader, so you picked up on that allusion, and I do hope a lot of people will pick up on that allusion to Louis' book. Louis himself, of course, is a great reader. I've learned a lot about reading, not only by reading what he says, but watching the way he does it. Yes. Really is a fine reader, and not only of scripture. My title does allude to Louis, and it alludes to what Louis was talking about. But it also has a bit of not whimsy, but humor, I guess, at least to me. The mirror can mean trifling, right? Is Sometimes in our just everyday talk, mirror, it's just merely wrought, something trifling. That's not what Louis meant. But Louis meant, when he spoke of mirror, is this essential content of Christianity that all people have in common. That's quite an important vision these days, the idea of a common core of belief that all Christians, regardless of their denomination, have in common. I wanted to ask the question, is that really the case with hermeneutics? Do all Christians really have anything in common when it comes to hermeneutics? What started as a illusion and almost a joke, how can hermeneutics be mere, eventually came to be a looming challenge for me.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Do I have the right to use that title? Is there anything mere about Christian hermeneutics? If you look at the church history, and one historian said, Church history just is the history of biblical interpretation. If you look at church history, you see one division after another. Wars even, the religious wars between protestants and Roman Catholic. How dare I? How dare I even speak of mere hermeneutics? That was The challenge I set for myself, and I think it's an important one because you want to defragment Christianity, and so do I. The reason you do is because the movement has become fragmented, and that fragmentation is often dragged out as an excuse or an argument or as evidence that it can't be true. There's a lot at stake here. I was raising the stakes because I'm dealing not just with one or two interpretations over which people differ, but ways of reading, hermeneutics themselves, over which Christians have differed for ages.

Keith Plummer

When When Louis talks about mere Christianity, he uses this illustration of a house or the hallway of a home. And what he had in mind with mere was the hallway, though he said, at some point you're going to have to go in a room. Does that hold at all for hermeneutics? There's that common aspect, but at some point, do we have to go in rooms?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yeah, great question. Yeah, I do. I do think it follows. And I like that. Because what happens in a room, that's a place where you get nurtured in different ways. But the church is one and yet many and diverse. We're a Catholic church in the sense of universal, not uniformity. There's a unity and diversity that I think is quite appropriate because not every difference has to be a division. I think there are differences in the church, and I'm challenged, and I'm glad. As a reformed theologian, I'm edified by discussions I have with Wesleyans and Lutherans and Anglicans, and I find this enriching unless we let our differences become divisions that prevent us from fellowshiping with one another. But true fellowship happens at the Lord's table, communion. When Louis talks about the hall where everybody meets, I like to think of it as a dining hall. They were having fellowship over food. The picture I have in mind is of these great dining halls that I discovered at Cambridge University. The dining hall in Oxford and Cambridge, both, the dining hall is the most impressive building of the college after the chapel. And so that's the picture I have.

Kevin Vanhoozer

I like, yes, we can go our separate ways into our different rooms But there should be things we agree on in the dining hall when we're enjoying Christian fellowship and a good meal.

Keith Plummer

You say, I have in mind what all spirit-illuminated readers have in common, regardless of the differences in their particular exegetical methodologies.

Kevin Vanhoozer

That's right. Just as in Christian theology, there's first-order doctrines about which everyone should agree. It doesn't mean we have to agree about everything, and we're not going to agree about second order and third order doctrines. And so there may be a hermeneutical equivalent to that as well. The book is primarily about, so what's first order hermeneutical priorities?

Keith Plummer

You have answered this in part already, but the subtitle is talking about reading the Bible theologically, and some might hear that and say, well, the Bible is a theological text. So what does it mean to read the Bible theologically? And how does that differ from what many have in mind when they think of simply interpreting the Bible? What's the difference between theological interpretation and to resort to the word again, mere interpretation in another sense?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Well, there's been a lot of confusion about theological interpretation for years. That's been a little frustrating for me because I edited a dictionary entitled the Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible. And despite the fact that there's a dictionary, we still can't agree on the definition of what's involved. But look, Definitions just tell you how people use terms. And the reason there's confusion is that people use this term theological interpretation in different ways. So what I can tell you is how I'm using it. When I speak of theological interpretation, I mean the reading of the Bible that is focused on God, not only as the author, but as the main character and as the one who's speaking to us in the present. More even than that, when I speak of theological interpretation, I have in mind thinking theologically about the nature of the text, the process of reading, and the reader, him or herself. When you think about the Bible theologically, you shouldn't have in mind a scholar reading the Bible as he would read any other text. The better image is to think of Moses approaching the burning bush. You don't listen to a burning bush the way you listen to other things, right?

Kevin Vanhoozer

And you don't approach a burning bush that has a voice coming out of it the way you do other plants. And so when you're reading the Bible theologically, you're going to approach it very differently. I think people should take their shoes off, right? We're approaching holy ground. That's one of the big differences. The other difference we've already touched on, it's just this posture of an awareness once being addressed by the living and active word of God. Not everybody who reads the Bible reads it with that awareness. But if you do, you're reading theologically.

Keith Plummer

Something I remember very much from your teaching is you made me really think about the question of what the Bible is. And in your book, you say related to the question of what the Bible is, is the question of what it is for. And you say that its ultimate purpose, as you've already stated, is to generate and govern a covenant people. So in speaking of reading and interpreting the Bible, theologically, it begins with the recognition of the text this is, what it is, and what as that it is designed to do.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yeah, I'm so pleased you've remembered that lesson because my own experience is that many debates over biblical interpretation boil down in the end to disagreements as to what the Bible is. So it's really now one of the first questions I ask people. If I feel like I'm in an interpretive

disagreement, I'll say, wait, time out. Let's just take a moment and say what each of us thinks the Bible is. And I can't tell you how many times that reveals where the real difference is. Yes.

Keith Plummer

As I was reading the book, I had an image come to mind several times, and that was envisioning you as a mediator, or at times even as something of a marriage counselor, seeking to aid in reconciling parties that were once happily wed, but that have over time become estranged, even warring. And maybe it would be more accurate to picture you as a counselor working with two couples, on one hand, biblical studies and theology, and on another theological scholarship in the church. First, do you think that that illustration has any warrant? And if so, what do you think, what were the factors that led to the fracture? And how can mere Christian hermeneutics help mend those rifts?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yeah. Well, I think you're The picture is uncannily appropriate, so much so that I'm wondering if you might have heard it in one of my seminars, because I actually do have a lecture. It might have been after your time, but the lecture is on what I called the love story between biblical studies and Systematic Theology. It's a tragic love story because there's a complication. There is a marriage at the beginning, which is happy, but then there are pressures on the marriage. There's a divorce, but then there's also the promise of them getting back together. I don't use that language in the book we're talking about, but I do speak about this recurring tension. Sometimes it looks like a breakup and not just the tension. Where does it come from? It goes way back. I call it a recurring intention because I see signs of it in the patristic era. I see signs of it in the medieval era. But where it really becomes a breakup is in modernity, where in the academy, when the Bible is read in the academy, people want to create what might be called a theology free zone. That is, in the modern academy, the Bible began to be read like any other book.

Kevin Vanhoozer

So on theologically, historically, descriptively. So I think it's true. In the modern university, particularly in North America, there has been a breakup. We've got two different departments, one Department for Biblical studies, one for theologians. We have, as you know, different professional societies. This is more than couples counseling. This is community counseling. We've got separate communities, the biblical scholars on the one hand and the theologians on the other. And guess what? They separated due to irreconcilable methodological differences. So you're right. I think that is a way of viewing my book. It's a counseling It's a therapy. We are trying to get them back together again.

Keith Plummer

Yes.

Kevin Vanhoozer

I'd go this far, and I would say what God has put together, biblical studies and theology, let no hermeneutic and put us under. Yes.

Keith Plummer

Well, related to these different methodologies, and particularly under the influence of modernity, you say something about frames of reference. And you had line that I really enjoyed, and I don't have it before me, so I can't quote it verbatim. But you said something about, If biblical studies adopts the frame of reference of secularism, then the only thing that it has to say to the theology is keep out.

Kevin Vanhoozer

I don't know where that quote is, but it sounds right. Frames of reference, that idea became really important to me the more I worked on this book. So a frame of reference is just the assumption you bring to the text about what the authors are talking about. I think this is where, again, this divorce began. The biblical scholar came with a frame of reference which gave a priority to say the ancient near Eastern culture. If you come with that frame of reference, you are expecting to find things in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, the kinds of things you find in the ancient near Eastern culture, if that's your frame of reference. But as a Christian theologian, I actually come to the Old Testament with a different frame of reference. I think Jesus came to books like Isaiah with a different frame of reference. He wasn't thinking about the ancient near East. He was thinking about, well, words and text that he believed spoke ultimately about him. So As I was working on this book, I did become convinced and convicted that the biggest hurdles, the biggest differences in hermeneutics, aren't over the sense of the text, how to figure out what the words mean, but they're rather about what are the words referring to?

Kevin Vanhoozer

What are the authors talking about? That's where the real disagreements seem to lie. Yes.

Keith Plummer

That influence of modernity, is that what, as I was listening to you describe that, I was thinking that's when you have the shift from theological studies to religious studies.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yes, exactly. In North American universities, theology really doesn't have a place in the university anymore. It's been supplanted by religious studies, which is an entirely different topic, I would argue, because the subject matter of religious studies is human religious behavior and belief and language. But that means the study of religion is the study of Anthropology, of what humans do. It's not the study of theology. So this is a big confusion that you can't really replace the study of theology with religion because religion is about Anthropology.

Keith Plummer

Well, let's take a break here. And then on the other side, I'd like to talk more about the significance of, particularly the subtitle of the book in terms of transfiguring what it means to read the Bible theologically.

Ben Best

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Keith Plummer

I'm back speaking with Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer about his latest book, Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically. And I wanted to talk about that idea of transfiguring. You make much of the transfiguration of Christ and how that plays a key part in hermeneutics. And I'd like to ask you to explain that and tell us about what you see as the hermeneutical significance of the transfiguration of Jesus. But before we talk about that, you also talk about another mountaintop experience, and that is that of Moses on Mount Sinai. You write, I invite readers to join me in ascending the mountain. There is perhaps no better picture of what is involved in reading the Bible theologically, particularly when my primary case studies, Moses on Mount Sinai and Jesus on Mount Tabor, feature accounts of humans having mountaintop

experiences of God's glorious presence. So maybe let's start with Mount Tabor. What is the significance of this for hermeneutics?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yeah. So I think this is what's unique about my book is that I use the transfiguration of Jesus as a into the whole question of biblical interpretation. I say that's my original contribution. I think it is. But I did find some church fathers who spoke in similar terms. For example, the idea that you meet God on mountaintops, the church fathers knew all about that. Gregory of Nissa wrote a book entitled *The Life of Moses*. And in that book, he compares the Christian life to climbing a mountain. And the goal of the Christian life, he thought, was to meet and see God. That's what Moses wanted, right? Moses asked the Lord, Please show me your glory. I'm thinking, Well, that's the mountain I'm climbing as a biblical interpreter. I want to read the Bible to hear and meet and see God, as it were. Now, when Moses came down from the mountain, his face was shining because he had been talking with God. Exodus 34. I can't help but see a connection between Mount Tabor. When he's on a mountaintop, his face shines, and Moses is with him, with Elijah, so the law and the prophets.

Kevin Vanhoozer

I just think the episode of the transfiguration is rich in theology. For example, in addition to the presence of Moses and Elijah and Jesus' shining face, we hear the voice of God. And it's one of the very few times that God speaks audibly in the New Testament. He says, This is my beloved son, listen to him. And the other thing that's striking is that Jesus' face is shining not because he's reflecting the glory of God, but it's emanating waiting from him. This is the reveal of all of scripture. It's telling us who Jesus is. He's God in the flesh. Not only that, it also is the big reveal about the ending of scripture because he shows himself in all his human glory as well. He shows us a preview of what we have to look forward to after the resurrection and our exaltation. It's a way into the meaning of the text. But even beyond that, I think this idea of seeing Jesus face shine in his humanity is a an analogy for seeing the glory of God in the letter of the text. In other words, I see an analogy. Everything hinges on this, an analogy between the letter of the text on the one hand, and how it shows us the glory of God, and the very human face of Jesus, and how it shows us the glory of God.

Kevin Vanhoozer

The key, of course, is that something changes. Something changes in Jesus' face. When people read theologically, something changes. This is, again, where biblical scholars begin to get very nervous. The they might want to say to me, So are you telling me that when we read theologically,

we distort the text, we alter it in some case, in some way? And again, the analogy with Jesus' transfiguration is really helpful because what happens when Jesus face shines, isn't that his face is distorted? It isn't that it becomes something that it was not. It's transfigured, right? And transfigured The standard means we see the glory that was always there. And that's what I want to say about the biblical text. When we read theologically as theologians, when we read to see the glory of God in the face of Christ, we're not distorting the text. We're not changing the letter. We're letting the letter be what it is, a revelation of the knowledge and the glory of God. So it was that that I found so compelling that if I'm reading spiritually or theologically or whatever word you want to say, if I'm finding Christ in the text, I'm not distorting the letter.

Kevin Vanhoozer

I'm actually appreciating its inner glory. The transfiguration doesn't simply show us what the Bible is about, but it also is a model for good Bible reading, the reading that perceives the glory of Christ in the letter of the text. If I can add just one more thing. Sure. When we read that way, I believe that we are affected as readers. That is, if we read in this way where we can behold the glory of God in the letter of the text, it's a transforming experience. We could say it's a transfiguring experience. The idea that my face might reflect something of the glory of God because I've read the word of God correctly, that idea still sends shivers down my spine.

Keith Plummer

Yes, that is- It makes Bible reading very, very special. Yes. You say at one point transfigural interpretation stands for the whole hermeneutical process of glorifying the biblical letter for the sake of the reader's glorification.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Right. That's That's what I think is happening when we're reading theologically. We're not just objective critics doing things with the biblical text. We're answerable subjects being done to. That is, God is working on us through his spirit. And what is he doing? Well, I think the apostle Paul addresses this in 2 Corinthians 3. It's in the context of his thinking about what to Moses when he was behold God. But Paul says, We all with unvaled face, unlike Moses had to veil his face, he says, We all with unvaled face, behold the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. Why I like this text, 2 Corinthians 3: 18, the English translation, We are being transformed it uses the same Greek term that Luke uses for Jesus' transfiguration. Metamorpho. We get our word metamorphosis from this. I think that's fascinating, that Paul seems to be saying, When we read this way, we are transfigured, or When we read

transfigurally for the glory of Christ, we are transfigured. That's the way it seems to me. I'm simply trying to reflect what I think I heard in Paul and what I think I see when I look at Jesus' transfiguration.

Keith Plummer

So going back to that idea of behold the glory that is there in the text and the text not being distorted, but actually we're seeing what is actually there. How would you differentiate what you're talking about from what some are scared of with respect to allegorical reading?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Right. That is the big challenge because I mentioned that people were confused about theological interpretation. I think, to be honest, one of the reasons it turns people off, some people off, is that they hear the word theological interpretation and they think allegory, or they're worried that it could degenerate into allegorical interpretation. I totally get that. I have the same concern I don't want to defend a certain allegory, in part because I think allegorical interpretation is a general hermeneutic. It's not a specifically Christian hermeneutic. Philo was an allegorizer, Philo of Alexandria. A lot of the Greek intellectuals in the ancient world, when they read their myths, they interpreted them allegorically because to take them literally makes the gods just like human beings with all their foibles and so on. There was a tradition of interpreting allegorically, but here's the difference. Again, these terms are... Well, if you look at the literature, there's a lot of contention over what allegory is. But I'll just explain how I use the term or how I've come to understand it. *Allos* is the Greek word that means other. What I don't like about allegorical interpretation is if it makes the text mean other than what it says.

Kevin Vanhoozer

That's the concern, that we're making the text mean other than it says. But what's going on? If that's happening or when that happens, I think it's because the allegorical interpreter is using a frame of reference taken from somewhere other than the biblical text. For example, if you're a platonist, if platonic philosophy becomes your frame of reference, you can read the biblical text and make it be about platonism. You can do that with existentialism, as Rudolf Boltmann did. You can do that with Marxism. You can take any framework and read the Bible through that, and the result is going to be allegorical interpretation interpretation. But my argument is transfigural reading doesn't take a framework from other than scripture. It uses a biblical framework. That is, the frame of reference that I use comes from the biblical narrative itself. I want to make connections between Moses and Jesus, Mount Sinai and Mount Tabor. Transfigural interpretation is ideological, but it's not allegorical because there's a textual control. The framework of

reference I'm using stems or comes from the biblical narrative itself. I think, by the way, that's what the School of Antioch was doing as opposed to the School of Alexandria.

Kevin Vanhoozer

I think it's what typology does in contrast to allegory. It uses the biblical narrative as the overarching frame of reference. At least that's how I would defend it.

Keith Plummer

I greatly appreciated the section that you have explaining the relationship between providence and these transfigural episodes and individuals in the text. Because providence is part of a biblical frame of reference, a biblical-derived frame of reference.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Also, providence is another way of saying that ultimately God is the author of history. So when I do use the term figures, so like the temple and the tabernacle in ancient Israel is a figure of the church, another dwelling place. But this is an allegory because I think the connections are biblically underwritten, as it were. They're biblically justified. And that, I think, is, again, what I mean by using the biblical narrative as a frame of reference.

Keith Plummer

You say much in the book about the importance of reading cultures and how all of us are situated in at least one. Could you say a bit about what you mean by reading culture? And why is it important for anyone to recognize that he or she is part of one?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yeah. Along frame of reference, reading culture was one of my aha moments, I think, if I can put it that way. It came to me to be an important idea that helped me understand why there isn't an agreement about hermeneutics as much as I'd like there to be. First of all, let me define what a reading culture is. Basically, we all know we learn to read either in first grade or second grade, but we learn because people help us to learn to read. I think something similar goes for biblical reading. I learned to read the Bible in very specific classroom settings, maybe Sunday school and sometimes at home. I was socialized into different reading practices when it came to the Bible. But those reading practices, they felt different when I was in the academy. What I've come to see is that depending on where you study and with whom you study, you can really be formed to be a particular reader. Again, what a reading culture is, it teaches you to ask certain

questions of a text, to use certain skills, to bring certain values to your reading. The fact is, you individuals sometimes disagree about how to read the Bible because they've been formed by different reading cultures.

Kevin Vanhoozer

A reading culture usually assumes what we're reading for. Again, if you're in a university master's course in historical criticism, you're going to be socialized into a certain way of reading for something specific, very different than if you were in an inductive Bible study in a church. I guess I'm really hoping this will be one of the talking points of the book, that people will ask themselves, What reading culture do I belong to when it comes to reading the Bible? Are churches and seminaries on the same page, for example? Are we forming the readers we want to form? I think it's a huge concern because what I guess I'm suggesting is that there's a time tie between hermeneutics and spiritual formation.

Keith Plummer

Yes.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Different methods of reading are spiritually formative. When I saw that, it became very important to me to ask the question, in my school, are we forming readers to have the right spiritual reflexes and habits and practices when it comes to reading scripture? Are we encouraging them to ask the kinds of questions that will help them grow into the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ and things like that. I don't recall people raising these issues. When I was learning the Bible for myself, what seemed to be important was the vocabulary, the grammar, the historical context. I believe all those things matter, but I didn't realize that I was formed to give more value, more weight to certain questions rather than others. As a Christian theologian, I really want to form readers who can follow the way the words go, by which I mean I want them to understand what's being said, but I want them to follow the words. I want them to respond to the words. I want them to obey the words and not just get the surface grammar right. All of this, I think, goes goes into what I mean by a reading culture.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Basically, I think I see the church as a reading culture with a calling. I have to ask myself as a theologian, are the churches with which I'm familiar, forming the right readers? Re readers that will have the mind of Christ and the heart of Christ. It's an important vocation.

Keith Plummer

Yes. And to that point, one of the questions that you keep coming back to in the book is what readers are being formed by our seminaries and by our churches? Yes. So to the pastor who is hearing what you're saying and saying, Yeah, I really want to form this reader, what would you say? And likewise to the person who is in Christian higher education, maybe Christian University, seminary and so forth, who's also saying, Yes, in my role, I want to be involved in forming these kinds of readers. Could you offer any words of advice and encouragement to those two populations?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Yeah. Thanks for that. So what you've raised is how I describe the difference between learning the exegetical tactics, getting the grammar right and so on, and then the theological strategy. So it's really you have to take a step back and not simply think about exegetical tactics, but what is the strategy here? Why are we reading? What person do we want to form? I have a little formula in the book that, again, I find personally challenging that I think answers your question. It's this, I want to form readers who are canonically aware and redemptively responsible. By canonically aware, I mean They need to keep the big picture of the Bible in mind. They need to know where they are. Whatever book in the Bible they're reading, they have to know where they are in the big picture. Then they have to be aware of the connections between the testaments. They have to be aware that all of these words and these figures and everything's pointing to Christ, ultimately. That's what I mean by canonically aware, but also redemptively responsible. By that, I mean, I want to form readers who know that they are caught up in the story themselves, that they must respond.

Kevin Vanhoozer

They can't just keep it at a critical distance as if it was about somebody other than them. I like what Kierkegaard says. When he reads the Bible, he says, It is to me it is speaking. It is about me that it is speaking. That's what I mean by redemptively responsible. We are creatures. We are fallen creatures. Hopefully, we are redeemed creatures. We are caught up in the very subject matter about which we're reading. I want to form readers that are canonically aware and redemptively responsible. Just four words. There's much more that could be said, but those four words continue to challenge me.

Keith Plummer

Sure. Related to that point, you have things to say in the book about the proper posture, and you have been discussing this throughout. But could you home in on that a little bit more? Because you talk about the place of prayer as well. Could you just say some words about that?

Kevin Vanhoozer

Sure. Well, we have been talking about posture, and it's important that we mention this because, again, many hermeneutics texts may assume it, but they don't really spend time with it. But if when we're talking about reading the Bible theologically, we're talking about reading to hear the living and active voice of God. If we're to respond to this voice, well, then we need to say something, too, even if it's, Here I am, Lord, which is a good thing to say. But prayer, to me, is the ultimate theological act. It acknowledges everything the theology cares about, the Creator, creature, distinction. When we pray, we acknowledge who God is, creator and Lord, redeemer. We confess who we are. This is the beginning of wisdom, says Calvin, right? To know who God is, to know who we are. Prayer performs that. It also inserts us into the story of the text. We see there are so many prayers. The Psalms are filled. They are prayers. This is one way of learning to become the right person, canonically aware, redemptively responsible, by coming to the text in prayer, praying through the text, and having read the biblical text, probably wanting to pray more as one now continues to live out the story in our own lives.

Kevin Vanhoozer

I think we should read prayerfully as well as with our minds. Paul says this, doesn't he? I want to pray with my spirit and with my mind. And let's read that way, too.

Keith Plummer

Well, that is one of the things that I have very much gained from and appreciated about you. You have constantly made this an emphasis in your teaching and your work, this idea of the bringing together of these things which are so easily separated. And I am very grateful for this particular work. It's one of those books that I was sad to have come to an end. I was very, very immersed in it. The book is *Mere Christian Hermeneutics, Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* by Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer. And again, Kevin, this has been a delight. Thank you so much for this time, and as I mentioned at the beginning, for your impact on me. I pray that the Lord will use this to bring forth much fruit in the lives of his people.

Kevin Vanhoozer

Well, thanks for your hospitality, and I've thoroughly enjoyed our reunion.

Ben Best

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