

Ben Best, Co-host

Welcome to Defragmenting, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity.

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In this bonus episode of *Defragmenting*, recorded at the Gospel Coalition's 2025 National Conference, Dr. Keith Plummer talks with New Testament scholar Matt Harmon and Cairn's own Distinguished Professor of Old Testament, Gary Schnittjer, about their book *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible: Seven Hermeneutical Choices for the Old and New Testaments*. They explain how the Old Testament use of Scripture is integral to understanding the New Testament author's use of Scripture. You can find more of Gary's writing and thoughts on his Substack newsletter, [carpentersstudent.com](https://carpentersstudent.com).

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Later in the episode, we'll also hear from Michael Keller, Senior Pastor of Redeemer, Lincoln Square, about what it means to faithfully contextualize the gospel and why it's so important. He also gives us a preview of a book that arose from conversations between him and his dad, Pastor Tim Keller, before his death, as well as unpublished writings by Tim following his going to be with the Lord. At the time of recording, the title was *Unsettled*. We know now it's *The Stories We Live By: How Jesus Critiques and Completes What Our Culture Tells Us*. Let's join these conversations now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I am joined by Dr. Matt Harmon and Gary Schnittjer, who are the co-authors of a new book by Zondervan, *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible: Seven Hermeneutical Choices for the Old and New Testaments*. Let me tell you a little bit about both before we get into it. Dr. Harmon is professor of New Testament Studies at Grace College and Theological Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana. He's the author of numerous books, including commentaries on Galatians, Philippians, 2 Peter and Jude. He also co-hosts the *Various and Sundry* podcast with John Sloat. Dr. Gary Schnittjer is one of my colleagues, Distinguished Professor of Old Testament, the School of Divinity at Cairn University, author of the award-winning book, *Old Testament: Use of the Old Testament, Torah Story*, now in its second edition, and *Old Testament Narrative Books: The Israel Story*, which we have spoken about on the podcast previously. Welcome to both of you. Thank you for taking the time to be with us.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

Thanks for having us, Keith. It's really a pleasure to be here.

Dr. Matthew Harmon

Great to be here.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Let's start with the title of the What is the meaning of the Bible's Use of the Bible?

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

That's a really good question. It's a new terminology or a new way of framing it. But once you get into it, you'll find out that it's really not something new. You feel like, wow, this feels familiar. Some of that's by intention. I think I need to step back first. A lot of us over the past few generations have heard about the New Testament use of the Old Testament. That's gotten a lot of traction and scholarship. A lot of ministers of the word are very interested in that. But it's also something that's been a little scary and a little problematic. Now, what I mean by that is people have noticed for these past few generations that something weird is happening when New Testament authors use the Old Testament. There's a lot of confusion around this subject. And increasingly, since scholarship has gotten into it during the 20th century and early 21st century, there's been a willingness to talk about our hermeneutics and their hermeneutics as though they're two different things. And that division or bifurcation or willingness to treat New Testament use of Scripture as a thing unto itself has compounded the confusion. And so, as you can imagine, you've probably seen this, I think all of us have, people will find in their Bible or something like this a page, and there'll be references from the Old Testament on the left column and references on the right column from the New Testament.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

And people are very comforted by this literature and appearance. And it's especially comforting when people don't look them up. Because when somebody begins to look up the things on the left column and the right column at the same time and figure out what's going on, then all of a sudden, they're like, What is going on? Again, I think that pressure from the laity who's less educated in the Bible than they used to be, combined with the increasing willingness by New Testament scholars to talk about this strange hermeneutic of how the New Testament uses the old, that has created this really a lot of confusion. So one of the things that maybe the main thing that we're trying to do in the Bible's use of the Bible or *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible*, is say, wait a minute. The New Testament use of Scripture is just a very small part of a much larger phenomenon that for what we would call the Old Testament use of Old Testament, that's something that's been around. And so that larger framework where we find the New Testament using the old in the same way that the Old Testament professors, authors.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

Sorry, I didn't mean to give myself a promotion here. But in the same way that the Old Testament authors use Scripture, that all of a sudden is this larger window. Now we have a framework to understand the New Testament use of the old. It turns out in this new framework, it's not really weird. And so once a person gets into it, I think they'll find, Oh, the Bible's use of the Bible. That makes sense. And that's what we're trying not to be innovative with this, but we're trying to say, No, wait a minute. There's some resources in the Bible we can use that actually make the problem evaporate into thin air.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So in other words, tell me if this is fair. You're saying that there is precedent for the way that the New Testament authors are using Old Testament Scripture in the Old Testament itself in terms of how later Old Testament authors are making use of earlier Old Testament writing?

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

Yes. I don't know how we get into this in this conversation, Keith, but it's not just a small precedent. What we find the New Testament authors doing with Scripture, they learned by studying the Old Testament. This is something that was going on for more than a thousand years before the time of Christ. So it's not weird, it's not novel. And once we frame the New Testament use of Scripture within this larger framework of the Bible's use of the Bible, it actually really helps us in some surprising ways, some ways that surprise me.

Dr. Matthew Harmon

And I would just say that the linchpin of that ultimately is how Jesus himself uses the Old Testament. And so the way that Jesus is using the Old Testament finds its precedent in later Old Testament authors using earlier Old Testament Scripture. It shouldn't be surprising then that the New Testament authors, following in the footsteps of Jesus, are using the same approach. I think that's part of what makes this book unique is to make the case that it's all part of one larger area of study, not these isolated silos of, well, the Old Testament authors use the Old Testament in one way, and the New Testament authors use it in a different way. We're saying, No, they are following the same sets of hermeneutical approaches and that Jesus is the focal point of making that transition, of modeling. When Jesus uses the Old Testament, he's following in the footsteps of later Old Testament authors and how they read the Old Testament fulfillment. Of course, there's a heightened sense of fulfillment with Jesus on the scene, and so there's an intensification, no doubt. But he's not doing something radically different. When the New Testament authors follow in the footsteps of Jesus' engagement with the Old Testament, they are part of this continuous stream that we can track all throughout Scripture.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That's fascinating. Related to what both of you were just describing is the concept of progressive revelation. Could you say a few words about that and how that plays into this project?

Dr. Matthew Harmon

Well, I think that for a while now, the idea of progressive revelation as a key element of the biblical meta-narrative has been well established. Really, it's essentially rooted in the Bible itself as you see how God, over time, reveals more and more of his plans, his purposes, and the specifics of how those things are going to work themselves out. An obvious example, even in the Old Testament itself, is the original promise that God gives to Abram in Genesis 12 gets expanded out as he continues to reiterate it later in the Genesis narrative, not just to Abram, but ultimately to Isaac and Jacob and the 12 sons. You see this continual expansion of God's revelation of who he is and what he's doing in redemptive history. That, of course, continues on all throughout the Old Testament into the New Testament. What's unique, I think, in part about our approach is to say that fundamental piece of our understanding of the Bible has to be applied to our understanding of the Bible's use of the Bible, and that one of the ways that God advances revelation, one of the ways that he reveals more and more about himself, about his redemptive purposes, is to inspire later biblical authors, to allude to, to cite earlier texts, and give additional explanation expansions of what God had originally said as a means of advancing revelation and making it clearer, more of the specifics and the shape of what God is doing throughout redemptive history.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

Keith, I think I hadn't put all of this together in my own mind, but when Richard Schultz was involved in a book review at another conference of *Old Testament Use of Old Testament*. You were there, I think, Keith, right?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes, I was there.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

I think Richard Schultz pointed out that something that's been underserved is the study of the Bible's use of the Bible, which wasn't even really a saying back then, but the study of Scripture's use of Scripture really wasn't put into the framework of progressive revelation. Progressive revelation wasn't thought of in those terms. And so progressive revelation God advancing his revelation. He, of course, does it through the prophets, through his mighty redemptive acts. But what we're studying is just a small subset of that. It's when biblical authors want to teach something new, but they again and again choose to teach something new through the use of God's earlier revelation, through the Scriptures that they themselves have been studying. There's a strong desire by biblical authors to show their new teaching isn't novel, but it's rather in continuity with and they're advancing. Well, they probably don't know they're advancing revelation per se, but God's using them to advance revelation. They're advancing their own teaching.

Dr. Keith Plummer

What are some common mistakes people make when studying the Bible's use of the Bible?

Dr. Matthew Harmon

Well, there's a whole range. I'd say, in one sense, the first mistake is not paying enough attention to it. That even as they're reading, say, through the New Testament, and they see a New Testament author is quoting from an Old Testament passage, that they don't take the time to go back and look at that Old Testament passage in its context. They just say, Oh, that's interesting. They're quoting the Old Testament. How curious. Or if they do go back and look at the Old Testament verse, they often don't necessarily read it in the larger context. And so they sometimes walk away confused and think, Is he just randomly selecting a verse out of nowhere? No, he's actually paying attention to the broader context. But if you don't go ahead and take the time to read around where that Old Testament passage is being quoted from, or if you're working in the Old Testament, use of the Old Testament, if you have a prophet quoting from the Torah, going back and reading the surrounding context to help you see what it is that's going on there. More often than not, you're going to find additional contact points where you say, Oh, okay.

Dr. Matthew Harmon

Not only is he quoting this specific line, but it resonates with this passage because of these additional contact points that the later author is assuming that you're going to catch onto because they were so

steeped in the biblical text that they're not just drawing upon individual verses, but larger contexts as well. I also think related to that, another common mistake that people make is simply assuming that the biblical authors are not intended intending to draw upon the original context, that, again, they're just atomistically using individual lines from a previous text without realizing there's a deep contextual routing there more often than not. Those are some of the most common mistakes, is failure to pay attention to that reality. I'm sure Gary has additional ideas there.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

I just wondered, Keith, would it be okay to give an illustration? Because I think sometimes people might not have in mind the things that it's going on. A lot of us are familiar with Zechariah 9, where he says, "Rejoice greatly, daughter Zion. Shout, daughter of daughter Jerusalem. See your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly, riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Now, again, many people are familiar with that, especially because it's quoted a couple of times in the New Testament. But I think that one of the things that Matt's getting at is when we talk about context, we need to not just think about the context surrounding that verse in Zechariah 9 or even in the Book of Zechariah. Zechariah is actually blending together two earlier Scriptures, one from Torah and one from the prophets. Listen to what Isaiah 62:11 says, "The Lord has made proclamation to the ends of the earth," and here it is, "Say to daughter Zion, 'see, your savior comes. His reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.'" Now, of course, that makes great sense within the new Exodus of Isaiah, chapters 40 and following.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

But what Zechariah is doing here is he's saying, it's not just your savior, it's the king. It's not just the savior the king. He's coming on a donkey. There's technical language for donkey in the Old Testament. He uses language that's very rare. It's only used in the blessing of Judah in Genesis 49, where the donkey comes, the donkey carries the Judah King into Judah, and It's such a lavish vineyard that he has to tie his donkey to a vine. It's this memorable phrase. This is what I'm really getting at, Keith, is that when we read the New Testament use of this in all four Gospels, a lot of times we're tempted to just go back to Zechariah 9. If we read the surrounding context in Zechariah 9, that's great. But if we're sensitive to what Zechariah is doing, we'll be able to quickly see at least three of the Gospels are tapping into the context in Isaiah and or in Genesis as far as what they're doing with Jesus in their presentation of him. It's not an accident in Mark 11, which is just an illusion to untie and tie that donkey, I think four or five times it's said in the text.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

So we have this, the context isn't just the surrounding verses, it's this deeper context, going back to the earlier citations. And these things are... All the evidence points to the fact that these things are consciously on the mind of the New Testament authors. This is how later Old Testament authors studied the Bible, and the New Testament authors learned to study the Bible in the same way. Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So we would err in assuming that the most explicit reference that the New Testament author is referring back to, that's the end of it, because of what you just illustrated is, Zechariah is doing some things with other Scriptures as well.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

That's precisely it. They're not just cheap proof texts. That there's this deep commitment to Scripture that we're probably not aware of until we really start to dig in and study it. And once we do that, we realize, wow, nobody was more committed to studying Scripture with Scripture than the authors of Scripture. And so they provided not only a model for the New Testament authors, but this is one of the more radical things we argue in the book, Keith, is that it's a mistake to talk about their hermeneutics and our hermeneutics, that this is actually once it's normalized by putting it within the framework of the Bible's use of the Bible, they're just doing plain sense exegesis, like we should be doing as well.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You mentioned in the book two kinds of contexts, horizontal and vertical context. Could you explain what those are and why it's important to study that with respect to the Bible's use of the Bible?

Dr. Matthew Harmon

Yeah, I'll piggyback off of the example that Gary just used there. When we talk about horizontal context, we are talking about the surrounding verses and chapter and even chapter and even the totality of that book itself. In that example, looking back to Zechariah 9, we're talking about what's in Zechariah 8, what's in Zechariah 10 and 11. It We're looking at the whole context of the book and understanding how Zechariah 9:9 fits into the larger horizontal context of that book. Doing similarly with the New Testament passage in this example, whether it's Matthew 21 or Mark 11, regardless, you're looking at horizontal context, surrounding verses, what we tend to think of more as literary context, essentially, is what it's similar to. But The other context we talk about is vertical context, which is what Gary was just modeling with looking at the fact that when a biblical author, here in this case, is looking at Zechariah 9:9, there's already an allusion to an earlier biblical text built into Zechariah 9:9. It's baked in because Zechariah is intentionally engaging Isaiah 62 as well as Genesis 49. And so vertical context pays attention to the relationship between those texts and how God, in essence, builds additional meaning, that meaning accumulates as these texts are alluded to and picked up on and explained through the process of the advancement of revelation.

Dr. Matthew Harmon

It's almost like a snowball that starts at the top of a mountain and is rolling down the hill and it's picking up more and more snow as it's going. That's what's happening. As biblical authors allude to earlier texts, the meaning expands based on the progress of Revelation in that process.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

Yes. So everything that Matt just said is perfect. Maybe this will help. Vertical across time. Okay. Whereas horizontal is at the same time in the same book, or there can be other horizontal contexts, but vertical, we're especially saying earlier. So exactly as Matt said across time, part of Zechariah's context is both Isaiah 62 and Genesis 49. A person that doesn't attend to that is already taking Zechariah out of context because that's part of the context of what Zechariah is doing.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That's helpful. So vertical, chronological, horizontal, as you said, Matt, what we normally think of in terms of literary.

Dr. Matthew Harmon

Yeah, that's right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Great. Let me just ask you this, what would be most rewarding or one of the things that would be rewarding to the two of you concerning how it is that your book might be made use of, benefit people? This isn't something that I asked you, but I'm just curious.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

I think that Matt might have a better answer than this. I think that Matt and I are both certainly academics in New Testament and in Old Testament, respectively. We live in that. But we're here at TGC with you, Keith. We're both hopeful that more ministers of the word will not just settle for a one-stop shopping going back to just the verse. It's at least something valuable to do the horizontal or literary context context, because once that allusion activates the literary context, both horizontal contexts, as Matt was describing, are both now playing off of each other in some really important ways. But even more than that, for more ministers of the word to become in touch with the advancement of revelation, that God is doing something that the biblical authors keep coming back to, and nobody's making them. They're studying this Scriptures, and they naturally have a bent to teach their people in their day according to what God has revealed in the past. I think that I'm hopeful that more ministers of the word and regular church folk will be able to begin to think in terms of the connectedness of the Scriptures. Our hope is, and that's why we're here at TGC, like I said, our hope is that maybe some pastors will become interested in studying this introductory book on how to study the Bible's use of the Bible and that it will make its way out into the pew.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

Back in the old days, when the cross-reference Bibles first came out, there was a generation or two of the laity that really studied the Bible in a very connected way at that time. It would be really nice to see that renewal toward what God has said in our own day. We're not thinking big. We just want to be a small part of that.

Dr. Matthew Harmon

I would just add that I think we are all aware of the growing biblical illiteracy in our congregations. At best, many of our many believers, even if they are clear, faithful believers, have at best pieces of the Bible in mind. Like, Well, I really like that story, or I really like this verse, or this proverb, or this Psalm. I really like this and they have lots of fragments, but they don't have the whole picture of how the Bible fits together. This is one of the ways that you can demonstrate in a very tangible manner, the interconnectedness of the Bible, that these verses and these passages are not just an anthology of interesting religious stories about people that matter to us. This is the holistic revelation of God from Genesis to Revelation. One of the primary ways that it hangs together is when later biblical authors quote or allude to earlier texts to help you see how the pieces fit together. We're not responsible for what clever way can we come up with to connect the pieces of the Bible. This is us trying to follow in the footsteps of the biblical authors in how from the mind of God, Scripture is interconnected.

Dr. Matthew Harmon

I think when you show people those pieces, it stirs in them an excitement for reading their Bibles, connecting with God, and wanting to go deeper themselves. Because I think there are tangible ways that even the ordinary layperson can enter into the study of the Bible's use of the Bible and begin to see how the Bible hangs together organically on in our own terms.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In other words, you're all about biblical integrity.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

Yeah. Defragmenting the modern pastoral mind when it comes to scriptural study. We were thinking about titling the book that, but the folks at Zonderman Academic thought, I don't know.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, thank you for your time, for your scholarship, for your friendship, and may the Lord bring fruit from it. The book's name again is *How to Study the Bible's Use of the Bible: Seven Hermeneutical Choices for the Old and New Testaments* by Matt Harmon and Gary Schnittjer, published by Zondervan. Thank you again. Thank you.

Dr. Gary Schnittjer

Our pleasure. Thank you.

Ben Best, Co-host

Cairn University invites pastors and lay leaders to our annual Church Leaders Conference. Join us on Thursday, March 5th, for a day of encouragement, fellowship, and sessions designed to equip you for effective leadership. This year's topic is recognizing, resisting, and recovering from gospel drift, which will be addressed by keynote speaker, Jared C. Wilson. Conference registration includes a copy of his book, *Lest We Drift*. Don't wait. Find more information and register today at [cairn.edu/clc](http://cairn.edu/clc). That's C-A-I-R-N.Edu/clc.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, it is a great pleasure, and that is more than a nicety, this is a sincere word of appreciation to have with me as a guest, Michael Keller. Dr. Michael Keller is the founding and senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Lincoln Square. He's a Council member of the Gospel Coalition. He also serves as a fellow for the Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. He is one of the three sons of Tim and Kathy Keller.

Dr. Michael Keller

The good son, the good one. Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I'm sorry, I left that out. Yeah, that's right. You hadn't asked me to say that, but sorry.

Dr. Michael Keller

Yes. Thanks, Keith, for letting me be here. I'm excited to be here, so thanks for welcoming me.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Good to have you.

Dr. Michael Keller

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I wanted to talk with you about an article that you wrote for the Keller Center. I know this is an area about which your dad gave a lot of thought, did a lot of teaching, and you, I would imagine in conversation with him, did. That's the topic of contextualization. You wrote a great article called Contextualizing. Tell me what the title- It's like contextualization in the West.

Dr. Michael Keller

"Contextualization in the Late Modern West." Yeah, in the Late Modern West. The subtitle was "How I became a Christian."

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. Yeah. Yes, which plays into that. Before we get to that, because I do want to ask that, what is contextualization for those who may be hearing that term for the first time?

Dr. Michael Keller

Yeah, it's a funky word, and it's a funny word. It's a technical word, and that's why it's a hard word to use sometimes that a lot of people... Sometimes you shouldn't use that word because people aren't in our line of work and profession. But The reason why it's helpful is it tries to get the idea that everybody has a context that they live in. Everybody has a social, cultural location. What's really cool about the gospel, because we believe in the Holy Spirit, we believe Jesus literally incarnates into the world, we believe that the gospel can actually incarnate into people's individual lives and cultures. And so that means even though the gospel doesn't change, how we present the gospel can and will. When you open up your mouth and speak in English versus Spanish, you're contextualizing the gospel. I would argue everybody contextualizes it. There's only people who are aware or unaware of it. And that's why I feel like it's important to remind people of this, because I think you can air on two different levels. You can either say this contextualization is really just a backwards way to skim on not just preaching the gospel.

Dr. Michael Keller

And what they're referring to probably is there are people who over contextualize where it loses its power, both to convict and convert. And there is a risk at that. But the problem when you do that, too, is then if you under contextualize, if you say, You know what? I'm not going to even think about the context that this other person's in, you risk just importing your values and your ways of how you see the world into somebody else's life, which is problematic. I can go into it more, but that's the background of it.

Dr. Michael Keller

Yes. I just want to let listeners know that if you want to read the article, you can find it at the Keller Center site at the Gospel Coalition. Let's just follow through with what you were talking about, because in the article, you do talk about the dangers to be avoided of over-contextualizing or over-adapting and under-adapting. Let's start with the first one that you started in with over-adapting. Would it be fair to say that that is where we are accommodating certain things about a particular person's context at the expense of the gospel?

Dr. Michael Keller  
Yeah, I would say that.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
And then under-

Dr. Michael Keller  
Under contextualizing is when you aren't thoughtful enough of how this might be received. Let's say you want to present the gospel because you want to say, Listen, you have a good Father in heaven. If you don't take into consideration, let's say there's a culture that is a matriarchy, and there's not... And fathers are... There are cultures in the world where the men are not present, and the idea of fatherdom is actually not even an idea because it's men are not in that culture. It's a very rare, it's not a normal example, but it is one. I think it would be an unfortunate miss on our part to try to lead with that as the presentation of the gospel in a society like that. I don't know. What would you say, Keith, for you, under contextualization would look like? What are examples of that from your background?

Dr. Keith Plummer  
Under contextualization, I think, would be a matter of not taking into consideration. Well, a lot of times, I'll use another term that we don't use normally, but the whole idea of plausibility structures. What is it about a particular community that are the underlying assumptions and beliefs, things that they haven't necessarily been formally taught, but they've just picked up in the air through various means. But they assume these things to be true. Because they assume these things to be true, they take the gospel as being impossible or undesirable. It's not just a matter of truth. It could be a matter of goodness. I think maybe under contextualization would be an example of that would be not thinking about how someone who may be in the throes of some form of enlightenment, rationalism, and materialism, they believe, they just assume, and they haven't really thought about it, that miracles just are foolish and it's an impossible. Then you're coming talking about these miracles. I think there, what would be necessary would be to recognize where they are and maybe help them see what some of the inherent flaws are, not just Logically, but also existentially with saying, Well, the only way that we can know what's true is by scientific verification, or the only things that exist are things that we can perceive with our senses.

Dr. Keith Plummer  
I think that would be one example.

Dr. Michael Keller  
That's a great example. If you're listening and you're like, plausibility structures and contextualization, what's going on here? Really, what we're talking about is, do you have the curiosity to sit with somebody and ask them questions to find out where they're coming from before you launch into a gospel presentation? There are types of people who, thankfully, are so excited about wanting other people to hear about Jesus. They want to tell people, but they They don't stop to think what might be the position they're in. A good example of this biblically is Paul on Mars Hill. When he goes in, before he goes in to speak to those folks, he looks around the statues, he sees them and he says, Hey, that statue of the unknown God, I'm here to tell you about something. What he's doing there is he's going into the context of stories of the area, and he's saying, I can tell that you already understand that there might be a God that you don't know yet, and I'm here to help you with that. And so he moves in and helps them with that story. So that's what we're just talking about. So these are complicated words sometimes, but in some ways, really just asking yourself, can you incarnate into somebody else's life to put yourself in their shoes, to see things from their perspective so that When you present the gospel, you can be more agile to what it might look like without compromising and keeping away the key features, which is distance from God, sin and in our nature, and then his love and grace and beauty.

Dr. Michael Keller  
There's ways to translate those things. There's just different aspects of it.



Dr. Keith Plummer

You mentioned the subtitle of your article, "How You Became a Christian." Yeah. In the article, you mentioned the surprise that people have, and I was among them, of people assume he grew up with Tim Keller as a dad. He was under his father's preaching. He heard the gospel many times. But you say that it wasn't until you went to college that there was a campus minister who communicated the gospel to you in a way, I think the words you used were that was more relatable and understandable than you had previously heard. You don't say this at the fault of your dad, but that there was something about this presentation that fit. Could you say a little bit about that?

Dr. Michael Keller

Yeah, it's always sometimes the context of these conversations. I talk to parents who have a child. They're hoping that they would understand the gospel, and they're Wow, I love the fact that you grew up. Tim Keller was your father. You must have gotten a great gospel presentation, and I did. I got a very great gospel presentation, but I didn't become a Christian until college, and they're always surprised. The mic drop moments when I say, Yeah, but you're not saved by a great gospel presentation. You're saved by the gospel. They're like, Oh. I'm like, You can have the perfect... Not that the presentation I got was perfect, but you can have a really good one, and that's not actually, that's not how you're actually saved. There's this person named the Holy Spirit, and there's other aspects of it. I think what helped when I got to college was, A, the distance from my family. I think growing up as a pastor's kid, you're wondering, where's the line? Where does my family's faith end? Where does mine begin? And how does that relate? I think there was a lot of that going on. But then I think a college pastor who's younger was closer to me and age, I felt that that person understood where I was coming from and challenged me in ways.

Dr. Michael Keller

And we may even allowed them to challenge me. So there's all kinds of factors that went into it, but I was able to actually, for the first time, Hear it and have it move me and change me. After that, a lot of the things that I grew up with family was important of hearing stories that finally made sense.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In some respect, that could have been the final blow of the ax. Yes. Because there had been several chops and choppings before that.

Dr. Michael Keller

But I tried to encourage parents, anybody, to say, Hey, we're supposed to do the best job we can. But the cool thing about contextualization, in some ways, it's actually, I hadn't thought of it this way, but it's just really creating space for grace that it's not us ultimately. We do the best job with it we can. Because I think people will either say, Oh, contextualization is a funky way to give yourself space to not just preach the gospel people. But the other view that I think people have is that if we just can just scientifically, parse out the other culture and get down to all the assumptions and issues, then we'll be able to have mass conversions. That's not necessarily true either, because you do the best job you can. But at the end of the day, it's still not us. Which is, I think, beautiful.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That's liberating.

Dr. Michael Keller

Yeah. Why is it liberating in your mind?

Dr. Keith Plummer

It's liberating because now I don't have to live with this anxiety that if I don't get it just right, this person's eternal destiny is at stake.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So good.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It's the whole divine action, human responsibility thing. We're not saying that we don't have a responsibility to speak as clearly and carefully as we can. But it's also the recognition. It doesn't hinge on that. It is the power of God. I think this is so important because sometimes people hear about contextualization and they think, Well, then you're denying the inherent power of the word and the Spirit. No. But we're recognizing God does call us to love people. Part of that is understanding them, listening, and speaking as clearly as we can in a manner that they can understand that's free of obstacles that are not themselves biblical.

Dr. Michael Keller

I wonder if it's because the word is such a technical word, because of that term like that, we think we can almost inherently that word infuse an idea that we're over-technicalizing the mystery of what's happening, I think, which is unfortunate. I know why many people might think that, but I love how you put that, Keith, is that we're not denying the mystery and power of how the John 3, how the spirit blows where he's going to blow. At the same time, you look at Paul and how he in every location to the Jew, he's contextualized for the Jew to the Greek. He contextualizes the Greek. There's space for us to actually put the gospel in different forms. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, they're same gospel, but they're being written to

Dr. Keith Plummer

Different audiences.

Dr. Michael Keller

Different audiences. You can see how each writer emphasizes some aspects over other ones to have a hearing in those people's views. It's same gospel, though. There are religions, there is no contextualization. It's written in one language. It has to be still said in that language. You can't untranslate it because it's the immutability of God in that religion. But so beautiful about our faith is you have a God who comes becomes man, becomes one of us, literally to translate who God is.

Dr. Michael Keller

I think that's what we're asking folks to be mindful of inside of a larger apparatus of God's in charge.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In closing, one of the things that we talk about, and we talk about contextualizing and cultural apologetics, I use the term cultural narratives, the stories that are hanging in the air that people have just absorbed. They come through media and advertising and films and so forth, but they just assume them. They haven't really looked at them, but they're living by them in various ways. I know that you and your dad were planning on doing a book together on cultural narratives and contextualization, and due to his going to be with the Lord almost two years now, that seemed like it might not happen. But you said that you had found some of his unpublished work on this area. And is it so that posthumously for him that there will be this collaborative work. Can you just say a little bit about it when we might expect it?

Dr. Michael Keller

Yeah. Thanks, Keith. I've actually already written it, but the way I wrote it is I was able to find about 40,000 words of his unpublished work on this. He's published some... You put it well, Keith. There are so many different versions of stories that our culture tells us that answer questions that we don't even know we were asking. Who am I? What's the point of everything? Why should I be here? What's wrong with the world? What will put it right? And there's an American story version of that. There's an Italian story. There's just different cultures have different stories.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Then I would imagine substories even within them.

Dr. Michael Keller

Yeah, exactly. I found them in my dad's preaching book, he talks about some of them, but not... I was able to get down about seven. There's a lot more than seven, but there's seven that I was able to pull together. Some of it he hasn't published in other places. So it's going to be a co-written book put

together because I was able to pull together and quote large portions of him and let him speak as well. And it's exciting because we were talking about doing it before he died. We already came up with how many cultural narrative we're going to talk about. And the idea would be to show folks, here's what the story is, here's what is right about it that actually we would agree with, here's where it's wrong, and when we fully buy into it, it breaks us. And yet here's how the gospel, it points to a true and better story in the gospel. We want a cultural narrative of freedom. Freedom says we want to be free to do whatever we want, wherever we want, as long as we don't harm anybody else. There's some truth that God wants us to be free, but not freedom from all things, but freedom to as well.

Dr. Michael Keller

I'm sure in your line of work as well, Keith, you're constantly seeing these stories everywhere, and I think it'll be helpful when we publish it by... I think we're hopefully doing it by next year.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Great. Is there a title?

Dr. Michael Keller

A working title is not quite, but it's like something along the lines of You are the stories you believe, or something along those lines.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay, well, we'll keep an eye out. We'll just look for Keller & Keller.

Dr. Michael Keller

Keller & Keller, right.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Regardless of the title.

Dr. Michael Keller

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I'm looking forward to that.

Dr. Michael Keller

Well, Keith, I'm excited to put it out there. So thank you.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, thank you, Michael, again for the time. I know your time at... We're at the TGC conference. Your time has been precious and that you would spend some of it with me and our listeners means a lot.

Dr. Michael Keller

Yeah. So thank you very much. Yeah, thank you. Thank you for hosting. Appreciate it.

Ben Best, Co-host

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