



BOOK REVIEW

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically*. Zondervan Academic, 2024; xvii+448.

It has been twenty-six years since Kevin J. Vanhoozer published his influential work, *Is There Meaning in This Text?*,¹ as a response to postmodern critiques of the Bible's authority. Now, he returns with his latest book, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*. His conviction in the Bible's authority remains unchanged, asserting that the world needs Biblical Christianity, whose existence and practices are rooted in biblical interpretation. The questions are: "Is biblical interpretation still relevant and trustworthy? What methods are employed, and by whom?" Vanhoozer believes that biblical interpretation is not merely a set of methods for interpreting or criticizing the Bible. Biblical interpretation also reflects a proper posture that views the Bible as divine voice, divine and human discourse, and divine purpose (chapter 1).

To explore this idea, Vanhoozer employs a biblical analogy of ascending a mountain. He states, "To ascend the mountain is to chart a pathway into the Holy Scriptures, up to the place where God speaks and humans listen" (23). The culmination of this ascent is a direct encounter with Christ's transfiguration on the mountain. Utilizing this analogy, Vanhoozer organizes his work into three principal sections: the first section pertains to the pre-climb stage, which discusses reading the Bible both within and outside of church (chapter 1–3); the second section is the ascent stage, which examines the understanding of literal interpretation (chapter 4–5); and the final section, which reaches its climax, addresses transfiguring literal interpretation (chapter 6–9).

In the first section, Vanhoozer shows the distinctive nature of biblical interpretation across the patristic, medieval, and Reformation periods, emphasizing its potential to shape and change the culture of readers. Regrettably, according to

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Zondervan Academic, 1998).

Vanhoozer, this transformation does not occur spontaneously, due to the dichotomy between the “looking at the text” approach, which tends to prioritize critical analysis of the Bible, and the “looking along the text” approach, which highlights experiential engagement with the text (50–53). This polarization is observable throughout history, exemplified by distinctions such as Antioch versus Alexandria, Monastic versus Scholastic traditions, and even within the theological dichotomy between biblical studies and systematic theology. In response to this, Vanhoozer subsequently advocates for exegetes and theologians to be actively engaged within the church community. The rationale is that, within the church, individuals are encouraged to prioritize the interests of the entire ecclesiastical community over their own concerns, thereby facilitating the process of integration (101–02).

In the second part, Vanhoozer concentrates on the issue of literal interpretation, which he argues is primarily caused by differences in the frames of reference used by readers, particularly between the immanent frame and the transcendence frame. Rather than being confined to a single frame, Vanhoozer proposes a middle way, which he designates as the “eschatological frame of reference,” providing examples of its application to Isaiah and Hebrews (chapter 4). In chapter 5, Vanhoozer also elaborates on allegorical and typological interpretation, leading him to “transfigural interpretation,” which has the potential to expand and deepen the literal meaning.

In the final section, Vanhoozer demonstrates the originality of mere Christian hermeneutics, which is grounded in literal meaning and its connection to the economy of light. According to Vanhoozer, the practice of interpreting texts is an expression of participation in the light of God, culminating in the encounter with Christ. In practice, this does not imply that Christ must always be explicitly identified or associated with the text. Instead, it emphasizes how the light of Christ becomes the climax in the reading of the text. Not Christocentric, but Christophanic! (315). Ultimately, engagement with the text will lead interpreters to a transformative experience that changes the heart and mind (354).

Vanhoozer’s *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* offers a hermeneutical approach enriched with reflective, personal, and transformative insights. Rather than engaging in debates regarding hermeneutical methods, although Vanhoozer does address this issue, his writing encourages readers to adopt a spiritual posture aligned with the authority of the Bible. That is why this book is highly recommended for theologians who are on a spiritual journey. Likewise, this is crucial reading for pastors

serving in local churches, as it reexamines the concept of relevance in today's world, emphasizing that all viewpoints must come and be grounded in the Bible.

The weakness of this book lies in Vanhoozer's lack of sensitivity to current real-world issues and challenges, such as racism, religious pluralism, ecological crisis, discrimination, social justice, and so on, which obviously demand a more contextual hermeneutical approach. Vanhoozer repeatedly claims that biblical interpretation can change the world (xv, 352, 355), yet his hermeneutical approach does not adequately address or provide answers to these real-world issues. Rather than being sympathetic, Vanhoozer labels the contextual hermeneutical approach as an "identity frame of reference" (95) and draws a distance from the liberative interpretive approach (147–49). This indicates that the transformative nuance in Vanhoozer's hermeneutics is limited to personal aspects.

Furthermore, Vanhoozer's emphasis on the transfiguration narrative also seems biased. This is evident when he explains the absence of the transfiguration narrative in the Gospel of John. Vanhoozer is correct that John emphasizes the theme of light (John 1:4–9; 3:19–21; 8:12; 9:5; 12:36, 46); however, the absence of the transfiguration narrative suggests that John did not find it necessary to include this event. If the transfiguration narrative were so significant to John, why is it not included in his writing?

Despite these weaknesses, Vanhoozer's hermeneutical approach is highly deserving of recognition and appreciation. Vanhoozer is an evangelical author who has been deeply involved in hermeneutics for many years, and several of his previous works have won the Christianity Today Book Awards (1999, 2006). In 2024, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* is again winning the Southwestern Journal of Theology Book of the Year and The Gospel Coalition Biblical Studies Book Award. In conclusion, this book serves as a call for Christians to "*Ad Fontes*," urging to establish the Bible as the foundation of theologizing.

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