

Extended Review Article: Seeing Christ in the Letter: A Review of Kevin J. Vanhoozer's *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*¹

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INTRODUCTION

Bridge-building or betrayal? Genuine unity or fundamental compromise? Throughout history, certain ideas and events have emerged with the rare power to unite previously opposing groups. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, both East and West celebrated together because a concrete symbol of oppression had finally crumbled, reuniting families and restoring freedoms everyone recognized as good. This was unity worth celebrating. But history

also warns us of darker reconciliations. The Compromise of 1877 brought “peace” between northern Republicans and southern Democrats, yet this unity came at a devastating cost: the abandonment of formerly enslaved people to Jim Crow terror, as Republicans sacrificed their founding principles for political expediency. The agreement may have bridged a political divide, but in doing so it papered over a moral catastrophe.

So when Kevin Vanhoozer’s *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* appeared in 2024 to enthusiastic endorsements from Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox alike, we found ourselves asking: which kind of unity is this? Has Vanhoozer genuinely transcended our interpretive divisions with insights into basic truths all Christian interpreters embrace? We sincerely hoped so! This is a noble goal, and Kevin Vanhoozer is as qualified as anyone to pursue it. Yet we were still concerned that his “mere” hermeneutics might achieve consensus by evacuating the doctrinal convictions that give each tradition its distinct identity. Peace and Christian unity are worth pursuing—but at what cost?

WHAT IS A MERE CHRISTIAN HERMENEUTIC?

Vanhoozer’s stated goal is “to do for biblical hermeneutics what C. S. Lewis did for Christian belief in his book *Mere Christianity*” (xxi). That is, to sketch the “hallway” of common agreement in which interpreters belonging to the various “rooms” of particular denominational or interpretive Christian traditions can and should mingle. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, then, is about “what all Spirit-illuminated readers have in common regardless of the differences in their particular exegetical methodologies” (17). What is it that all such readers share in common, if not a method? An orientation towards Scripture that sees it as the Word of God (divine discourse) addressed to *us*, in which Christ is revealed. Vanhoozer argues that despite all the disputes about *how* to read the Bible, all Christians agree on *why* to read the Bible—to hear God and to see Jesus (22).

What grounds the shared Christian perspective on why we read the Bible? Vanhoozer argues it is a forgotten element of hermeneutics: frame of reference. A frame of reference is “the interpretive assumptions that enable readers to identify what authors are speaking about” (67, *emphasis original*). In practice, “to read with a frame of reference is to examine the text from

a particular angle, put a certain set of questions to it, and filter the readers' perceptions of what the text is about" (68). The Christian frame of reference then, is one that sees Christ as the ultimate referent (subject of) of Scripture. How Christ is found to be Scripture's referent (method) varies: some use allegory to see Christ as mystically present in every rock and tree, others trace the authorially-intended typological structures across redemptive history. But all believers agree that the Bible is about Jesus and for us. Training Christian Bible-readers, then, requires forming Christian reading cultures that shape believers into people who come to God's word as humble listeners to divine speech, expectant to see the glory of Christ and be transformed into his image.

ASCENDING THE MOUNTAIN: A SUMMARY OF VANHOOZER'S ARGUMENT²

Vanhoozer's argument proceeds in three movements which he illustrates as the ascent up a mountain. First, he lays groundwork for the project with the assertion that what the Bible is determines how it ought to be read (6). Since Scripture is the voice of the living God, used by God for the purpose of addressing, establishing, "and preserving his covenant people," (12), its readers are "answerable persons" (14) accountable to read rightly with humility and diligence, so that their affections might be converted to God's communicative intentions (21).

While at base camp, Vanhoozer also surveys the various reading cultures Christians have produced from the patristic era to the present day in order to convince readers that they are "answerable subjects, responsible for hearing, doing justice, and responding to the divine address of Scripture" (193) and that such answerability demands a certain exegetical posture, not merely a right method. Additionally, Scripture aims not only to call individuals to response, but to create a believing community sensitive to the divine address. The contemporary divide between biblical studies and theology has created two polarized reading cultures, each of which brings their own frames of reference to the text.³ Neither of these frames line up exactly with the church's interpretive questions and interests, which both biblical scholars and theologians must recover. We must read Scripture with a theological frame of reference that "does not do away with the historical,

but, rather, views the historical as a field of ... divine communicative action,” (98) in the eschatological community of the church.

Having surveyed the area, Vanhoozer begins the first ascent up the mountain to determine what Scripture means. The starting point for this task is to determine the Bible’s “literal sense” and that sense’s relationship to Jesus. The Bible’s literal sense, Vanhoozer argues, is what the author(s) of Scripture are saying: the words they use, and the meaning of those words in the context of their discourse.⁴ This is distinct from, but closely related to, the text’s *referent*—what or whom it is about. “The literal *sense* is the *way* words run; the literal *referent* is that *to which* the words run” (123, italics original).⁵ Every text has both a sense and a referent: that is, every text both says something and is about something. Literal interpretation then involves rightly discerning both *what is said* and *what (or whom) it is said about*.

Because any given Scripture has two authors (human and divine), many interpreters have understood Scripture to have two different senses: literal and spiritual (or figural). But Vanhoozer argues that the text’s spiritual sense is not different in *sense* from its literal sense. Instead, he claims that the “spiritual sense” is simply the glory of the literal sense’s ultimate *referent*.

Whether or not one sees this referent, however, depends on one’s frame of reference. One’s frame of reference is the window through which one looks at a text and determines what the reader will pay attention to: “a frame of reference refers to all the things that influence how a reader attends to the letter of the text, and thus what the reader sees there” (124). To see what Scripture is really about (referent), we need a frame of reference that makes us attentive to what it is really about. Now that Christ has come and brought the end-time fulfillment of what the OT promised (i.e., the *eschaton*), rightly reading it requires an *eschatological* frame of reference. Using Vanhoozer’s terms, recognition of Scripture’s spiritual sense, that is, its glorified literal sense requires a grammatical-eschatological *frame of reference* (24, 106, 180, 182) in which readers approach the text expecting to see the glory of Christ in the subject matter of the text and desiring to be transformed into his image.

Vanhoozer contends that the literal sense ought to be understood from both historical and eschatological frames of reference, such that the literal meaning is understood to include both “the events in the

immediate present of the human author” and their “future fulfillment” or “eschatological realization” (358). Debates about the literal sense are largely issues of *which frame of reference* the literal sense belongs in (127). Against modernism, which would situate biblical discourse within an immanent frame of reference (that is, a closed naturalistic system), Vanhoozer argues for a transcendent-eschatological frame that situates biblical revelation squarely in God’s plan of revealing himself in the face of Christ.⁶ Such an eschatological frame of reference is necessary to do justice to the letter of the text: “Literal interpretation ... requires thick description: a reading that takes account of all relevant contexts that have a bearing on what authors mean by their words,” and so, if the fulfillment of all God’s promises in Christ is a relevant context the eschatological frame will be absolutely necessary to properly interpret the literal sense (136). This frame does not change the *sense* of the OT’s human authors (*sensus plenior*); instead, it clarifies the referent of their discourse beyond what they could have known (*referens plenior*) (137).

Finally, Vanhoozer argues that what Scripture is ultimately about is “the knowledge of God in the face of Christ” (194, 358) and that the Spirit illumines believers to this eschatological Christological referent, so that they might behold him, believe him, and be transformed into his image (259, 336, 346). In this final section, Jesus’ transfiguration functions as a governing analogy: just as the transfiguration did not change Jesus’ nature but revealed the glory he always possessed, so the eschatological frame of reference that has come with the coming of Christ and the sending of the Spirit do not change the meaning of Scripture’s literal sense, but reveal the glory of that to which it always ultimately referred (266–270). In the end, Vanhoozer asks us to embrace “a transfiguration [i.e., a rethinking] ... of what is involved in reading theologically” as well as “an interpretive process that transfigures” (359). Only in so doing will we both establish properly Christian reading cultures that cut across epochal, institutional, and disciplinary divides and do justice to the literal sense of the divine discourse that addresses us.

SINGING THE ROCK: POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

Vanhoozer's book is a tour-de-force: perhaps one of its greatest strengths is its breadth. In addition to developing the book's main thesis, Vanhoozer deals with so many issues and current conversations in hermeneutics that it is difficult to catalogue all the contributions the book makes. However, there are a few that stand out to us. Due to the sheer volume of these, we have elected to list them as bullet points:

- Against critical and sterile readings of the text, Vanhoozer reminds us that a right reading of Scripture is *always spiritual*. The text is never simply an object to be scientifically analyzed, but the Word of God which addresses us and makes a claim on us.
- Vanhoozer helpfully recognizes that all believers seek the same thing in the Scriptures: we all want to see Jesus. Regardless of errors some may make in method, there is common ground in that we seek the same thing.
- Despite recognizing our common aim, Vanhoozer helpfully distinguishes between "good" and "bad" figuration. This book does *not* fall into the trap of blurring all distinctions between Christian readers, or of making all methods of reading equal.
- To distinguish good and bad figuration, Vanhoozer turns to Scripture's own self-presentation of the relationship between Christ and the literal sense, rather than a grid imposed on Scripture from the outside (whether by the church or anyone else).
- He therefore rightly identifies a biblical hermeneutic as one that traces *redemptive historical* developments across Scripture to find Christ, rather than one that adopts a Christian Platonist scheme in which Christ is mystically present in the text (130–133). In other words, the relationship between the OT and Christ is *horizontal* (movement towards fulfillment in history) rather than *vertical* (mystical sacramental presence).
- Along the same lines, Vanhoozer refuses to accept the cheap dismissals of the distinction between typology and allegory which are sadly all too prevalent today. Typology aims to be sensitive to redemptive history and Scripture's own development of its patterns, whereas allegory conforms Scripture to an outside interpretive grid.
- One reason Vanhoozer's work here is more helpful than other recent contributions is that Vanhoozer does not limit himself to gleaning from the patristic era. While he resources⁷ much good from the church fathers,

Vanhoozer does not do so in such a way that eliminates the clarity and distinctions contributed by later eras of the church. He draws just as much from the Protestant Reformers and the Reformed Scholastics as he does from the fathers.

- As such, Vanhoozer does not retrieve a “lowest common denominator” hermeneutic, drawn only from points of universal agreement. Instead, he seeks to provide a “richest common denominator” that takes the best of what all Christians agree on and develops and clarifies it to its fullest extent. Vanhoozer identifies the hermeneutic of the Protestant Reformers and Reformed Scholastics as this “richest common denominator.”
- As Christians, we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus Christ really died, rose again, ascended, and poured out his Spirit on the church *in history*. The OT promises and covenants *really have been fulfilled*. Vanhoozer’s insight that this creates a new eschatological *frame of reference* (since we live in the *eschaton* the OT promised) is invaluable. We cannot read as though Christ has not come.
- Yet Vanhoozer also helpfully demonstrates that an eschatological frame of reference does not distort the literal sense of the OT, by reading back meanings that were never there, but rather *illuminates* what was always there (315).
- In general, we find the distinction between *sense* and *referent* (123) that Vanhoozer employs to be helpful. However, we will address this in more detail at the end of the review.

Finally, the greatest contribution of Vanhoozer’s approach is that it provides a sight of our Savior. We see Jesus in the text of Scripture, yet we see him as he was always there — in the meaning of the text. For Vanhoozer, this spiritual sight of Christ (the spiritual sense of Scripture) is not separate from the literal sense, but its glory, now illumined in light of the eschatological frame of reference in which Christ has come, accomplished his work, and poured out the Spirit upon his people.

Vanhoozer’s reading of Song of Songs (364–368) provides a clear payoff of the “mere Christian hermeneutic.” Vanhoozer resists both the temptation to read the Song “literalistically” as nothing more than an ode to erotic love *and* the temptation to read it allegorically, in which every detail maps onto Christ. Instead, Vanhoozer sees the Song as being “toward Christ” (368): the love of a husband and wife has always been meant to figuratively depict “Christ’s love for [his] church and the church’s desire for union with Christ,” both in creation and in the Song. The Song, even in its original context, is meant not only to idealize the love between husband and

wife but to present that love as an image of God's love for his people which was (in the OT) awaiting its consummation in redemption. Therefore, while Christ is not the "sense" of every detail in the image, the referent towards which the whole image runs is *Christ*.

FISSURES IN THE EARTH: CONCERNS AND CRITIQUE

Despite all the benefits found in Vanhoozer's work, we both have significant concerns. One overarching concern is that the creativity of Vanhoozer's prose frequently obscures his point. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* is full of evocative imagery, but that imagery is easy to backfill with the perspective one already holds. This is especially true of the illustration that governs the book: the transfiguration. When Vanhoozer gives his argument directly, we believe he is (mostly) clear. Yet we find a great deal of ambiguity in the imagery he employs, such that on our first passes through the book, it was easy to (mis)understand Vanhoozer in several contradictory ways. It took several re-readings of key sections to nail down the argument with precision, and even in those re-readings the best strategy was often to skim past several pages worth of powerful but easily misconstrued illustrations.

Additionally, Vanhoozer's claim that the transfiguration is *necessary* for biblical interpretation was not convincing. While it is a powerful (and biblical) illustration for interpretation, we believe that making the transfiguration episode the hinge of the biblical canon strains the text to its breaking point. The coming of Christ may certainly be the hinge of the canon, and the transfiguration may be a clear demonstration of Christ's identity, but it cannot bear the full weight Vanhoozer places on it.

As stated in the introduction, Vanhoozer's aim to provide a truly *mere* Christian hermeneutic is laudable, yet his positive proposal inevitably precludes other popular approaches. Certainly, given the scope of what Vanhoozer covers, there is merit enough in the work for interpreters of all stripes to glean value from it. Nonetheless, Vanhoozer's core argument is *not* one that all Christian interpreters can agree on—his so-called "richest common denominator" *requires* some sharp lines and *excludes* certain groups and certain methods. Apologists of allegory do not belong. Neither do those who make the church's experience the arbiter of the Scripture's meaning. In fact, there is one group that even Vanhoozer

singles out as the best practitioners of this hermeneutic: the Protestant Reformers and their scholastic heirs. Thus, while we agree that Vanhoozer demonstrates a common *aim* in all Christian interpretation, we also believe he shows that *not all Christian readers achieve that aim*. In other words, while we think that in many ways Vanhoozer succeeds in offering a rich Christian hermeneutic, we do not believe his work ultimately can survive as a “hallway” in which interpreters of all Christian traditions can gather. Instead, Vanhoozer offers us a richly furnished room (that of the reformed tradition) with a beautiful and attractive entryway. At some point, the interpreter must decide which tradition’s doctrines enable them to consistently read Scripture in the way Vanhoozer has proposed. We argue that only those traditions whose doctrine is in accordance with the Protestant Reformation fit the bill—to practice this hermeneutic consistently, one must reject the magisterial authority that Rome and the Eastern metropolitans claim for themselves.

Finally, and most significantly, we are concerned that *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* introduces confusion about the literal sense of Scripture and the relationship between divine and human authorial intent. Much of Vanhoozer’s career has been dedicated to defending and upholding reading Scripture both theologically and according to its literal sense. These are causes we celebrate and support. *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* does indeed seek to advance this cause and does succeed in various ways. Nevertheless, Vanhoozer’s work here also introduces confusion into the concepts of reading Scripture according to its literal sense.

The first way confusion regarding the literal sense is introduced is through definitional issues. In his helpful glossary, Vanhoozer provides his definition of “literal sense” which is worth quoting in full:

an oft-used term whose familiarity belies its complexity; in the history of biblical interpretation, the straightforward, surface, or nonfigural level of meaning of the textual letter; in this book, the meaning of the human-divine biblical discourse when read grammatically-eschatologically in canonical context, and the norm of theological interpretation (402).

This account presents the literal sense as the total meaning of the human-divine discourse in canonical context. For reference, the glossary definition

of discourse is “what someone says/writes about something to someone at some time, in some way for some purpose” (401). An apparently different definition of “literal sense” appears, however, in Vanhoozer’s definition of “grammatical-eschatological exegesis,” which reads as follows: “a way of reading for the trans-figural sense of Scripture combining a grammatical interest in the way the words go (*literal sense*) with an eschatological interest in that to which they ultimately refer (Christological subject matter)” (401, emphasis ours). On the one hand, “literal sense” is here restricted to “the way the words go,” in keeping with Vanhoozer’s emphasis in this volume on the distinction between sense and referent (see 123, 137). But on the other hand, “literal sense” is also referred to as “the meaning of the divine human discourse when read in *canonical context*” (402, emphasis ours). This latter definition goes beyond just “sense” and encompasses “referent” as well.

In the body of his book, these unresolved definitions present confusion. In chapter 5 under the heading “The Literal Sense as Grammatical-Eschatological,” Vanhoozer presents six things to avoid when seeking a proper definition of the literal sense. The fifth and sixth points are particularly pertinent. The fifth is “we should not define the literal sense apart from the canonical context, for it is one of the relevant contexts by which we determine what the divine author was doing with his divinely inspired human discourse.” As for the sixth, he states that “we must avoid defining the literal sense apart from the eschatological frame of reference that allows the final subject matter of biblical discourse to come into focus” (177). A page earlier Vanhoozer describes the “divinely intended literal sense as the *totus sensus*: the whole meaning of the divine author, including the figural and trans-figural intent” (176, cf. 180). These statements seem to situate the operating definition of “literal sense” in terms of the whole human and divine discourse of Scripture in canonical context (encompassing both what is said and what it is said about). Elsewhere, however, we see “literal sense” restricted to merely “what is said.” On p.123, Vanhoozer says,

While the *sense* is what someone says, “the *reference* is that about which that something is said. Literal meaning and interpretation involve both sense (what is said) and reference (that about which something is said).” The literal *sense* is the way words run; the literal *referent* is that to which the words run (italics original).

Here Vanhoozer makes literal sense only a part of “literal meaning.” The difficulty is that Vanhoozer never presents a clear, explanatory way of reconciling these apparent differences in terminology. This affects the clarity of his overall project on a trans-figural sense or “the glory of the literal sense” (25).

Vanhoozer is right to distinguish *what is said* from *that about which something is said*. He seeks to account for how *what is said* remains the same even as the referent is further illuminated in the light of Christ. Trans-figural interpretation is “reading that follows the way the biblical words run across or beyond (*trans-*) figures to the realities those figures foreshadow and anticipate” (402).

This perplexity on the meaning of the “literal sense” seen above can be resolved, however, if we attend to the Reformed Scholastic and great synthesizer of much of the Post-Reformed Orthodox tradition, Francis Turretin. Turretin in his *Institutes* explains that “only one true and genuine sense belongs to the Scriptures. That sense may be twofold: either simple or compound.”⁸ He goes on to state that a simple or historical literal sense “contains the declaration of one thing without any other signification.” This sort of simple literal sense is seen in doctrinal Scriptures (i.e., epistles) and the non-typological histories of Scripture. This simple literal sense can be proper, when the words carry normal signification, or figurative, when the words are used figuratively or metaphorically. Turretin continues, “The composite or mixed sense is in prophecies as types, part of which is in the type, part in the antitype.” To avoid any confusion, Turretin explains “This does not establish two senses, but two parts of one and the same sense intended by the Holy Spirit, who with the letter considers the mystery.”⁹

When the true and genuine sense is compound or composite, the “literal sense is sometimes taken more widely for the whole compass of the sense intended by the Holy Spirit (whether in type or antitype) and so contains within it the mystical sense [i.e., the antitype fully revealed in Christ].” He then explains the terminology sometimes employed for this compound literal sense by stating that the term “literal sense” can be “taken more strictly for that which the words immediately and proximately afford and so is distinguished from the mystical (which is signified not so much by the words as by the things which the words signify), which arises only mediately from the intention of the speaker.”¹⁰ Thus, when the sense or meaning

is compound, the full literal sense intended by the Holy Spirit is composed of both a more narrowly construed literal sense (the type the words immediately refer to; e.g., the paschal lamb of Exod 12:46) and the mystical sense (what the type refers to by virtue of “the intention of the speaker;” e.g., Christ the unblemished lamb).¹¹

We believe that Turretin’s distinctions between simple and compound literal senses and his accompanying definitions clarify much of the definitional obscurity we’ve noted in Vanhoozer. First, Turretin is clear that *sense* is not limited *only* to *what is said*, but encompasses referent, and thus, *sense* can be synonymous with *meaning*. If clearly distinguished, the word *sense* can perhaps be used, as Vanhoozer does, to describe *what is said* in a very narrow way of speaking as a description of the bare content of the words taken together apart from what gives their words actual full intended meaning. Also, in the context of biblical typology or figuration, this more limited idea of the first signification of the words (whether they be proper or figurative/metaphorical) can be spoken of as the literal sense “more strictly taken.” Yet the antitype, the mystical sense, is entirely contained within the Spirit’s intended use of the words, and thus the whole meaning is a compound yet unified *literal sense*.

The second way we wish Vanhoozer’s work was a bit clearer in matters related to the literal sense and interpretation is on the relation of the *referent* of the human authors of Scripture to the *referent* of the divine author. For example, on p.137 in the context of discussing the frame of reference of the OT and its authors (particularly Isaiah), Vanhoozer states the following: “Christians believe that the prophets *said* more than they could consciously *know* about ‘what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ’ (1 Pet. 1:11)” (emphasis original). He rephrases this statement saying, “Better: the prophets knew *what they were saying*, but they did not know exactly what, or whom, they were speaking *about*. They understood the sense of their discourse but not its ultimate referent. This way of viewing the matter explains why we still need the hard work of philology to clarify the sense of the words, and other frames of reference than Isaiah’s to understand the *referent* of his discourse that his words ultimately indicate” (137, emphasis original). Here, Vanhoozer appears to limit the prophetic understanding to only *what they said* (his literal sense).

Many questions arise at this point. If we need frames of reference other than Isaiah's, what was Isaiah's frame of reference? And how does it cohere with the divine author's frame of reference to produce one unified meaning? Was Isaiah's frame of reference not Christological? It is indeed correct to say that they did not understand all that they referred to, but was their understanding only limited to *what is said* and not *what is spoken about* (referent)? If so, how could they produce through the leading of the Spirit discourses coherent in any way to themselves, because all discourse must have "sense" and "referent"?

Later in the book, however, Vanhoozer brings some clarifications on these questions. On p.274, Vanhoozer states, "The apostle Peter seems to take for granted that the prophets — and indeed the whole Old Testament — were speaking of the future messiah, even if they did not explicitly name him Jesus Christ." He also affirms that the prophets knew their prophecies were future in orientation (275), and that "the Old Testament authors did not know the full meaning of what they wrote, [but] they knew part of it" (276). We believe these statements are accurate and helpful. Yet these valuable statements are obscured by his continued affirmation, repeated on p.274, that the prophets "knew the sense of their words, but not their referent." What he apparently means by this is stated in the next sentence: "Their vision of how their words would become true in the future was blurry" (274). Yet if their vision was blurry and they knew part of the full meaning of their texts, then they must have understood not merely *what they said* but also *some of that which they were speaking about*, even if with a lack of clarity. We believe what Vanhoozer is trying to say would be best clarified if his way of relating the prophetic understanding to *what was said* be changed.

That the biblical authors had *some* even if not complete knowledge of their eschatological referent is essential for saying that the fullness seen in the text through the light of Christ's coming is not a different meaning than the prophet's communicated. Otherwise, we would not be practicing literal interpretation. We believe this reality can be well expressed in the following two-fold manner: "1) the communicative intent of the Old Testament human authors involved an expectation of greater, eschatological revelation of their referent and further illumination of their own inspired writings. 2) God's full intention in these prophetic writings which is unveiled only through the missions of the Son and the Spirit coheres

with this limited human intention to produce one literal sense normative for interpretation.”¹²

CONCLUSION

Mere Christian Hermeneutics has much to commend it. Both of us have benefitted greatly from Vanhoozer’s numerous insights. Indeed, Vanhoozer provides some level of insight into nearly every ongoing conversation about biblical interpretation, and those already engaged in these discussions will glean much from his work. We would not, however, recommend this book for audiences beginning the complex trek into the world of biblical hermeneutics. The confusion about “literal sense” is a fault-line that runs through the entire book that can prevent it from being a solid starting point. Additionally, while Vanhoozer’s imagery and wordplay captivate the imagination and delight the senses, they can at times undermine the clarity of his argument, making *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* an even more difficult read for those not already familiar with the conversation. We recommend Vanhoozer’s earlier work, specifically *First Theology* and *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* for the more solid foundation they provide in understanding of textual meaning and the literal sense. Then we would commend *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* to those who already have that foundation in place but desire to dive deeper in specific aspects of hermeneutics, or to discover an even richer picture of how Christ is the *referent* of all of Scripture, already present in its literal sense, and now fully illumined by the Spirit in these last days brought about by the coming of Christ and the completion of his work.

¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What it Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024). This review was originally published at “Christ Over All,” October 2025 at <https://christoverall.com/article/concise/seeing-christ-in-the-letter-a-review-of-kevin-j-vanhoozers-mere-christian-hermeneutics/>.

² *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* largely comes as a development of ideas Kevin Vanhoozer dealt with in the 2012 article “Ascending the Mountain, Singing the Rock: Biblical Interpretation Earthed, Typed, and Transfigured” *Modern Theology* 28.4 (2012): 781–803.

³ Biblical scholars typically operate with a “historical frame of reference” which privileges “the world ‘behind’ the text” whereas theologians operate with frames of reference that privilege some “world ‘in front of’ the text,” whether “ecclesial tradition or . . . the prevailing philosophies and cultural currents of the day” (97). The world behind the text is “the sociocultural context of the authors and editors who produced it,” whereas the world in front of the text is “that of its readers, who bring the world of the text into their lives, if only for a moment.” Both of these are distinguished from the world of the text, which is “made up of words and has a coherence of its own, thanks to its literary structure and plot” (87).

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- ⁴ We recognize that this definition is vague. Concern over the confusing and contradictory ways Vanhoozer defines “literal sense” will feature later in this review.
- ⁵ More fully, “the sense of a word or text pertains to one’s mental concept of an object; the referent is the real-world object to which that sense or concept corresponds” (123).
- ⁶ Vanhoozer explicitly contrasts this eschatological frame with the “sacramental frame” (i.e., sacramental ontology) of Hans Boersma. Boersma makes the biblical text a “sacrament” which “participates” in the Word of God (that is, Christ). The exegete who approaches the text with a sacramental frame of reference “looks for the deeper, hidden meaning beneath the literal, or historical, meaning of the text,” that is the Christological *res* in which the *signum* of the text metaphysically participates. Vanhoozer, 131, citing Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 140. The problems with the sacramental frame are 1) the spiritual sense of the text quickly becomes unmoored from the literal meaning via allegory and 2) that it fails to capture the dynamic development of redemptive history (creation, fall, redemption, consummation).
- ⁷ This word is an intentional reference to *Ressourcement*, the return to patristic sources that became popular in mid-twentieth century scholarship and continues to the present day. *Ressourcement* is a French word meaning “return to the sources,” and it became an anthem of the *nouvelle* theologians who influenced Vatican II. While the recovery of patristic sources has brought many benefits, they can be weaponized to undermine clarifications and contributions made by later eras of the tradition, reducing us to a lowest common denominator kind of Christianity.
- ⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1:150.
- ⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- ¹⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:151.
- ¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:150.
- ¹² Michael J. Pereira, “‘And Now The Lord God Has Sent Me and His Spirit’: The Divine Missions, the Literal Sense, and Reading the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 68.4 (Dec 2025): 639–61.