



GOSPEL *for* LIFE

Hearers and Doers with Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer Season 1, Episode 7 Transcript

[00:00:00] Announcer: Welcome to the Gospel for Life podcast. We help churches make disciples. And now, here's your host, Darryl Dash.

[00:00:21] Darryl: Well, thank you for joining us again today, I'm pleased to welcome Dr. Kevin Vanhoozer as my guest today, Dr. Vanhoozer is a theologian I've followed for a number of years. He's a native Californian who married a woman from France, studied at Cambridge University, taught at Edinburgh University before settling down in the Midwest to raise two daughters. He supervises dozens of doctoral candidates and teaches hundreds of students, serving as Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

I wanted to speak to Dr. Vanhoozer about his most recent book *Hearers and Doers*, a book that speaks of a kind of doctrine that's full of life and love and is critical for disciple-making in the local church. Dr. Vanhoozer argues that scriptural doctrine is vital to the life of the church, and the local pastor-theologian should be the one delivering it to his or her community.

Dr. Vanhoozer, welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:22] Dr. Vanhoozer: Thanks for having me here.

[00:01:24] Darryl: It's really good to have you with us. I've been reading your book. I've read a number of your books now, and you were supposed to come to my area to speak at Heritage Theological Seminary about a year ago, but COVID got in the way of that.

[00:01:39] Dr. Vanhoozer: Yeah, I believe that is still on, but it's been rescheduled.

[00:01:43] Darryl: Okay, well I look forward to that.

Well, Kevin, you write that everyone is always following someone else's words. So I wanted to ask you, what are some words, stories and images that are discipling us in North America right now?

[00:01:58] Dr. Vanhoozer: Right, that's a great question.

Let me just start by reminding us about Jesus' comment that we're not able to live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out from the mouth of God, that's true. But what if people don't take their bearings from God's word? I think we can generalize Jesus' point that is we don't live by bread alone. We live by words that if they don't come from God, they come from somebody else's mouth.

And I think that's what we're seeing today. People need some kind of guidance and orientation. You know, how-to books are almost always the most popular books. People are looking to live by somebody's words. And I think this is this would be a great topic for a book in and of itself.

But I can think of three stories that are forming the spirits of 21st century men and women in the West today, at least three stories.

One is a liberation narrative. It's really the story of modernity. I still remember reading the philosopher Immanuel Kant's essay, "What is Enlightenment?" — sort of a wake up call to the modern world. And he was the one who said that to be modern is to cast off the chains of authority and tradition and to think for yourself. So to some extent, we're still living out that story of modernity, becoming more progressive, throwing off more and more chains, recognizing less and less authority. So that would be one story: that we're in a modern age that is making progress because we're basically free from church tradition.

A second set of stories I think has to do with how to be well. I'm thinking not only of dieting books, which are one kind, but there is this new trend to be well, wellness involving the soul and spirit as well as the body. It's big business as well. And of course Christians have had this health and wealth gospel. So even the church has bitten caught up in this story about human wellness.

And then a third story I think people are living by and this is a very general category, but it's basically about finding your own identity. Carl Trueman has written a book recently that looks into this, but the idea that each of us as

individuals is a kind of plastic figure. We can kind of reinvent ourselves by exploring this or that aspect, whether it's sex, gender or something else.

So I think I would say those three big stories are ones that lots of people are living by, of course, other options out there.

[00:05:00] Darryl: These stories are so powerful and a lot of us aren't even may be aware that they're influencing us. Maybe a lot of pastors feel like they're not qualified to speak to them. So in light of these stories and these forces, how can pastors respond?

[00:05:16] Dr. Vanhoozer: Yes. Well, the first thing I want to say is pastors I think are responsible for knowing something about these big stories, because we're to help our congregations understand the word of God to be sure. But we also want to help people navigate the waters we're in these days. And that means helping people understand the world we live in and to do it biblically.

But as far as pastor is able to respond, they can because the Bible tells us the story of true liberation: freedom in Christ. And that liberation narrative has the power to subvert these false gospels.

And then the other thing I would want to say about wellness or identity is that these are humanistic in their orientation. But pastors should be confident that the only good humanism is a Christian humanism because Jesus Christ is fully human. He's the paradigm of what we want to be as human beings.

So I would encourage pastors to think of themselves not as experts in contemporary trends, but as helping people to become culturally literate minimally, just to know basically what's going on here. But then also to help people to become biblically literate — that is, able to follow the big story of Scripture.

And I don't think we should underestimate the power of sermons. The problem is we only get to preach once a week, most of us, and so we need to use that time well. But Jesus taught in parables, which were stories that subverted the stories that people were living by during his day. And I think pastors should see themselves doing something similar when we preach the gospel. We're preaching the gospel, yes, but we're also subverting all those false gospels that are out there were calling out false stories and idols and ideologies. So I just don't want pastors to underestimate the power of the ministry of the word done in a context where we're praying for the Holy Spirit's illumination and guidance.

[00:07:42] Darryl: I've noticed a temptation to de-emphasize doctrine sometimes. I don't think that pastors would say that out loud that they don't want to teach doctrine, but I think there's such a push to being practical and offering things that people can take home. Without wanting to create a false dichotomy, I just sense this pressure sometimes, that doctrine belongs in the academy and when pastors get up and preach we just need to be practical. Why is doctrine essential to discipleship?

[00:08:11] Dr. Vanhoozer: Thank you for this question.

I do know pastors who say bad things about doctrine and there's a kind of general feeling out there that doctrine divides and if we're to be peacemakers, let's stay away from doctrine.

But increasingly, in my own teaching, I've been insisting that doctrine matters for the church. I actually tell my students, look, if you think I'm off on a doctrinal rabbit hole that has nothing to do with practical ministry, stop me. Call me on it. Force me to show you how it's practical. But in general, my strategy is to argue if doctrine isn't somehow involved in the process of making disciples, then it's defective. So that puts the onus on me as a theologian to show that doctrines are indeed practical.

So how are they practical, you ask. I think one way they are very practical is they help us understand what the Bible is talking about because it's on the one hand, it's a book, a storybook. Children can read it, but when you begin asking questions about it, you discover well what Karl Barth calls it: it's a strange new world. And I don't think he was referring to the fact that it's an ancient world. I think what's strange about the Bible's world is that it's all about our being in Christ. And this to me is the important thing that doctrine helps us fill out.

I sometimes actually define theology as the task of saying what is in Christ. And I like that because in philosophy, metaphysics, the study of reality, is the study of what is. But I like to think of theology is the study of reality, what is in Christ and that's even more real than what the scientists study, because in Christ is the beginning of a new creation. Doctrine helps us understand the real world and the strange world of scripture, what it is to be in Christ.

I think people often have a misconception of what a doctrine is, but I want to say that Christianity is not a system of ideas, it's not an ideology, it's not a philosophy. I've argued in another book that it's a drama, a way of living, a way in which God has entered into our world. So doctrine, to me is a help to understand what God has done and doing again this dramatic, the greek term δράω means to do. So I think the Bible is the story of God's doing a theodrama.

And doctrine teaches us both about what God has done and about how we should respond to that. In other words, what do we have to say and do to correspond to what God has done is doing and will do?

Doctrine serves the project of making disciples, because it helps us understand what God has done and helps us understand how we can participate in it. So doctrine tells disciples what they need to know about what God has done, so that they can say and do things that would be to his glory and correspond to what he has done in Christ.

[00:11:57] Darryl: Your whole notion of theodrama was so life changing for me to recast how I see my role as a pastor: of helping people locate themselves within the larger story that is God's story, and how to play their part within it. That's so helpful.

And that leads me to ask you: there are so many models of what pastoral ministry is all about. I remember a businessman once telling me that it's not my fault that I didn't get it because I don't understand business. Implied in that was that church is really should operate as businesses, and that pastors are at a disadvantage because they were trained in a seminary and didn't really have a good understanding of how to operate things that the way they should be. So we have this image of pastors being maybe CEOs or entrepreneurs. In your writing, you really talk about the role of a pastor as pastor-theologian. Why is it important that pastors see that role as being important?

[00:13:02] Dr. Vanhoozer: Again, really important question.

Let me just set it up by talking about a book called *Metaphors We Live By*. It was an influential book not by Christians, but their idea was that metaphors matter the pictures we have in our head of what we're doing. They matter because they structure the way we think about what we're doing. So, for example, in the United States we say time is money and that's a metaphor that structures people's lives, right? We talk about spending time or wasting time. And if that's the picture in our mind, we're going to live a certain way.

Well, I want to write a sequel to that book. I want to write a sequel. It's called *Metaphors We Minister By*, because as you said, there are these pictures that get lodged in our minds of say what a successful leader looks like. And this is a serious question when if we're if I'm a pastor and I want to do excellent work, what's the picture in my mind that defines success? Is it a CEO? Is it a therapist? Is it a comedian? You know, I think there're some pastors who have stand up comedian maybe as one of their paradigms, but all of these images that are very popular in our culture and our images for leadership somewhere, I

think all of these images tempt us to exchange a pastor's birthright for thin gruel. It doesn't really fit. Eugene Peterson has done a lot of good work on this as well, and he regrets very much the encroachment of the business metaphor into the church.

So the metaphor I like, and I've used it as a title of a book, is that of a public theologian. Is it a metaphor? Maybe it's just a literal description, but it's a picture. And I think pastors are theologians because they're there to help people understand God and all things in relation to God. They're public theologians, because they're ministering understanding to people everyday people, not professionals, not academics.

I also like other pictures, though. I like the image of a pastor as a doctor in the church. Doctor has a nice double meaning. It could mean one who teaches, But it also could mean one who is concerned with health. And I think that is exactly what a pastor does. A pastor is concerned with the health of the body of Christ. And one way to preserve the health of the body of the Christ is to teach God's word. So I like the image of the pastor of the church as primary care physician. Maybe that's not exactly right. I guess Christ and the Holy Spirit are the primary care physicians. We're secondary care physicians, or maybe we're just nurses. But I think you get the meaning,

[00:16:14] Darryl: this is so helpful, and it really brings up the whole role of imagination in the Christian life. And I know you piggyback on some of Charles Taylor's thought about the social imaginary. So could you unpack a little about the role that imagination plays in living the Christian life?

[00:16:31] Dr. Vanhoozer: Yeah. And again, here, I think I have to address a picture that people might have in their minds of the imagination. Let me say straight away, I see the imagination as a cognitive capacity, that is, a kind of reasoning. We have analysis, a kind of reasoning that takes things apart into little pieces and examines them and how they fit together. But the imagination goes in the opposite direction. I like to think of the imagination as reason in a synthetic mood. That is reason, putting things together to see how they fit. And you need imagination to see the big picture. And, for example, if understanding a story or something else is a matter of finding out how the parts fit into the whole. You need imagination for understanding. So I view imagination as a cognitive faculty that makes connections between things and thus discerns meaningful patterns. I see imagination as the ability to think in terms of a big picture.

I know there are vain imaginings and this is the picture, I think, that many people have of the imagination. It's a kind of visual capacity that sees things that aren't

there. That sounds delusional. And I think sometimes the King James Version of the Bible when it talks about imaginings, it's almost always in this negative sense, which is why the term vain qualifies it. I want to say straight away there is such a thing as vain imagining, but then I would want to insist there's also such a thing as virtuous imagining.

We've already talked about metaphors and stories. These are simply forms that the imagination takes. So I think the imagination is at its best and serves the project of theology and discipleship when it allows us to see the big picture, what I call the theodrama, the story, the Bible's telling. And it is a big picture, because it's the story of what God the Father is doing, and God the Son through God the Spirit, to make all things new. It takes imagination to see how that all fits together. So that's why I think it's crucial for pastors to address it and for disciples to use it to figure out how they fit into the story.

So, I actually like to speak about the evangelical imagination, which is the ability to live in the story of the Gospel, even if we can't empirically see it with our five senses all the time, because imagination can be related to faith. In Hebrews 11, faith is defined as the conviction of things not seen, but they can be grasped together. So that's why I have a very strong appreciation as a theologian for the imagination, Jesus doesn't tell us not to use images; he tells us to take them captive to the Gospel, and the imagination can be a means of doing that.

[00:20:17] Darryl: In your book, I love how you tackle one of the predominant images and forces that shaping us today, which is one of fitness. And then you use that image of the pastor is a fitness trainer, too, in a different way. You're, you're borrowing the cultural image of a fitness trainer and then saying, actually, we can reimagine the pastor's role in a way as being a fitness trainer. So unpack that. What do you mean by that kind of image?

[00:20:49] Dr. Vanhoozer: Yeah, well, you're right. Fitness is all the rage. It's big business. There's many kinds of fitness, but there're programs everywhere, right? People care about this for our health and so on.

Well, the reason I see a connection is that, as we've already said, this is a metaphor the New Testament uses, by the way. The Bible calls the church body of Christ. And so if you just run that metaphor for a while, the next question is, so what kind of shape is it in? And what's striking to me is there's so much concern for physical fitness, but what about the spiritual fitness of the church?

But again, staying with the metaphor of physical fitness, the core is foundational for what we do with our physical bodies. And so, your exercises for the core are crucial, because the body depends for anything it does on the core. So if we

think about that, and if we think about the church is the body of Christ, then we have to ask: so what is the core of the church? What is the foundation for all its bodily movements?

And not only that, we also have to ask about fitness, because when I was researching this, I discovered that it's hard to define fitness. You have to specify fitness for what that is for what purpose. And the ancient gymnasiums in Ancient Greece, they had an understanding that fitness was about preparing citizens for war. That's not how we think about it today as a rule, although the U. S. Army has invested a lot of money in studying the fitness of soldiers. But again we've been talking about metaphors.

Well, let's remember that Paul in Ephesians 6 does say that our struggle isn't with flesh and blood but with cosmic powers and spiritual forces. And then he talks about training yourself for godliness. You see, I think the purpose for becoming fit as a body of Christ is godliness.

And what does that mean? I think fitness has to do with being able to do all things through Christ who strengthens us. But I actually would want to say we can tie both the physical picture of fitness with that ancient Athenian view of preparing citizens for battle if we remember that we're fighting against powers and principalities. And so what should concern pastors is the fitness of their members for gospel citizenship, training for a different kind of war. It's not Athens, it's Jerusalem. We want to be citizens of Jerusalem, we want to be citizens of the gospel. So I think disciples are fit for their citizen purpose when they know how to act as representatives of the Kingdom of God, speaking and doing things that Christians should be doing.

[00:24:22] Darryl: I'm picturing a pastor right now who — as we're recording this, it's a Monday, maybe they're feeling a little tired. It's been a tough year of ministry with COVID, all the political controversy swirling around, and then you've got the normal pressures of pastoral life. Maybe a pastor is listening to this thinking, “This is good, but I'm struggling with how do I do this? How do I create a culture of discipleship within the church in the mess of real people and real problems?” So what encouragement would you offer to such a pastor who's struggling with creating that culture and that that desire for discipleship within the local church?

[00:25:06] Dr. Vanhoozer: Well, look, I've never said it was easy, I've said that it's easier teaching theology in a classroom than it is being a pastor because pastors have to work with real people.

I guess the encouragement would be that the word of God is powerful, so I don't think pastors should feel that all the burden is on their own personal efforts. If you read the book of Acts, the word of God is multiplying and taking territory captive just because it's been faithfully preached and handed on. And, so I think realistic expectations of what God does and what the pastor does help.

But look, also take some time. You know, you're not going to create a culture overnight. I think the maybe a better analogy is to think about your family life. You know, families cultivate traditions over time, and tradition matters because a tradition really is a way of continuing a story, and that's what pastors are trying to do. You're grafting people. You're introducing people to a story which is the story of the family of God. You're asking them to become mature, and maturity takes time, and hopefully you'll see some progress. But that's the huge privilege of being a pastor. You are shepherding a part of the family of God, passing on traditions that have been handed on to you just as Paul says to Timothy. And it's going to take time, but it's not something that humans alone have to do.

So I just think if you feel overwhelmed, just remember that you're not supposed to know everything about everything, but you're supposed to understand the gospel and the gospel can transform everything. And, so just focus on what you've been called to do, to minister the Gospel and word and deed, and with the Holy Spirit, we trust that the word will multiply where you are.

[00:27:12] Darryl: I want to ask you a couple of personal questions if you're open to that. What are you learning right now?

[00:27:20] Dr. Vanhoozer: Well, I think my LinkedIn site identifies me as a student of theology, so it's a good question, but my learning goes in many directions. I'm always trying to study some part of the Bible. I'm also always trying to study or get up to speed on some part of the history of theology, and I'm always trying to keep up with what's happening in contemporary culture, and then what's exciting to be about theology is bringing those three streams together. They're not equal, right? I'm reading about theology and the tradition in order to understand the Bible, and I'm reading the Bible to understand my present, but I'm learning all sorts of things all the time.

It seems at the moment that I'm focusing on biblical interpretation and trying to retrieve things from the Reformation and just after the Reformation, patterns of reading the Bible that I think we need to recover to bring about a kind of peace talk between disciplines that have grown apart, exegesis and systematic theology. So I'm trying to learn how to be a peacemaker between exegetes and theologians, which sounds odd when I say it. The only reason that we're at odds

is that the disciplines in the modern university have gone their separate ways and that that division does not serve the church, so that I hope I'm learning things about that.

[00:28:58] Darryl: Well. One of the things about your role is whatever you're learning probably will end up in a book in some form, and we will end up the beneficiaries of that. So I appreciate your continual learning.

I want to ask you what's encouraging you right now.

[00:29:14] Dr. Vanhoozer: Yes, well, you know, there are encouraging things and I know we've had a difficult year with the pandemic. But again, we talked about the big picture. And if I step back and look at trends, say trends from when I started studying at seminary, I am encouraged by several big trends that I in my little faith, wasn't sure would that I'd ever see.

One is — and this is maybe a selfish thing — is a renewed interest in my discipline, systematic theology. I think there's been a kind of renaissance in my discipline. For so long it seemed to be kind of subservient to philosophy and so on. I wasn't sure I would see it, but systematic theology has come into its own in a new way in this time. And I am encouraged as well by signs that there is a healthy dialogue between biblical studies and systematic theology, I think because it has come into its own and isn't subservient to philosophy. So that's been deeply encouraging because I'm a theologian who wants to be biblical and I have lots of exegete friends, and so I've just been encouraged by how that dialogue has been coming.

I think I'm also encouraged by what I see a movement to form multi-ethnic churches, because I think this is very much part of the Gospel, the news that the dividing wall of hostility that separated Jew and Greek has come down, but it also has to come down between all the other ethnic tensions. And so this is part of the Gospel, and this is dramatic. I think it's a way of living out the reconciliation that is in Christ. So, I've been encouraged. Obviously, we have a long way to go, but my hope would be that churches could be at the forefront of some of these conversations.

And then the last trend that I'm encouraged by, and I really am encouraged by this is the new interests in being pastor-theologians. I've been involved for several years and something called the Center for Pastor Theologians, and I just think this is a wonderful development, and it's the next generation. It is people younger than me. For the most part, that means it will last longer than I will. But I've been very encouraged that there's a good number of people from various churches. It's not confined to one denomination, that I have recovered what I

think is the authentic role for the pastor and that is the theologian in that person's local place.

[00:32:01] Darryl: Well, I am very grateful that you are somebody who has a passion for pastors. And speaking is as a pastor, I know in all your writing, you write for the academy and you also write for the church. You care for the local church, you care for pastors and their role. And so today you've helped us understand a bit of our role. You've reinforced some things that maybe we've forgotten and need to be reminded of, and you've helped us reimagine our role. So I want to thank you for that because I don't take that for granted, and it's a gift to have a theologian who loves the church and wants to serve the church. So I appreciate that. And you're writing as well.

[00:32:50] Dr. Vanhoozer: Thank you, Darryl, for your interest. And again, for the invitation to let me share my vision.

[00:32:55] Darryl: I hope that if listeners have not picked up any of Dr. Vanhoozer's books, they'll check them out. Are there any that you would especially recommend for a pastor?

[00:33:05] Dr. Vanhoozer: Well, the one you mentioned earlier, *Hearers and Doers*, because that's the pastor's guide to making disciples. And then if you did want to explore the theodrama analogy a bit more, there's a book called *Faith Speaking Understanding*. And then if you're interested in the imagination, there's a book of essays that I did plan to I've shaped them so that they make a coherent whole, but it's all about the imagination and theology. And that was called *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom*.

[00:33:43] Darryl: Excellent. Well, thank you Dr. Vanhoozer for joining us today and thank you for your ministry as well.

[00:33:48] Dr. Vanhoozer: You're very welcome.