

# The Nature and Result of Literal Interpretation

by Earl Radmacher

## Introduction

Thirty plus years ago I accepted a series of random classes to teach at several colleges in the greater San Jose area. In each situation I always started with the subject matter of the course at hand and took the thinking back to biblical principles. After the classes there were always several students who would want to discuss their interests further. One such student, after expressing his appreciation for the lecture, asked if he could get an appointment with me to rap. I was glad for the opportunity and agreed upon a time and place. We were both on time and immediately got into a heavy discussion which necessitated bringing quotations from other authorities to our aid.

When I called forth help from the Apostle Paul, however, he objected saying, "Well, there are many different interpretations of that." Now even though I had only been teaching hermeneutics for a few years then, it still brought up my ire when someone departed from common sense, to use such lame and irresponsible argumentation. Thus I responded, "Wait just a minute. You asked me to get together to wrap and I don't see any presents to wrap or any wrapping paper or ribbon with which to wrap them. Now I don't know how we are going to wrap without presents or wrapping paper.

He looked at me like I had lost my mind saying, "Well, that's not what I meant," to which I responded, "But there are many different meanings to what you said. Now let's wrap!" Totally frustrated, he said, "We can't even continue this discussion." "You are exactly right," I responded. "We cannot continue until I am willing to understand what you meant by what you said. There are not many meanings to what you said. Only one! And if I refuse to find out your meaning for what you said, intelligent communication comes to a halt. We cannot go on further until I am willing to understand the single sense you have in mind by what you have said. And I am simply insisting that you allow the Apostle Paul the same privilege that you are expecting. There are not many different interpretations. There may be forty suggested interpretations for that verse but I guarantee you that thirty-nine of them are wrong and maybe all forty. There is one, and only one, interpretation of any passage of scripture."

And, dear friends, that is the bottom line in understanding any communication. And there is no more abused principle in the history of interpretation of the Word of God than the principle of the single sense. Whether by ignorance or design, great harm has been brought to the cause of Christ by the use of *sensus plenior* or multiple senses. E. D. Hirsch is right on target in stating "if the meaning of a text is not the author's, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of the text."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it amounts to the banishment of the author and, in the case of the scripture, therefore, the elimination of its authority which is supplanted by the reader.

## The Basic Principle of Interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 5.

Biblical Beginnings of Hermeneutics. At the risk of being unduly rudimentary, allow me to review some very well-known biblical beginnings of the art and science of hermeneutics. Almost 600 years before Christ, the Jewish people were taken captive by the Babylonians. Their return under the Persians was in three stages led by Zerubbabel (538 B.C.), Ezra (458 B.C.), and Nehemiah (444 B.C.), under whom the city wall was rebuilt. In the process of the decades in the Babylonian captivity, the Jews ceased speaking Hebrew and spoke Aramaic; thus, this created a language gap between themselves and their Scriptures. So when the people stood in the open square before the Water Gate within the rebuilt city wall, they asked Ezra the Scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses to read to them. Also, the Levites circulated among the people to help them understand what Ezra was reading. Nehemiah records: "So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading"(Neh. 8:8). Ramm explains: "It was the task of Ezra to give the meaning of the Scriptures by paraphrasing the Hebrew into the Aramaic or in other ways expounding the sense of the Scriptures. This is generally admitted to be the first instance of Biblical hermeneutics."<sup>2</sup> Notice that it was not *sensus plenior* but "sense", that is, the singular sense of Moses as found in the written document.<sup>3</sup>

That which was true of Ezra the scribe in the Hebrew scriptures is also true in the Greek source of our English word hermeneutics as used by Luke in recording the practice of Jesus with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus: "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded {Ep.tvth4<sup>4</sup> to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself' (Luke 24:27). All of the Bible has Christ as the apex of revelation; thus, everything in the Hebrew scriptures, whether the Law, the Prophets or the Writings, ultimately has Christ as its focus. He is the Alpha and the Omega. Everything in the Old Testament was preparatory for Him and everything in the New Testament, following the Gospels, is explanatory of Him. The Gospels are the epitome of God's special written revelation of Christ.

Stewardship of the Special Revelation. When Moses approached the end of the writing of the Pentateuch, including the blessings and curses determined by obedience or lack of it, he wrote: The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Dt. 29:29). In essence, God says, "It's yours. I'm trusting you with it. Now manage it well." This statement of Moses with respect to the stewardship of the Law is parallel to Paul's announcement that "you have heard of the dispensation (oiKovb.toc) of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery . . . which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets. . . ." (Eph. 3:2-5).

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: BakerBook House, 1988), pp. 45-46.

<sup>3</sup> Ramm continues: "Far removed from the land of Palestine, the Jews in captivity could no longer practice their accustomed religion (Mosaism) which included the land, their capitol city, and their temple. There could be no Mosaism with no temple, no land about which there were many regulations, and no harvest. Robbed of the national character of their religion the Jews were led to emphasize that which they would take with them, their Scriptures. Out of the captivities came Judaism with its synagogues, rabbis, scribes, lawyers, and traditions." p.46

<sup>4</sup> This is a strengthened form of cpJ.tEvcuw which signifies "to interpret fully, to explain".

To be the recipient of the revelation of God is a stupendous privilege. And privilege begets responsibility. Thus, Paul says to the Corinthians: "Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards (οἰκονομοῦντες) of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). Thus, he admonishes his understudy, Timothy, to "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). Little wonder that James (likely the half-brother of Jesus) warns: "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). Yes, privilege begets responsibility and the greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility. We understand, then, why the aged Apostle John gives the final warning in the Scripture: "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.<sup>5</sup> He who testifies to these things says, Yes, I am coming quickly" (Rev. 22:18-20). Truly, playing fast and loose with God's revelation is dangerous business. And creating plural meanings not found in the text will be found worthy of loss of reward at the *bema* (2 Cor. 5:10)

The Entrance of "Adding and Subtracting": The ink had scarcely dried on the vellum before Satan began enticing God's servants to tamper with His holy word. It shouldn't surprise us, however, since that was precisely the strategy he used to immerse mankind in sin. "Has God indeed said? "We still hear the arch deceiver today! "Surely, there must be a deeper, more spiritual meaning than the crass, literal meaning of the text." And, yet, it seemed so pietistic in the beginning rationale. The literary culprit I am referring to is allegorical interpretation which really results in the banishment of the author in its practice of multiple meanings (something that flourishes in a less formal way, more than we would like to admit, in many current bible studies and sermons). Though it wasn't invented by Origen of the Alexandrian School (ca. 185-254), his three-fold meaning (literal, moral, and spiritual/allegorical) through his great learning and magnetic personality certainly popularized it. For him the literal meaning was simply the immature or carnal level for the unsophisticated but to rise to the moral meaning and hopefully to the hidden spiritual meaning (allegorical), for those who had been truly initiated, was to achieve greatness.

Not everyone bought into the charmed method of Origen, however. While his "fantasy unlimited"<sup>6</sup> thrived in Alexandria, the church leaders in Antioch of Syria,<sup>7</sup> that emphasized historical, literal interpretation, sensed the rampant disregard for the literal meaning of the scriptures in the Alexandrian Fathers. Roy Zuck claims, "They stressed the study of the Bible's original languages (Hebrew and Greek) and they wrote commentaries on the Scriptures. The basis for uniting Old and New Testaments was

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<sup>5</sup> These are among the strongest of words in the bible that speak of the believer's loss of reward (cf. 2:7; 3:12; 22:14).

<sup>6</sup> Milton. S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 609, n. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Where the early disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

typology and predictive prophecy rather than allegorizing. For them, literal interpretation included figurative language.<sup>8</sup> Of this fine school, Bernard Ramm states:

"It has been said that the first Protestant school of hermeneutics flourished in the city of Antioch of Syria, and had it not been crushed by the hand of orthodoxy for its supposed heretical connections with the Nestorians, the entire course of Church history might have been different. The Christian community was influenced by the Jewish community and the result was a hermeneutical theory which avoided the *letterism* of the Jews and the *allegorism* of the Alexandrians. It boasted of such names as Lucian, Dorotheus, Diodorus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Chrysostom. As a school it influenced Jerome and modulated the allegorism of Alexandria in the West. It also had an influence on medieval exegesis, and found itself again in the hermeneutics of the Reformers.

The Syrian school fought Origen in particular as the inventor of the allegorical method, and maintained the primacy of the literal and historical interpretation of the Scripture. It is true that in practice some of the Antiochenes were found dipping into allegorizing, nevertheless in hermeneutical theory they took a stout stand for literal and historical exegesis. They asserted that the literal was plain-literal and figurative-literal. A plain-literal sentence is a straightforward prose sentence with no figures of speech in it. 'The eye of the Lord is upon thee,' would be a figurative-literal sentence. According to the Alexandrians the literal meaning of this sentence would attribute an actual eye to God. But the Syrian school denied this to be the literal meaning of the sentence. The literal meaning is about God's omniscience. In other words literalism is not the same as *letterism*.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of all of the excellencies attributed to the hermeneutical excellence of the School at Antioch by all writers on the subject, they lost the battle for literal interpretation because of a chink in their armor,<sup>10</sup> on the one hand, and a great name, on the other hand, Augustine (354-430). Not only was he a leading theologian with a great influence on the church for centuries and a primary influence on John Calvin, but he became the father of amillennialism. But notice the event that turned the tide for Augustine. Ramm states: "Augustine was driven to the allegorical interpretation of Scripture by his own spiritual plight. It was the allegorical interpretation of Scripture by Ambrose which illuminated much of the Old Testament to him when he was struggling with the crass literalism of the Manicheans. He justified allegorical interpretation by a gross misinterpretation of 2 Cor. 3:6. He made it mean that the *spiritual* or *allegorical* interpretation was the real meaning of the Bible; the literal interpretation kills. For this

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<sup>8</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1991), p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Revised Edition (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1956), p. 48-49.

<sup>10</sup> The great historian of hermeneutics, Frederic Farrar, sighs over the demise of the school: "Unhappily for the Church, unhappily for any real apprehension of Scripture, the allegorists, in spite of protest, were completely victorious. The School of Antioch was discredited by anathemas. . . And we soon descend to allegorical dictionaries of the threefold sense. . . . *History of Interpretation* (1886; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961) pp. 239-40.

experimental reason Augustine could hardly part with the allegorical method."<sup>11</sup> In listing twelve controlling principles of Augustine, Ramm includes the following: " (ii) Although the literal and historical are not the end of Scripture we must hold them in high regard. Not all of the Bible is allegorical by any means, and much of it is both literal and allegorical. Augustine's great theological works indicate that the literal method was employed far more than he admitted on paper. (iii) Scripture has more than one meaning and therefore the allegorical method is proper. The supreme test to see whether a passage was allegorical was that of love. If the literal made for dissension, then the passage was to be allegorized. Besides this he had seven other somewhat farfetched rules for allegorizing the Scripture. He did work on the principle that the Bible had a hidden meaning, and so in his allegorical interpretations he was frequently as fanciful as the rest of the Fathers."<sup>12</sup>

At this point, I must issue the warning that Lenski gave of the bad influence that the Apostle Peter had on Barnabas. Remarking on Galatians 2:13, he states: "Barnabas is a warning to us. The church is full of great names that are still constantly quoted in support of some false doctrine, false practice, false principle, false interpretation. Their very names stop lesser men from testing what they advocate and so they, like Barnabas are carried away"<sup>13</sup> Let the hearer beware.

### Clarification of the Basic Principle

The father of the English Bible, William Tyndale, gave a striking statement after fifteen hundred years of writers wandering in the wastelands of allegorical interpretation with pitifully little interruption. The Reformation leaders protested the medieval exegetes who, following Origen, regarded the literal sense of Scripture as unimportant and unedifying. With the sound of antiquity, William Tyndale declared: "Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the Scripture hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave thou canst never err not go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. Nevertheless, the Scripture uses proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifieth is ever the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently."<sup>14</sup>

The latter part of Tyndale's statement concerning figures of speech has been the area where confusion has abounded. Many statements have been made which give the impression that figures of speech are antithetical to literal interpretation. Clarence Bass evidences this when he says, "Dispensationalists will not interpret the obviously literal as literal, and the obviously symbolical as symbolical. Everything must be literal."<sup>15</sup> Nor have dispensational writers helped to alleviate the confusion when they say that "some Scriptures are contextually indicated as containing figures of speech and not

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<sup>11</sup> Ramm, *Interpretation*, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ramm, *Interpretation*, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1946) p. 98.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism 'and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, Publishing Co. 1959), p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> C. B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), pp. 23-4.

intended for literal interpretation."<sup>16</sup> More accurate is the statement of Charles Ryrie that "the use of figurative language does not compromise or nullify the literal sense of the thing to which it is applied. Figures of speech are a legitimate grammatical usage for conveying a literal meaning."<sup>17</sup> Behind every figure of speech is a literal meaning, and by means of the historical-grammatical exegesis of the text, these literal meanings are to be sought out. As Ramm states: "The literal meaning of the figurative expression is the proper or natural meaning as understood by students of language. Whenever a figure is used its literal meaning is precisely that meaning determined by grammatical studies of figures. Hence, figurative interpretation does not pertain to the spiritual or mystical sense of Scripture, but to the literal sense."<sup>18</sup>

The Syrian school of interpretation in Antioch in the early centuries of the church asserted that literal interpretation is both plain-literal and figurative-literal. The plain-literal sentence is one of straightforward prose and a sentence such as "The eye of the Lord is upon thee" is a figurative-literal sentence.<sup>19</sup> According to the Alexandrians the literal meaning of this sentence would attribute an actual eye to God. But the Syrian school denied this to be the literal meaning of the sentence. The literal meaning is about God's omniscience. In other words, literalism is not the same as letterism.

More recently Robert Mounce has suggested similarly that "A writer may convey his thought either by the use of words in their directly denotative sense or he may choose the more pleasing path of figurative expression. But one thing must be kept clear: In either case the literal meaning is the same."<sup>20</sup> Mounce goes on to say: "An interpretation is literal only when it corresponds to what the author intends to convey with his statement. When Jesus spoke of Herod as "That fox" (Luke 13:32) he was not trying to tell us that a carnivorous mammal of the family *Canidae* had entered the human race incognito. He was only saying that the Galilean ruler was cunning, although relatively insignificant.<sup>21</sup> In like manner we realize upon our reading the statement of Jesus, "I am the door," that He is not a 2' 8" x 6' 8" birch door, but He is that which the figure literally signifies, namely, a way of entrance and, more specifically in the context, the Way of entrance into eternal life. The literal meaning is the intention of the metaphor.

Very often Isaiah 55:12 is set forth as sort of an "Achilles' heel" to those who hold the literal interpretation. Exultingly Isaiah speaks: "For you shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." Here the writer is not speaking of that which would be an inherent contradiction, but he is marvelously portraying in word pictures that even all of nature shall rejoice when the king shall come to reign in his kingdom. By such a graphic word picture he has said more than could be said in several paragraphs of straight prose.

## Credibility of the Basic Principle

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<sup>16</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham), p. vi.

<sup>17</sup> Charles C Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux, 1953), pp. 42-3.

<sup>18</sup> Ramm, *Interpretation*, p. 141.

<sup>19</sup> Ramm, *Interpretation*, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Mounce, "How to Interpret the Bible," *Eternity* (May 1963), p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Mounce, "How to Interpret," p. 21.

At this point a question needs to be raised: "When one applies this principle of literal interpretation consistently to prophecy, what is the result?" A postmillennialist, Loraine Boettner, responds, "It is generally agreed that if the prophecies are taken literally, they do foretell a restoration of the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine with the Jews having a prominent place in that kingdom and ruling over the other nations."<sup>22</sup> An amillennialist, Floyd Hamilton concurred: "Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures."<sup>23</sup>

But does such a consistently literal approach to prophecy have any strong support in Scripture? The late professor of Old Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary, Martin J. Wyngaarden, in his study of the scope of "Spiritualization" in Scripture, begins his first chapter with the "Wonders of Jehovah's Prophecy". He asks the question, "Were any Old Testament prophecies fulfilled literally?" and then proceeds;

Few things can so stimulate one's faith in the revelation of God as the fulfillments of prophecy. Here we have, first of all, those fulfilled in Christ's ministry, in his sacrifice and resurrection. But there are also many others fulfilled in the history of great cities and mighty nations, in a most remarkable manner. The fulfillments are so precise, unmistakable, important and far-reaching as to recall the words of Isaiah, addressed to those inclined to reject Jehovah's predictions (Isaiah 41:21, 22) . . . and then we find many literal fulfillments of prophecy, in connection with Israel as the theocratic nation, and in connection with the surrounding nations referred to by the prophets serving under the theocracy—the Old Testament kingdom of Jehovah. *Now the very remarkable thing is that those fulfillments are so exceedingly literal.*<sup>24</sup>

(One might mention in passing that something cannot be "exceedingly" literal. It is either literal or not literal depending on whether it is the meaning of the author.)

After such a statement it is perplexing indeed to discover that Wyngaarden concluded that much of the prophecy which is yet to be fulfilled must be fulfilled in another way other than literally. As he looked to certain unfulfilled prophecies he was convinced that there are those that must be spiritualized. "Even if we should say that prophecies are fulfilled literally as a rule," he stated, "we find a series of exceptions to this rule, in the future state of Israel, in the eschatology of the theocracy, in the spiritualization of the kingdom of priests—the holy nation."<sup>25</sup> For these reasons, he concluded, "The problem thus raised is one of great interest, with a view toward attempting to discover the sphere in which the spiritualization of prophecy takes place."<sup>26</sup>

It would seem that, without theological predispositions, one would conclude that the prophecies which have been fulfilled are to form the pattern in the interpretation of

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<sup>22</sup> Loraine Boettner, "A Postmillennial Response," *The Meaning of the Millennium*, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of the Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 38.

<sup>24</sup> Martin J. Wyngaarden, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment: A Study of the Scope of the "Spiritualization" in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 13-14.

<sup>25</sup> Wyngaarden, *Future of the Kingdom*, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Wyngaarden, *Future of the Kingdom*, p. 14.

prophecy that has not yet been fulfilled. If we have seen that so long as we have the history of the Jews to compare with the prophecies concerning them—that is, up to this time—a certain mode of interpreting those prophecies is rendered indispensable, then why not simply continue that same mode of interpretation, when we have prophecy alone not yet illustrated by history? If prophecies concerning the Jews, delivered two or three thousand years ago, be proved, by the history of the interim up to our own days, to have been fulfilled in the literal sense, and, therefore, to demand a literal interpretation, upon what principle can it be alleged that other prophecies, delivered in similar language by the same prophets, are not to be similarly interpreted after our days?

The logic resulting from a study of the history of fulfillment is obvious. Why then would anyone depart from it? Albertus Pieters states: "No one defends or employs the allegorizing method of exegesis. Calvin and the other great Bible students of the Reformation saw clearly that the method was wrong and taught a now generally accepted 'grammatical-historical' interpretation, so far as the Scriptures in general are concerned. That they retain the spiritualizing [notice the word game] method in expounding many of the prophecies was because they found themselves forced to do so in order to be faithful to the New Testament."<sup>27</sup>

One might question here whether it is faithfulness to the New Testament which forces this deductive principle of spiritualization (i.e. allegorization), or whether it might more correctly be stated that it is faithfulness to a particular theological interpretation of the New Testament. If the latter is the case, then one might certainly question the wisdom of overthrowing the literal interpretation which is a proven biblical principle, for the unproven deductive principle of spiritualization.

At any rate the use of a dual hermeneutic which applies the literal hermeneutic to the great majority of Scripture and the spiritualizing hermeneutic to a *portion* of prophecy, namely, that portion which is future only and not even all of that, has its dangers. It is easy to see how such a method of interpretation could easily get out of hand. For example, while the evangelical believes that the prophecy of the second coming of Christ will have a future literal fulfillment, the liberal theologian applying the spiritualizing principle erases any hope of a literal return of the Lord to the earth for his saints.

Because of this possibility, therefore, the evangelical who posits a dual hermeneutic protects its excessive use by certain regulative principles in addition to his deductive spiritualizing principle. Hamilton states: "But if we reject the literal method of interpretation as the universal rule of the interpretation of all prophecies, how are we to interpret them? Well, of course, there are many passages in prophecy that were meant to be taken literally. In fact a good working rule to follow is that the literal interpretation of the prophecy is to be accepted unless (a) the passages contain obviously figurative language, or (b) unless the New Testament gives authority for interpreting them in other than the literal sense, or (c) unless a literal interpretation

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<sup>27</sup> Albertus Pieters, "Darbyism vs. The Historic Christian Faith," *Calvin Forum* 2 (May 1936), pp. 225-8.



would produce a contradiction with truths, principles, or factual statements contained in the non-symbolic books of the New Testament. . . .<sup>28</sup>

If one examines each of these suggested regulative principles carefully, he will discern that none of them is necessitated by a proper understanding of literal interpretation.

### **The Application of the Basic Principle**

Literal interpretation, then, is the "bottom-line" of dispensationalism. Although certainly one would not claim absolute consistency among dispensationalists in the application of the principle, there are areas of unanimity among them which have become theological tenets in their system. Undoubtedly, the most significant of these is the maintaining of a distinction between Israel and the church. The roots of this go in two directions, first, the Old Testament covenant promises to Abraham stated in Genesis 12:2-3 and established unconditionally in Genesis 15:6-21, and second, the New Testament revelation of the mystery of the church as established in Acts 2:41-47 and explained in Ephesians 3:1-6. In the minds of dispensationalists it is the Abrahamic covenant promises—particularly the land and seed promises—that have suffered most from spiritualization in interpretation.

Presenting the logic of this very simply, Ryrie asks two questions: "(1) Does the Abrahamic covenant promise Israel a permanent existence as a nation? If it does, then the Church is not fulfilling Israel's promises, but rather Israel as a nation has a future yet in prospect: and (2) Does the Abrahamic covenant promise Israel permanent possession of the promised land? If it does, then Israel must yet come into possession of that land, for she has never fully possessed it in her history."<sup>29</sup> And, may I add, does not possess it today even though it was an everlasting possession.

One of the most probing recent works on this subject was done by one who would not likely be called a dispensationalist, namely, Arnold A. VanRuler, the late Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the University of Utrecht. In his work of 1955 translated in 1971 by Geoffrey Bromiley, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament*, he states: "To the very depths of Old Testament expectation, the people of Israel as a people, the land, posterity, and theocracy play a role that cannot possibly be eliminated. This role cannot be altered by regarding Christ and his church as the fulfillment, in other words, by spiritualizing. There is a surplus in the Old Testament, a remnant that cannot be fitted into the New Testament fulfillment."<sup>30</sup>

He continues: "I believe that the New Testament never says that the people of Israel. . . . is definitively rejected. It simply says that the people of Israel is blind and hardened and indeed with a view of a new development. This development has an eschatological

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<sup>28</sup> Hamilton, *Basis*, pp. 53-4.

<sup>29</sup> Ryrie, *Basis*, pp. 48-9. For further discussion of the distinction between Israel and the church, see Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church* 3d printing (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1996), pp. 176-86; Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 132-44; Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), pp. 69-97.

<sup>30</sup> A. A. Van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) p. 45.

range: it contains the solution to the riddle of the world (Rom. 11:15).<sup>31</sup> May those who posit Replacement Theology take note.

And then he raises the key question:

How are we, as the Christian church standing in the New Testament in the light of God's act in Jesus Christ, to handle the Old Testament? . . . A renewal of allegorizing may seem to offer a way of assigning an authentic function to the Old Testament in the Christian situation . . . . I believe that we must resist to the last the temptation lurking in this idea. The idea is in fact a temptation, for it seems that allegorizing can solve all the problems of the Christian church in relation to the Old Testament. . . . (It) gives the appearance of making it perfectly plain that the Old Testament is wholly and exclusively the book of the Christian church, which can be exploited fully by it alone.<sup>32</sup>

It is difficult to resist continuing the quotation from Van Ruler because his remarks are so cogent, but it is that key phrase of his—"surplus in the Old Testament"—which catches one's attention. It is that surplus which has so often been spiritualized to find its fulfillment in the church. But when interpreted literally it demands an earthly reign of Christ such as this earth has never seen. Thus, it is the nature of the earthly reign of Christ as predicted in the Old Testament and not simply the length of that reign in the millennial prophecy of Revelation 20 that provides the basis for dispensational premillennialism.

Continuing to apply this basic principle of literal interpretation, the dispensationalist not only finds significant eschatological distinctions within God's kingdom program, but he is confronted with a unifying philosophy of history which presents a majestic and climactic victory within history on this earth. In his system, history is not simply an endless series of cycles of testing, apostasy and judgment moving nowhere. Rather, history has meaning and purpose, and this is seen in its progressive movement toward its grandest demonstration of its doxological purpose. Thus, with intensity and expectation God's children pray the Disciples' Prayer, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9, 10). The King, the Second Adam, is coming and he is going to reign until he has reversed the curse on this earth and subjected every shred of rebellion precipitated by Satan and his opposing kingdom of darkness "so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

Too often theological systems, or their applications, have narrowed God's kingdom purpose down to a redemptive purpose. They have become redemptocentric rather than theocentric; consequently, they have minimized or spiritualized activities in the Word that do not have immediate relation to the redemption of man. In this they fall short of an adequate philosophy of history for they fail to account for all of created reality.

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<sup>31</sup> Van Ruler, *Christian Church*, p. 55.

<sup>32</sup> Van Ruler, *Christian Church*, p. 57.

On this subject one must listen to Van Ruler again in his chapter "The Necessity of the Old Testament for the Christian Church."<sup>33</sup>

. . . the Christian church really has to make something out of the Old Testament. It is unquestionably the book of the people of Israel. . . . In the Old Testament this original and final element, this faithfulness to the earth and time, is more plainly visible. In my view this means that, in this respect, we have to speak most emphatically of the greater value of the Old Testament as compared with the New. The Old Testament has a more positive concern with creation and the kingdom, with the first things and the last, with the image and the law, with sanctification and humanity, with ethos and culture, with society and marriage, with history and the state. These are precisely the matters at issue in the Old Testament. For this reason the Old Testament neither can be nor should be expounded Christologically, but only eschatologically, in other words, *theocratically*. There is in it a profound confidence in the goodness of the world, the serviceability of man, and the possibility of *sanctifying the earth* [italics mine]. . . . For the consciousness of the Christian church throughout the centuries there has always been a surplus in the Old Testament that it could not assimilate. This surplus is not just the cultus. The church has spiritualized this or brought it into its own liturgy or used it as a witness to the message of Golgotha or simply said that it has been superseded by Christ. . . . In my view Martin Buber is completely correct to level against the Christian church throughout the centuries the accusation that it has never really been faithful to this Old Testament belief, this grand vision of the God of Israel, this visionary faith in the possibility of the sanctification of the earth. From the necessity of the cross of Christ, which the church has accepted on the basis of the New Testament, the false conclusion has been drawn that no more can be made of the earth. . . . The Christian church has treated the Old Testament just as uncertainly and unsuitably as it has treated the Jews. . . . Does everything end in the church? Does everything, not only Israel, but history and creation exist for the sake of the church? Or is the church only one among many forms of the kingdom of God, and does its catholicity consist precisely in the fact that it respects, acknowledges, and holds dear all forms of the kingdom, for example, even the people of Israel?<sup>34</sup>

Just a few years after Van Ruler raised those questions, another Dutch theologian, Gerrit G. Berkower, observed a new openness among his colleagues to the Chiuiast's philosophy of history:

Time was when most theologians regarded Chiliasm as a fantastic, earth-bound eschatology. A remarkable change has taken place. . . . While the critics of Chiliasm find its description of the millennial times objectionable and unacceptable, the same critics praise the Chiliast's fidelity to God's purpose for the earth. It is this motif, they say, which has made Chiliasm a current that has never been wholly set aside in the Church. The Chiliast's

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<sup>33</sup> Van Ruler, *Christian Church*, pp. 75-98.

<sup>34</sup>

hope for Christ's kingdom on earth is sometimes called the anti-spiritualistic motif in millennialism. It is the faith that God's salvation has meaning not only for heaven, but for earth as well. For *this* earth.<sup>35</sup>

Yes, the dispensationalist, by means of consistent literal interpretation, is enabled is optimistic about what God is yet going to do with this earth. The greatest and grandest display of God's glory is yet to come when the multiformity of his kingdom program will consummate in a many-splendored unity. The earliest prophecy of God's Word, Genesis 3:15, presents in microscopic fashion, God's twofold solution to a twofold problem occasioned by sin. "And I will put enmity between you and the women and between your Seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel". The problem was (1) how to reclaim his usurped kingdom, and (2) how to provide redemption for mankind. Two prophesied bruising or crushings are the key. "He shall bruise your head" portrays the final destruction of Satan and his kingdom provided for in Christ's death on the cross. "You shall bruise His heel" pictures Christ's death as also the basis for God's redemptive program. In his work, *Biography of a Great Planet*, Stanley Ellisen shows the progressive unfolding of this twofold purpose in the rest of the Scripture.<sup>36</sup>

The Lord chose two men of faith through whom he inaugurated these programs.<sup>37</sup> With Abraham he made a covenant promising among other things a seed that would bless all nations. This seed Paul identified as Christ who would bring redemption to men, fulfilling the redemptive program (cf. Gal. 3:6-16). To fulfill his kingdom purpose, God chose David out of the same line and made a covenant about a kingdom and a royal seed (2 Sam 7:12-16). This royal seed would rule, not only over Israel, but over the whole world. Through the seed of David, God would fulfill his kingdom program by destroying the rebels and ruling the world in righteousness. The victory will be won where the battle was started. Ellisen concludes: "Although these two functions of Christ are inextricably related throughout the Bible, they are distinct in their purposes. The kingdom purpose is primarily for God, having to do with his reclaiming what was lost from his kingdom."

What a tragedy it would be, indeed, to lose these truths of the future universal reign of King Jesus on this earth and much, much more through the allegorizing/spiritualizing method that has blighted so much of Christ. In fact the beautiful hymn by Isaac Watts, the Father of English hymnody, "The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom," has been spiritualized under the title "Joy to the World" and made to refer to the first advent. Think of the words as Watts meant them with respect to Christ' coming as King at the second advent.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come;  
let earth receive her king;  
let every heart prepare him room,  
and heaven and nature sing,  
and heaven and nature sing,

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<sup>35</sup> G. C. Berkower, "Review of Current Religious Thought," *Christianity Today* 6 (October 27, 1961), p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Stanley A. Ellisen, *Biography of a Great Planet* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1975), pp. 22-6.

<sup>37</sup> Note Matt. 1:1, "The son of David, the son of Abraham."

and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns;  
let all their songs employ;  
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,  
repeat the sounding joy,  
repeat the sounding joy,  
repeat, repeat the sounding joy

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
nor thorns infest the ground;  
he comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found  
far as the curse is found,  
far as, far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
and makes the nations prove  
the glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love,  
and wonders of his love,  
and wonders, wonders of his love