

CONTRAST LITERAL WITH ALLEGORICAL, SPIRITUALIZATION, AND GENRE HERMENEUTICS

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I know that the subject matter caught your attention. It is not a subject matter in which most Christians would be interested in on the surface. However, I think it will be of interest when a person reads with an inquisitive mind... desiring to learn the intricate details of why the writers of God's Word wrote as they did. Certainly they had their own thoughts and interpretations as they wrote each sentence, paragraph, letter, etc. But, what we must understand is that it was the Holy Spirit's inspiration causing the writers of God's Word to hold to the truth. We must realize that it is truly God's Word... not man's. Nor, was it man's great minds that came up with the details of the Spoken Word. Faith mixed with the Holy Spirit's inspiration brings truth with no false intentions.

The literal interpretation of Scripture contends that any sentence or word should be viewed in light of its usual, ordinary, and normal sense, whether it is in conversation or is written. Simply put, the literal approach is to take the meaning for just what it says in the way one would ordinarily think, talk, or write.

"Hermeneutics is the science and art of interpreting what an author has written. It involves establishing the principles for our understanding any part of the Bible, and then interpreting it so its message is made clear to the reader or listener. It inevitably involves exegesis, which is the process

of examining the actual biblical text as it came from the hand of its writer to discover how he communicated God's truth. The goal in applying principles of hermeneutics is to 'rightly handle the word of truth' (2 Timothy 2:15, striving to accurately discern the meaning of the text."

Since the great part of the Bible makes sense when interpreted literally, why should we not approach all of the text in this sense? It is felt by literal interpreters that this is the only method which agrees with the nature of inspiration. That is, God wanted all writing that projected His Word to express what He meant without it being obscured. Whether we are looking at documents, parables, allegories, or symbols, we still should understand that their meaning depends upon the normal usage of the word in application and understanding. It should be understood that this method is the only one that makes sense and is a common safety check on the imagination of mankind... lest the interpreter will let the word, passage or text be "allegorized" to mean whatever he desires it to mean.

Allegorical Interpretation, in contrast to Literal, was often the predominant method of interpretation prior to the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. An "Allegory" is a symbolic representation. Allegorical interpretation basically means to take the literal words of Scripture and assume that they were symbolic or of deeper spiritual truths. We know that there are some obvious symbols in the Word of God, i.e. Ezekiel 1. However, it would be a violation of God's meaning of Scripture to assume that all Scripture is symbolic and that literal has no significant meaning. To put it bluntly, allegorical interpretation creates meaning through the interpreter. In turn, the allegorist believes that an ordinary lay person may be reading and interpreting Scripture wrongly and without the help of a wise well-trained theologian because the lay might not be "rightly dividing the Word."

The philosopher that was noted for allegorical interpretation was Philo (20 B.C.-54 A.D.). He taught that the "milk of Scripture was the literal but the meat was allegory." Therefore, there was always a hidden meaning. In his way of thinking, the Word of God had two levels of interpreting Scripture: the literal was on the surface, but the allegorical represented the deeper, more spiritual meaning. The liberal interpreter was simple minded who was missing the greater meanings that were in Scripture. To Philo, only the immature would be a literalist; the mature would look for the deeper meaning (allegorist).

It is thought to be true that the allegorical method of interpretation "was not born out of the sturdy of the Scriptures, but rather out of a desire to unite Greek philosophy and the Word of God. It did not come out of a desire to present the truths of the Word, but to pervert them."

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness," (II Timothy 3:16). This is true for the literal interpreter as well as the allegorist. Content of a passage is important. "A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text." Without knowing the situation of the times in which a passage of Scripture was written, the interpreter starts to use his own intellect in trying to understand the meaning of Scripture. Although most passages of Scripture can be applied to present day situations, the allegorist must understand that he can't interpret Scripture to mean something deeper if it is obvious that the Scripture was relevant for that time and must be interpreted literally as it was understood at the time.

As we look at where the allegorical interpretation originated, that is, with a "mystic" (Philo), we can see that there has been a "tampering" with the meaning of the Old Testament; thus causing the "polluting" of the real meaning of the Word of God. Origen (185-254) followed in the footsteps of Philo and is often called "Mr. Allegorism." He made allegory the dominant method of biblical interpretation down to the Middle Ages. It was obvious as historians and theologians look back, that Origen made a desperate effort to avoid the plain meaning of the text. To put all of this in proper order, the allegorizing of Scripture was Satan's way of trying to destroy God's Holy Word. We have, now, literalist that look upon the Word of God as Truth from God's Mouth. We can thank the Literalist forerunners for breaking away from the humanist views of Scripture.

There are other interpretations beside the two mentioned above. For instance, Spiritual interpretation of Scripture is one that was born out of the allegorizing method of interpreting Scripture. It was a means of interpreting Scripture as a spin-off of Catholic allegorizing. In Catholic allegorism, one of the hermeneutics is that "the Scripture do possess a spiritual or mystical meaning which is beyond the literal."

This "spiritual" or mystical interpretation (Spiritualization) has three (3) rules to go by:

1. A passage of Scripture may have an allegorical meaning. Of course, this would refer to the future or prophetic meaning and includes both allegorical and typological interpretation. Many Catholics today prefer the typological method of interpretation due to the known abuses of the allegorical method in the early history of the church.
2. A passage could have an eschatological meaning which "spiritualizes" and leads up to thoughts, concepts, and anticipation of the Church in glory.
3. A Scripture passage could have a tropological meaning (teaching a way of life; the moral significance of a particular passage).

The problem with Spiritual or mystical interpretation is that it leads the interpreter to believe that:

"Some Christians may have spiritual insight that although similar to other Christians is greater in degree. In this view any devout Christian, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, can be the author of inspired Scripture. Adherents to this view suggest it is not the writing that is inspired, rather it is the writers who are inspired."

Of course, when man places himself in a position whereby God is not the author and inspirer of His Word, he is... then that person is in danger of profaning the name of God Almighty and belittling God's Holiness and Authoritativeness. If a so called "interpreter of God's Word" is not contrite in heart, knowing that all of His abilities and talents come from the Author and Finisher of our faith, then he is not worthy to be recorded, verbally or in writing.

The literalist, in contrast, realizes that what the Scripture says, God means. Therefore, the literalist would never place his word above or even on the same plain with God. The literalist knows what it means to take God's Word to heart. In faith, the literalist seeks God with all his heart, soul, and mind. With his mind, the literalist wants to know what God is saying... not what he thinks God is saying. This is when wisdom, knowledge, and inspiration are all on the same page.

Another misused approach to interpreting Scripture today is the use of genre hermeneutics. "Genre is a French term, which simply means kind or species. When applied to biblical studies, genre refers to the fact that the Bible contains different types of literature, such as prophecy, epistle, poetry, etc. Such a categorization is made to alert Bible interpreters to the fact that particular genres are to be understood in light of the

common traits that define a given genre."

Genre can be a useful tool in interpreting Scripture. Charles Ryrie specifically notes that literalism "does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustration, apocalypses, and other genres with the basic framework of literal interpretation." However, today's preachers have pushed the genre concept too far. For instance, today genre is often used as an excuse for changing or suspending the ordinary rules of hermeneutics. An example of this would be when the liberals read into the Constitution ideas that are not found in a "literal" reading of the document. The liberals claim that the founders of the Constitution purposely created a document that was not to be read literally; rather it was created to be a "living document." This, of course, would mean that a judge should be able to alter the Constitution to coincide with where society is headed. By stating that the Constitution is a living document, it classifies it (genre). So, the judge in line with this means of interpretation, is no longer required to abide by the literal, grammatical, and historical method in interpreting what is therein. To expose this abuse of power and literal interpretation... especially in biblical studies is the term "genre override." This term was first used by Robert Thomas.

Apocalypticism is often used as an excuse for by-passing or doing away with the literal, grammatical, historical method in the realm of biblical eschatology. Apocalyptic literature is and has been a candidate for this clear abuse of interpretation of Scripture. Genre hermeneutics is often used as an excuse for the utilization of both non-literal and literal interpretation of Scripture. The Church of today is engulfed in the idea that you cannot literally interpret prophecy.

As a literal, grammatical, historical Christian believer, it is important to understand and acknowledge the abuses in interpreting the Word of God. I "affirm that the authority of Scripture cannot be separated from the authority of God. Whatever the Bible affirms, God affirms. And what the Bible affirms or denies, it affirms or denies with the very authority of God. Such authority is normative for all believers; it is the canon or rule of God."

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