

**The Superiority of a Literal Hermeneutic  
as Observed Through Contrast with Other Methods**

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## **The Superiority of a Literal Hermeneutic as Observed Through Contrast with Other Methods**

Mal Couch defines hermeneutics as “the art and science by which one interprets the biblical text.”<sup>1</sup> In *2Timothy 2:15* Paul exhorts his “Son in the faith” with these words: “*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*” In taking this command seriously it is evident that the method chosen to interpret God’s precious, Holy Word is of vital importance. Bernard Ramm crystalizes this point when he states that “Hardly any study in the whole vast realm of intellectual life could be more important than the science of hermeneutics as applied to the Word of God, that which gives us an understanding of the eternal revelation of God to men.<sup>2</sup>” The interpreter dare not take the choice of hermeneutic method lightly! The sheer number, variety, and obvious diversity seen in hermeneutic systems make it evident not all are created equal. It is the

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<sup>1</sup> Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics: A Guide to the History and Practice of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2000), 32

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1970) xiii

purpose and aim of this paper to demonstrate the superiority of the literal hermeneutic method.

### **The Literal Method**

Possibly the best description of a literal method of hermeneutics is the word “normal”. “Literal interpretation means the words and sentences of Scripture are understood in their *normal* meaning—the ways that words are understood in normal communication.”<sup>3</sup> At first glance this appears obvious. After all, if words cannot be understood in their normal, literal way they immediately surrender themselves to redefinition and every other form of interpretive indignity. Yet it is the assertion of some that a literal interpretation of the Word of God needs to be regarded “as not only inadequate but as downright unacceptable.”<sup>4</sup> It is therefore necessary for the literal method to be rigorously defended.

Huber Drumwright, Jr. captures the essential argument behind literal interpretation when he states,

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 176

<sup>4</sup> Frederick F. Bruce “The History of New Testament Study,” in *New Testament Interpretation : Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1977), 26

The language of the Bible is human language and, as such, is subject to the same principles and laws that govern the interpretation of any book or writing other than the Bible. If the language of the Bible was other than a true human language subject to the usual regulations of human communications, there would be no basis for human beings to interpret or come by any trustworthy knowledge of its meaning.<sup>5</sup>

This is the basic assertion made by proponents of literal interpretation.

Despite its divine source, the Bible uses ordinary human language to communicate God's revelation and must be interpreted using normal (literal) methods. The strength of this position is the submission of the interpreter to the authority of the Biblical text. As will be demonstrated, all other systems fail to do this.

### **The Allegorical Method**

Charles C. Ryrie defines allegory as follows:

An allegory is a symbolic representation. Allegorical hermeneutics stands in contrast to literal hermeneutics and is usually resorted to when the literal sense seems unacceptable to the interpreter. The actual words, then, are not understood in their normal sense but in a symbolic sense, which results in a different meaning of the text, a

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<sup>5</sup> Huber L. Drumwright Jr. "Interpretation," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Vol. 3, H-L, gen. ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 297

meaning that, in the strictest sense, the text never intended to convey.<sup>6</sup>

It must be understood that most true allegorists would use literal interpretation for the majority of Scripture. As Ryrie stated above it is “when the literal sense seems unacceptable to the interpreter” that an allegorical method is used. Ramm clarifies the motivation behind allegorical hermeneutics. “Allegorical interpretation believes that beneath the letter (*rhētē*) or the obvious (*phanera*) is the real meaning (*hyponoia*) of the passage.”<sup>7</sup>

Originally the desire of allegory was good. As contemporary philosophies and worldviews conflicted with the literal interpretation of Scripture men sought to find a balance between the two. Unfortunately, this balance was achieved by stripping portions of Scripture, especially prophecy, of any literal understanding, instead assigning mystical, and oftentimes weird, meanings. In Cone’s treatment of the origin and history of allegorical hermeneutics he states that, “The allegorical

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<sup>6</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 125

<sup>7</sup> Ramm, *Protestant Biblical interpretation*, 24

method, then, in origin, was a submission of the Divine Text to the pervading philosophies of the day in order to justify the Text with the perceived world around it.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, “In allegorical exegesis of this kind, the text becomes a coat-hook on which the interpreter hangs his own ideas; the exegete can draw from the parable almost whatever he likes. Interpretation becomes an ‘in-game’.”<sup>9</sup> It is this inherent danger in allegorical hermeneutics that most condemns it. Because the interpreter is enabled to inject his own ideas into an alleged interpretation the allegorical method becomes highly subjective and relativistic. Though not the desire of allegorists, the reality is that allegorical hermeneutics leaves you with a dual hermeneutic where sometimes passages are literal, and sometimes they are not. Since the deciding factor on what should and shouldn’t be taken literally is the mind, or theological system, of the interpreter the final result is that man’s opinion takes

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Cone, *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2012), 216

<sup>9</sup> Graham N. Stanton “Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism,” in *New Testament Interpretation : Essays on Principles and Methods*. ed. I Howard Marshall (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1977), 63

precedence over the Biblical text. This strips God's Word of all authority.

### **The Spiritualization Method**

The spiritualization and allegorical methods of hermeneutics are very similar. Some would argue that there is little or no distinction at all.<sup>10</sup> However, albeit slight, there is, a distinction. Cone writes, "Although closely related to the allegorical hermeneutic, the spiritualization hermeneutic differs in motivation. Whereas the allegorical hermeneutic seeks at its heart to resolve textual difficulties arising from literal interpretation, the spiritualization hermeneutic seeks a deeper meaning in the text, and uses allegorical methods to accomplish that end."<sup>11</sup> Due to the belief that the true meaning lies beneath the obvious one, spiritualization seeks a "deeper" or "hidden" meaning in virtually all texts of Scripture. The primary difficulty in this method is that it simply goes too far. In their quest to find meaning deeper than the

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<sup>10</sup> Zuck states that "'Spiritualizing' becomes almost synonymous with allegorizing." Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1991), 237

<sup>11</sup> Cone, *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method*, 225

plain, literal sense of the words, spiritualization hermeneutics become increasingly fanciful. Animals become symbols of lust for food, miracles become spiritual lessons, and history becomes parable. It is clear that in this method, as with the allegorical, it is the interpreter who has the authority and not Scripture. Because words are not understood in their literal sense, one verse can give birth to a myriad of varied and opposing interpretations. The end result of this method is that the Word of God is viewed as contradictory at best and wholly unreliable at worst.

### **The Genre Method**

It is evident to even a casual observer that Scripture is written within a wide range of literary genres. In the genre method of hermeneutics, recognition of these genres is taken to the extreme and made the essential element in determining how to interpret any given book or passage. Cone writes, "Genre, or literary form, hermeneutics sees recognition of literary form as the overriding factor in the hermeneutic process. By redefining the structure of various books, genre hermeneutics provides a means whereby the literal grammatical

historical approach can be abandoned.”<sup>12</sup> Once the literal approach is abandoned proponents of genre hermeneutics develop “a different list of hermeneutical principles for each of the genres found in the Bible.<sup>13</sup>” Of concern is the tendency to redefine genres within the books of Scripture. This is done in any book of the Bible where a literal understanding might prove theologically inconvenient for the interpreter. As with other systems already considered this is usually in the realm of prophecy.<sup>14</sup> The primary failure of genre hermeneutics is that it ignores, overlooks, or deliberately violates the descriptions of genre given within the books themselves. Daniel, Isaiah, and Revelation in particular are internally described as history, vision, and prophecy. In Genre hermeneutics this is ignored and they are reclassified. Robert L. Thomas concludes accurately when he states, “When literary genre wields control that overrides normal rules of interpretation, evangelical hermeneutics has

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<sup>12</sup> Cone, *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method*, 228

<sup>13</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 80

<sup>14</sup> Black and Dockery write “There is an approach of interpreting, Scripture which requires that all texts be taken literally unless there is clear evidence of the use of figures of speech, but however helpful this approach may be for other literary genres, it is almost certainly more misleading than helpful when one approaches prophecy.” David Alan Black, David S. Dockery. *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 286

sunk to unprecedented depths.”<sup>15</sup> The fact that literary genre is allowed to override and determine how Texts will be interpreted demonstrates that, as with the other methods considered, this method also fails to submit itself to the authority of God’s Word.

### **Conclusion**

Allegorical hermeneutics fail to place the interpreter in submission to the Text. The result is a subjective interpretation that undermines the authority of Scripture. Spiritualization hermeneutics fail to allow Scripture to speak normally. The mystical and fanciful interpretations indicative of this process contribute to the popular idea that the Bible is a collection of fairy tales further eroding the foundation of Biblical authority. Genre hermeneutics reclassify books of the Bible leaving them wholly unreliable. When the historic and scientific accuracy of Scripture is questioned or removed altogether, how can the reader place confidence in the spiritual elements of the Word? It is obvious that they

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<sup>15</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), 308

cannot and ultimately all claims of Scripture are discounted; historic, scientific, and spiritual alike.

The strength of the literal hermeneutic method is its ability to allow the words of Scripture to speak normally. This brings the interpreter under the authority of the Text and enables readers to be confident in obedience to what is read. Ron J. Bigalke writes a fitting conclusion. “Whenever times of literal interpretation dominated, there has been an increase in biblical knowledge and spiritual awakening. Conversely, whenever non-literal interpretation dominated, there has been moral and spiritual decline, in addition to spiritual ignorance. Whenever non-literal interpretation dominates, ignorance of the truth of God’s Word prevails.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ron J. Bigalke, “Historical Survey Of Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 14, no. 42 (August 2010): 50.

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