

The Effects of Postmodernism on the Interpretation of the Bible and the U.S. Constitution

Dr. Andy Woods



Genesis 3:1

- Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?"



Preview

- I. Traditional hermeneutics
 - A. Bible
 - B. Law
- II. Challenge to traditional hermeneutics
 - A. Bible
 - B. Law



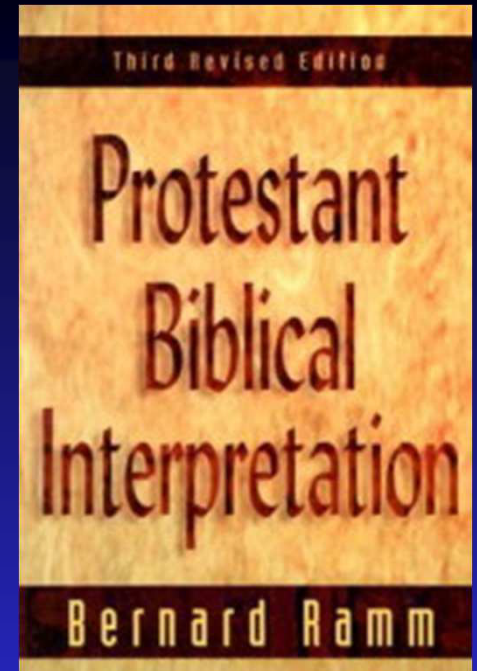
Traditional Hermeneutics

- Literal
- Grammatical
- Historical



Literal

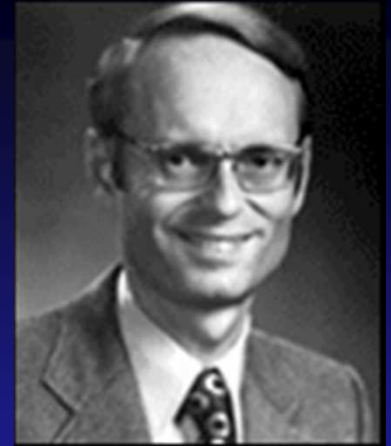
- A literal hermeneutic attaches to every word the same meaning that it would have in normal usage, whether employed in speaking, writing, or thinking.



Bernard, Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Boston: W.A. Wilde, 1956), 89-92.

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.

David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), 11.



literal interpretation “...might also be called plain interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech.”

Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 86.

Literal Interpretation

One Meaning

Plain Literal

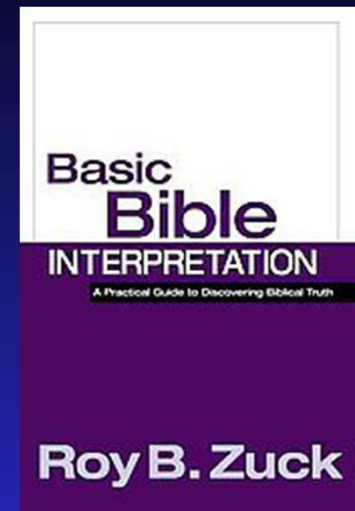
The literal interpretation is the explicit assertion of the words—DENOTATIVE

Figurative Literal

The literal interpretation is the specific intention of the figure—CONOTATIVE

Chart by Earl Radmacher

Grammatical interpretation observes the impact that grammar plays in any given text. Thus, bible interpreters must correctly analyze the relationship that words, phrases, or sentences have toward one another. Such an analysis entails the study of lexicology (meaning of words), morphology (form of words), parts of speech (function of words), and syntax (relationship of words).



Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), 100.

The interpreter should, therefore, endeavour to take himself from the present, and to transport himself into the historical position of his author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion. Herein we note the import of the term *grammatico-historical* interpretation.

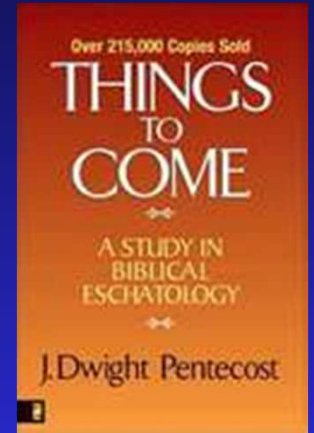
Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (NY: Philips and Hunt, 1883; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 231.

Every Geographical Location in Acts/Epistles



Dangers of Allegorical Interpretation

- Authority transfers from the text to the interpreter
- Scripture is not being interpreted
- No basis for testing the conclusions of the interpreter
- No mechanism for controlling the interpreter's imagination



J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 5-6.

“...once we start with the rule that whole passages and books of scripture say one thing when they mean another, the reader is delivered bound hand and foot to the caprice of the interpreter.”



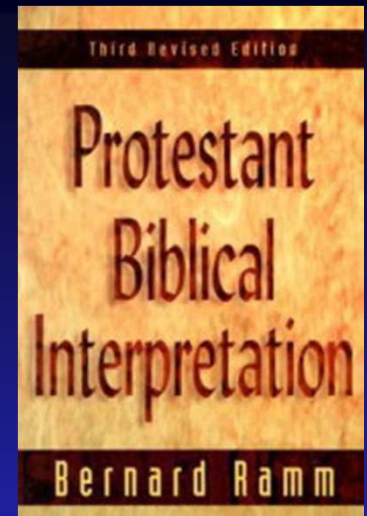
Jerome; Quoted by F.W. Farrar, *History of interpretation* (NY: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1886), 238-39.

...it will be noticed at once that its habit is to disregard the common signification of words and give wing to all manner of fanciful speculation. It does not draw out the legitimate meaning of an author's language, but foists into it whatever the whim or fancy of an interpreter may desire.

Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (NY: Philips and Hunt, 1883), 224.

...to state that the principal meaning of the Bible is a second-sense meaning, and that the principle method of interpretation is “spiritualizing,” is to open the door to almost uncontrolled speculation and imagination. For this reason we have insisted that the control in interpretation is the literal method.

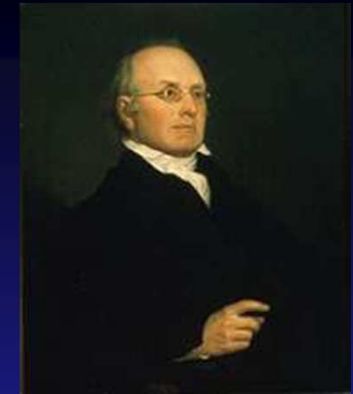
Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d ed. (Boston: W.A. Wilde, 1956; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 65.



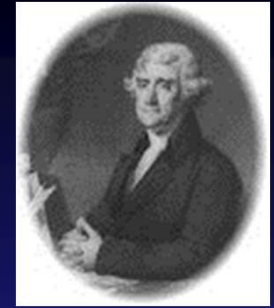
We...should aim...to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would have naturally made upon the minds of the first readers...Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures ought to teach...All such presumptions are uncalled for and prejudicial.

Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (NY: Philips and Hunt, 1883; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 595.

In construing the Constitution of the United States, we are in the first instance to consider, what are its nature and objects, its scope and design, as apparent from the structure of the instrument, viewed as a whole and also viewed in its component parts. Where its words are plain, clear and determinate, they require no interpretation... Where the words admit of two senses, each of which is conformable to general usage, that sense is to be adopted, which without departing from the literal import of the words, best harmonizes with the nature and objects, the scope and design of the instrument.



Joseph Story; quoted in Edwin Meese, III, Address to American Bar Association, 1985; adapted in "Toward a Jurisprudence of Original Intention," *Benchmark* Vol. II, no. 1, (January-February 1986): 10.



Carry ourselves back to the time when the Constitution was adopted,
recollect the spirit in the debates, and
instead of trying what meaning may
be squeezed out of the text, or
invented against it, conform to the
probable one in which it was passed.

Thomas Jefferson, *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Albert Bergh, ed. (Washington D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), Vol. XV, p. 449, in a letter from Jefferson to Justice William Johnson on June 12, 1823.

We...should aim...to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would have naturally made upon the minds of the first readers...Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures ought to teach...All such presumptions are uncalled for and prejudicial.

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Thomas Jefferson, *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Albert Bergh, ed. (Washington D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), Vol. XV, p. 277, September 28, 1820.

“You seem...to consider judges as the ultimate arbiters of all constitutional questions; a very dangerous doctrine indeed, and one which would place us under the despotism of an oligarchy. Our judges are as honest as other men, and not more so...and their power the more dangerous as they are in office for life, and not responsible, as the other functionaries are to the elective control. The Constitution has erected no such single tribunal...”

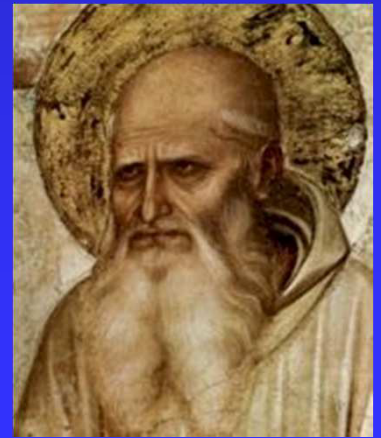
Challenges to Traditional Hermeneutics



- *Ad hominem* attack against the literal, grammatical, historical method and advocates
- Authority is transferred from text to interpreter
- Interpreter's biases render authorial intent unknowable
- Movement away from studying original sources
- Ignoring older commentators
- An over-emphasis on studying background literature to determine a text's meaning
- Constructing a paradigm on a lack of textual support
- Texts are not static

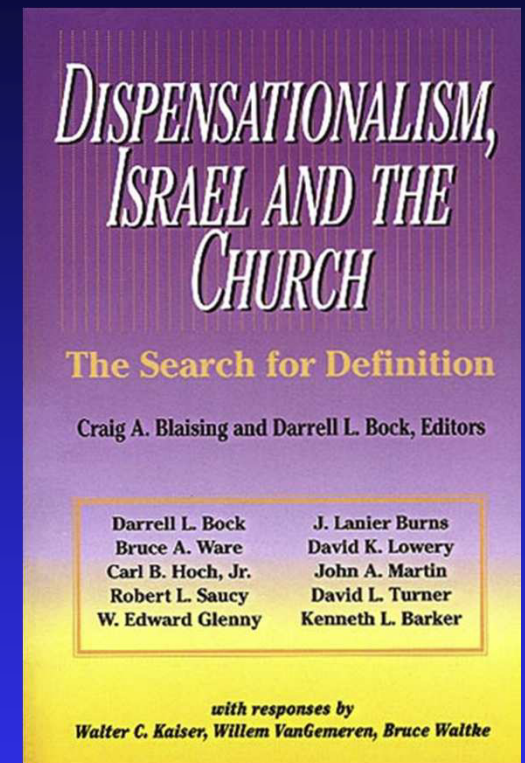
Papias . . . says that there will be a millennium after the resurrections of the dead, when the kingdom of Christ will be set up in material form on this earth. I suppose that he got these notions by a perverse reading of the apostolic accounts, not realizing that they had spoken mystically and symbolically. For he was a man of very little intelligence, as is clear from his books. But he is responsible for the fact that so many Christian writers after him held the same opinion, relying on his antiquity, for instance Irenaeus and whoever else appears to have held the same views.

Eusebius, Ecclesiastical history, 3.39.12-13

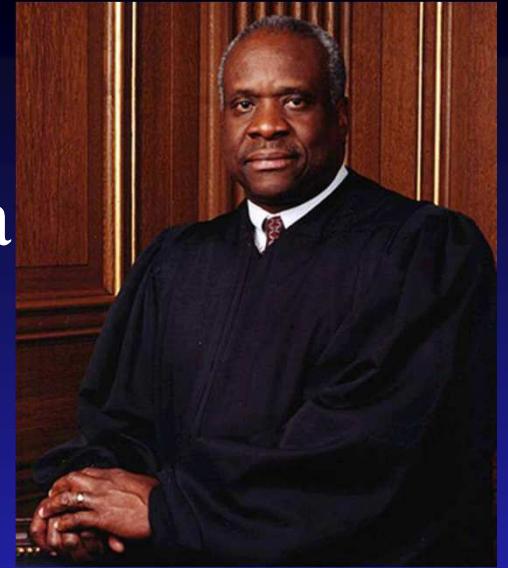


But when that which is in fact new is presented and accepted as if it had always been the case, the result is not only historical confusion but a conceptual naïveté that resists both the idea and the fact of further development within the tradition.

Blaising, *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, p. 29



He is the dumbest Justice to ever sit on the bench...He waits to see how Scalia votes, and he votes the same. He rarely issues comments or engages in questions during any Supreme Court hearing...He rarely grants media interviews (because he knows he will look stupid). He rarely writes opinions. He believes in a narrow interpretation of the Constitution. He is an idiot.



http://juneauempire.com/opinion/2011-09-22/outside-editorial-law-and-clarence-thomas#.Tn5rqNSo1_p



Some instances of literalism seem to me to be strange, unreasonable, and unnecessary. For example, Robert Thomas holds that the eerie locusts of Revelation 9 and the strange frogs of Revelation 16 are literally demons who take on those peculiar physical forms, that the two prophets of Revelation 11 literally spew fire from their mouths, that every mountain in the world will be abolished during the seven bowl judgments, that the fiery destruction of the literal city of Babylon will smolder for more than 1000 years, that Christ will return from heaven on a literal horse, and that the new Jerusalem is literally a 1500-mile high cube.

Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., “A Preterist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 40.

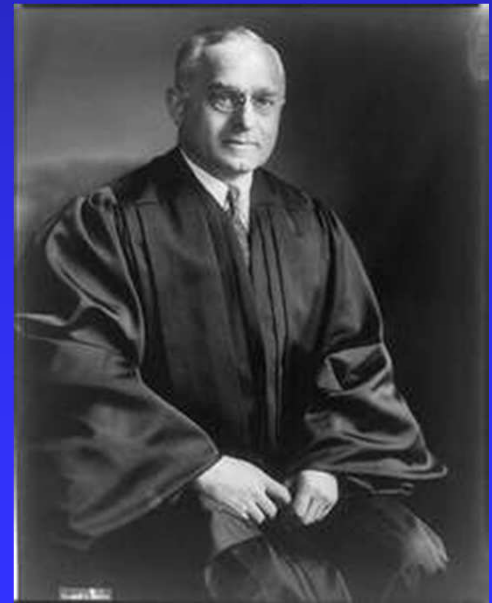


Edwin Meese, III, Address to American Bar Association, 1985;
adapted in “Toward a Jurisprudence of Original Understanding,”
Benchmark Vol. II, no. 1, (January-February 1986): 6.

“Under the old system the question was *how* to read the Constitution; under the new approach, the question is *whether* to read the Constitution.”

Felix Frankfurter in *Graves v. New York ex rel. O'Keefe*, 306 U.S. 466, 491-492 (1939).

“The ultimate touchstone of constitutionality
is the Constitution itself and not what we
have said about it.”

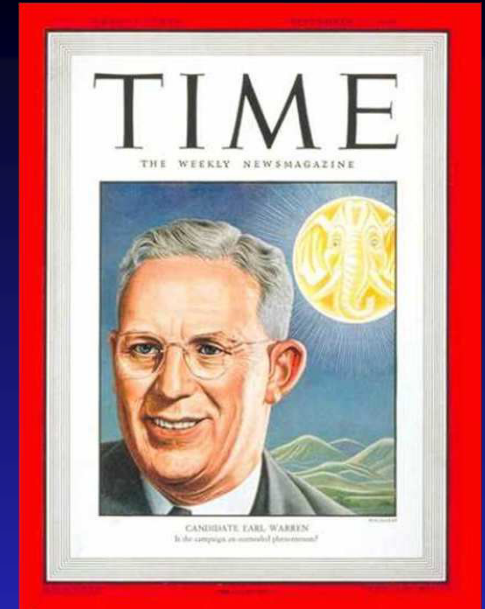




Charles Evans Hughes; quoted by Craig R. Ducat and Harold W. Chase,
Constitutional Interpretation (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1974, 1983), 3.

“We are under a Constitution, but the
Constitution is what the judge says it is.”

Warren Court Quip



“With five votes we can do anything”

Owen M. Fiss, “Objectivity and Interpretation,” in Interpreting Law and Literature: A Hermeneutic Reader, ed. Stanford Levinson and Steven Mailloux (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 244.

A highly publicized courtroom drama of the 1990s presents an analogy. Robert Shapiro and Johnny Cochran and their defense team in the murder trial of ex-football star, O. J. Simpson, did a masterful job of diverting attention away from their client. They focused on the investigative energy of the police officers, their qualifications, their motives, the lab technicians, the failings of the L.A.P.D. and communicative breakdowns in the District Attorney's office. By the end of the case one wondered who was on trial.



Was it Simpson, the District Attorney's office, or the Police, or the Judge? Philosophy and modern linguistic theory have done the same things with hermeneutics, a discipline which has traditionally been concerned with the text of Scripture and God's ability to communicate with His people. It is now the interpreter who is under investigation, rather than Scripture, as God's vehicle for communicating truth. Human limitations in regard to language as a means of communication; human predisposition to distort, human conceptual distance from the text, human incapacity to know anything with certitude, human inability to comprehend communication originating in another culture.



In essence, hermeneutics had become an exercise in probing anthropological finitude instead of an attempt to grasp the meaning of God's written revelation from an infinite God. This perspective radically departs from the long-standing grammatical, historical, dependence on God's ability to communicate regardless of human finitude. The fact that God has given a special revelation carries with it His purpose is to transmit truth through that revelation. Not doing so can question their ability to receive truth, so that they might know His will and His ways with certainty.

Thomas, Evangelical Hermeneutics, p. 49-50

It is arrogant to pretend that from our vantage we can gauge accurately the intent of the framers on application of principle to specific contemporary questions. All too often sources of potential enlightenment such as records of the ratification debates provide sparse or ambiguous evidence of the original intention...And apart from the problematic nature of the sources, our distance of two centuries cannot but work as a prism refracting all we perceive.

William J. Brennan, Jr.; quoted in Eidesmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution*, 398-99.





“The issue with the Constitution is that the text is confusing because it was written more than 100 years ago and what people believe it says differs from person to person and differs depending upon what they want to get done.”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bc4qHHIRcJw&feature=related>.

...the story of the New Testament scholar who was retiring after forty years, and he was asked what his greatest regret was. And he said my biggest regret as a New Testament scholar is I never had an opportunity to study the New Testament. I spent all my time understanding what the experts were saying about the New Testament but I never really worked through the biblical text on my own.

Hodges on Farstad



Pat Robertson, *America's Dates With Destiny* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 95.

“I spent three years getting my law degree at Yale Law School. From the moment I enrolled, I was assigned huge, leather-bound editions of legal cases to study and discuss. I read what lawyers and judges, professors, and historians said about the Constitution. But never once was I assigned the task of reading the Constitution itself...”



Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 287.

“...if human beings are continually evolving for the better, then the wisdom of earlier generations...is not likely to be as valuable as modern thought.”

I find it very unscholarly, that in all the progressive dispensationalism literature I never found even a reference to George Peters' Theocratic Kingdom. That is as unprofessional as it could be to ignore a great authority in some area, which you're talking about, and I've said, until you guys can answer George Peter's defense of the offer of the Davidic kingdom, I don't even want to hear you. You can't go on without at least addressing him. Why do you ignore him? That bothers me a great deal. He wrote three volumes, pages and pages of fine print, and in it an enormous defense of the offer, the contingent offer of the Davidic kingdom at Christ's first advent. He was not a dispensationalist either, of our variety anyway.. But progressive dispensationalism rejects that without even answering all of his arguments. I find that omission horrendously inexcusable.

Lack of Pre-1947 Precedent

Case	Date	Pre 1947 Citations	Post 1947 Citations
Levitt v. Committee	1973	0	18
Committee v. Nyquist	1973	1	99
Stone v. Graham	1980	0	9
Marsh v. Chambers	1982	1	32

Barton, *Myth of Separation*, 163-66.

Michael Licona is a highly respected Christian apologist, and the author of the massively researched The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach. He has come under intense fire from two other estimable scholars, Norman Geisler and Albert Mohler, for what they consider to be dangerous compromise in his interpretation of Matthew 27:52-53...Dr. Licona has interpreted the events in that Matthew passage as probably belonging to a figurative and eschatological genre: apocalyptic, in other words...Apocalyptic literature is often intended not to be taken literally. Drs. Geisler and Mohler say that in this context, such an interpretation represents a denial of biblical inerrancy.



<http://firstthings.com/blogs/evangel/2011/09/licona-geisler-and-mohler-some-questions-about-process/>

U.S. SUPREME COURT

• *BOWERS V. HARDWICK (1986)*

• *LAWRENCE V. TEXAS (2003)*



Why have the ACLU and its allies turned for the most ingenious form of government ever designed by man to international law? Probably because they know that even with their broad theories and legal demands, the U.S.

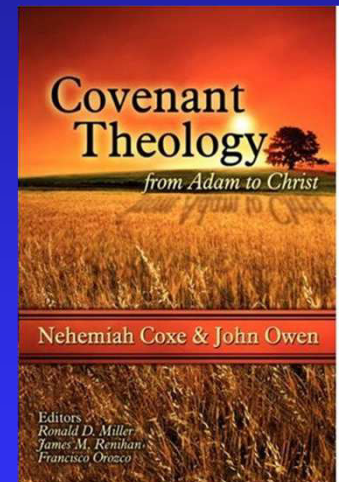
Constitution can be stretched only so far, so fast, to advance their radical agenda. They could find only so many “emanations from penumbras” to invent new “rights” that the Founding Fathers never authored, intended, or even conceived of.



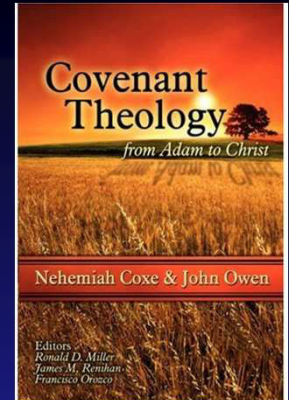
Alan Sears and Craig Osten, *The ACLU Versus America*, p.178.

Distinctives of Covenantism

- A system of interpreting the Scriptures on the basis of two covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Some add the covenant of redemption.
- Importance of grace – In every age, believers are always saved by grace.
- God's primary purpose on earth is redemptive.
- Partial allegorical system of hermeneutics



Distinctives of Covenantism

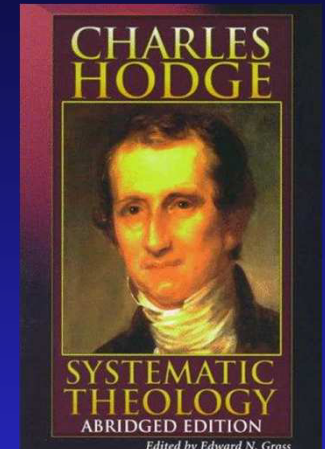


- Covenant of Works – God entered into a covenant with Adam as the federal head of the human race in which He promised eternal life for obedience and eternal death for disobedience.
- Covenant of Redemption – A covenant made between God the Father and God the Son in eternity past in which they covenanted together for the redemption of the human race.
- Covenant of Grace – A covenant made by God with the elect in which He provides salvation to the elect sinner.

Implied vs. Exegetical Covenants

“this statement does not rest upon any express declaration of the Scriptures...And although the word covenant [as in works] is not used in Genesis, and does not elsewhere, in any clear passage occur in reference to the transaction there recorded,...it is plain that the Bible does represent the arrangement made with Adam as a truly federal transaction.”

Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:117



Abrahamic Covenant



Unconditional covenant with a conditional blessing (Deut. 28; Lev. 26)

First Amendment

- “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise there of.”



Baer v. Kolmorgen, 181 NYS 2d. 230,
237 (1958).

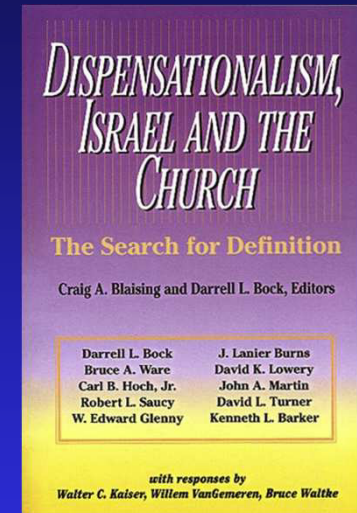


- “Much has been written in recent years concerning Thomas Jefferson’s reference in 1802 to ‘a wall of separation between church and state...’ [It] has received so much attention that one would almost think at times that it is to be found somewhere in our Constitution.”

Complementary Hermeneutics

- “the New Testament does introduce change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison Old Testament promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise.”

Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 392-93.



The genius of the Constitution rests not in any static meaning it might have had in a world that is dead and gone, but in the adaptability of its great principles to cope with current problems and current needs. What the constitutional fundamentals meant to the wisdom of other times cannot be their measure to the vision of our time.

Speech of Justice William Brennan Jr., Georgetown University, 12 October 1985, Washington, DC, quoted in Charles Pickering, *Supreme Chaos*, p.123.



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