

Hermeneutical Confusion and Hermeneutical Consistency

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The Rationale Behind Dispensational Hermeneutics

Without a doubt, the issue of hermeneutics is one of the hottest issues in theology today. The word comes from the Greek *hermeneia* which basically means “interpretation.”^[1] How do we interpret the Bible, and, in particular, those relatively few, yet significant parts of it which cause puzzlement or debate?

No one can enter upon the task of theology without confronting this question. Yet the answer to it is not as straightforward as it may appear at first sight. Take for an example this quote from an important work on biblical ethics:

The church dares to articulate fresh and audacious readings of Scripture only because it relies upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the community – as promised in the New Testament texts themselves (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6-16; John 16:12-15). The Spirit reshapes the community into unexpected metaphorical reflections of the biblical stories and thereby casts new light back onto the texts. Such illuminative conjunctions are impossible to predict and difficult to discern, but the church that seeks to deny or preclude them will find itself locked into the stifling grip of “the letter” (*gramma*, 2 Cor. 3:6), unable to hear the Word of God. Another way to put this point is to say that it is finally God who writes the metaphors.^[2]

The quotation is reproduced to show that there are a lot of scholars out there whose idea of how to interpret the Bible is wildly different than dispensationalists. The writer wants the broad church to explore interpretive possibilities and discover novel new interpretations of well-worn texts. In this way, he says, the church avoids getting cemented in a particular time and culture. More importantly, God is not similarly confined.

The trouble with this kind of view is that it violates the Golden Rule.^[3] It treats the passages of the Bible differently than its own passages. That is to say, the writer of the above statement wants to be taken literally, at face value. He employs numerous figures of speech; “The church *dares*”; “The Spirit *reshapes* the community” and “*casts new light* back onto the texts”; a church that denies this risks becoming one that is “unable to *hear* the Word of God”; “God...*writes* the metaphors.” But he does this without giving a second thought as to whether his language will be misunderstood by literalistic interpreters. Moreover, he cites certain texts of Scripture (1 Cor. 2:6-16; John 16:12-15; 2 Cor.3:6), presumably with the intent that the reader will turn to those verses and read them in their plain sense – figures and all.

It is just this kind of hermeneutical inconsistency; a discontinuity between the text of the Bible and the texts of those who write about the Bible, that dispensationalists object to so strenuously. John Walvoord, in a fine analysis of this question, pointed out that if amillennialists [for example] used their spiritualizing^[4] method of interpretation upon non-eschatological passages, “it would be utterly destructive to Christian doctrine.”^[5]

Dispensationalists also think that non-literal hermeneutics adversely affects the teaching of the perspicuity of Scripture. After all, they ask, is not the Bible written for Everyman? And is it not clear and straightforward in its propositions? Surely, the Scriptures are not the sole domain of the scholar? Did not “the common people hear [Jesus] gladly” (Mk.12:37)? The answer to those questions would seem to be yes. The Bible was not just given to a scholarly

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elite. In fact, it was not *primarily* given to them. Its statements are, for the most part, clear enough. “God’s truth is communicated in objective propositional form, and does not require personal faith to understand it. Those who have faith may indeed be more sensitive and receptive to the subtler nuances of the biblical teaching, but the message is given in objective grammatical expression that anyone may comprehend.”^[6] Does not the Scripture itself say that “[the words of God] are all plain to him who understands” (Prov. 8:9)?

One reason why hermeneutics is important is that human language is often equivocal, that is, capable of having more than one meaning. And since the Bible uses human language it is often possible to misinterpret someone’s meaning. This is especially true when either the person has not expressed themselves well (something we dare not predicate of the Bible), or when the reader/hearer due to bias or unconscious preconceptions has a different set of ideas in his head to which he fits the words of another. Thus, there is need for interpretation. As Walter Kaiser has stated,

What, then, was meant when the scriptures were declared [by the Reformers] to be clear and perspicuous for all? Simply this: the Bible was understood to be clear and perspicuous on all things that were necessary for our salvation and growth in Christ. It was not a claim that everything in the Bible was equally plain or that there were no mysteries or areas that would not defy one generation of Bible readers or another.^[7]

In other words, the Bible is very clear on what it means to be a child of God, but it also contains places where its meaning is discovered after much labor, even for the attentive reader. That said it is of crucial importance that we take the clarity of Scripture seriously. Moreover, we must insist upon the equally important rule that Scripture is God’s Word to Everyman. Its interpretation is not the province of a select group of scholars. To say that encroaches on the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer, setting up, as it in essence does, a higher priesthood of hermeneutics specialists.

Grammatical-Historical (GH) interpretation is the traditional way of doing Protestant hermeneutics. All evangelicals have until recently employed this method to a greater or lesser extent. In its consistent use, it exemplifies dispensational interpretation. A succinct definition is provided by Milton Terry:

Its fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intended to convey. It applies to the sacred books the same principles, the same grammatical process and exercise of common sense and reason, which we apply to other books. The grammatico-historical exegete...will inquire into the

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circumstances under which [the original author] wrote, the manners and customs of his age, and the purpose or object which he had in view. He has a right to assume that no sensible author will be knowingly inconsistent with himself, or seek to bewilder or mislead his readers.^[8]

The importance of literal, (that is, grammatical-historical), interpretation is that it fastens the meaning of the text to the plain sense of the wording. This gives the text priority in hermeneutics.^[9] Zuck, in his book, *Basic Bible Interpretation* says,

to determine God's thoughts we need to study His words and how they are associated in sentences. If we neglect the meanings of words and how they are used, we have no way of knowing whose interpretations are correct. The assertion, "You can make the Bible mean anything you want it to mean," is true only if grammatical interpretation is ignored.^[10]

Grammatical interpretation is important because of the inspired nature of Scripture itself.^[11] We hold to the full (plenary) verbal inspiration of the Bible. This forces us to pay attention to the wording.^[12] Secondly, if one is to be a good exegete he must study the way a Biblical writer has used words and sentences within his discourse. Accuracy to what is *said* is the great goal of grammatical-historical interpretation.

As the name indicates, this form of interpretation pays close attention to the historical situation of the writer and his intended audience. It is primarily interested in finding out what God was saying in a particular situation.^[13] One must strive to find out, as nearly as possible, the circumstances in which the inspired author wrote. Its concern is with ascertaining the meaning of the text by means of exegesis of the passage in context. In order to understand Scripture correctly, it must be understood first, contextually. This includes taking the genre of the passage into consideration. For instance, one recent dispensational writer states that "Each genre embodies characteristics which are distinctive and thus requires attention to its own unique interpretive principles...Recognizing and understanding the genre of a given passage prompts a reading strategy, rules out false expectations, and represents an entre to the meaning of the text."^[14] But as Thomas is well aware, scholars today are still arguing over the identification and assignation of literary genres. (Take, for example the controversy created by Robert Gundry's view that the Gospel of Matthew is an example of Midrash, or Richard Longenecker's opinion that the Apostolic church employed the Peshet interpretation of the Pharisees). One person has made the following illuminating admission.

We may think that we now have a clear notion of what a novel or Gospel

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entails as a genre, but that is seen in light of the other genres that we may have available. How such a category (if it is even pertinent at all...) may have functioned in the ancient world is another matter.^[15]

The fundamental belief behind the employment of the G-H hermeneutic is that the literal or plain sense is to be retained unless it is clear that it cannot be. Even then, if the genre, for example, does not allow for a “surface meaning”, still, one must insist upon the truth that behind the figure stands a literal or normal interpretation.^[16] If, for example, one considers Psalm 98:8 which says “Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together” it is obvious that the language is poetic and figurative. But it is also obvious that the meaning is for the creation of God to join in with the psalmist in giving praise to the Almighty.^[17] The literal sense, then, is the sense *intended* in the context.

The Analogy of Faith

Stated briefly, this rule is simply the rule which says that Scripture is a coherent doctrinal whole, and that, therefore, it can interpret itself. Thus we say that Scripture must interpret Scripture (cf. 1 Cor. 2:13). So if any two passages seem at first to contradict each other, (e.g. Rom. 3:28 with Jam. 2:21), we do not automatically conclude that the Bible contradicts itself. Instead we compare the two passages to find out whether the authors are referring to the same thing. In the case above we would see that Paul and James are using the words “works” and “faith” in slightly different ways. Thus, the Analogy of Faith rule will involve us in a faith-led exploration of the message of Scripture.^[19]

The main issue comes to the fore with the question, *When is the right time to call upon the Analogy of Faith?* If it is brought in to the interpretive process at a premature stage it may alter the way the interpreter reads the passage in question, thus threatening a contextual understanding of the literary unit under consideration. This is especially ominous when prophetic passages come into view. Many times, what it amounts to is attaching a *theological preunderstanding* to the overall interpretive procedure. Thus, a grammatico-historical hermeneutic suddenly becomes a grammatico-historical-theological hermeneutic – one which is far more suitable for those devoted to covenant theology.^[21] The Analogy of Faith is also dragged into service at an early stage by proponents of progressive dispensationalism. In their case it forms a vital part of their “complementary hermeneutic,” which is less elegantly described as a “grammatical-historical-literary-canonical-theological” approach. Unless the Analogy of faith were incorporated within their hermeneutical procedures they could not introduce either the canonical or the theological elements into their complementary scheme.^[23]

What is one to do then with the Analogy of Faith? Thomas has these words to say:

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Are we then suggesting doing away with the analogy of faith? No, we are rather proposing a conscious effort to postpone its part in the interpretive process until the very end. In fact, we may even suggest that it not be a part of the exegetical process at all. It should be a double check on completed exegesis. Its removal from among the hermeneutical principles could be a safeguard against abuses.^[24]

The Interpretation of Prophecy

All Evangelicals subscribe to the G-H method of interpretation. But there is a difference of opinion about how to apply it to many prophetic statements of Scripture. The key issue is how the New Testament interprets the Old. Does the New Testament re-interpret the original promises given to Israel in light of the Cross, giving them a meaning which would have been totally foreign to the original hearers? To say it another way, did the Holy Spirit give the Apostles a deeper, less literal understanding of prophecy so that, for instance, the prophecies concerning Israel, which appear to be crystal clear, were to be seen as fulfilled, not by the Jews, but by the “spiritual Israel”, the Church, which, in point of fact, is composed mainly of Gentiles?^[25] The dispensationalist says that to allow this kind of hermeneutical shift into ones thinking introduces uncertainty regarding what seem to be the clearly unconditional promises of God to the nation of Israel. We say it reverently, if God is in the habit of changing the meaning of His statements from one time period to the next, how can we be sure that the promises made to us in the Gospel will not be revised at some later date? So, whereas some Christians, under the influence of a revised hermeneutic (say, “grammatical-historical-theological”) re-interpret the prophetic covenants made with Abraham and David to exclude national Israel, the dispensationalist *stays* with a G-H hermeneutic when reading these and other prophecies.

Ten Guidelines for Interpretation

Dispensationalists get attacked on all sides about the consistency of his or her hermeneutic. Sometimes this is deserved and sometimes the critic wants to see certain uses of G-H as in effect, some other kind of hermeneutic. Whatever the truth may be, the fact ought not to escape anyone that the criticism is one of *practice* not of *method*. Here are ten guiding principles, taken from recent literature, which, we believe, give real help in this area.^[26]

1. Progressive revelation cannot annul unconditional promises.^[27] If once a promise is made unconditionally by the Lord (e.g. the Land promise to Abraham), it is not abrogated nor transformed further along the historical ladder.
2. If the NT does not explicitly or implicitly cancel something in the OT we

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are to presume it is still in force, or will be in the future.^[28] God does not have to constantly repeat Himself in order for His original pronouncement to be taken seriously.

3. We must be aware that there is no such thing as a consistent NT pattern of OT passages. “There are varieties of NT uses of the OT.”^[29] This is perhaps *the* issue between Dispensationalists and Covenant Theologians. Central to the argument is the issue of *sensus plenior* or new meaning. Dispensationalists guard a single meaning of the sacred text though with expanded applications. By allowing the NT to reinterpret the OT without reference to the original context, other systems like Covenant Theology play fast and loose with a literal hermeneutic whilst claiming unabashedly that they are still interpreting the sacred text literally. In other words, they believe that the *spiritual applications* of the apostolic writers give them carte blanche to ride roughshod over the plain prophecies of the OT.
4. No NT writer claims that his new understanding of the OT passage cancels the meaning of the OT passage in its own context, or that the new application is the only meaning of the OT passage.^[30] This especially affects places such as Peter’s usage of Joel 2 in his first Acts speech (Acts 2), and James’s use of Amos 9 in Acts 15.
5. Typology does not cancel the meaning of the type in its setting, nor does it substitute the meaning of the antitype for it.”^[31] Type and antitype are never exactly alike. For one thing, the type is inferior to the antitype.
6. The NT cannot redefine or re-interpret the OT without hazarding the *revelational* aspect of the OT passage.^[32] God’s word in the OT was a word directed to a particular life-setting. Any predictive elements or future NT applications were not intended to usurp or transform the pristine revelation.
7. Though grammatico-historical hermeneutics tells us the sense of an OT prediction, we cannot always know the referent until the fulfillment.^[33] We are neither Apostles nor prophets.
8. Types and analogies must be handled differently than predictions and prophecies.^[34] They are too open to theological gerrymandering.
9. The Bible uses the term fulfillment and fulfilled in various ways. Interpreters must be sensitive to this phenomenon.^[35]
10. One must carefully distinguish how the NT writers are using the Old. Fruchtenbaum identifies 4 usages: Literal prophecy plus literal fulfillment; Literal plus typical; Literal plus application; and, Summation.

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^[36] While this is a useful classification, it is not identification. Better is Thomas's view (borrowed from Walton) of "inspired *sensus plenior* application" (ISPA). What he means by this term is that the inspired authors of the New Testament could assign a new meaning to an Old Testament passage and apply it to something appropriate to the Church, even doctrinally.^[37]

To summarize in the words of Elliot Johnson, "The bottom line is this: To adopt literal interpretation as a *sine qua non* is to affirm that the context of the theological system provides no valid warrant to expand or alter the meaning understood in the immediate context."^[38]

More than a hundred years ago, Milton Terry described the correct method of Biblical interpretation:

Its fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning which the writers intended to convey. This applies to the sacred books the same principles, the same process and exercise of common-sense and reason, which we apply to other books. The grammatico-historical exegete... will inquire into the circumstances under which [the author] wrote, the manners and customs of his age, and the purpose or object which he had in view. He has a right to assume that no sensible author will be knowingly inconsistent with himself, or seek to bewilder or mislead his readers.^[39]

As those committed to the final authority of Scripture, we must hold that a normative interpretation of its words is always possible. That is why Bernard Ramm maintained, "we need to know the correct method of interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of man."^[40] Such an assertion presupposes that objective meaning (God's voice) is able to be discovered, and that subjectivism (man's voice) is undesirable. That is where we start.

But the dispensationalist insists upon objective revelation through "normative, literal, or plain sense hermeneutics," applied equally (yet not without discernment) across all genres.^[41] "To be sure, literal/historical/grammatical interpretation is not the sole possession or practice of dispensationalists, but the consistent use of it in all areas of biblical interpretation is."^[42] A corollary to this is a belief in the single-sense of Scripture.^[43] There may be various good applications of a verse or passage, but there are not many meanings. God intended His words to be understood unequivocally. He made human language so that He could converse with man, and so that man could broadcast the name of his Lord and Maker to all creation.^[44] When Jesus spoke we are told that, "the common people heard Him gladly" (Mark 12:37). It would be strange indeed if the One who said "He that has ears to hear let him hear" expected to be "heard"

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in any number of ways!

Are Dispensationalists Obligated to Change?

We have pointed out that consistent grammatical-historical hermeneutics is the very oxygen of dispensationalism. Any other theology could adopt some of the modern hermeneutical thinking and survive. But that is just not an option for us. There are some places where one just cannot go. We may be called names and branded backwoodsmen but we must stick to our guns. The truth of the matter is that outside of normative dispensational interpretation most everyone else is at sixes and sevens. David Dockery admits, “the present state of biblical studies is seemingly headed toward a hermeneutical impasse. The problem of interpreting Scripture is one for which all would like to find a simple key, an easy formula that would enable us to approach a text quickly and certainly establish its meaning. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer.”^[45]

This does not mean, however, that we live up to the name of obscurantist. What we have tried to show is that there is every reason in the world for classic dispensationalists to defend the credibility and validity of our hermeneutics. In the last thirty years we have had a tendency to sit back and let our forebears do our talking for us. This will not do in the future. Some scholars are saying that dispensationalism is dead. If we do not put the kind of hard work needed into developing it and refining it, we could well fulfill that prophecy in the next generation.^[46]

[1] Walter C. Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 15.

[2] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 305.

[3] I say this rather tongue-in-cheek of course, since the Golden Rule is hardly aimed at hermeneutical decision-making.

[4] “In the 1940’s and 1950’s the antagonists [sic] from both sides... operated under the assumption that the crucial dividing line between the two theological systems was literal versus allegorical interpretation.” – Michael D. Stallard, “The Theological Method of Arno C. Gaebelein,” Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992, 143-144. NB. Gaebelein frequently used the term “spiritual” instead of allegorical. Ibid, 154.

[5] John F. Walvoord, “Amillennialism as a Method of Interpretation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 107:425 (Jan '50), 49.

[6] Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 4. 210.

[7] Kaiser and Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, 166.

[8] Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 173.

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- [9] Stallard, "The Theological Method of Arno C. Gaebelein," 352.
- [10] Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 1991), 99.
- [11] Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 111.
- [12] Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 19-20.
- [13] Ibid, 155.
- [14] Irvin A. Busenitz, "Must Expository Preaching Always Be Book Studies? Some Alternatives," *Masters Seminary Journal* 2:2 (Fall 91), 146-147.
- [15] Porter, 116
- [16] Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 42-45.
- [17] See Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), 128-129.
- [18] Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 90.
- [19] In my opinion Covenant Theology pushes this rule too far.
- [20] Thomas, 63-65.
- [21] See Paul Martin Henebury, "The Eschatology of Covenant Theology," in *Journal of Dispensational Theology*, Vol. 10.30, (Sept. 2006), 5-16
- [22] Cf. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 85-105, where Bock makes it clear that he has left G-H behind.
- [23] See, e.g., Bock's remarks in Bateman IV, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 89.
- [24] Thomas, 75.
- [25] This is the basic issue dividing the various schools of prophecy, and especially the one which divides Dispensationalists off from the rest.
- [26] I say "real help" not definitive help, as work must never cease on the hermeneutical questions.
- [27] John Feinberg in John S. Feinberg ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 76.
- [28] *ibid.*
- [29] *ibid.*, 77.
- [30] *ibid.*
- [31] *ibid.*, 78.

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[32] Paul D. Feinberg in *ibid*, 116.

[33] *ibid*, 118.

[34] *ibid*, 122. Cf. also Charles H. Dyer's contribution to Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, eds., *Issues in Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 57f.

[35] Charles Dyer in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 57-72.

[36] Thomas Ice in *Ibid*, 38-41. See also John Feinberg in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 80, where he refers to four kinds of Old Testament blessings, viz. Spiritual, Social, Political, and, Economic.

[37] Thomas, 242.

[38] Elliot Johnson in Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 76.

If I may be permitted a personal reflection at this point, it is imperative that responsible Dispensationalists distance themselves from any and all who use the system for the purpose of appearing to be "seers of the times." These people undermine Dispensational theology, making it look like the theology of the sensationalist. The doctrine of the Bible is not to be bent to serve the flights of fancy of the modern would-be prognosticator, nor writer of fiction.

[39] Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint, n.d.), 173.

[40] Ramm, 2.

[41] Mal Couch, (ed.), *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 59, 61.

[42] Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 40.

[43] See e.g., Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, (Dallas, TX: Bible Communications Inc., 1993), 119; Robert Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 154-155. A long-standing proponent of single-meaning is Walter C. Kaiser. See his *Toward An Exegetical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981). Unfortunately, because he fails to employ G-H hermeneutics consistently his examples can look stretched upon occasion.

[44] This parallel with the purpose of language was highlighted by dispensational interpreters years ago. See, for instance, George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1884] reprint), 1.55.

[45] David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 169-170.

[46] Some good work has been done, e.g. Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*, but this work suffers badly from a ponderous style and a lack of definitional clarity. Robert Thomas's *Evangelical Hermeneutics* is a fine book, but it concentrates on highlighting what is wrong with modern hermeneutics without setting forth a positive contemporary corrective.