

Enthroning the Interpreter: Dangerous Trends in Law and Theology - Part II

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The previous article (part one) demonstrated that the utilization of a literal hermeneutic in order to ascertain authorial intent is a key component of American jurisprudence. This article (part two) will establish that the employment of this same method of interpretation is also the cornerstone of proper biblical interpretation. It stands to reason that if jurists employ literalism in order to discover the author's meaning in contracts, testamentary documents, statutes, or constitutions, interpreters of Scripture should do no less when seeking to discover what God Himself has declared. Thus, one notices distinct similarities when comparing traditional maxims of legal interpretation with basic maxims of biblical interpretation. Specifically, this article will show that both biblical and legal interpretation use the identical interpretive approach and underlying philosophy.

Similar Interpretive Approaches in both Biblical and Legal Interpretation

Post reformation biblical interpretation employs what is called the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation. Let us break this phrase down into its component parts. The dictionary defines *literal* interpretation as that type of interpretation which is “based on the actual words in their ordinary meaning . . . not going beyond the facts.”¹ Thus, literal interpretation encompasses the idea of assigning to every word the same meaning it would have in its normal

¹ *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, unabridged, 2d ed., s.v. “literal.”

usage, whether employed in speaking, writing, or thinking.² Cooper's "Golden Rule of Interpretation" incorporates such an understanding of literalism:

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.³

Because literalism resists "going beyond the facts," when interpreting a given text, literal interpreters resist the temptation to import foreign ideas from outside the text. A classic example of going beyond what the text says is the ancient interpretation that the four rivers in Genesis 2, the Pishon, Havilah, Tigris, and Euphrates, represent the body, soul, spirit, and mind. Such an idea is not readily apparent from studying the text in Genesis 2. One must go outside the text of Genesis 2 and bring into it foreign concepts in order to arrive at this conclusion.

It should be noted in passing that literal interpretation has been unfairly criticized on the basis that it adheres to a wooden, inflexible literalism that fails to allow for types, symbols, figures of speech, and genre distinctions. Such a straw man argumentation is easily recognizable by simply reading how those advocating a literal hermeneutic define the term literal. Charles Ryrie specifically notes that literalism "...does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of

² Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d ed. (Boston: W.A. Wilde, 1956; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 89-92.

³ David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), 11.

types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within the basic framework of literal interpretation.”⁴ Ryrie further explains that 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.”⁵ Ryrie buttresses this point by appealing to the following quote from E.R. Craven:

The literalist (so called) is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols are used in prophecy, nor does he deny the great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly figurative so regarded.⁶

The absurdity of the notion that a literal hermeneutic fails to encompass basic figures of speech is also illustrated by the fact that the most extensive scholarly treatment of figures of speech available today⁷ was completed not just by a dispensational literalist, but by a hyper dispensationalist! E.W. Bullinger, the creator of this work, was not only a literalist and a dispensationalist, but a hyper dispensationalist who believed that the age of the church began after Acts 28:28. Thomas Ice observes that, “Bullinger’s work demonstrates that literalists have

⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 86.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ E.R. Craven and J.P. Lange, ed., *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (NY: Scribner, 1872), 98 (cited in Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 87).

⁷ Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968).

at least thought about the use of figures of speech in a detailed and sophisticated way and do not consider such usage in conflict with literalism.”⁸

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).⁹ *Historical* interpretation takes into account historical context, setting, and circumstances in which the words of Scripture were written. Milton S. Terry explains:

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.¹⁰

In essence, the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation is designed to arrive at authorial intent by allowing the ideas plainly found within the text to speak for themselves. By way of comparison, the literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutical method is identical to the contractual hermeneutical method reflected in the words of Justice Flaherty that

⁸ Thomas D. Ice, “Dispensational Hermeneutics,” *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, gen. eds. (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 42.

⁹ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), 100.

¹⁰ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (NY: Philips and Hunt, 1883; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 231.

was mentioned in part one. Flaherty noted, “It is well established that the intent of the parties to a written contract is to be regarded as being embodied in the writing itself, and when the words are clear and unambiguous the intent is to be discovered only from the express language from the agreement...”¹¹ Furthermore, the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation is virtually identical to Joseph Story’s aforementioned approach to constitutional interpretation. According to Story:

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.¹²

Moreover, Terry’s above described definition of historical interpretation bears much resemblance to Thomas Jefferson’s admonition to return to the Constitution’s original intent. The previous article quoted Jefferson in this regard when he said that we must:

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

¹¹ Justice Flaherty; Quoted by E. Allan Farnsworth and William F. Young, *Cases and Materials on Contracts*, 5th ed. (Westbury, NY: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1995), 603-4.

¹² 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.

of the text, or invented against it, conform to the probable one in which it was passed.¹³

In sum, maxims of biblical interpretation have much in common with traditional maxims of legal interpretation. Both approaches have as their underlying goal the pursuit of authorial intent by first and foremost observing the ideas plainly presented in the text.

Philosophical Similarities in Legal and Biblical Interpretation

Although there are similarities in approach when comparing maxims of legal and biblical interpretation, the similarities do not end there. The philosophy of interpretation is also shared between the two disciplines. The underlying goal of both legal and biblical interpretation is to transfer the authority away from the subjective impulses of the interpreter and instead toward the objective standard of the author's meaning.

Why should biblical interpreters employ the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation? J. Dwight Pentecost cites several dangers when such an approach is not used.¹⁴ First and foremost, the authority transfers from the text to the interpreter. In other words, the basic authority in interpretation ceases to be the Scriptures, but rather the mind of the interpreter. Early church father Jerome warns, "that the faultiest style of teaching is to corrupt the meaning

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 5-6.

of Scripture, and to drag its reluctant utterance to our own will, making Scriptural mysteries out of our own imagination.”¹⁵ F.W. Farrar adds, “...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.”¹⁶ Bernard Ramm observes, “The Bible treated allegorically becomes putty in the hands of the exegete.”¹⁷ Thus, scripture becomes held hostage to whatever seems reasonable to the interpreter when the literal, grammatical, historical interpretive method is dispensed with.

Second, the Scripture itself is not being interpreted. The issue becomes not what God has spoken but what the interpreter thinks. In other words, the text becomes servant to the interpreter rather than the interpreter being subservient to the text. Terry explains:

...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.”¹⁸

Third, one is left without any means by which the conclusions of the interpreter may be tested. When the objective standard of language’s common meaning is dispensed with, one

¹⁵ Jerome; Quoted by F.W. Farrar, *History of interpretation* (NY: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1886), 232.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 238-39.

¹⁷ Ramm, 30.

¹⁸ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (NY: Philips and Hunt, 1883), 224.

man's personal interpretation becomes just as valid as anyone else's. In such an environment, there is no way to determine whose interpretation is correct because there is no longer an objective standard that personal interpretations can be compared to. Fourth, there is no mechanism to control the imagination of the interpreter. Ramm notes:

...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.¹⁹

Thus, literal interpretation properly constrains the dictates of the carnal imagination by allowing it to roam only so far. Otherwise, interpreters (to borrow the language of the great New York jurist, Chancellor James Kent) would be able to "roam at large in the trackless fields of their own imaginations." In sum, the philosophy behind utilization of the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation is to shift the authority in the interpretive process away from the subjectivity of the interpreter's ever-vacillating imagination and back toward the objectivity of the static text.

This same rationale also exists in the domain of legal interpretation. For the same reasons described above, when interpreting a contract, courts first of all observe the plain meaning of the contract language. Because courts understand that parties have a right to enter into contractual terms of their own choosing, courts understand that they are not in the business of rewriting contracts in a way that is contrary to the expressed wishes of the parties. Therefore, courts allow the authority in the interpretive process to reside in the contract language rather than in their own opinions regarding what the contract should or should not say. As previously mentioned in part

¹⁹ Ramm, 65.

one, Justice Flaherty succinctly summarized the philosophy behind literal interpretation in contract law:

...the rationale for interpreting contractual terms in accord with the plain meaning of language expressed is multifarious, resting in part upon what is viewed as the appropriate role of the courts in the interpretive process: This court long ago emphasized that the parties have the right to make their own contract, and it is not the function of the court to re-write it, or to give it a construction in conflict with...the accepted and plain meaning of the language used...In addition to the justifications focusing upon the appropriate role of the courts in the interpretive process, the plain meaning approach to construction has been supported as generally best serving the ascertainment of the contracting parties mutual intent...In determining what the parties determined by their contract, the law must look to what they clearly expressed. Courts in interpreting a contract do not assume that its language was chosen carelessly. Neither can it be assumed that the parties were ignorant of the meaning of the language that they employed...²⁰

Similarly, because courts desire to honor the wishes of the testator, they also allow authority to rest in the testamentary document itself by utilizing a literal approach when interpreting such documents. Moreover, because the judiciary traditionally has not desired to transform itself into a super legislature, it has attempted to follow the plain language of statutes whenever possible when interpreting legislation. In addition, because jurists have traditionally not desired to amend the Constitution from the bench, they have typically followed the plain language of the Constitution's drafters thus allowing authority to abide in the constitutional text rather in their own ideological predilections. Traditional principles of constitutional interpretation recognize that the maxim of following the plain language of the text is indeed the best insulation against an

²⁰ Justice Flaherty; Quoted by E. Allan Farnsworth and William F. Young, *Cases and Materials on Contracts*, 5th ed. (Westbury, NY: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1995), 603-4.

overly ideological judiciary. If jurists approached these documents any other way, they would not be interpreting. Rather, they would be amending and rewriting them.

Lawyers Advocating Literalism throughout Church History

As indicated in the preceding discussion, appropriate biblical interpretation, as capsulated in the works of hermeneutical authorities such as Ramm, Pentecost, Terry, and Farrar, is nearly identical to the principles of legal interpretation in both approach and philosophy. However, this similarity will come as no surprise to students of church history. Some of the greatest contributions to the church's understanding of the importance literal interpretation have come from those who were either lawyers or former students of the law. Great advances in hermeneutical method came about when these Christian jurists applied their legal training to the study of the Scriptures. Their efforts resulted in trusted interpretive methods later codified and summarized by recent hermeneutical authorities.

For example, reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, both students of the law in their formative educational years,²¹ played integral roles in rescuing the church from the Alexandrian allegorical method of interpretation that was introduced in the second century and grew to dominate the church throughout the middle ages. Luther denounced the allegorical approach to Scripture in strong words. He said: "Allegories are empty speculations and as it were the scum of Holy Scripture." "Origen's allegories are not worth so much dirt." "To allegorize is to juggle the Scripture." "Allegorizing may degenerate into a mere monkey game." "Allegories are awkward,

²¹ Alan W. Gomes, *Reformation & Modern Theology and Historical Theology Survey Course Syllabus* (La Mirada: Biola Bookstore, 1999), 23; Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985), vol. 2: 62.

absurd, inventive, obsolete, loose rags.”²² Luther also wrote that the Scriptures “are to be retained in their simplest meaning ever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids” (*Luther’s Works*, 6:509).²³

Calvin similarly rejected allegorical interpretations. He called them “frivolous games” and accused Origen and other allegorists of “torturing scripture, in every possible sense, from the true sense.”²⁴ Calvin wrote in the preface of his commentary on Romans “it is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.”²⁵

Both reformers rejected the use of church tradition as a guide for spiritual truth and instead advocated returning to scripture alone or “*sola scriptura*” as the source of Christian belief and practice. To put this into legal terms, Luther and Calvin rejected the case law approach as a guide to Scripture.²⁶ The case law method places more emphasis on studying what legal authorities have said about a given legal source than on studying the legal source itself. The case law method and its relationship to constitutional law will be dealt with in part three. In addition, both

²² Martin Luther; Quoted in Farrar, 328.

²³ Martin Luther; Quoted by Zuck, 45.

²⁴ John Calvin; Quoted in Zuck, 47.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ John Eidesmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 402.

reformers recognized the value of knowledge of biblical Hebrew and Greek due to the fact that a return to scripture inevitably required knowledge of the original languages of Scripture.

However, despite their emphasis upon literally interpreting some aspects of Scripture, Luther and Calvin did not go far enough in applying a literal hermeneutic to all areas of divine truth. Regarding Luther, Roy B. Zuck observes:

Though Luther vehemently opposed the allegorizing of scripture, he too occasionally allegorized. For instance he stated that Noah's Ark is an allegory of the church. For Luther, Bible interpretation is to be centered in Christ. Rather than allegorizing the Old Testament, he saw Christ frequently in the Old Testament, often beyond what is legitimately provided for in proper interpretation.²⁷

Because the reformers were primarily concerned with soteriological issues, they failed to apply the same literal interpretation that they used to interpret soteriology to the areas of ecclesiology and eschatology.

Such a selective and inconsistent application of a literal hermeneutic was not rectified until the budding of the dispensational movement centuries later. What makes dispensationalism unique as a theological system is not merely its emphasis upon a literal hermeneutic, but its willingness to consistently apply this literal hermeneutic to the totality of biblical revelation. Thus, Ryrie includes consistent literal interpretation in his *sine qua non* of dispensational

²⁷ Zuck, 45.

theology when he says, “the distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation.”²⁸

By insisting on the application of a literal hermeneutic to all of Scripture, dispensationalism, in essence, completed the hermeneutical revolution begun by the reformers. Dispensationalists took the literal hermeneutic applied by the reformers in the area of soteriology and applied it to all areas of theology, including eschatology and ecclesiology. Just as Calvin and Luther, the two men most credited for introducing a literal hermeneutic to soteriological issues in the reformation era, were trained in the law, many of the leaders of the dispensational movement were heavily influenced by their legal training and thinking. For example, John Nelson Darby, the man mostly credited with rediscovering the scriptural doctrine of the pretribulation rapture, planned to enter the field of law after graduating from Trinity College in Dublin. He was called to the Irish Chancery Bar in 1822. However, after a spiritual struggle that led to his conversion he opted to give up the law in order to become a priest in the Church of England.²⁹

Another key dispensational thinker was Sir Robert Anderson. Though more recent work may shed new light on Anderson’s prophetic calculations,³⁰ his work *The Coming Prince* is considered a classic in the area of biblical chronology because of its detailed explanation of the literal fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks. Anderson, like Darby, was also

²⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 40.

²⁹ Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics: A Guide to the History and Practice of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 112; Floyd Elmore, “Darby, John Nelson,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 82.

³⁰ Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 115-39.

heavily influenced by the legal profession. After receiving his law degree from Trinity College, Dublin in 1863, he became a member of the Irish bar and worked drawing up legal briefs on a traveling circuit. He served as chief of the criminal investigative department of the Scotland Yard. After retiring with distinction, he used his investigative training and ability to think logically to study the Scriptures.³¹

Cyrus Ingerson Scofield was yet another influential dispensationalist who also happened to be a lawyer. Following the Civil War he studied law and received his law degree. He then entered politics in Kansas. President Grant later appointed him to the office of District Attorney. Scofield's best-remembered contributions include his influence as a Bible teacher as well as *The Scofield Reference Bible*, which advocated a pretribulation rapture, a literal return of the Jews to the homeland, premillennialism, and dispensationalism.³² In sum, given the contributions that legal minds have made throughout church history concerning the significance of literal interpretation, it is no wonder that the maxims of proper biblical interpretation, as summarized by hermeneutical authorities such as Ramm, Pentecost, Terry, and Farrar, bear such a close resemblance to traditional maxims of legal interpretation.

Conclusion

Just as employing a literal method of interpretation in order to ascertain authorial intent is central in the field of law, the exact same maxim of interpretation is also crucial toward proper biblical interpretation. Not only is this interpretive approach the same in both fields, but the

³¹ Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics: A Guide to the History and Practice of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 119.

³² *Ibid.*, 119-120.

philosophy behind the approach is also the same in both. The rationale for a literal hermeneutic in both legal and biblical interpretation is to transfer authority away from the subjective impulses of the interpreter and toward the objective standard of the text.

These first two articles demonstrate the significance of literalism to proper legal interpretation (part one) and proper biblical interpretation (part two). Now that this foundation has been laid, the next two articles will expose gradual erosion of these principles in modern legal interpretation (part three) and in contemporary evangelical biblical interpretation (part four).