

ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

PART 5

HERMENEUTICS, PART 5

For the most part, literal hermeneutics were lost until the Reformation but there were some theologians throughout history who figured out the need for literal interpretations. They realized that God could only be known by reading the Bible through literal hermeneutics. John Wycliffe (ca. 1330-1384) was called “the Morning Star of the Reformation.” “He is best known ... for instigating a translation of the Vulgate into English.... In order to know and obey God’s law, it is necessary for them to read the Bible. For Wycliffe, the Holy Scriptures were the only standard of faith and source of authority. That is why he felt that it was so important to make them available in the vernacular. He spent the last few months of his life on that task, leaving the completion of the Wycliffe Bible to his followers.” [“Wycliffe, John in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*]. His legacy lived on through some of his students at Oxford who were from Czechoslovakia who returned home and influenced Jan Hus (ca. 1372-1415). Hus did not completely depart from Roman Catholic theology but he did emphasize “preaching the Word of God to bring about moral and spiritual change in listener’s lives. To help them read the Scriptures, he also revised a Czech translation of the Bible. As a theologian, Hus helped restore a biblical vision of the church, one that focused on Christ’s teachings and example of purity. Moreover, his stress on preaching and the universal priesthood of believers became hallmarks of the later Protestant Reformation.” [“Hus, Jan” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*]. Hus was imprisoned and placed on trial for heresy, found guilty, and burned at the stake. Literal hermeneutics was the reason many fine, faithful Christian pastors, theologians, and lay people were put to death by the Roman Catholic Church and by some of the early Reformers such as Calvin and Zwingli.

William Tyndale (ca. 1494-1536), a British theologian, translated the New Testament into English. He was martyred near Brussels, Belgium. Tyndale wrote, “Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the Scriptures hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. Neverthelater, the Scripture useth proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifieth, is over the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently. ...” [Charles Augustus Briggs, *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture* pp. 456-57 as quoted by J. Dwight Pentecost in *Things to Come*, p. 27].

Luther realized the folly of allegorical hermeneutics and became convinced that literal hermeneutics was the only way to be faithful to God and to what He was telling us through the written Word. He still had some hermeneutical practices we wouldn't agree with, but he came a long ways from where he started. "Luther was trained in the fourfold interpretation of the Middle Ages, as is evident in his early writings. But, according to James S. Preus, he abandoned it in 1517, when he opted for a single, literal sense. Yet he struggled throughout his life to overcome the temptation of allegorical interpretation. He confesses, 'When I was a monk I allegorized everything. But after lecturing on the epistle to the Romans I came to have some knowledge of Christ. For therein I saw that Christ is not an allegory, and I learned to know what Christ actually was.' Elsewhere he admits, 'It was very difficult for me to break away from my habitual zeal for allegory. And yet I was aware that allegories were empty speculations and the froth, as it were, of the Holy Scriptures. It is the historical sense alone which supplies the true and sound doctrine.'" Luther angrily dismisses allegorical interpretation: 'Origen's allegories are not worth so much dirt.' 'Allegories are awkward, absurd, invented, obsolete, loose rags.' 'Allegory is a sort of beautiful harlot, who proves herself specially seductive to idle men.'

Of his own development, Luther writes, 'Ever since I started to stick to the historical sense, I have always had a horror of allegories and did not employ them unless the text itself indicated them or the interpretation were there in the New Testament....' I leave allegories alone. A young theologian should avoid them as much as he can. I think that in a thousand years there was no more economical allegorist than myself.... Become a text critic and learn about the grammatical sense, whatever grammar intends, which is about faith, patience, death, and life. The Word of God does not deal with frivolous things.'" [Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*, pp. 112-113].

One thing Luther was never able to do was abandon amillennial Eschatology. He specifically and explicitly denied the concept of a literal, 1,000 year Messianic Kingdom. As previously noted, Calvin also maintained his amillennial Eschatology.

In the revision of his book *Dispensationalism*, Dr. Ryrie has an excellent definition and discussion on the hermeneutics of dispensational theology. "Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation. This means interpretation that gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. It is sometimes called the principle of *grammatical-historical* interpretation since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations. The principle might also be called *normal* interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated *plain* interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech. Symbols, figures of speech, and types are all interpreted plainly in this method, and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or

plain meaning that they convey to the reader.” [Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 80-81].

In a commentary on Revelation, J. P. Lange commented on the dispensationalist understanding of language as it applies to literal hermeneutics. “The *literalist* (so called) is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols*, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.” In other words, figurative language always represents a literal meaning or truth and sometimes that is a spiritual truth. The difference is that dispensational exegetes don’t make up a spiritual truth simply to serve their theology or their own personal thoughts and emotions. They allow the Scriptures to stand as written.

God gave us communication skills not only to communicate meaning from one person to another person but to communicate with Him as well. It is not unreasonable to suppose that He intends for us to understand exactly what He has communicated to us through the prophets and the apostles as He revealed Himself and what He wants us to know through the written Word of God. Using any hermeneutic other than the literal hermeneutic demeans the communication process God has instituted in order to reveal Himself and His plan for history to us.

“If God is the originator of language and if the chief purpose of originating it was to convey His message to humanity, then it must follow that He, being all-wise and all-loving, originated sufficient language to convey all that was in His heart to tell mankind. Furthermore, it must also follow that He would use language and expect people to understand it in its literal, normal, and plain sense. The Scriptures, then, cannot be regarded as an illustration of some special use of language so that in the interpretation of these Scriptures some deeper meaning of the words must be sought. If language is the creation of God for the purpose of conveying His message, then a theist must view that language as sufficient in scope and normative in use to accomplish that purpose for which God originated it.... If one does not use the plain, normal, or literal method of interpretation, all objectivity is lost. What check would there be on the variety of interpretations that man’s imagination could produce if there were not an objective standard which the literal principle provides? To try to see meaning other than the normal one would result in as many interpretations as there are people interpreting....” [Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 81-82]. Because so many Christians have abandoned literal hermeneutics, the theological chaos Dr. Ryrie has warned us about is exactly the situation in which the church finds itself today.

Concerning Eschatology, understanding prophecy provides us with a powerful incentive to exegete the Scriptures with a literal hermeneutic. There are many prophecies that have been fulfilled throughout history including the First Advent of Christ and His death, burial, and resurrection. Many prophecies concerning Israel have

been fulfilled and many more remain to be fulfilled. If some prophecy has been fulfilled, isn't that powerful proof that prophecies as yet unfulfilled will be fulfilled just as God's predicted? Of course, it is. Amillennialists and postmillennialists do not believe God's Word literally means what it says. We saw examples of that earlier, in which some of the theologians who hold those eschatological viewpoints admit a literal reading produces an understanding of prophecy that is in agreement with dispensational theology. They are more beholden to their theology than they are to the Scriptures so that literal meaning cannot be allowed to stand.

Ryrie points out that many theologians use literal hermeneutics but they do not use them consistently. He believes the hallmark of dispensational hermeneutics is the consistent use of literal hermeneutics. Ryrie writes, "The difference lies in the dispensationalist's claim to use the normal principle of interpretation *consistently* in *all* his study of the Bible. He further claims that the nondispensationalist does not use the principle everywhere. He admits that the nondispensationalist is a literalist in much of his interpretation of the Scriptures but charges him with allegorizing or spiritualizing when it comes to the interpretation of prophecy. The Dispensationalist claims to be consistent in his use of this principle, and he accuses the nondispensationalist of being inconsistent in his use of it." [Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 82].

I could not disagree with Dr. Ryrie more on this point. The use of other than literal hermeneutics for prophecy results in incorrect interpretations that, in turn, lead to faulty doctrinal positions and this affects all the areas of Systematic Theology and not just Eschatology. Non literal systems of hermeneutics must then be employed in order to justify the incorrect interpretations. These theologians are inconsistent in their hermeneutic throughout the Scriptures and not just concerning prophecy. Their theology demands it. Every nonliteral hermeneutical system concerning prophecy results in Replacement Theology and that, in turn, has an effect on other areas of theology. I've already noted how Augustine's amillennial theology resulted in a massive change in his Soteriology.

There was also a historical reason why Chiliastic or premillennial theology fell out of favor and that was Constantine's imposition of Christianity as the state religion. To that time, the church had been Chiliastic or Millennial in its understanding of the Scriptures, but when the peace and prosperity of being an acceptable, even mandatory, religion in the culture came about people began to think that was the Kingdom in their midst. People were no longer looking forward to the promises of the Millennial Kingdom. The true purpose and nature of the Kingdom was lost in favor of proclaiming the Kingdom to be here now in the church as evidenced by the peace and prosperity Christians began to enjoy concomitant with the cessation of persecution.

“Notably, the conversion of Constantine, the deliverance and exaltation of the church, and finally the union of State and church under Imperial supervision and protection, served to make Millenarianism unpalatable. We leave others, who have no sympathy for our doctrine, testify. Thus e.g. Smith, after stating that ‘the interval between the apostolic age and that of Constantine has been called the Chiliastic period of Apocalyptic interpretations,’ proceeds: ‘Immediately after the triumph of Constantine, the Christians, emancipated from oppression and persecution, and dominant and prosperous in their turn, began to lose their vivid expectations of our Lord’s speedy Advent and their spiritual conception of His Kingdom, and to look upon the temporal supremacy of Christianity as a fulfilment of the promised reign of Christ on earth. The Roman Empire, become Christian, was regarded no longer an object of prophetic denunciation, but as the scene of a Millennial development. This view, however, was soon met by the figurative interpretation of the Millennium, as to the reign of Christ in the hearts of all true believers.’ Kurtz ... adds: ‘But as the aspect of outward affairs changed under the reign of Constantine the Great, these views (Chiliastic) lose their hold on men’s minds. The church now prepared for a long-continued period of temporal prosperity, and the State church of that time forgot the Millennial glory of the future.’... ‘This [abandonment of Millennial doctrine] was brought about by their adoption of the Origenic rule of interpreting the teachings of Isaiah and St. John on the one hand, and the explaining of them in accordance with the theory of Eusebius, which made Rome the New Jerusalem of the Apocalypse on the ground that Constantine turned the heathen temples into Christian churches, etc., on the other.’” [George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, pp. 1:505-506 (proposition 76, observation 8)]. This is what we might today all newspaper exegesis on steroids! When peace broke out, people lost interest in an imminent return of Christ to deliver them from poverty and persecution. They placed their trust in the state for protection and they gloried in the fact that the state mandated their religion as the official state religion. Thus, the thinking of the people fell right into an amillennial mindset which held that prophecy had all been completed in 70 A.D. Replacement theology insured that the Jews were rejected and replaced by the church so any notion of a literal Jewish return to Israel and of Christ ruling on a literal Davidic throne in Jerusalem was lost.

The word “Chiliasm” comes from the Greek *χιλιάς* and *χίλιοι* both of which mean 1,000. We derive millennium from *mille anni* which is the Latin expression of the Greek. Zodhiates describes the three main views of 1,000 in the entry under “*χίλιοι*”. “The significance of this numerical term in Rev. 20:2-7 is much disputed. On the one hand, there are those who take this to be formally literal and understand it to represent a period of time lasting one-thousand years; they are called chiliasts. Those chiliasts who locate this period after the return of Christ are called premillennialists (a few of whom do not insist on exactly one-thousand years considering the expression to be figurative for a large segment of time). Those chiliasts who locate this period before Christ’s return

are called postmillennialists (represented by the liberal and the evangelical schools). On the other hand, there are those who take this to be essentially literal and understand the thousand-year reign to represent ideally the present spiritual victory of Christ and His redeemed over this evil world system (Babylon); they are called amillennialists or 'nuncmillennialists' [now-millennialists]. The use of the expression 'thousand years' itself does not require a formally literal interpretation. The literary genre of the Book of Revelation is apocalyptic and as such uses numbers, places, personages, and its other elements primarily as symbols." [Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, "χίλιοι"]. The errors Zodhiates makes in explaining this word are sourced in his Reformed theology rather than in the use of the word in the text. He has to rely on allegory, spiritualization, literary genre, and theology for the meaning he assigns to the word.

Philip Schaff (1819-1893), the pre-eminent church historian of the nineteenth century, had a lot to say about Chiliasm in early church history prior to Constantine. Schaff was a Reformed theologian who became very involved in ecumenical endeavors and liberal seminaries. He believed that Roman Catholicism and Protestantism would eventually merge into a new evangelical faith. ["Schaff, Philip", *Dictionary of Evangelical Theology*]. I could not definitively discover his position on premillennial theology, but given his theological background it is improbable he was anything but an amillennialist. He had to have subscribed to replacement theology. Given that, his honest reporting on the state of the very early church concerning its premillennial stance is commendable. Compare that with the theologians who today deny the premillennial Eschatology of the early church when they ignore it and make the claim that the history of Eschatology started with Origen and Augustine.

"The most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment. It was indeed not the doctrine of the church embodied in any creed or form of devotion, but a widely current opinion of distinguished teachers, such as Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius; while Caius, Origen, Dionysius the Great, Eusebius (as afterward Jerome and Augustine) opposed it.... The advocates of this theory appeal to the certain promises of the Lord, but particularly to the hieroglyphic [sic] passage of the Apocalypse, which teaches a millennial reign of Christ upon this earth after the first resurrection and before the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. In connection with this the general expectation prevailed that the return of the Lord was near, though uncertain and unascertainable as to its day and hour, so that believers may be always ready for it. This hope, through the whole age of persecution, was a copious fountain of encouragement and comfort under the pains of that martyrdom which sowed in blood

the seed of a bountiful harvest for the church." [Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:614-615].

Schaff's skepticism concerning a literal 1,000 year Messianic Kingdom is apparent when he refers to the 1,000 years of Revelation 20 as a "hieroglyphic passage of the Apocalypse." In other words, the apocalyptic genre of Revelation makes it very difficult to decipher and therefore it is impossible to reach any dogmatic conclusions about its meaning. At least he does honestly report the fact that many of the early church fathers were premillennial in their Eschatology.

"Among the Apostolic Fathers Barnabas is the first and the only one who expressly teaches a pre-millennial reign of Christ on earth. He considers the Mosaic history of the creation a type of six ages of labor for the world, each lasting a thousand years, and of a millennium of rest, since with God 'one day is as a thousand years.' The millennial sabbath on earth will be followed by an eighth and eternal day in a new world, of which the Lord's Day (called by Barnabas 'the eighth day') is the type." [Schaff, 2:615]. Apostolic Fathers refers to those men who were first century apostles; he is not referring here to the second century and after Patristic Fathers of the church. Barnabas expressed his belief in the "cosmic week" understanding of history. This doctrine understands God's plan to encompass 6,000 years of human history followed by 1,000 years of Millennial rest, and then the eighth day is eternity.

"Justin Martyr represents the transition from the Jewish Christian to the Gentile Christian chiliasm. He speaks repeatedly of the second parousia of Christ in the clouds of heaven, surrounded by the holy angels. It will be preceded by the near manifestation of the man of sin who speaks blasphemies against the most high God, and will rule three and a half years. He is preceded by heresies and false prophets. Christ will then raise the patriarchs, prophets, and pious Jews, establish the millennium, restore Jerusalem, and reign there in the midst of his saints; after which the second and general resurrection and judgment of the world will take place. He regarded this expectation of the earthly perfection of Christ's kingdom as the key-stone of pure doctrine but adds that many pure and devout Christians of his day did not share this opinion. After the millennium the world will be annihilated, or transformed." [Schaff, 2:616-617]. This is a solidly biblical understanding of premillennial Eschatology.

"Irenaeus, on the strength of the tradition from St. John and his disciples, taught that after the destruction of the Roman empire, and the brief raging of antichrist (lasting three and a half years or 1260 days), Christ will visibly appear, will bind Satan, will reign at the rebuilt city of Jerusalem with the little band of faithful confessors and the host of risen martyrs over the nations of the earth, and will celebrate the millennial sabbath of preparation for the eternal glory of heaven; then, after a temporary liberation of Satan,

follows the final victory, the *general* resurrection, the judgment of the world, and the consummation in the new heavens and the new earth." [Schaff, 2:617-618].

These men reflect a generally literal understanding of the Scriptures; therefore, much of it is in alignment with what premillennialists teach today. The charge that amillennialism is the historic, traditional understanding of the church is simply untrue. That only became true after Augustine popularized amillennial doctrine and the church accepted his theology as the theology of the church.

Pentecost wrote an excellent summary of the history of hermeneutics. "As this history of interpretation is summarized, it is to be noted that all interpretation began with the literal interpretation of Ezra. This literal method became the basic method of Rabbinism. It was the accepted method used by the New Testament in the interpretation of the Old and was so employed by the Lord and His apostles. This literal method was the method of the Church Fathers until the time of Origen when the allegorical method, which had been devised to harmonize Platonic philosophy and Scripture, was adopted. Augustine's influence brought this allegorizing method into the established church and brought an end to all true exegesis. This system continued until the Reformation. At the Reformation the literal method of interpretation was solidly established and, in spite of the attempts of the church to bring all interpretation into conformity to an adopted creed, literal interpretation continued and became the basis on which all true exegesis rests. It would be concluded, then, from the study of the history of interpretation that the original and accepted method of interpretation was the literal method, which was used by the Lord, the greatest interpreter, and any other method was introduced to promote heterodoxy. Therefore, the literal method must be accepted as the basic method for right interpretation in any field of doctrine today." [J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 32-33].

Pentecost was a little overenthusiastic about the use of literal hermeneutics since the Reformation. Many people claim to use that system but do not. It is absolutely correct to say that all true exegesis rests on the foundation of literal hermeneutics.