

HERMENEUTICS: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

HERMENEUTICS, PART 3

An amillennial Calvinist named Oswald T. Allis also had some rather alarming things to say about literal hermeneutics and Eschatology and, at the same time, he harshly criticized premillennial dispensational theologians. Allis is a little difficult to pin down concerning Eschatology. He seems to be amillennial but at times he writes things that sound postmillennial. At any rate, he is totally against premillennialism and he rejects literal hermeneutics. He makes the claim that the Eschatology of Darby and the Brethren movement was founded on “distinctive doctrines” meaning they were different than what the church had historically taught. But this is only partially true. The early church was totally Chiliast, or Millennial, in its eschatological understanding of God's plan for Israel, for the Church, and for history. It wasn't until Augustine in the fifth century switched his Eschatology from premillennial to amillennial that this changed and it remained that way, through the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformers, until the Darby and the Brethren shed light on the actual biblical teaching of the Bible concerning Eschatology.

“The Brethren Movement from which Dispensationalism derived its distinctive doctrines was at first characterized by great simplicity of teaching. The Brethren denounced the historic creeds of the Church as man-made ‘systems’ and insisted that they alone were truly ‘subject’ and ‘submissive’ to the Bible as the Word of God. But they very soon developed a system which was as distinctive as any of the systems which they denounced, so that their denunciation of all creeds and systems speedily came to mean no more than this, that all were false except their own; and their contempt for theology and theologians was simply due to the fact that in none of the historic creeds and theological systems known to them were the doctrines set forth which they held to be essential and which they claimed to have rediscovered, after they had been lost to view for centuries. This hostility to creeds was unfortunate. Had the Brethren been willing to test their new beliefs in the light of the history of the doctrine of the Church during nearly two thousand years, they might have been saved from serious errors. Unfortunately, Dispensationalists have inherited not a little of this regrettable prejudice.” [Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy & the Church*, p. 16].

Allis is belittling premillennial Eschatology by calling it a “distinctive doctrine’ and simple teaching. This is an elitist attitude that essentially says, “Why don't you simpleton dispensationalists leave the real theology to us erudite, educated, theologically nuanced experts? You people can't possibly understand the intricacies and subtleties of real biblical theology. Just shut up and leave the real work of theology to the experts—which, of course, are us Calvinists.” That is the message he is conveying in this

paragraph. His reliance on the creeds is normative for Calvinist theologians. If you read much of their theology, you cannot help but notice their reliance on the creeds seemingly more than they rely on the Bible at times. Also notice his reliance on history "during nearly two thousand years." Again, this is equating what Calvinist theologians believe with the doctrines the Roman Catholic Church has maintained since Augustine. I'm pretty certain that equating your theology with Roman Catholicism is probably something no well-educated, biblical Protestant theologian should be doing.

Allis then moves on to criticize literal hermeneutics. "One of the most marked features of Premillennialism in all its forms is the emphasis which it places on the literal interpretation of Scripture. It is the insistent claim of its advocates that only when interpreted literally is the Bible interpreted truly; and they denounce as 'spiritualizers' or 'allegorizers' those who do not interpret the Bible with the same degree of literalness as they do. None have made this charge more pointedly than the Dispensationalists. The question of literal versus figurative interpretation is, therefore, one which has to be faced at the very outset. And it is to be observed at once that the issue cannot be stated as a simple alternative, either literal or figurative. No literalist, however thoroughgoing, takes everything in the Bible literally. Nor do those who lean to a more figurative method of interpretation insist that everything is figurative. Both principles have their proper place and their necessary limitations." [Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy & the Church*, pp. 16-17].

Our position is that the only true hermeneutic is a literal hermeneutic. What Allis fails to realize is that literal hermeneutics fully accounts for figurative speech. How else can truth be discerned if the written Word isn't taken at face value? The problem with a figurative language hermeneutic is who gets to determine what is figurative and what is its meaning? You noticed in the example I gave earlier concerning the 144,000 that the figure was arrived at by multiplying the twelve tribes by the twelve apostles. Why? Because that method produced the desired result of replacing Israel with the church and allowed the 144,000 to be declared believers throughout history, Old Testament and New Testament believers alike who are all the church, and to deny they were all Jewish men. There is no exegetical reason for using that method to determine the meaning of that number; it is made up in order to reinforce and support amillennial Eschatology. Beyond that, those theologians could not agree among themselves what all those figures meant. They had varying meanings to justify the necessity for multiplying $12 \times 12 \times 1,000$. When the theological conclusion is determined before the text is exegetically examined, the theology drives the exegesis.

Allis presents three reasons why he thinks a literal interpretation of Scripture is impossible.

His first reason is that the "language of the Bible often contains figures of speech." [Allis, p. 17]. That's true but what he refuses to acknowledge is literal hermeneutics accounts

for and understands figurative speech to be part of the normative method of communication between human beings and it is no less so in the Word of God. Figures of speech are understood to be expressing literal truths during the exegetical process. These theologians refuse to give us credit for being able to understand the nuances of figurative speech. Men like Hank Hanegraaff claim that premillennial dispensationalists use “hyper-literalism” or “wooden literalism” to interpret the Bible and thereby fail to understand its true meaning. “To avoid the dangers of hyper-literalism, one must adeptly employ the literal principle of biblical interpretation. Rather than viewing all of Scripture through the opaque lens of wooden literalism, the careful student of the Bible recognizes and accurately interprets *form, figurative language, and fantasy imagery.*” [Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*, p. 20]. By “form” he means genre hermeneutics and by “fantasy imagery” he refers to apocalyptic literature. Hanegraaff truly hates what he calls “Christian Zionism” and he is thoroughly an amillennial replacement theologian even though he denies the “amillennial” characterization of his theology. Hanegraaff claims that he is the theologian who uses the literal principle of biblical interpretation. His claim is made to fool people into thinking his is the literal hermeneutic.

The second reason Allis provides as a limitation on literal hermeneutics is that the “great theme of the Bible is, God and His redemptive dealings with mankind. God is a Spirit; the most precious teachings of the Bible are spiritual; and these spiritual and heavenly realities are often set forth under the form of earthly objects and human relationships. ...Whether the figurative or ‘spiritual’ interpretation of a given passage is justified or not depends solely upon whether it gives the true meaning. ...[W]e should remember the saying of the apostle, that spiritual things are ‘spiritually discerned.’ And spiritual things are more real and more precious than visible, tangible, ephemeral things.” [Allis, p. 17-18]. This sounds a lot like Platonic dualism. His first error is the presupposition that the purpose of God is revealed in the Bible to be the redemption of mankind. The problem is God’s program for history and beyond is far greater than just the redemption of man; it is all for His glory. This reasoning is simply an excuse for allowing theology to trump the plain reading of Scripture. The spiritual meaning is prioritized over the literal and in that way the meaning that affirms the theology can be presented just as we saw in our example of the 144,000 in Revelation. They use their theology, and not the words found in the text, to determine the “true meaning” as Allis called it.

His third reason for making the claim that literal hermeneutics is limited is that the New Testament must be used to reinterpret or explain the Old Testament. “The fact that the Old Testament is both preliminary and preparatory to the New Testament is too obvious to require proof.” [Allis, p. 18]. Allis just dogmatically makes this statement and expects everyone to simply accept it without question. It isn’t a fact and it should be questioned. The concept that the New Testament must reinterpret the Old Testament is

an absolute requirement for replacement theologians but it is deadly to correctly understanding the Scriptures. These theologians cannot allow the Old Testament to speak for itself and it must be interpreted by reading the New Testament back into it. As previously noted, many of them admit that a literal exegetical reading of the Scriptures leads to a premillennial understanding. Progressive dispensationalists have adopted this interpretive sleight of hand and they call it a “complementary hermeneutic.”

The primary eschatological issue that seems to really bother Allis is the future of Israel. “This literalistic emphasis has shown itself most plainly in their insistence that Israel means Israel: it does not mean or typify the Church. The early Brethren denounced most severely the custom, very general at that time, of applying to the Church the prophecies regarding Israel. This, of course, led to literalism along other lines....” [Allis, p. 19].

Here is an example of how amillennial replacement theology uses the New Testament to reinterpret the Old Testament in many ways but particularly when it relates to prophecy. Reformed pastor/theologian Kim Riddlebarger wrote a book entitled *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*.

Riddlebarger claims to have grown up believing premillennial dispensational doctrine. After he became exposed to Reformed theology, he became convinced of the veracity of the amillennial position. “But after a difficult journey from dispensationalism to the theology of the Protestant Reformation, I have come to believe that these books [here he is referring to Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and to Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkin's series *Left Behind*] and the particular interpretation of biblical prophecy they present seriously default at many points. My goal in writing this book is to humbly attempt to point out these errors and provide what I think is a more biblical way to understand the Bible's teaching on the coming of the Lord and the millennial age. ...My purpose is to set forth the historic Protestant understanding of the millennial age. This position is commonly known as *amillennialism* and is centered in the present reign of Jesus Christ. Amillennialism is grounded in *redemptive history*, the historical acts of God as they unfold in the Bible to provide for the salvation of his people. ...Amillennarians believe that the millennium is a present reality (Christ's heavenly reign), not a future hope (Christ's rule on earth after his return).” [Riddlebarger, p. 11].

It is important to recognize the presuppositions this man brings into his theology. He has come to believe that the history behind the Eschatology of the Reformation is confirmation that amillennialism must be correct. However, we know this “history” is based on one man's personal beliefs concerning asceticism that were founded on his pagan Manichean and Greek philosophical background that he embraced after a youthful period of debauchery. That man, of course, was Augustine. Calvin, the

Reformation theologian Riddlebarger embraces, adopted this theology directly from Augustine via the Roman Catholic Church and introduced it into Protestant theology. Knowing this, we can conclude that simply because something is historical or traditional, does not make it biblical. Calvinists rely on the creeds, on history, and on tradition as foundational presuppositional elements of their theological system. Second, it is a primary presupposition of amillennial theologians to maintain that Christ is at this time reigning over the Kingdom from the (supposed) Davidic throne in heaven. Finally, he points out that the primary purpose of God is the redemption of mankind. All of these presuppositions are serious unbiblical error.

Riddlebarger takes the liberty to redefine our hermeneutic for us by denying that dispensationalists use a literal hermeneutic and they are instead using what he terms a literalistic hermeneutic. "Although dispensationalists claim to interpret Scripture literally, in actuality, they often read a passage literalistically, by which I mean they downplay or ignore how Old Testament passages are interpreted by the authors of the New." [Riddlebarger, p. 38-39]. "The irony is that dispensationalists' practice of interpreting all prophetic texts in a literalistic fashion amounts to a repudiation of the historic Protestant hermeneutic and the principle of the analogy of faith. If amillennialists adopt the New Testament writers' interpretation of the Old Testament, are they not following the literal sense of Scripture, even if the New Testament writer universalizes something which was limited to Israel in the Old Testament? The dispensationalists' literalistic reading of prophetic passages must not be confused with a literal reading. A literal reading—a reading that gets at the plain sense of the text—will allow the New Testament to interpret the Old. It is amillennialists, not dispensationalists, who interpret prophecy literally in that they follow the literal sense of how the writers of the New Testament interpret Old Testament prophecy." [Riddlebarger, p. 40]. According to this theologian then, a literal hermeneutic is one in which the New Testament is used to reinterpret the Old Testament. His explanation of all this is dangerously close to Orwellian doublespeak. He explains how he understands the differences between the two interpretive systems work in practice. "Because of their commitment to a literal interpretation of the Bible, dispensationalists see Old Testament prophecy as the determinative category through which New Testament prophetic data is interpreted. For example, the Book of Revelation must be interpreted by the book of Daniel, according to the dispensationalist hermeneutic [he references Dr. Walvoord's book *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* as proof for his assertion]. The amillennialists, on the other hand, see the New Testament data as the determinative category by which Old Testament and future Eschatology is to be interpreted. Therefore, amillennialists see the Book of Revelation as the God-given interpretation of Daniel." [Riddlebarger, p. 38]. Because that presupposition is false, they have to assign numerous allegorical and spiritual meanings to Revelation to try and make their interpretation work.

He then uses a specific New Testament Scripture that quotes an Old Testament prophetic book as proof texts to make his point. He references the Jerusalem council as it is recorded in Acts 15:1-29 and specifically the quotation of Amos James uses as part of the basis for his decision. Riddlebarger ignores the larger context in both Acts and in Amos as he attempts to prove his point. These contextual issues will render his argument disingenuous at best and deceitful at worst. What did James actually say in Acts?

Acts 15:13–21 ¹³After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, “Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁴“Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. ¹⁵“With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, ¹⁷SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’ ¹⁸SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. ¹⁹“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, ²⁰but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹“For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

James acknowledged that Peter had reported to the council the events surrounding the conversion of Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:1-48. James then acknowledged the Old Testament was bearing witness to the fact that Gentiles were part of God's plan for the Kingdom. The “rest of mankind” in v. 17 refers to the Gentile population of the earth in total and “the Gentiles who are called by My name” in v. 17 refers to those who respond in faith. James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to prove his point and to provide the biblical basis for Gentile inclusion into the Kingdom; what took place between Peter and Cornelius and his household is perfectly consistent with Old Testament revelation. Riddlebarger ignores the context in Amos 9 that provides the Kingdom background for what James said.

First of all, in the verses preceding the context from Amos James used in Acts, the Tribulation is presented and then the restoration is predicted.

Amos 9:8–10 ⁸“Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are on the sinful kingdom, And I will destroy it from the face of the earth; Nevertheless, I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob,” Declares the LORD. ⁹“For behold, I am commanding, And I will shake the house of Israel among all nations As grain is shaken in a sieve, But not a kernel will fall to the ground. ¹⁰“All the sinners of My people will die by the sword, Those who say, ‘The calamity will not overtake or confront us.’

Amillennialists deny the reality of a seven year Tribulation period preceding a literal Millennial Kingdom on earth. Instead, they understand some sort of massive rebellion to occur immediately prior to the Second Coming when Jesus will return and execute a final judgment on mankind, believers and unbelievers alike, at the same time and at the same judgment seat. There is no seven year period of Tribulation and there is no Millennial Kingdom for 1,000 years on earth.

The context of Amos is that a period of judgment will befall Israel followed by a restoration of the house of David and in which there will be Gentile peoples who will be believers.

Amos 9:11–15 ¹¹“In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, And wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins And rebuild it as in the days of old; ¹²That they may possess the remnant of Edom And all the nations who are called by My name,” Declares the LORD who does this. ¹³“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “When the plowman will overtake the reaper And the treader of grapes him who sows seed; When the mountains will drip sweet wine And all the hills will be dissolved. ¹⁴“Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, And they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them; They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, And make gardens and eat their fruit. ¹⁵“I will also plant them on their land, And they will not again be rooted out from their land Which I have given them,” Says the LORD your God.

Any honest reading of Amos, in context, reveals that Gentiles are said to be included in the Millennial Kingdom. That’s what the reference to “the nations who are called by My name” is about. Riddlebarger has to deny that truth for two reasons. First, Israel has been replaced by the church so the “fallen booth of David” cannot be literally raised up again. Second, he doesn’t believe there will be a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ Jesus ruling from Jerusalem. Therefore, he has to interpret this Scripture according to his theology rather than according to what it actually says.

The accurate interpretation of Amos is represented by Fruchtenbaum. “When the Kingdom is established, the ruins of the House of David will be repaired, and the Davidic Throne will again exercise all the glory of the days gone by (v. 11). But in addition to all the glory of the past, the authority of the reestablished Davidic Throne will extend to all the Gentile nations (v. 12).” [Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, p. 436].

“James now notes how the teaching of the prophets matches or agrees with the inclusion of the Gentiles. The verb συμφωνοῦσιν (*somphōnousin*) [“agree”, v. 15] literally means ‘share the same sound,’ and thus ‘match’ or ‘agree’. ...The reference to the prophets is important. James’s point is not just about this one passage from Amos;

rather, this passage reflects what the prophets teach in general, or what the book of the Prophets as a whole teaches. Other texts could be noted. James is stressing fulfillment, for the prophets agree with what Peter has described. This is not an affirmation of analogous fulfillment but a declaration that this is now taking place. God had promised Gentile inclusion; now he is performing it." [Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, "Acts", p. 503].

Dr. Toussaint made these observations: "James did not say Amos 9:11-12 was *fulfilled* in the church; he simply asserted that what was happening in the church was in full agreement with the Old Testament prophets. The word 'prophets' is plural, implying that the quotation from Amos was representative of what the prophets in general affirmed. James' main point is clear: Gentile salvation apart from the Law does not contradict the Old Testament prophets." [Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 394].

There are quite a few Old Testament Scriptures that predicted the inclusion of Gentiles in the plan of God for salvation.

Isaiah 49:6 ⁶He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Zechariah 2:11 ¹¹"Many nations will join themselves to the LORD in that day and will become My people. Then I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent Me to you.

Isaiah 53:11–12 ¹¹As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. ¹²Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.

It is interesting to compare Riddlebarger's New Testament reinterpretation of the prophet's words with the literal interpretation and his take on it is as follows: "James saw the prophecy as fulfilled in Christ's resurrection, exaltation, and in the reconstitution of his disciples as the new Israel. The presence of both Jew and Gentile in the church was proof that the prophecy of Amos had been fulfilled. David's fallen tent had been rebuilt by Christ. In Amos' prophecy, 'after this' indicated that the prophecy referred to what God would do for Israel after the exile. When James applied this prophecy to the church, was he spiritualizing an Old Testament text? Or was James reading the Old

Testament through a Christ-centered lens typical of the greater light of the messianic age? This question lies at the heart of the debate between Amillenarians and dispensationalists." [Riddlebarger, p. 39].

Not one word of Riddlebarger's interpretation is true according to a simple, plain reading of the text in question. He claims this prophecy was about Israel and what God would do for them after their exile at the hands of Assyria. A major problem with this interpretation is Israel was never restored after the Assyrians removed them from the land. The other major problem is that his interpretive conclusions are not even remotely mentioned in this Scripture. In this pericope, Amos was writing about the Tribulation and not about the exile of the people of Israel. How can he say that is what the original meaning of this Scripture meant? The only reason he can say it is because his theology demands it; the Bible certainly doesn't say it. He puts the resurrection, the exaltation of Christ, and the church as the new Israel all in a prophecy about a literal Tribulation, a literal restored Davidic throne on earth, and a literal Messianic Kingdom. James is making a literal point, Gentile inclusion in the church, based on literal prophecies of Gentile inclusion in the Kingdom which will follow the Tribulation. This kind of amillennial hermeneutic simply destroys any possibility of understanding the plan of God and it destroys the reality of the predicted Millennial Kingdom.

Replacement Theology obliterates the Jewish context of much of Scripture. These men do not understand that God has a plan and a program for Israel. The New Testament Scriptures were written by Jewish men who understood the plan of God to include a Messianic Kingdom. Their use of the Old Testament is consistent with that program. Fruchtenbaum has identified the ways the Jewish authors of the New Testament quoted the Old Testament and none of them involve a reinterpretation of the Old Testament.

1. Literal prophecy plus literal fulfillment.
2. Literal plus typical (typology).
3. Literal plus application.
4. Summary.

Fruchtenbaum provides the insight needed to understand how the Jewish authors of Scripture related the Old Testament Scriptures to the New Testament. For our purposes here, we need to understand that no New Testament writers added a reinterpretation of the Old Testament in any quotation they used of it in the New Testament. It is simply the imagination of the amillennial interpreter that creates that false hermeneutic.

It is easy to recognize the disdain these men have for literal hermeneutics. Dr. Andy Woods has identified eight trends in the attack on literal hermeneutics [Andy Woods, Duluth Bible Conference, Oct. 2011] and we can see at least six of the eight in this discussion.

1. *Ad hominem* attacks against literal hermeneutics and literal interpretations. The premillennial dispensational position is frequently misrepresented.
2. Authority is transferred from the text to the interpreter. The use of any spiritual, allegorical, or theological hermeneutic places the authority with the interpreter and removes it from the inspired Word of God.
3. The interpreter's biases render the intent of the author of the text unknowable. For example, Riddlebarger's interpretation of Amos 9:11-12 completely destroys authorial intent.
4. There is a movement away from studying original sources. Notice the significant, unquestioning reliance many theologians place on the creeds and on the history and traditions of the church.
5. Ignoring older commentators. The idea is that people today know more than previous generations which is an evolutionary mindset. For example, they do not recognize the pre-Augustine church Fathers that were all chiliasts. It is as though church history started with him.
6. Overemphasis on studying background literature in order to determine the meaning of a text. A ministerial mindset seeks to serve the text; a magisterial mindset seeks to judge the text.
7. Building an entire paradigm despite a lack of textual support. A paradigm is a pattern or model; it is a worldview composed of the underlying theories and methodologies of a subject. Amillennial doctrine is based on a presuppositional paradigm that the church has replaced Israel and the Kingdom is not literal but spiritual.
8. Texts are not static; texts change. The New Testament can change the Old Testament and the New Testament adds meaning when it quotes the Old Testament. This is what Riddlebarger called literal hermeneutics.