

The Dangers of Allegorical Interpretation Part 2

Allegorical Interpretation Results in a Wrong Application

The Allegorical approach leads the Christian into a wrong personal application of a Scripture passage. It is generally understood that Bible study consists of three basic steps: *observation*, *interpretation*, and *application*. A careful *observation* of the text allows for an accurate *interpretation* which enables the reader to make a meaningful *application*. If a person's interpretation of a Bible text is faulty, the result will be a faulty application.

Allegorical interpretation mistakenly assigns God's promise to heal and restore a repentant Israel to the church. "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."¹ Although there is a reminder here of the heart attitude God desires to see in those who love and worship Him, these words are written directly and specifically to the nation of Israel, a theocracy. This promise cannot be applied to the church in the historical context; in addition, the church does not have a land and is not under a conditional covenant.

Allegorical interpretation has resulted in eschatological and ecclesiological applications, including Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, Preterism, and Covenant Theology, and these applications have brought widespread confusion to the church for centuries. These faulty applications are a result of faulty interpretations. Origen insisted, ". . . it is the task of the interpreter to decide which events are to be taken literally and which are not." Origen continued by saying the reader must ". . . carefully ascertain in how far the literal meaning is true, and in how far impossible."² Such a statement strongly implies the divine Author of Scripture has deliberately inspired untrue or misleading meanings.

Allegorical Interpretation Denies the Inspiration of Scripture

Allegorical interpretation denies the inspiration of Scripture by not regarding the words of Scripture in their normal or natural meaning. Linguistically, words are indispensable for the accurate expression of thought, and God did not entrust the human authors of

¹ 2 Chronicles 7:14

² Ronald E. Diprose, Israel and the Church – The Origin and Effects of Replacement Theology, (Authentic Media 2004), p. 83.

Scripture with the responsibility of choosing words to express His thoughts. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,” including every word, even to the smallest Hebrew letter and the smallest stroke of one Hebrew letter.³ The inspiration of Scripture extends to the words and even the letters in the original documents. Moses recorded much of God’s written revelation, but Moses did not summarize what God said in his own words. Instead, with great care, “Moses wrote all the words of the Lord.”⁴ The Apostle Paul wrote that the Jews were entrusted with the very utterances or words of God.⁵ Just as the inspired writers of Scripture were responsible to record the very words of God, and the Jews were entrusted to preserve the record of those same divine utterances, so we who read the scriptures are responsible to regard the words of God in a literal sense and in their normal usage.

Allegorical Interpretation Denies the Inerrancy of Scripture

Origen believed that since the Bible is full of mysteries, riddles, parables, dark sayings, and moral problems, a deeper meaning of what is written must be found. Some of the “problems” Origen had with the inerrancy of Scripture was that “days” were said to exist before the sun or moon were created; God is said to be “walking” in the Garden; the earth has no mountain high enough from which the devil could have shown Jesus all the world’s kingdoms; Jesus said to pluck out your eye if it offends you, but He did not say which eye; and immoral accounts of people’s actions are given including Lot’s incest, Noah’s drunkenness, Jacob’s polygamy, and Judah’s seduction of Tamar.⁶ Since it is felt that these things could not be an accurate account of what God meant, the allegorical interpreter must seek a hidden and deeper meaning.

Allegorical interpretation denies the historical and grammatical interpretation to the Scriptures. Dr. Mike Licona is Associate Professor of Theology at Houston Baptist University. In 2010, he authored the book, [The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach](#). In this book, Licona suggests that the account of the resurrected saints walking through the city recorded in Matthew 27:51-53 might not actually have happened. Licona denies the historical accuracy of this account, calling it “poetical,” a “legend,” an “embellishment” and literary

³ Matthew 5:18

⁴ Exodus 24:4

⁵ Romans 3:2

⁶ See, Dr. Stephen R. Lewis, “Hermeneutics Bible 405 the Study of the Interpretation of Scriptures,” Chafer Theological Seminary

“special effects.” Long-time friends of Licona, like Dr. Gary Habermas and Dr. David Beck of Liberty University support Licona, and Liberty University has offered Licona a position on their faculty. Licona also denies the historical accuracy of other events in the Gospels, including the appearance of angels at Jesus’ tomb.⁷

An accurate written record of God’s revelation demands that the original autographs or writings of the Scriptures be completely without error in conveying exactly what God intended and completely dependable and trustworthy in all it affirms or teaches, whether related to historical, scientific, poetical, doctrinal, or prophetic matters. The basis for the inerrancy of God’s written revelation is His very nature which is perfect and infallible. Jesus made the statement “the Scripture cannot be broken,”⁸ meaning what God has inspired men to write cannot be proved false or “emptied of its force by being shown to be erroneous.”⁹

Allegorical Interpretation Denies the Authority of Scripture

Since the Scripture is “God breathed,” by that very nature it commands divine authority as the Word of the Living God.¹⁰ Allegorical interpretation denies the divine authority of the Scriptures by replacing God’s inspired message with the imaginations of the interpreter. Consequently, the allegorical interpreter, by forcing so-called ‘deeper meanings’ into the text removes God as the sovereign authority of the meaning of His own revelation! The result is that no allegorical interpretation can claim the authority of the original text. No allegorical interpreter can say, “Thus saith the Lord,” and no one who believes what the allegorical interpreter says can know of a certainty that their faith is anchored in what God has declared to be true.

Allegorical Interpretation Denies the Perspicuity¹¹ of Scripture

“The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God’s help and being willing to

⁷ Dr. Norman Geisler, Mike Licona on Inerrancy, <http://normangeisler.com/mike-licona-on-inerrancy-its-worse-than-we-originally-thought/> Nov. 2011

⁸ John 10:35

⁹ Leon Morris, The Gospel of John, p. 468

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

¹¹ Perspicuity has to do with language that is clear or understandable.

follow it.”¹² However, the allegorical interpreter claims what God has written cannot be understood in its literal sense or by the normal use of language, because there is a hidden meaning that must be discovered by the human reader.

Allegorical interpretation is motivated by human pride in seeking a deeper meaning than what God has plainly revealed and in ignoring the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit. Clement felt that a literal interpretation of the Scriptures was adequate for the majority of Christians but for those Christians who were “more advanced spiritually,” God revealed deeper truth through allegorical interpretation. Eusebius, a Greek historian of the 4th century, had disdain for a man named Papias of Hierapolis (AD 60-130) who is generally thought to have been taught by the Apostle John and who held to chiliasm.¹³ Eusebius stated that because of his theology which was based on a grammatical/historical interpretation of Scripture, Papias qualified for the distinction of being “a man of exceedingly small intelligence.”¹⁴

Origen taught that the real meaning of a passage was hidden beneath the normal understanding of the words and could only be drawn out by the allegorical interpreter. On the contrary, the clarity of Scripture is directly linked with the readers approach to Scripture. “It is open and transparent to earnest readers; it is intelligible and comprehensible to attentive readers.”¹⁵ Not only is Scripture clear when understood by the normal usage of language, but the Christian approaching Scripture is not alone in interpreting God’s Word. The Holy Spirit Himself “searches the deep things of God” and helps us as believers to “know the things that have been freely given to us by God.”¹⁶

The Bible itself testifies to its clarity. The longest chapter in the Bible is Psalm 119. All 176 verses, with the exception of verses 122 and 132, refer to the Word of God and point to the perspicuity of Scripture and show us that God intended His written revelation to be clearly understood in order to be simply applied. How could God’s revelation be “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”¹⁷ or give “understanding to the simple”¹⁸ if it was not

¹² Wayne Grudem

¹³ Chiliasm is the belief that there will be a literal 1000-year reign of Christ on earth characterized by peace and prosperity.

¹⁴ Early Christian Writings, “Fragments of Papias,” <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/papias.html>

¹⁵ James Callahan, The Clarity of Scripture, (Downers Grove, Illinois, 2001)

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 2:10-12

¹⁷ Psalm 119:105

clear or if it required a deeper interpretation? There is no ‘deeper meaning’ than the plain words that God breathed into the authors of Scripture. To seek a ‘deeper meaning’ than what can be understood literally by taking God at His word seems an affront to the ability and eagerness of God to communicate clearly to man.

Allegorical Interpretation is Subjective and Results in Eisegesis

The allegorical interpreter may become offended by the literal sense of the Scripture passage in the following ways: 1) What is conveyed by the literal sense is unworthy of God; 2) The literal sense conflicts with a preferred theological position; 3) What the literal sense presents is impossible or unreasonable.

If the interpreter is offended by the literal meaning, the interpreter then feels justified in searching for a ‘hidden’ allegorical meaning.

The Christian should always seek to perform careful interpretation or exegesis; that is, ‘reading out of’ the Scripture text what God intended it to mean. By contrast, the subjective nature of allegorical interpretation leads to eisegesis; that is, ‘reading into’ the text what the interpreter wants it to mean. Of course, there can be any number of allegorical interpreters and any number of interpretations, so the allegorical interpretation can never be tested or verified because it is not based on the authority of the original text but is based on the personal imaginations and preconceived ideas of the interpreter.

Origen believed that when the literal meaning of Scripture expressed what was “unworthy of God,” the interpreter needed to seek for a deeper meaning that was “worthy of God.” Origen wrote, “seeing those events which lie on the surface can be neither true nor useful, we may be led to the investigation of that truth which is more deeply concealed, and to the ascertaining of a meaning worthy of God in those Scriptures which we believe to be inspired by Him.”¹⁹ This ridiculous human reasoning begs the question, “How can it be that God would inspire men to write words unworthy of Himself?”

Conclusion

William Tyndale, the translator of the first English Bible from the Greek and Hebrew,

¹⁸ Psalm 119:130

¹⁹ By Dr. Paul Hoskins, “Biblical Interpretation History of Biblical Interpretation: Allegorical Interpretation and Origen of Alexandria,” February, 2017 <http://www.bibleandtheology.net/highlights-from-the-history-of-biblical-interpretation-allegorical-interpretation-and-origen-of-alexandria/>

was put to death by Rome in 1536 for heresy. Although the following words expressed by Tyndale below are in an old English writing form, they are worthy of our attention.

“Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the Scripture 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.”²⁰

We could paraphrase Tyndale’s thoughts like this: “You must understand that Scripture has only one meaning or interpretation, which is the plain, normal or literal sense that governs language. That plain, normal or literal sense is the root, foundation and anchor of interpretation which never fails. If you hold to the plain, normal or literal understanding of God’s Word, you will not fall into error or be led astray. If you abandon the plain, normal or literal understanding of God’s Word, you will most certainly be led down paths of error.”

[Sanford Bible Church](#)

²⁰ William Tyndale, cited by Charles Briggs, *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture*, p. 456-57