

# Going Beyond the Allegorical Debate

## Introduction

For many years, discussions about interpreting God’s Word often focused on the use of *plain* or *literal interpretation* versus *spiritual* or *allegorical interpretation*. However, the case for allegorical interpretation seemed to be a losing position for its supporters. Even the very nature of language itself demands plain or literal interpretation for actual understanding to take place. If the reader is allowed to reinterpret the words of the author by means of allegorical interpretation, then any hope of meaningful communication is lost. Therefore, those arguing in favor of allegorical interpretation needed a better line of reasoning to defend their position.

Herbert Bateman explains how the focus of the discussion has changed in more recent years:

First, debates between evangelical dispensationalists and nondispensationalists in the 1960s and 1970s were confined to “literal” versus “spiritual.” Each condemned the other for either an overly literal interpretation or an overly spiritualized (allegorical) interpretation of the text, especially when it concerned prophecy. ... Recent debates, however, are more complex due to developments in hermeneutics, especially *how to interpret* a New Testament author’s use of the Old Testament...<sup>1</sup>

Bible teachers who promoted the use of allegorical interpretation felt that they could better support their weak position by looking at how New Testament authors used quotations from the Old Testament. They reasoned that if New Testament authors used allegorical interpretation when quoting from the Old Testament, then that gave them permission to also spiritualize the plain meaning of God’s Word.

In this lesson we will look at how the debate about allegorical interpretation has progressed and what effect it has on the interpretation of God’s Word.

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert W. Bateman IV, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1999), 36-37.

## Enter the Progressives

In the early 1900s, discussions about methods of interpretation took place between Dispensationalists and non-Dispensationalists. The Dispensationalists argued for *plain* or *literal interpretation*. The non-Dispensationalists argued for *spiritual* or *allegorical interpretation*. In the 1980s a new type of Dispensationalist entered into the debates. They are known as Progressive Dispensationalists. Progressive Dispensationalism<sup>2</sup> represents a step toward Covenant Theology from Normative Dispensationalism. These new Progressives have led the way in arguing for a method of interpretation that accommodates the allegorical approach promoted by Covenant Theology. They say that New Testament authors used an allegorical method of interpretation when quoting the Old Testament. This allegorical interpretation of the New Testament writers allowed them to change the original meaning of the Old Testament authors. Since the New Testament writers set the precedent for using allegory, those who read the Bible today should also have the freedom to use the same method of interpretation.

Dr. Gary Gilley explains:

Traditional and moderate dispensationalists believe that the Old Testament text has one meaning which could never be changed by the New Testament, although the New Testament could further explain its meaning. Progressives, leaning toward Reformed theology, accept that the New Testament can expand or alter the meaning of the Old Testament. The resultant consequence is that an Old Testament passage means one thing for now and something else in the future.... This is a denial of grammatical/historical hermeneutics. The Old Testament text has more than one meaning for the progressives....<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Elliot E. Johnson represents a normative dispensational view of Biblical interpretation. His understanding of how the New Testament authors used quotations from the Old Testament is significantly different than the Progressives. Dr. Johnson argues that Progressive Dispensationalists have confused revelation and interpretation. He says that the authors of the New Testament were given additional revelation. These

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<sup>2</sup> For more information see the lesson on Progressive Dispensationalism.

<sup>3</sup> Gilley, Gary. "Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism by General Editor: Herbert W. Bateman IV." Think on These Things. <http://tottministries.org/three-central-issues-in-contemporary-dispensationalism-by-general-editor-herbert-w-bateman-iv/> (accessed July 14, 2017).

New Testament authors simply explained the meaning of Old Testament passages in light of additional revelation. They did not change the original meaning of the Old Testament writers.

This new debate brings up a number of questions which need to be considered:

- Did the New Testament authors actually use allegorical interpretation? If so, does that give today's reader of the Bible the right to use allegorical interpretation? We will consider these questions in the lesson that deals with *Paul's Use of Allegory in His Letter to the Galatians*.
- Did the New Testament authors change the original meaning intended by the writers of the Old Testament? We will deal with this question in two lessons: *Matthew's Use of Hosea 11.1* and *Understanding the Biblical Term Fulfillment*.
- What does it matter? Do these debates actually make a theological difference?

## Why It Matters

Progressive Dispensationalists have certainly distanced themselves from Normative Dispensationalists in a number of areas. Their hermeneutical approach to interpreting God's Word has resulted in them blurring the lines between Israel and the Church.

George Eldon Ladd was a professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Fuller Theological Seminary. Ladd held to a doctrine which has been called Covenant Premillennialism. This is not to be confused with Dispensational Premillennialism.

Covenant Premillennialists have the same basic ideas about the nature of the Church as do other Covenant Theologians. They teach that all believers throughout history are part of the Church and that the Church was predicted in Old Testament prophecy. This results in blurring the distinctions between Israel and the Church. In contrast, Normative Dispensationalists teach that the Church is a mystery and was not mentioned by the Old Testament prophets. They maintain the distinctions between Israel and the Church.

Ladd taught that the rapture of the Church would take place after the tribulation. The tribulation is also known as the time of Jacob's trouble. Jeremiah predicted this event when he wrote, "Alas! For that day is great, So that none is like it; And it is the time of Jacob's trouble, But he shall be saved out of it. (Jer. 30:7)" If we go back to verses 3 and 4, we see that Jeremiah was speaking about "Israel and Judah." The purpose of the

tribulation is to bring “Israel and Judah” to repentance through a horrible time of trouble. By placing the rapture after the tribulation, Ladd once again blurs the distinction between Israel and the Church. In contrast, Dispensationalists teach that the rapture of the Church will take place before the tribulation. God removes the Church from earth before He begins to once again deal with the nation of Israel.

Ladd also blurs the distinctions between Israel and the Church with his “already—not yet” concept of the Millennial Kingdom. He taught that the Millennial Kingdom began at the time of Christ in an inaugurated form (already). However, it will be fully realized when Christ begins His thousand-year reign on earth (not yet). Ladd’s “already—not yet” theory has also been called “realized eschatology.” It is this “already—not yet” concept that the Progressives have adopted as their own.

Dr. Gilley explains:

Traditional (and modified) dispensationalists, while affirming that Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father, reject that He is now reigning from David’s throne. Progressives argue that the Old Testament texts teach that Christ will sit on David’s throne in the millennial kingdom, but that the New Testament has altered that meaning to allow for Christ to do so now. As a result, progressives have embraced Ladd’s “already—not yet” understanding of the kingdom. We are in the kingdom now, but there remains a future kingdom on earth. The more traditional dispensationalists would say the “already—not yet” theory disregards the mystery and distinction of the church, as revealed in the epistles. This is one of the major differences between the two schools of thought....

The concern of more traditional dispensationalists is that progressives are so blurring the distinction between Israel and the church as to virtually eliminate that distinction. As a matter of fact, progressives view the church as the first stage of the millennial kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

We will have more to say about these concerns in the lesson about *Progressive Dispensationalism*.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Imagine opening a letter and reading the following:

Dear Sir,

You are in violation of statute #573 of the municipal government code. You are requested to immediately pay a fine of \$10,000 USD. If you do not comply within 10 days, you will be confined to prison for a term of not less than 2 years.

*The Office of the Municipal Prosecutor*

Immediately you look at the front of the envelope and see that the letter was actually addressed to someone else. What a relief!

Reading someone else's mail can cause a lot of confusion and problems.

Likewise, much confusion can result in misapplying promises or warnings to our own lives that were actually meant for the people of Israel. This happens far too often when people blur the distinctions between Israel and the Church.

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