

# HOW LITERAL IS LITERAL?

by

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## Introduction

In the forward to Charles Ryrie's original *Dispensationalism Today*, Frank Gaebelin noted that the "...system of Bible interpretation known as dispensationalism has in recent years been subjected to much opposition."<sup>1</sup> Fifty years later the situation has not changed. If anything, it has worsened. The Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics has set out to examine Ryrie's threefold *sine qua non* of dispensationalism over a three-year period. The 2015 meeting considered the distinction between Israel and the Church. But as Ryrie has said, "This distinction between Israel and the Church is born out of a system of hermeneutics which is usually called literal interpretation. Therefore, the second aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism is the matter of plain hermeneutics."<sup>2</sup> Ryrie acknowledges that the word 'literal' is not as good as the words 'normal' or 'plain' but in so doing he strives to distance himself from any interpretation that smacks of spiritualizing or allegorizing (which are more characteristic of nondispensational systems).<sup>3</sup> Notice that even Ryrie's original apologetic for dispensationalism was uncomfortable with the word 'literal' and clarified it with the words 'normal' and 'plain'.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

I think it is safe to say that all dispensationalists have an understanding of what literal interpretation is; that is, when asked to define it, we all have a definition that describes how we implement it. But sometimes one definition does not match another definition. This is true even when two Bible students/scholars both agree that literal interpretation is the correct method. It is painfully true when someone is criticizing the 'literal interpretation' methodology. This paper will examine several questions. They are:

1. What is 'literal' interpretation?
2. Exactly what is 'literal'?
3. Does everyone agree on what is 'literal'?
4. How 'literal' should 'literal' interpretation be?
5. What is the effect on biblical interpretation, not only on prophecy, but also on ancient biblical history, including the issue of origins?

### **Presuppositions**

In order to proceed it is necessary to delineate several presuppositions which are very basic and hardly revolutionary. They are as follows:

- The Bible is God's revelation to humanity.
- The Bible is inspired by God.
- God's character does not allow Him to lie.
- What God has revealed to us must be true.
- Accumulated manuscript evidence and translation fidelity yields confidence in the trustworthiness and authority of the Bible.
- God's revelation to humanity is meant to be understood.

- Our responsibility is to understand what God has revealed in the Bible and to be ‘doers of the Word’ and not hearers only.
- Therefore, the goal is to determine the Author’s intended meaning as delivered through the human author’s words in the text of the Bible.
- Because God does a perfect job of inspiration, there are no hidden meanings.

### **Definitions**

What are some typical definitions of ‘literal interpretation’ of the Bible? Paul Lee Tan says, “Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means explaining the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say that in the process of interpreting literally we must consider the accepted rules of grammar, and the historical and cultural data of biblical times. This is often referred to as the grammatical-historical method of interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

Calvary University makes use of Roy B. Zuck’s text, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, in our classes on hermeneutics. When dealing with the proper interpretation of Scripture, Zuck establishes the method of literal interpretation. What is the literal meaning of a biblical text? The opposite of literal is assumed to be ‘allegorical’ (which presupposes many possible hidden meanings). By contrast we must use the correct method of biblical interpretation. “We believe that to be the literal method which approaches the Scripture in the normal, customary way in which we talk, write, and think. It means taking the Scriptures at face value in an attempt to know what God meant by what He said.”<sup>6</sup> In establishing a literal hermeneutic Zuck utilizes

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Literal Interpretation of the Bible*, (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1978), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, (Victor Books, 1991), 7.

Bernard Ramm to advocate for the method. “The Bible itself follows the normal or literal method of interpretation.”<sup>7</sup> Ramm then cites Old Testament prophecy which was literally fulfilled.

Clearly, the literal method of interpretation is not universally endorsed by Christendom. The method is not even endorsed by all of evangelicalism. It is often ridiculed as ignorant and ‘fundamentalistic’ as well as unsophisticated and ‘flat earthy’. Mostly it is criticized for not recognizing figures of speech, not recognizing different genres, and generally for being ‘woodenly literal’. All of these assaults are straw men easily blown over by nondispensationalists who do not really do their homework. More on this later.

### **The Importance of Hermeneutics to Dispensational Theology**

Once again, what are the distinguishing features of dispensationalism? Ryrie asked and answered this question by suggesting the *sine qua non* of the system in his definitive publication. The answer included three critical elements. The first is the distinction between Israel and the Church. The second is the matter of plain hermeneutics or literal interpretation. The third aspect concerns the ultimate purpose of God in the world to be bringing glory to Himself.<sup>8</sup> While the essence of dispensationalism is the distinction between Israel and the Church, Ryrie emphasizes that “this grows out of the dispensationalist’s consistent employment of normal or plain or historical-grammatical interpretation . . . .”<sup>9</sup>

In a chapter contributed by Ryrie to a book examining issues in dispensational theology,<sup>10</sup> he notes that in the early days of the formulation of the dispensational system it can

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 38-41.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, General Editors, *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994).

be demonstrated that John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and other contemporaries, though not necessarily agreeing on all details of dispensationalism, did insist on the literal interpretation of all of Scripture. “This literal hermeneutic was deemed especially important to the correct understanding of Revelation, Daniel, and other Old Testament prophecies ... The hermeneutic of early dispensationalism was literalistic.”<sup>11</sup> As dispensationalism developed in America through the several Bible conferences of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the various speakers utilized what they themselves called a grammatical-historical method of interpretation. In a comment about the very popular and influential Scofield Reference Bible (1909) Ryrie acknowledges that this work popularized dispensationalism perhaps more than any other entity. “Literal interpretation and the distinction between Israel and the church (and other distinctions) are preeminent in its notes.”<sup>12</sup> The emphasis on the consistent use of a literal hermeneutic which leads the interpreter to maintain the clear distinction between Israel and the Church has been a key element in normative dispensationalism up to the present time.

### **What Is A Literal Hermeneutic?**

Critics of literal interpretation often refer to it as “wooden literalism.” They accuse literal interpreters of not recognizing figures of speech, symbolism, or apocalyptic imagery.<sup>13</sup> When the Bible uses the phrase “the four corners of the earth” critics think that a literal interpretation demands the understanding that the Bible teaches a flat, even square, planet. They insist also that the number 1000 (as in 1000 years) does not always mean 1000. A literal Millennial

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>13</sup> An example of such criticism is dealt with in Thomas Ice, “Literal vs. Allegorical Interpretation,” *Pre-Trib Perspectives*, vol. VIII, number 18, October 2004.

Kingdom is negated by taking a symbolic meaning for the number from a different context and reading that meaning into Revelation 20:2-7.<sup>14</sup>

Typical of this kind of criticism is frequently found in *Christianity Today* magazine. In an article titled, “Defending Scripture. Literally.”, the author begins by stating, “Not everything the Bible has to say should be literally interpreted. But that doesn’t make it less powerful.”<sup>15</sup> She recalls for us that she attended a Christian university decades ago, before computers and smartphones, when zealous students wanted to defend the authority of Scripture to prove they were sincere evangelicals. She states, “One of the unintended side effects of our fervor was that we took almost everything literally, at least in spiritual matters. Generally, we weren’t very good with oblique metaphors and analogies.”<sup>16</sup> This author learned only later that it is more difficult to understand the Bible than she and others had imagined. “We’d been blithely unaware that there is more than one genre in the Bible, or that literary context profoundly matters to meaning. We didn’t understand that when we read ancient Hebrew prose poems (like Genesis 1) ... as if they were science textbooks, we were actually obscuring their meaning.”<sup>17</sup> [Perhaps attending a different school may have solved her problem, or paying more attention in hermeneutics class.]

Frankly, I know of no actual person who reads Genesis as a science textbook. Nor do I know of anyone today (especially at this conference) who is unaware of figures of speech, such as similes and metaphors. The book *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*<sup>18</sup> lists over 8,000

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<sup>14</sup> Hank Hanegraaff, the Bible Answer Man, is guilty of this. See Thomas Ice, “One Thousand Years: Literal or Figurative?” *Pre-Trib Perspectives*, vol. VIII, number 19, November/December, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Arends, “Defending Scripture. Literally.”, *Christianity Today*, May 2, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Baker reprint, 1968).

examples/illustrations of some 200 such figures covering over 1100 pages. Mercifully, this book is now digitized and part of many electronic Bible study software programs.

Often I think that a better term than literal would be “normal.” When one reads the newspaper, for example, one has little trouble understanding what is being communicated. The reporter uses words, putting them together in sentences, in order to communicate ideas or historical facts or even his own opinions. The same is true for magazines, novels, fictional and nonfictional books, and technical articles. The reader understands that words have meaning as they are used in sentences (the literary context) and that one expects facts from a newspaper, entertainment from a novel, and analysis of history from a book on the Second World War. If one is simply trying to understand what the author wrote, regardless of the type or style of writing, and shares the language of the writer, the task is really not that formidable.

The same should be true when interpreting the Bible. The interpreter’s task is really straightforward. He must come to an understanding of what the author of the biblical passage was communicating, the author’s intended meaning.<sup>19</sup> How does one do this? The Bible was originally written in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) over a period of at least 1500 years by about 40 different (human) authors covering a very long time historically speaking. American Christians residing in the twenty-first century are most often dealing with an English translation of the Bible having at least some notes and cross references to help us understand what we are reading. If one does not possess the knowledge or skill of Hebrew or Greek exegesis, one comes to an understanding of the author’s intended meaning by an inductive

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<sup>19</sup> See Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990); Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002); and other works advocating a normal hermeneutic.

method of the study of the English translation. At least, this is what we hope to transmit to our students.

First, one must observe what the passage says. Then, using a normal hermeneutic, one interprets the passage understanding the meaning of the words by the way they are used in the context of the passage, taking into account the grammar and syntax of the passage, as well as the historical situation surrounding the passage being studied. This is the time honored method known as the grammatical-historical method of interpretation.<sup>20</sup> The consistent application of this method will yield the author's intended meaning of each book of the Bible.

Why is it necessary to determine the author's intended meaning? What if the interpreter thinks the passage means something else? The answer is obvious. The meaning of any biblical passage or book, indeed, the meaning of anything written, resides in the text being examined and is determined by the author of the text when it was written, not by the interpreter. The interpreter's function is to uncover/discover by careful and diligent examination the meaning that the author intended to communicate to his original readers. The interpreter is never to impose his meaning or any other foreign meaning onto the text of Scripture. That would not be exegesis, it would be eisegesis. The contention is that a careful and consistent application of a normal hermeneutic . . . a normal system of interpretation . . . to the entirety of Scripture results in a Dispensational Theology, nothing else. (It also results in other conclusions, of course, but the subject of this conference is Dispensationalism.)

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<sup>20</sup> For classical works describing this system of hermeneutics see Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999 reprint), originally published by Hunt & Eason, 1890; and Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Third rev. ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970).



By this time, it should be clear that consistently using a normal hermeneutic (not to be confused with a woodenly literal methodology) recognizes the author's use of figurative language, symbols, figures of speech, parables, and allegories, to name only some examples. However, the use of the above is determined from the context, from the way the author uses language, from an analysis of the grammar of the passage, and recognition of the historical circumstances surrounding the passage. It is not determined by the interpreter after deciding that all remaining unfulfilled prophecies will not be fulfilled literally, but must be fulfilled spiritually, as is done in Covenant Theology or by amillennial commentators.

### **Covenant Theology**

As a system of theology, Covenant Theology antedates dispensationalism by about fifty years, being associated with the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1648. In this system the whole of Scripture is viewed as being covered by the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the covenant of redemption (although not all covenant theologians include the latter covenant). The entire Bible is understood in terms of these covenants. The problem, however, is that none of these covenants are biblically stated covenants, as is the Abrahamic, Palestinian, Davidic, and New covenants. They are theological covenants inferred from Scripture, but not being explicitly found therein.

The covenant of works is understood to be between God and Adam before the Fall in Genesis 3. In this covenant God offers life for obedience and death for disobedience. Man fell. Therefore, God instituted the covenant of grace between Himself and the elect sinner in which He offers salvation for faith in Christ. The covenant of redemption is between the Father and the Son in which the Son agrees to redeem the elect as a basis for the covenant of grace. Obviously, a corollary of covenant theology is limited atonement, the idea that Christ died only for the elect

and not for the world. This third covenant is more recent in development and is not found in the Westminster Confession.

The biblical basis for these three covenants is scant. Rather than resulting from an inductive examination of Scripture, it results as a deduction from certain assumptions. There is no scriptural reference to these specific covenants. Consequently, as a result of these covenant ideas, the hermeneutic of Covenant Theology is inconsistent literalism. The Old Testament is interpreted in light of the New Testament resulting in forced interpretations, faulty exegesis, bad typology, and allegorizing and spiritualizing of Scripture. The New Testament must be read back into the Old, and so the Church becomes the “true Israel” and the promises to Israel must be realized by the Church (hence, the Church takes the place of Israel inheriting all the promises, i.e., Replacement Theology).

### **Inconsistent Literalism**

Basic rules of interpretation accepted by covenant theologians<sup>21</sup> include that words must be understood in their plain historical sense (the grammatical-historical sense); that Scripture is of divine origin and contains no contradictions; that Scripture should explain Scripture (the so-called “analogy of Scripture”); and that the Holy Spirit must illuminate the meaning of the text for us.

However, covenant theologians modify these basic rules in actual application and use as follows:

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<sup>21</sup> Refer to the following sources: L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1939, 1941), 712; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1973 reprint), 187-188; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 114-119; Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 86-109, 187-189.

- Literal interpretation of prophecy not yet fulfilled is entirely untenable.<sup>22</sup>
- Prophecy must be interpreted in a spiritual or allegorical sense (that is, prophecy not yet fulfilled).
- A “theological interpretation” must be added to the grammatical-historical method (especially to unfulfilled prophecy).<sup>23</sup>
- The Old Testament must be interpreted by the New Testament (resulting at times in a new meaning of the Old Testament passage).

With such modifications, of course, the result is an artificial exegesis.

The imposition of a theological system (Covenant Theology) upon the Bible forces a re-interpretation of prophecy not yet clearly fulfilled (it is difficult to reinterpret a prophecy already literally fulfilled, such as the birth place of Jesus<sup>24</sup>). The extent of this imposition controls the interpretive outcome. The outstanding characteristic of nondispensational hermeneutics is the inconsistent use of the basic rules, which would yield normal, literal interpretation, especially in the area of prophecy. Thus, a normal hermeneutic using the principles of grammatical-historical interpretation applied consistently throughout Scripture, will lead the interpreter to Dispensational Theology. If the rules are modified and theological interpretation is added to the grammatical-historical method (inconsistent literalism), the result is Covenant Theology. The spiritualizing of all unfulfilled prophecy and the identification of true Israel with the Church results in full-blown Amillennialism and Replacement Theology. Less spiritualizing of prophecy and the allowance of a future of some kind for Israel leads to Covenant Premillennialism.

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<sup>22</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 712.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism” (Doctor’s dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 147.

<sup>24</sup> Micah 5:2.

### **Examples of Abnormal Hermeneutics**

If the grammatical-historical method of interpretation is the literal or plain or normal method, then any other hermeneutic that deviates from these principles would be “abnormal.” The inconsistent literalism discussed above falls into this abnormal category as does a full blown allegorical method of interpretation.

Allegorical interpretation may have originated with the ancient Greeks to cover up embarrassing episodes in Greek mythology. It was passed on to the Jews who in turn passed the method on to the church Fathers. It became the dominant mode of biblical interpretation throughout the Middle Ages up to the Protestant Reformation. Allegorical interpretation is defined as creating a level of meaning completely foreign to the author’s intentions by the fanciful use of figurative language. However, unlike legitimate use of figurative language, allegorizing is often farfetched, absurd, or unreal. Meanings are imported into the text by the interpreter. Rather than attempting to determine the author’s intended meaning, allegorical interpretations are highly subjective and liable to change with the moods and feelings of the interpreter.

An example of allegorical interpretation from early church history is seen in one of Augustine’s sermons on the gospel of John. John 2 describes Jesus’ first public miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. Water was placed into six large stone water pots, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. The water was turned into wine by the

Son of God. Augustine interprets the six water pots to signify the six ages or six periods, each probably referring to a thousand years (hence, six thousand years).<sup>25</sup>

Another example of allegorizing from the medieval period of church history is taken from a commentary of the gospel of John by Rupert of Deutz (about the 12<sup>th</sup> century). Commenting on the 153 fish caught by the disciples (see John 21:11), Westcott summarizes Rupert's interpretation: "Rupert of Deutz . . . regards the three numbers [100, 50, 3] as the proportions of three different classes united in one faith. The 'hundred' are the married, who are the most numerous, the 'fifty' the widowed or continent who are less numerous, the 'three,' the least in number, are the virgins."<sup>26</sup> Examples could be multiplied, but the point is made. The interpretation obviously did not come from the text; rather it was read into the text. It did not result from carefully applied normal hermeneutics, but from inconsistent hermeneutics.

To illustrate what is done with prophecy using abnormal hermeneutics, consider the following examples:

Revelation 7:4-8 describes the 144,000, stated in the passage to be 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. They are identified by Ladd<sup>27</sup> to be the "true Israel" (the true people of God) in the Tribulation. In his view they are not the literal twelve tribes and not literal Jews. Rather, there is a spiritual significance to this group of people. The true people of God will be preserved complete during this time. Not one "true one" will be lost during the time of God's wrath. However, he apparently is not so certain about his interpretation to be dogmatic about it (for example, he says ". . . whoever they are").

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<sup>25</sup> St. Augustine, "Homilies on the Gospel of John," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Phillip Schaff, ed., 1<sup>st</sup> series, vol. VII, 65.

<sup>26</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 1950), 307.

<sup>27</sup> George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1956), 126.

Fairbairn<sup>28</sup> also sees the 144,000 as “the Lord’s people generally” who are kept safe from the desolations sweeping the earth during the Tribulation. The twelve tribes historically composed the professing church in the first century.

The problem with interpretations such as this is that the biblical text plainly states that the 144,000 are composed of 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel and names each of the tribes (Judah, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Manasseh, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin). This would seem to be wasted information if all the author were intending to communicate was that the true people of God, whoever they are, will be preserved through the Tribulation period.

Another curious interpretation is given by Fairbairn of Ezekiel 38-39, the attack by Gog against the people of Israel. Fairbairn regards this as an ideal delineation of certain dangers and assaults against the people of God in the distant future.<sup>29</sup> At this time, the “future,” the condition will be peace, the enemies of the people of God will be hostile powers from remote regions under the command of an enterprising leader named Gog, and the distance really means a moral distance from God, not a literal physical distance.

Mickelsen proposes to interpret prophecy in terms of equivalents, analogy, or correspondence.<sup>30</sup> He notes that prophecy is fulfilled in the future, therefore, all language would be symbolic of something future at the time of fulfillment. Some examples of the equivalents or correspondence would be cars instead of chariots; guns instead of swords; or church instead of temple. On the surface this sounds very appealing. The problem here is that we must know the

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<sup>28</sup> Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy, viewed in its distinctive Nature, its special Function, and proper Interpretation* (Edinburgh, 1865; New York, 1866), 251.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 485-487.

<sup>30</sup> A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1963), 296-305.

time of fulfillment in order to identify the exact equivalent. When Mickelsen applies this technique to Ezekiel 40-48, the twelve tribes of Israel are equivalent to the unity of the people of God. The 144,000 of Revelation 7 are equivalent to the entire church of the end time.

This use of equivalents is not used exclusively by nondispensationalists. Hal Lindsey of *The Late Great Planet Earth* fame uses these same principles to equate the weapons of war of Ezekiel 39 to atomic bombs, missiles, tanks, helicopters, and the like.<sup>31</sup> This, however, assumes that he knows the time of fulfillment, which, of course, no one knows except God alone.

### **Is Consistent Literalism Biblical?**

I have argued that normal hermeneutics - consistent literalism - applied to the entire Bible leads the interpreter to Normative Dispensational Theology. It also leads the interpreter to other conclusions, such as a supernatural (miraculous) creation of all things from nothing by God in six normal days as we would define them, not very long ago (thousands of years, not billions of years). Mark Noll has observed that “a biblical literalism, gaining strength since the 1870s, has fueled both the intense concern for human origins and the end times. Literal readings of Genesis 1-3 find their counterpart in literal readings of Revelation 20 (with its description of the thousand-year reign of Christ).”<sup>32</sup> Noll also speculates that the earlier spread of dispensationalism connects with the later popularity of creation science through the common thread of literal (normal) interpretation and the observation of major discontinuities in biblical history, both past and future.<sup>33</sup> Despite Noll’s and others’ criticism of normal (literal)

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<sup>31</sup> Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1970).

<sup>32</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 194.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

interpretation, this connection between Creationism and Dispensational Theology has merit and we might even consider Creationism as a kind of “scientific dispensationalism.”

In a collection of essays arrayed against Creationism, historian George M. Marsden makes the astounding claim that literalism or normal interpretation of Scripture is “. . . not derived from the Bible itself, but from philosophical assumptions that appear to be closely related to the Enlightenment Baconianism of their tradition – which lends itself toward a strong preference for definite and precise statements of fact.”<sup>34</sup> Marsden further suggests that fundamentalists can abandon the “literal where possible” approach while still believing that “the Bible is true.” He concludes his analysis by saying that “the point of Genesis . . . is not to tell us the details of *how* God created, but to assure us *that* God created the universe and the human race.”<sup>35</sup> If this is actually the case, then why are the details in the text at all? Using this line of thinking, we might then suggest that the point of the Bible is not to tell us the details of *what* God revealed, but to assure us *that* God revealed His Word to the human race. Or, the point of the Bible is not to tell us the details of *how* we can be saved, but to assure us *that* we can be saved. And again, the point of the Bible is not to tell us the details of *what* will occur at the Second Coming, but to assure us *that* there will be a Second Coming. The absurdity of such reasoning is self-evident.

Clearly, if God communicated His Word to us through the special revelation of the Bible, it seems obvious that He expects us to understand what He has communicated. I would argue that God ‘hard-wired’ humans to communicate plainly, normally, and literally. He originated communication. He also originated the ability to understand communication. From the

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<sup>34</sup> George M. Marsden, “Understanding Fundamentalist Views of Science,” in Ashley Montagu, ed., *Science and Creationism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 111.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*



perspective of philosophy, it seems that the purpose of language requires normal interpretation. How would we even be able to understand the criticism of a normal hermeneutic from Noll and Marsden, for example, except by understanding what they wrote in a normal, literal manner? Contrary to Marsden's claim that literalism is not derived from the Bible, we simply point out that the prophecies in the Old Testament of the first coming of Christ, including His birth, childhood, ministry, death, and resurrection, were all fulfilled literally! There simply are no nonliteral fulfillments of these prophecies in the New Testament. If this does not argue for a biblical basis for the literal method, what does?<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, at the beginning of the Bible. In a paper presented last year by Christopher Cone, he argues quite convincingly that a literal hermeneutic is actually imbedded in the text of Genesis itself.<sup>37</sup> After examining ninety-four passages in Genesis and Job he concludes that the evidence is overwhelming that "... God intended for His words to be taken at face value, using a plain-sense interpretive approach. The hermeneutic method that reflects this straightforward methodology has become known as the *literal grammatical historical hermeneutic*." Cone concludes: "This method recognizes that verbal expression has meaning rooted in and inseparable from the grammatical and historical context of the language used, and that these components require that readers be consistent in applying the interpretive method in their study of the Scriptures."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, literal interpretation is not linked to the adoption of Enlightenment Baconianism, as in Mark Noll and George Marsden, but to the Scriptures themselves, contra Noll and Marsden.

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<sup>36</sup> For a fuller discussion of this issue see the chapter on "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" in Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 86-89.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Cone, "The Genesis Account as Early Model for Scriptural Hermeneutics," presented to the *Symposium on Scripture, Hermeneutics and Language*, San Diego State University, April 13, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

Without normal interpretation of Scripture, any objectivity to determining the author's intended meaning is lost. A consistent application of a normal hermeneutic to the entirety of the Bible will lead the interpreter to Dispensational Theology, among other critical conclusions. The key to a person's theological convictions resides with his hermeneutic. Calvary University teaches and holds to a normal hermeneutic. Hence we are convinced that Normative Dispensational Theology is correct.

How literal is literal? What do we mean by literal interpretation or a literal hermeneutic? Even Ryrie hedged on the term 'literal' using instead 'normal' or 'plain' interpretation and meaning. Is literal the best way to describe our hermeneutic? We are searching for the normal, plain, meaning; using a grammatical-historical method; seeking to discover the author's intended meaning imbedded in the text of Scripture. If the two choices of hermeneutic are literal vs. allegorical, perhaps the best term to use is 'objective' instead of 'subjective'.