

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE:
THE DANGERS OF LOOKING FOR DEEPER MEANING

A Paper
Presented to
Dr. Forrest Weiland
Veritas Evangelical Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Course
TH520 Biblical Hermeneutics

by
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July 2013

ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE: THE DANGERS OF LOOKING FOR DEEPER MEANING

Abstract

This is a paper on why the allegorical method of interpretation is a dangerous way to interpret the Bible. The allegorical method suggests that there is deeper meaning underneath the literal text. It began with Greek philosophy and is foreign to the way people in the Old Testament interpreted Scripture. It opens up the Scriptures to far-fetched, contradicting, and even heretical interpretations. Examples of its usage are given from Harold Camping, Augustine, and a famous pastor within my denomination. I also discuss my own struggle to want to find deeper meaning from Scripture. I propose that what draws us to allegory is a desire for the entire Bible to be relevant and for God to speak to us personally. Nevertheless, it is dangerous and should be avoided.

It's Obvious Harold's Been Out Camping

Remember Harold Camping? How can we forget! Camping has made quite a career out of doomsday predictions. His first date for the rapture was September 6, 1994, which he published in a book by that same name, *1994*. When that failed, it became September 29, October 2 and March 31, 1995. Most recently, the rapture was to occur May 21, 2011. This time there would be devastating earthquakes, three percent of the earth would be raptured, and October 21, 2011 would bring the end of the world.¹

In this last go-around, 78-year old Doris Schmitt was so convinced she gave Camping nearly all of her \$250,000 lifesavings.² Robert Fitzpatrick, then 60 and retired, spent all of his

¹ *Wikipedia*, s.v. "List of Dates Predicted for Apocalyptic Events," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events.

² Jen Carlson, "Woman Leaves Life Savings To Failed Domsday 'Prophet' Harold Camping," *Gothamist*, June 4, 2011, http://gothamist.com/2011/06/04/queens_woman_leaves_life_savings_to.php.

retirement savings (\$140,000) advertising the rapture.³ There were many others who maxed out their credit cards, sold all their possessions and quit their jobs. Worse, there was the fearful fourteen-year-old who committed suicide.⁴ One woman even slit her daughter's throats, then her own, hoping to escape the coming Tribulation.⁵ They did this because, based on Camping's interpretation of the Bible, they were certain the world was about to end.

Why Would Anybody Follow Harold Camping?

The question I kept hearing at the time was, "Where on earth does he get *that* from the Bible?" How could a preacher claiming to base his beliefs completely on the Bible come up with something so bizarre? It happened because he went beyond the plain, obvious meaning of Scripture. And instead he looked for hidden, deeper meaning. Trevor Hammack is a former Harold Camping follower and pastor. In an interview with *The Christian Post*, he explained:

Before any end of the world prediction theology, Camping was very appealing in the sense that he would go in depth, verse by verse through the books in the Bible, not in any "shallow or irreverent manner," and would always stick to the Bible and treated it as the final authority. But everything began to change in subtle ways and gradually when Camping began to develop a hermeneutic or a principle of Bible interpretation based on Mark 4, where it says that Jesus spoke in parables. *He took that to mean that everything in your Bible is a parable. Everything.* For example, "so when Jesus gets on a boat to cross the sea, well the sea represents one thing, the boat represents something, people in the boat represent something and so he began to use this to interpret the Bible," Hammack illustrated. "*Once you go in that direction everything is open for anybody to interpret it the way they want* and he left [out] any type of historical context and it just

³ Stephanie Samuel, "Rapture Prediction to Devastate Christians' Faith?," *Christian Post*, May 20, 2011, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/rapture-prediction-to-devastate-christians-faith-50351>.

⁴ Elena Garcia, "Fearful Teen Commits Suicide Due to Harold Camping's Judgment Day Prediction," *Christian Post*, May 26, 2011, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/fearful-teen-commits-suicide-on-eve-of-harold-campings-rapture-50542/>.

⁵ IBTimes Staff Reporter, "Harold Camping Says Not Responsible for Suicidal Followers, Will Not Admit Mistake," *International Business Times*, May 24, 2011, <http://www.ibtimes.com/harold-camping-says-not-responsible-suicidal-followers-will-not-admit-mistake-video-644290#>.

becomes a spiritual parable which he can kind of mold into what he thinks it says. And that's what happened.”⁶

In short, Camping treated everything in the Bible as though it were a parable with symbolic meaning. In other words, the text means more than what we see at its face-value. It has, he said, deeper, spiritual meaning. And millions followed him because he convinced them this was a proper way to interpret Scripture.

There Are Many “Campers”

Harold Camping is certainly not alone.

There's the Unity School of Christianity with its 200,000 members in the United States and 1.5 million worldwide. They teach the entire Bible is an allegory. They are able to claim an allegiance to the Bible, yet at the same time deny the Trinity, deity of Jesus, personality of the Holy Spirit, necessity of the atonement of Jesus for our sins, heaven, hell, sin, the existence of the devil and at the same time somehow affirm reincarnation.⁷

Eastern Lightning is another group. As of 2001, the sect had only 300,000 followers, but it does appear to be gaining momentum, especially in China. Recent estimates show they now have upwards of one million followers.⁸ By spiritualizing the Bible, they believe Jesus has already returned to earth and is currently hiding among us as a normal looking 30-year old girl.⁹

Christian Science is a more widely known group which bases doctrine on allegorized interpretations of the Bible¹⁰. And we've all heard of David Koresh and Jim Jones, who

⁶ Josephine Vivaldo, “Harold Camping Ex-Follower Speaks Out,” *Christian Post*, May 31, 2011, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/exclusive-harold-camping-ex-follower-speaks-out-50708>, emphasis mine.

⁷ Russ Wise, “Unity School of Christianity,” Probe Ministries, accessed July 12, 2013, http://www.probe.org/site/c.fdkEIMNsEoG/b.4217639/k.E5BE/Unity_School_of_Christianity.htm.

⁸ *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Eastern Lightning,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Lightning.

⁹ Ryan Turner, “What is Eastern Lightning?” accessed July 12, 2013, <http://carm.org/what-is-eastern-lightning>.

¹⁰ Mary Baker Eddy advanced an allegorical interpretation of the Bible called the *Key to the Scriptures* which she appended to *Science and Health*. It was a dictionary to assist in allegorical interpretation. See Gordon

reportedly were both fond of this approach. It's really no surprise that cults would like studying the Bible this way. There's a freedom that comes from spiritualizing Scripture. As from Harold Camping follower Trevor Hammack said above, you can make the text say just about anything and then claim biblical authority. Ramm adds:

Metaphysical cults, theosophical cults, divine science cults, pantheistic cults all base their interpretation of Holy Scripture on the theory that the meaning of Scripture is plural. The first meaning is the ordinary historical or grammatical one; and the second meaning is the one the cultist brings to Scripture from the particular metaphysical system or religious system he is pushing.¹¹

By allegorizing Scripture, it's easy for a cultic group to claim to base their teaching on the Bible, yet read something out of it that is completely unbiblical. This is what Christian Science does, what Unity School of Christianity does, what Harold Camping did, and what we do if we're not careful.

My Confession

I'll admit it. One of my favorite Bible teachers within my denomination uses allegory. I'm embarrassed to say that he uses it quite often, actually. I'm not ready to name him by name, so I will call him Pastor Wayne.

Any Christian within the Calvary Chapel movement who has been a Christian for more than a few years has probably heard Pastor Wayne or heard of him. He's very popular. People really like him because he can take some of the driest passages and make them come to life. Pick a passage in the Old Testament—a genealogy, a story about people fighting over a well—any passage, you name it, and he's sure to bring it to life in a way that keeps thousands engaged.

Melton, "Encyclopedia of Protestantism: Christian Science," accessed July 12, 2013, http://protestantism.enacademic.com/152/Christian_Science.

¹¹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1980), 111.

Examples of Allegory from Pastor Wayne

It's so much fun to study the Old Testament with Pastor Wayne. It's always fresh, relevant, and he shows me many things I've never really seen before, especially in books of the Bible that are already very familiar to me.

For example, Pastor Wayne said that Genesis 1 is not just a description of physical creation, but it's also a picture of what happens when a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ. The earth being void, formless and in darkness is our spiritual condition before salvation. The Holy Spirit moving over the waters of the deep is the Holy Spirit working on our hearts. God commanding light to shine in darkness is the moment of our salvation. The greater and lesser lights are the two ways we know truth—directly from God and indirectly through the church.

Pastor Wayne makes the story of Noah's Ark interesting too. It's really a picture of salvation, he says. It's a giant coffin covered inside and out with pitch and this pitch is the atonement of Christ. The one door indicates that there is one way to heaven, Jesus. There were many compartments inside the Ark which represent the different denominations of the church in one body.

Pastor Wayne goes on to explain how when Abraham pitched his tent between Bethel (the name means "House of God") and Ai ("Ruin") it means that he dwelt somewhere between the flesh and the spirit just like we do today. The story of Abraham sending out his servant to find a wife for Isaac is a picture of how God the Father (Abraham) sent the Holy Spirit (the servant) to the church (Rebekah) to be married to Jesus (Isaac).

Pastor Wayne seems to find insight at every turn of the page. Even obscure texts have deeper meaning. A good example is the story of young men making fun of Elisha. Elisha had just picked up Elijah's mantle after witnessing him being taken up to heaven, and was on his way

up a mountain. On the way they ridiculed him saying, “Go up you bald head.” Pastor Wayne explains that this is a type of the world making fun of those who believe in the Rapture.¹²

Now, I admit some of this is a bit of a stretch. But if I’m being honest, I also admit that there’s a part of this that appeals to me. Why?

We Desperately Want the Bible to Be Relevant

We seem to desperately want the Bible to be relevant to us. Part of what drives us to Bible study is the expectation that when we come to a passage, the Holy Spirit will help us see how it relates to us. We come to expect that God will speak to us in our daily devotions—that He will indeed give us our daily bread. We expect this daily bread whether we’re in the Gospel of Luke or 1 Chronicles.

After all, “The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Heb. 4:12) It’s easy for me to envision the Holy Spirit illuminating my mind as I’m reading 1 Chronicles and making it speak to me in a deeper way—in a way that might not be obvious if I weren’t asking, seeking, knocking with great desire, leaving no stone unturned. So I find in me a desire for even the driest of passages to be relevant and meaningful. And this may be one of the reasons I am tempted to look for meaning that might not necessarily be there.

Close Relationship Involves Conversation

I also earnestly desire that God speaks to *me* personally. And I don’t think I’m alone. Many of us learned as new Christians that Christianity is like a relationship. A close relationship involves communication and our relationship with God is no different. To develop our

¹² The idea is that Elijah’s ascension in the whirlwind was a type of the rapture, and the children were making fun of Elisha because he also believed he would “go up” in a rapture like his mentor.

relationship, we need to talk some and listen some, each day. Through *prayer* we talk to God, and through *reading* His Word (the Bible), we hear Him speak to us.

And in this sense, we come to expect that God will speak to us in our daily devotions, that He will indeed give us our daily bread. Therefore, we hope, and expect, that God will lead us through our major life decisions in our daily fellowship with Him. Should we accept that new promotion? Should we get involved in that particular ministry? Should we go back to school and complete our degree? It's in the quiet moments of our day, in our speaking and listening—in our Bible reading—that we expect to hear an answer.

And therein lays the danger. Sometimes, in an attempt to find relevance to a text, we want to read out of a passage something that was never intended for us.¹³ In some cases our mistake may be harmless, but as we've seen with Harold Camping and the cults, it can lead to perverted doctrine and have disastrous consequences.

What Is Allegory?

It would now do us well to look at exactly what allegory is. One good definition from a theological dictionary is the following:

An allegory is a story in which the details correspond to or reveal a 'hidden,' 'higher' or 'deeper' meaning. The allegorical method of biblical interpretation assumes that biblical stories should be interpreted by seeking the 'spiritual' meaning to which the literal sense points.¹⁴

And here's another good definition from a leading expert on the topic, Roy Zuck:

Allegorizing is searching for a hidden or a secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of a text. In other words the literal reading is a sort of code, which needs to be deciphered to determine the more significant

¹³ There are many ways we do this, such as taking something God said to an individual in the Bible and applying it to our situation, or even picking verses at random in an attempt to receive an answer to prayer. These are both ways we pull our meaning from Scripture that isn't really there. See Appendix 1 for more.

¹⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 8.

and hidden meaning. In this approach the literal is superficial; the allegorical is the true meaning.¹⁵

Stated in a simple sentence, we allegorize when we interpret the Bible hoping to find hidden meaning behind the text or some deeper truth.

Some Clear Allegories in the Bible

But how do we know it's bad? Some might argue that we find clear uses of allegorical interpretation in the Bible, and therefore it's valid. For example, the Bible portrays Samaria and Jerusalem as two prostitutes (Exe. 23), Israel as a destroyed vine (Psa. 80:8-16), Nebuchadnezzar and Egypt as two eagles (Eze. 17), wisdom as a housewife (Prov. 9:1-6), the Christian's spiritual defense as armor (Eph. 6:11-17) and Jesus as a vine (John 15:1-6).¹⁶ We also have Galatians 4:21-31 where Paul seems to suggest the very persons of Hagar and Sarah in the Old Testament represent something deeper—that Hagar represents law and bondage under the Mosaic covenant, and Sarah represents the freedom that comes through the new covenant. These are clearly not meant to be taken literally, but represent a spiritual truth. So clearly, there is allegorical usage in the Bible.

How Far is Too far?

The problem is, where does it end? We've already looked at some strange interpretations. But consider a famous one from Augustine. Here's his interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (bold text indicates original text from Luke 10:30-37):

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely; of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he

¹⁵ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, Co: Victor Books, 1991), 29.

¹⁶ Ibid., 222.

is therefore called half-dead. The priest and the Levite who saw him and passed by, signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament which could profit nothing for salvation. Samaritan means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The binding of the wounds is the restraint of sin. Oil is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The beast is the flesh in which He deigned to come to us. The being set upon the beast is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The inn is the Church, where travelers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The morrow is after the resurrection of the Lord. The two pence are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that which is to come. The innkeeper is the Apostle (Paul). The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him to live by the gospel.¹⁷

So according to Augustine, the main character is actually Adam, the innkeeper is Paul, the promise to pay for future expenses is Paul's vow of celibacy, and Jericho is the moon and represents our mortality. Did God intend for us to get *this interpretation* from the parable? Probably not! Furthermore, Augustine's interpretation is different from Origen's, which differs from Ambrose and Aquinas. Who is correct and how do we know? The fact is, unless the Bible tells us, we cannot know.

When Literal Interpretation Was All There Was

There is another good reason to stick to plain, ordinary interpretation. It's biblical. A quick survey of the Old Testament shows us that the Jewish people interpreted older books of the Bible in a literal way. Samuel's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, got themselves into trouble because they weren't offering sacrifices properly, that is, they were not literally following the Mosaic Law. When Josiah finds the Book of the Law, he commands his kingdom to repent and commit to keeping it literally. He understood that Moses intended that the Passover should be kept based on a literal interpretation. (2 Ki. 23:21).

The outcry of every Old Testament prophet was that the people had stopped worshipping God, had departed from the Law of Moses, and that is why they were under judgment. The

¹⁷ C H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1961), 1, 2.

prophets are expecting people to respond to the Law in a literal fashion. There is no concept of the people responding to it spiritually or figuratively. Daniel realized from the writings of Jeremiah that the captivity would last literally seventy years¹⁸. Daniel understood it literally; one prophet wrote something and a second prophet read what he wrote and took it at face value.

It's clear that the way people in the Old Testament interpreted prior written revelation was in a normal, literal fashion. We also know that historically, outside the Bible, there was a time when allegorical interpretation didn't even exist. So where did it come from? It came from the Greeks.

Allegory Came From Greek Philosophy

The ancient Greeks had a problem. They revered the writings of Homer and Hesiod which spoke of their gods, but over time, they became embarrassed by the immoral conduct of their deities. Some gods delighted in slaughtering people, others, like Aphrodite, openly committed adultery. They stole from each other, lied to each other, and in many cases seemed to behave worse than mere mortals. In addition, as more Greeks were turning to philosophy, logic, reason and ethics, it became increasingly obvious that their mythologies were embellished.

How could the Greek philosophers revere these writings and at the same time accept the elements in their writings 'which were fanciful, grotesque, absurd, or immoral'? To get around this problem, the philosophers allegorized the stories, looking for hidden meanings underneath the literal writings.¹⁹

By allegorizing the text, they were able to make the text mean something else. They could continue to promote their mythological writings and avoid ridicule at the same time. Thus, in an effort to salvage what they could from an embarrassing text, the allegorical method of interpretation of literature had begun. It was not something developed within the church, or even amongst the Jewish Rabbi's, but was developed by the Greek philosophers beginning with Plato.

¹⁸ c.f. Dan. 9:2 with Jer. 25:11.

¹⁹ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 29, 30.

A Brief Summary of Plato

Plato (427 BC) is considered to be one of the greatest philosophers of all time. He was born four centuries before Christ yet his teaching would have tremendous influence over early Christian doctrine and continue to shape Christian thought until this day.

Plato asserted that what we see around us in our physical world—trees, chairs, horses, plants and people—everything we see, touch, taste and smell is not actually real. Only the idea behind a thing is real. For example, everybody has an idea of a horse. When we compare one horse to the next, we can see that there are differences, but we all know they are horses because there's an idea of a horse. And this idea is the perfect horse. The perfect horse only exists as an idea or "form". Because only ideas of things are perfect, Plato asserted that the realm of ideas was far superior to this physical world we live in.

As a result, Plato wanted to set people free from their bondage to this world. In his Parable of the Cave, he explains how a person could be set free from bondage to the shadows of this world by becoming aware of the higher reality of forms. His parable asserts that all human beings are chained in darkness, believing reality to be the things that we see around us. But there is a higher reality that exists beyond, and if we could just be set free and experience it, we would understand that it is far better, because it is the actual true reality of which everything is but a shadow.

In short, for Plato, the physical was bad and the spiritual was good. This philosophy, applied to literature, gave rise to the allegorical method of interpretation we know today. To the allegorist, it's not so much the literal meaning of the text that is important, but the spiritual meaning behind it.

The First Jews to Adopt Allegory

As far as we know, the first Jew to begin applying Plato's principles to biblical interpretation was Aristobulus (160 BC). But Philo of Alexandria (20 BC – 54 AD), who came a

few generations after him, is probably the most recognized Jewish allegorist. Philo had a great love for Greek philosophy, especially Plato and Pythagoras.

Philo did not think that the literal meaning was useless, but it represented the immature level of understanding. The literal sense was the body of Scripture, and the allegorical sense its soul. Accordingly the literal was for the immature, and the allegorical for the mature.²⁰

Philo had twenty rules to determine how a passage should be interpreted. Here are his rules for determining if a passage contains allegory:

(i) Grammatical peculiarities are hints that underneath the record is a deeper spiritual truth. (ii) Stylistic elements of the passage (synonyms, repetition, etc.) indicate that deeper truth is present. (iii) Manipulation of punctuation, words, meaning of words, and new combinations of words can be so done as to extract new and deeper truth from the passage. (iv) Whenever symbols are present, we are to understand them figuratively not literally. (v) Spiritual truth may be obtained from etymologies of names. (vi) Finally, we have the law of double-application. Many natural objects signify spiritual things (heaven means the mind; earth means sensation; a field, revolt, etc.).²¹

The Early Church Fathers Follow

The Jews weren't the only ones affected. Early Christians were also heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. Many church fathers believed God had given Greek philosophy to the Gentile world to prepare it for the coming Messiah in the same way that God used Moses to prepare the Jewish people. Plato, in this way, was seen to have a kind of preparatory role for the Gospel. They believed that the great philosophers had been recipients of "the universal light of a divine revelation through the 'Logos,' which, and through human reason, 'lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'"²² As a result, they espoused many of Plato's ideas and tended to look for hidden, spiritual meaning underneath the text.

²⁰ Ibid., 27.

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² Philip Schaff, *A Religious Encyclopaedia: Or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology*, Vol. 3 (Michigan: Funk & Wagnalls, Publishers, 1882), 1850.

A study of the commentaries or use of Scripture among the early Church Fathers reveals a fantastic use of the imagination in finding New Testament truth or spiritual truth or theological truth in the Old Testament by the use of allegorical interpretation. This is really an assertion of the plural meaning of Scripture.²³

This was true of influential leaders like Clement of Alexandria (150 AD), Justin Martyr (100 AD), Eusebius of Caesarea (263 AD) and Bishop Theodoret (393 AD). And, of course, those familiar with Augustine (354 AD) know that he held the philosophers in very high regard and took a strong liking to allegorical interpretation.

Two Rival Schools Begin to Form

Over time, two schools began to form over the issue: (1) the School of Alexandria (allegorical approach) and (2) the Syrian School at Antioch (literal approach). These two schools setup the framework for the same two major methods of interpretation used today.

Allegory and the School of Alexandria

The Alexandrian School followed the allegorical approach of biblical interpretation. This school includes Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Jerome and Augustine. One of its influential teachers, Clement, said there were five possible ways to interpret any passage of the Bible: (1) historical, (2) doctrinal, (3) prophetic, (4) philosophical and (5) mystical (a hidden kind of meaning). A passage, he taught, doesn't just have one meaning, but all five at the same time.

Like allegorists today, this school didn't throw away the plain, literal meaning. But the literal was the lowest view, and really wasn't interesting to them. They believed that a passage's spiritual interpretation was the way to interpret if you want to get on to a deeper level, to maturity.

²³ Ramm, 111.

Literal Approach and the School at Antioch

The Syrian School was not a formal school like that at Alexandria, but a network of like-minded scholars. They rejected the allegorical method from their rivals in Alexandria and were determined to get back to a literal approach. This movement began with Lucian (240-314) and continued with Diodore of Tarsus (393), Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom and Theodoret (386-458). They demonstrated an ordinary, literal interpretation. In some cases, they went to an extreme. When the Bible said, “The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous” (Psalm 34:15) they believed this meant that God has eyes. There was no sense of figurative speech.

Allegory All Grown Up: The Roman Catholic Church

Eventually, the Alexandrian view prevailed. To say that allegory became the view of the Roman Catholic Church is a bit of an understatement. Modern Catholic scholars admit that their church has a “sordid history of fanciful allegorical interpretation.”²⁴ Cardinal Newman writes: “The use of Scripture then, especially its spiritual or second sense, as a medium of thought and deduction, is a characteristic principle of doctrinal teaching in the (Roman Catholic) Church.”²⁵ This “characteristic principle” of interpreting Scripture in a spiritual sense has been the source of much disagreement between Protestants and Catholics.

For example, Protestants wonder how Catholics justify the priesthood. Where do Catholics see the need today for a Gentile priestly class distinct from common people who follow a detailed sacramental system? Catholics base this on an allegorical interpretation of the priesthood in Leviticus:

He has determined the function of the high-priest, the place assigned to the priests, and the offices of the Levites: there are prescriptions for the man of the people, the layman, i.e. for the Israelite who does not belong to the tribe of Levi and to the priestly family.

²⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁵ John Henry Newman, “An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine,” accessed July 13, 2013, <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/chapter7.html>.

This is simple allegory... a hierarchy distinct from the people: there are clerics and there are laymen."²⁶

What about nuns? The Catholic Church allegorizes the story of Anna in the Temple (Luke 2:36-38) for this.²⁷ What about the veneration of Mary? It's established partly from an allegorized interpretation of 1 King 2:19 where King Solomon "had a throne brought for the king's mother, and she sat down at his right hand." Catholics also hold the woman in the Song of Solomon is the Virgin Mary and found further support for Mary veneration in an allegorical interpretation of Song 6:4 where Mary is described as being "beautiful in her holiness."²⁸

Say Goodbye to Personal Bible Study

But something even more dangerous happened. Allegorical interpretation is notoriously ambiguous. The average layman reading the Bible might understand its plain, ordinary message. But as far as the deeper, more spiritual meaning behind it, that's open for interpretation. To prevent a biblical free-for-all, the Roman Catholic Church stepped in and offered the official "correct" version of these deeper interpretations. Eventually, it was unacceptable to interpret the Bible apart from the Church.

The Reformation: A Return Back to a Plain, Literal Approach

The reformation was really a *return* back to the *literal* approach.

One of the early forerunners of the reformation, John Wycliff (1330- 1384), stressed historical grammatical approach.

Martin Luther (1483- 1546), the man who sparked the reformation with his *Ninety-Five Theses*, actually confessed that he was a horrible allegorizer. But upon reading the book of

²⁶ Pierre Batiffol and Henry L. Brianceau, *Primitive Catholicism* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), 127.

²⁷ Ramm, 106.

²⁸ Duane A. Garrett, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 14, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1993), 354.

Romans, he realized something that might be obvious to us, but which nevertheless, was revolutionary for him at the time. Luther said that Christ cannot be an allegory—he had to be real. Eventually this thought led him to reject the allegorical method of the Church altogether. He argued that the Bible was the only supreme authority and that the text should be understood literally.²⁹

Other notable reformers who emphasized this return back to the literal method include Phillip Melancthon (1497-1560), John Calvin (1509- 1564). Calvin went so far to say that allegory was satanic.

Final Conclusion

We've seen how it wasn't until Greek philosophy that people began to depart from the literal method. We've seen the two schools have divided over this subject historically. And we've seen how the Roman Catholic Church used allegory to justify some of its practices. We discussed how the Reformation was really a return back to the literal method.

We have also seen how allegory leads to far-fetched interpretations of Scripture, like Augustine's interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and the doomsday predictions of Harold Camping, and even heretical teachings like those of Christian Science and Eastern Lightning. What are we to make of all this? Stay away from the allegorical method! It might seem to make the Bible interesting and relevant for us personally, but it opens the door to a method of interpretation that is ambiguous at best and damaging at worst.

Where to Go From Here?

Lastly, I also want to mention what I did not talk about. My goal for this paper has been simply to show the dangers of looking for deeper meanings in Scripture. I did not talk about how we ought to study the Bible so much as what we should avoid.

²⁹ Yet when you read Luther's writings he still allegorizes. For example, he said Noah's ark is an allegory of the church. He wasn't saying the ark didn't literally exist, just that it had a deeper meaning.

There are many great books and even free online classes available on how to study the Bible.³⁰ These resources go over types, symbols, literary genres and proper principles of interpretation. Two great books are *Basic Bible Interpretation* by Roy Zuck and *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* by Bernard Ramm, both listed in the bibliography below. Even a casual reading of these books will reveal that there really is a right way, and a wrong way to interpret Scripture.

³⁰ Many seminary classes can now be found for free on iTunesU. For example, see Liberty University, "Hermeneutics," iTunes, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/course/hermeneutics/id529513606>.

Appendix 1: “Allegorical Vs. Literal” Not A Good Description

We have come to label it the “allegorical vs. literal” debate. But this is probably not a good description. Both the allegorist and the literalist claim to base interpretation on literalness of Scripture. As Zuck explains:

Figurative speech... is a picturesque, out-of-the-ordinary way of presenting literal facts that might otherwise be stated in a normal, plain, ordinary way. Saying that “the argument does not hold water” is an unusual way of saying the more ordinary sentence, “The argument is weak.” Both sentences convey a literal fact. One conveys it in a figurative fashion, the other in a nonfigurative way... Figurative language then is not antithetical to literal interpretation; it is a part of it.³¹

Conversely, the literal camp does interpret some Scripture figuratively.

Calling the debate “allegorical” versus “literal” suggests that the positions are mutually exclusive, that one is the opposite of the other. This is misleading and causes confusion.

Rather than saying, “Figurative is the opposite of literal,” it may be preferable to say, “Ordinary-literal is the antithesis of figurative-literal,” while understanding that both are legitimate means of communicating literal truths—truths to be interpreted in their normal, historical, grammatical sense without making them say something not intended by the words.³²

I agree with Zuck: “Perhaps it is better not to speak of ‘figurative versus literal’ interpretation, but of ‘ordinary-literal’ versus ‘figurative-literal’ interpretation,”³³ or, as Radmacher says, “ordinary-literal” versus “plain-literal”. Unless we make this distinction, we easily find cases where the other side is inconsistent, and waste time arguing against points the other doesn’t actually believe.

³¹ Zuck, 147.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Appendix 2: Other Ways We Look For Deeper Meaning

“God Spoke To Me through This Verse Today”

There are other ways we look for deeper meaning in Scripture not mentioned previously. I have a friend who felt called to plant a church. He was desperately seeking the Lord’s will over what he should do next. In his morning devotional, he happened to be in that section of Acts where Paul gets converted. He came across the verse, “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” (Acts 9:6) As he read the verse, he felt the Lord was speaking it to him, personally. He “did not want to be disobedient to the heavenly vision” and so within twenty four hours he got into his car and drove three states away to the city he felt the Lord was calling him to, expecting, as the verse says, that God would reveal the next steps once he was obedient.

It’s not my place to judge whether this feeling was really from the Lord. The Good Shepherd can certainly speak to His sheep, and they hear His voice. And there’s no reason why he cannot use Scripture to do so. But the reality is that my friend returned thirty days later because he wasn’t able to find any work, and so in the end, no church was started. What are we to make of this?

Brother Andrew tells a similar story. In his book *God’s Smuggler* he describes how as a young man he longed to have a wife. He brought it before the Lord and, after flipping through the pages, a verse just seemed to stand out to him: “The children of the desolate are more than the children of the married.” (Isa. 54:1) He just “knew” that this verse was from God and that this was his answer. However later in the book Brother Andrew humorously described how God did bring him a wife, and he would go on to have a wonderful marriage.

Maybe God’s perfect will was that Brother Andrew stay single but he talked God out of it? Maybe. But if you read the rest of the story it sure seems like he had a very fruitful life anyway and was probably all the better to have a like-minded companion to share it with. Or

regarding my friend who wanted to start a church, maybe God wanted to simply test my friend's obedience or teach him a lesson by having him get up and "go into the city".

But one could also argue that the feeling was just that... a feeling... and that we really shouldn't be looking for deeper meanings behind a Scripture's plain meaning. The point is that we need to consider that the Scriptures we read in the Bible describe historical events involving people. Unless a promise or command is given to the entire church, we need to consider its obvious intended meaning *in its context*. Anything beyond that is speculation and we could really get ourselves into trouble, or at least a lot of confusion.

Playing the "The Fortune Cookie Bible Verse Game"

Another practice we Christians like to do in determining the will of God is randomly opening the Bible and placing our finger on a verse. Some have called this "The Fortune Cookie Bible Verse Game" and many of us have played it. Many preachers have used the following story to demonstrate how dangerous it can be:

A man dissatisfied with his life decided to consult the Bible for guidance. Closing his eyes, he flipped the book open and pointed to a spot on the page. Opening his eyes, he read the verse under his finger. It read, "Then Judas went away and hanged himself" (Matthew 27:5) Closing his eyes again, the man randomly selected another verse. This one read, "Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'" (Luke 10:37)³⁴

We long to have God speak to us through the Word. But when we play "The Fortune Cookie Bible Verse Game," in reality, we turn a verse into a proof text.³⁵ And in this way, we are also guilty of looking for deeper meaning in Scripture beyond its literal meaning.

³⁴ Elizabeth Tokar, "Humorous Anecdotes Collected from a Methodist Minister," *Western Folklore* 26, no. 2 (April 1967): 89-100, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1498932>, 92.

³⁵ "Proof texting" is the practice of using isolated quotations from a document to establish a proposition.

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