



Radmacher: “Adding & Subtracting”: Augustine Adopts Origen’s 3-fold Sense; Tyndale, Ryrie, Ramm, & Mounce: Figures of Speech Have Literal Meanings

Of this fine school, Bernard Ramm states:

It has been said that the first Protestant school of hermeneutics flourished in the city of Antioch of Syria, and had it not been crushed by the hand of orthodoxy for its supposed heretical connections with the Nestorians, the entire course of Church history might have been different.

The Christian community was influenced by the Jewish community and the result was a hermeneutical theory which avoided the *letterism* [**hyperliteralism: the interpretation of words in their most basic sense without allowing for metaphor**] of the Jews and the *allegorism* [**beneath the obvious is the real meaning of the passage**] of the Alexandrians. It (Antioch) boasted of such names as Lucian \lü' shan\, Dorotheus \da-räth' ē-as\, Diodorus \dī-a-dör' as\, Theodore of Mopsuestia \mäp-sü-wes' chē-a\ and Chrysostom \kris' as-tam\. As a school it influenced Jerome and modulated the allegorism of Alexandria in the West. It also had an influence on medieval exegesis, and found itself again in the hermeneutics of the Reformers.

The Syrian school fought Origen in particular as the inventor of the allegorical method, and maintained the primacy of the literal and historical interpretation of the Scripture. It is true that in practice some of the Antiochenes were found dipping into allegorizing, nevertheless in hermeneutical theory they took a stout stand for literal and historical exegesis. They asserted that the literal was plain-literal and figurative-literal. A plain-literal sentence is a straightforward prose sentence with no figures of speech in it. “The eye of the Lord is upon thee,” would be a figurative-literal sentence. According to the Alexandrians the literal meaning of this sentence would attribute an actual eye to God. But the Syrian school denied this to be the literal meaning of the sentence. The literal meaning is about God's omniscience. In other words literalism is not the same as *letterism*.” [Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Revised Edition (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1956), p. 48-49.]

In spite of all of the excellencies attributed to the hermeneutical excellence of the School at Antioch by all writers on the subject, they lost the battle for literal interpretation because of a chink in their armor, on the one hand, and a great name, on the other hand, Augustine (354-430). Not only was he a leading theologian with a great influence on the church for centuries and a primary influence on John Calvin, but he became the father of amillennialism.

[The great historian of hermeneutics, Frederic Farrar, sighs over the demise of the school: "Unhappily for the Church, unhappily for any real apprehension of Scripture, the allegorists, in spite of protest, were completely victorious. The School of Antioch was discredited by anathemas. And we soon descend to allegorical dictionaries of the threefold sense. [*History of Interpretation*. 1886 reprint. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), pp. 239-40.]



NOTE: The “threefold sense” refers to the system of hermeneutics developed by Origen at Alexandria. These “three senses” define the approach to Scripture popularized in the mid fifth century and which remained the norm for almost 1500 years. First of all, its inventor:

Douglas, J. D. (gen. ed.). *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 733:*

ORIGEN (c.185-c.254). Alexandrian theologian. Born in Egypt and raised by Christian parents, studied under Clement in the Catechetical School in Alexandria. *De Principiis* is among his important works, being one of the first systematic theologies. Book 4 of *De Principiis* deals with biblical hermeneutics and the literal-moral-allegorical interpretation of Scripture.

A summary of Origen’s system is provided by:

Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics. 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 32-33:*

Origen wanted to escape the crudities of lay people who were literalists to the point of taking everything symbolic, metaphorical, or poetic literally. He wished to eliminate what were absurdities or contradictions in Scripture and make Scripture acceptable to the philosophically minded. His approach can be summed up as follows:

The *literal meaning* of Scripture is the preliminary level of Scripture. It is the “body,” not the “soul or “moral sense,” nor the “spirit” or the “allegorical sense” of the Bible. The literal sense is the meaning of Scripture for the layman.

The literal in Scripture is to provoke us to a deeper and more spiritual study of the Bible. History, for example, is to be taken symbolically. (p. 32)

The true exegesis is *the spiritual exegesis of the Bible*. The Bible is one vast allegory, a tremendous sacrament in which every detail is symbolic. The Bible is a spiritual book, and its meaning is found only by spiritualizing it. (pp. 32-33)

Dr. Radmacher continues:

But notice the event that turned the tide for Augustine. Ramm states:

Augustine was driven to the allegorical interpretation of Scripture by his own spiritual plight. It was the allegorical interpretation of Scripture by Ambrose which illuminated much of the Old Testament to him when he was struggling with the crass literalism of the Manicheans [Persian dualism founded by Mani \mä' nē\ that syncretized Zoroastrian dualism and Christian soteriology]. Augustine justified allegorical interpretation by a gross misinterpretation of:

2 Corinthians 3:6 - God made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter [meaning the Law], but of the Spirit; for the letter [the Law] kills [reveals sin & spiritual death], but the Holy Spirit gives life [salvation].

Augustine made it mean that the *spiritual* or *allegorical* interpretation was the real meaning of the Bible; the literal interpretation kills. For this experimental reason Augustine could hardly part with the allegorical method. (Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 35.)

In listing twelve controlling principles of Augustine, Ramm includes the following:

(ii) Although the literal and historical are not the end of Scripture we must hold them in high regard. Not all of the Bible is allegorical by any means, and much of it is both literal and allegorical. Augustine's great theological works indicate that the literal method was employed far more than he admitted on paper.



(iii) Scripture has more than one meaning and therefore the allegorical method is proper. The supreme test to see whether a passage was allegorical was that of love. If the literal made for dissension, then the passage was to be allegorized. Besides this he had seven other somewhat farfetched rules for allegorizing the Scripture. He did work on the principle that the Bible had a hidden meaning, and so in his allegorical interpretations he was frequently as fanciful as the rest of the Fathers. (Ramm, p. 36.)

At this point, I must issue the warning that Richard Lenski gave of the bad influence that the Apostle Peter had on Barnabas. Remarking on Galatians 2:13 (“And the rest of the Jews joined Peter in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.”), Lenski states:

Barnabas is a warning to us. The church is full of great names that are still constantly quoted in support of some false doctrine, false practice, false principle, false interpretation. Their very names stop lesser men from testing what they advocate and so they, like Barnabas are carried away. [R. C. H. Lenski. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians*. (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1946), p. 98.]

Let the hearer beware.

NOTE: This is sadly the case for so many pastors today. They have been trained in seminaries that subscribe to theological conclusions developed half a millennium ago and do so without scrutinizing the source. For over 1500 years Christian theology has been distorted by allegorical hermeneutics. Certain Reformers, whose names are now hallowed among mainline Protestant denominations, were heavily influenced by long associations with the Catholic Church whose system of hermeneutics was not only allegorical but in addition had adopted a long list of heretical doctrines that had absolutely no biblical basis. The writings of men may be trusted if their system of hermeneutics is bona fide, namely, literal-grammatical-historical. When this is the case then a pastor will present consistently accurate interpretations of Scripture. However, serious damage has resulted from unquestioned acceptance of doctrines developed in the sixteenth century. True scholarship would demand that these writings be examined to see if they conform to the biblical record. Unfortunately this is not done and therefore even more fanciful doctrines are invented in order to invest legitimacy into the original error. When a denomination's theology is based on an “ism” rather than on Scripture then it is tragically flawed.

Clarification of the Basic Principle

The father of the English Bible, William Tyndale (1494-1536), gave a striking statement after fifteen hundred years of writers wandering in the wastelands of allegorical interpretation with pitifully little interruption. The Reformation leaders protested the medieval exegetes who, following Origen, regarded the literal sense of Scripture as unimportant and unedifying. With the sound of antiquity, William Tyndale declared:



You shall understand, therefore, that the Scripture has but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never fails, whereunto if you cleave you can never err nor go out of the way. And if you leave the literal sense, you can not but go out of the way. Nevertheless, the Scripture uses proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle, or allegory signifies is ever the literal sense, which you must seek out diligently. [Quoted by J. I. Packer. *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1959), p. 103.]

The latter part of Tyndale's statement concerning figures of speech has been the area where confusion has abounded. Many statements have been made which give the impression that figures of speech are antithetical to literal interpretation. Clarence Bass evidences this when he says:

Dispensationalists will not interpret the obviously literal as literal, and the obviously symbolical as symbolical. Everything must be literal. [C. B. Bass. *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), pp. 23-4.]

Nor have dispensational writers helped to alleviate the confusion when they say that:

... some Scriptures are contextually indicated as containing figures of speech and not intended for literal interpretation." [John F. Walvoord. *The Millennial Kingdom*. (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham), p. vi.]

More accurate is the statement of Charles Ryrie that:

... the use of figurative language does not compromise or nullify the literal sense of the thing to which it is applied. Figures of speech are a legitimate grammatical usage for conveying a literal meaning. [Charles C. Ryrie. *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*. (New York: Loizeaux, 1953), pp. 42-43.]

Behind every figure of speech is a literal meaning, and by means of the historical-grammatical exegesis of the text, these literal meanings are to be sought out. As Ramm states:

The literal meaning of the figurative expression is the proper or natural meaning as understood by students of language. Whenever a figure is used, its literal meaning is precisely that meaning determined by grammatical studies of figures. Hence, figurative interpretation does not pertain to the spiritual or mystical sense of Scripture, but to the literal sense. [Ramm, *Interpretation*, p. 141.]

The Syrian school of interpretation in Antioch in the early centuries of the church asserted that literal interpretation is both plain-literal and figurative-literal. The plain-literal sentence is one of straightforward prose and a sentence such as "The eye of the Lord is upon thee" is a figurative-literal sentence. [Ramm, *Interpretation*, p. 49.] According to the Alexandrians the literal meaning of this sentence would attribute an actual eye to God. But the Syrian school denied this to be the literal meaning of the sentence. The literal meaning is about God's omniscience. In other words, literalism is not the same as letterism.

More recently Robert Mounce has suggested similarly that:



A writer may convey his thought either by the use of words in their directly denotative sense or he may choose the more pleasing path of figurative expression. But one thing must be kept clear: In either case the literal meaning is the same.

An interpretation is literal only when it corresponds to what the author intends to convey with his statement. When Jesus spoke of Herod as "that fox" (Luke 13:32) he was not trying to tell us that a carnivorous mammal of the family *Canidae* had entered the human race incognito. He was only saying that the Galilean ruler was cunning, although relatively insignificant. [Robert Mounce, "How to Interpret the Bible," *Eternity* (May 1963), p. 21.]

In like manner we realize upon our reading the statement of Jesus, "I am the door," that He is not a 2' 8" x 6' 8" birch door, but He is that which the figure literally signifies, namely, a way of entrance and, more specifically in the context, the Way of entrance into eternal life. The literal meaning is the intention of the metaphor.

Very often Isaiah 55:12 is set forth as sort of an "Achilles' heel" to those who hold the literal interpretation. Exultingly Isaiah speaks:

Isaiah 55:12 - "For you shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

Here the writer is not speaking of that which would be an inherent contradiction, but he is marvelously portraying in word pictures that even all of nature shall rejoice when the king shall come to reign in his kingdom. By such a graphic word picture he has said more than could be said in several paragraphs of straight prose.