

A Case for Literal Interpretation

by Bob Nyberg

“Hey Sam,” Pete said. “Do me a favor. Run into town and pick up a cool DVD.” Five hours later Sam returned sweaty and out of breath with a DVD encased in ice. Don’t you just hate it when some clown like Sam takes you literally?

In advocating literal interpretation, do I mean that even figurative language should be interpreted literally? No. Because of such misconceptions, literal interpretation is also known as plain or normal interpretation.

All languages use figures of speech. If you say that you’re going to run into town, I would expect that you’re going to drive and not run, jog or sprint. If you said that you had a cool DVD, I would not expect you to store it in the freezer.

So what do we mean by literal interpretation when it comes to understanding the Bible?

David L. Cooper’s “golden rule of interpretation” explains it best: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”

Premillennial Dispensationalism is founded on this basic principle. Charles Ryrie puts it this way: “Dispensationalism keeps Israel and the church distinct. This is the most basic test of dispensationalism. The distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation. Dispensationalism interprets words in their normal or plain meaning; it does not spiritualize or allegorize the text. The strength of dispensationalism is its consistently literal, or plain, interpretation of Scripture.”¹

Down through the centuries there have been many opponents of literal hermeneutics. Origen was a Greek philosopher and theologian who reinterpreted Christian doctrine through Neo-Platonist philosophy. His influential work was later condemned as unorthodox.² Later Augustine, his protégé, used allegory to explain away Revelation 20:1-6 which depicts a thousand year millennial kingdom. Augustine’s system of allegorical Amillennial interpretation has been a thorn in the side of the church ever since.

Interestingly, we find the first opposition to literal hermeneutics in Genesis 3:1. There we read:

The serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

Notice that the serpent didn’t question the existence of God. He didn’t challenge God’s authority to “make the rules.” He simply asked, “did God really say that?” In other words, is that what the Word of God really means? Did God really mean a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth in Revelation 20? Did God really mean a literal 24-hour day in the creation account found in Genesis 1 and 2?

If the enemy can plant doubts about the beginning of creation found in the first book of the Bible and the end of the ages found in the last book of the Bible, then everything else in between is up for grabs.

The apostle Paul encourages us to be “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13).” But if there is no literal millennium, no literal second coming of Christ to reign upon earth, no literal rapture of saints before the tribulation as Amillennialism teaches, then the church is robbed of scripture’s promise.

Augustine would have done well to pay more attention to Scripture rather than the Greek philosophers from whom he and Origen borrowed their system of interpretation. Paul clearly says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Col. 2:8).”

When the church adopted the allegorical teaching of Augustine’s Amillennialism in 400 A.D., the blessed hope of Christ’s return was lost. And so the enemies’ insipid whisper, “did God really say,” continues to echo throughout church history.

The Roman Catholic Church not only adopted Augustine as their venerable saint, they also claimed ownership of his allegorical Amillennial system of interpretation. The Reformers, Calvin and Luther, must be commended for their stance against Roman Catholicism. However, they didn’t distance themselves enough from that corrupt system. The trappings of such flawed Augustinian doctrines as infant baptism and Amillennialism clung to Luther and Calvin like a ball and chain as they attempted to distance themselves from the Roman Catholic Church. Amillennialism became the official position of not only the Roman Catholic Church, but also of the Lutheran Church and the Church of England. By far the majority of Reformed Churches today still hold to Amillennialism.

The devastating effects of allegorical interpretation have taken a toll on the church through the ages. What began as a small ripple centuries ago has turned into a tsunami that’s wreaking havoc upon churches today.

Christianity in Europe and the United Kingdom is on the decline. While 59 percent of Americans say that religion is very important in their lives, only 11 percent of the French, 21 percent of Germans, and 33 percent of Britons do, according to the Pew Research Center.³

Countries that once blazed with fires of the Reformation are abandoning Christianity. Across the European landscape one can find only smoldering embers of the faith once delivered to the saints.

The Daily Telegraph in the U.K. reports:

Britain's Churches will be well on the way to extinction by 2040 with just two per cent of the population attending Sunday services, according to a new report.

If current trends continue, churchgoing will plummet by two thirds over the next three decades while Islam will mushroom, the statistical analysis by the Christian Research organisation says.

By 2040 there will be nearly twice as many Muslims at prayer in mosques on Friday as Christians worshipping on Sunday, it says.

Moreover, the average age of Christian congregations will have risen to 64 as the young abandon the churchgoing habits of older generations in the face of growing secularisation.

The total membership of all the denominations will fall from 9.4 per cent of the population to under five per cent by 2040, and 18,000 more churches will have closed, the report says.

The study paints a grim picture of a disestablished and demoralised Church of England struggling against the forces of secularism.⁴

What is the reason for this abandonment of the Christian faith in Europe and the U.K.? A recent study was done to answer that very question. Don Batten, of AnswersInGenesis.org, writes:

Churchgoing in Britain is in freefall in the 'mainline' denominations. Membership of the Church of England declined 27% between 1980 and 2000. This realization led to a survey in 2003/2004 to find out why. In all, 14,000 people in Britain and Ireland responded to the widely-advertised invitation to say why they were giving up on church. People wrote responses, rather than answering multiple-choice questions.

Astonishingly, 91% gave very similar reasons for disenchantment with church, which can be summarized in the words of one person: 'The church needs to give a more robust defence of the reasons for believing.' People pleaded for the churches to answer the sceptics and defend the faith.

Many respondents had joined house churches to get teaching that built their faith. Several websites were frequently listed as providing the sort of teaching that people wanted; one was the Answers in Genesis website. Respondents wanted evidence for their faith and teaching that upheld the authority of the Bible.

Unfortunately, many church leaders in the traditional churches have capitulated to the evolutionary view of history, destroying their trust in the Bible and any desire to defend it. Josef Ton, the Romanian Baptist pastor who suffered for his faith at the hands of the communists, said, 'I came to the conclusion that there were two factors which destroyed Christianity in Western Europe. One was the theory of evolution, and the other, liberal theology ... Liberal theology is just evolution applied to the Bible and our faith.'

People in the United States are also deserting 'mainstream' denominations that have become infected with liberal theology. The liberal churches are dying and conservative (Bible-believing) churches are growing.

Clearly the creation message, with its focus on upholding the authority of Scripture, is pivotal to this question of church growth or decline. If church leaders do not uphold the authority of the Bible from the very first verse and do not emphasize teaching that shows the truthfulness of Scripture, people will increasingly see the churches as irrelevant ... and vote with their feet.⁵

As I read the results of this survey, I was struck by comments of people pleading for a reason to believe. They are desperate for teaching that upholds the authority of the Bible. They are tired of clergy who dumb down the message of scripture by means of allegorical gibberish. They hunger for true Biblical teaching on subjects such as prophecy, the literal creation account and apologetics.

According to the survey, “Hundreds of replies revealed how frightened people were by world events. Many avoided watching the news or reading newspapers in order to escape the reality of today’s troubled times.” Churches that taught the prophetic scriptures “responded to these anxieties by explaining the nature and purpose of the second coming of Christ.”⁶

Their comments are quite revealing:

A young mother from West Sussex summarized the fears of many when she wrote:

“I have found constant talk of war, weapons of mass destruction, terror attacks, Bible Codes and the end of the world very frightening. It seems every time you open a newspaper or switch on the news there is more bad news. It had totally taken over my otherwise rational thinking to the point where I avoided buying a newspaper and left the room when the news comes on. I had lain awake at night unable to sleep because of the thought whizzing around in my head ... we’re all going to die ... then started attending a small church nearby ... (one Sunday) a talk was delivered on Matt. 24:22 23 explaining that while it was prophesied that there will be a world conflict centering around the Middle East, ‘such as the world had never seen before’, the Lord was going to shorten this trouble by his return, otherwise ‘no flesh would have survived.’ It was explained to the congregation that the whole reason for Jesus’ return is to stop the human race from destroying itself. I wish I had known this before ... it was such a relief to hear these words from Scripture. I got a copy of the pastor’s sermon and anytime I get frightened I read it over and over again. I really do feel as if a black cloud has been lifted and replaced by a ray of sunshine.”

From Ashbourne a woman expressed it this way:

“I am ashamed to say that I was placed in the category of those predicted in Luke 21:26 where it describes ‘men’s hearts fainting from fear’ concerning the troubles befalling the planet. Now that the pastors I sit under have explained the purpose of the Second Coming of Jesus, I am now like those in v. 28 where it describes the devout as being excited, looking forward to and spiritually preparing for His glorious return.”

From Lincoln a churchgoer wrote from a slightly different angle:

“I have always felt that among all these horrors we can remain confident. When my mother was a small child (born 1902) an elderly man explained to her that he had studied Bible prophecy for many years. He said that Scripture predicted that some day the Jews would return to Israel and reestablish their nation, and that many different countries would gather at a place called Armageddon for war. At this point Christ would dramatically return in His glory and set up His Kingdom

on earth, which is why we say in the Lord's own prayer 'Thy kingdom come.' World events as such have never worried me because I know the world is in His hands and He will not allow us to be annihilated."

Hundreds of individuals were grateful for their churches' explanation of the second coming and the reassurance it brought them. Many others who had not received this kind of teaching expressed their need for such reassurance.

The large number of references to this topic showed that prophecy has attracted people's interest and some respondents even admitted to reevaluating their previous thinking. From County Down one man admitted:

"I had looked upon the Bible as being a collection of myths ... but as we look around and see its prophecies being fulfilled, I am having doubts about this view ... the thought keeps coming to my mind — 'what if I'm wrong and the Bible is true after all? I have to honestly admit to myself that this is a serious possibility.'"

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When Dispensational Premillennialism is taught from the prophetic scriptures people have hope. But when those scriptures are explained away through Amillennial allegory that blessed hope is destroyed.

It's a dangerous thing to tamper with the literal teachings of the Bible. When you begin to allegorize one section of scripture, it's very easy to allegorize other passages that don't harmonize with your finite understanding. The creation account of Genesis 1 and 2 is a case in point. I find it interesting that non-dispensationalists are more likely to deny a literal 24 hour day in the creation account. If you can "fudge" in the Book of Revelation to make it fit your preconceived notions then why not "fudge" in the Genesis account of creation? Did God really say that there would be a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth? If not, then did God really say that creation took place in 6 literal 24 hour days?

For years Princeton was the bulwark of Reformed Covenant theology. Charles Hodge was the principal of Princeton Theological Seminary between 1851 and 1878. Although Hodge himself opposed Darwinism, compromise can be seen in his writings. Hodge, in his Systematic Theology, makes room for the days of the creation account to be long ages. Hodge caved to the science of his day and in no time Princeton succumbed to Darwin. His protégé, B. B. Warfield, adopted a modified form of Darwinism known as Theistic Evolution.

The debate over the Genesis account has raged in Reformed circles over the years. Not all Reformed theologians have sided with Hodge and Warfield on this issue. But many have caved in to the pop-science culture of our day.

The Presbyterian Church in America commissioned a study of this controversy. The results of this report, which were published in 2000, are quite revealing. The committee states:

Clearly there are committed, Reformed believers who are scientists that are on either side of the issue regarding the age of the cosmos. Just as in the days following the Reformation ... so today there is not unanimity regarding the age question.⁸

The conclusion of this committee was:

The goal of general revelation along with special revelation is to know God, and thus “enjoy Him forever.” He has given us rational minds that are capable of thinking His thoughts after Him, particularly as concerns His creation. Just as the Holy Spirit illuminates our minds as we read His special revelation, so His providence directs the church of Jesus Christ to know the truth of His general revelation. In the knowing, that truth will indeed set us free. Until we know, Christ’s Church must not be divided over what we do not yet know.⁹

So for the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America scripture is not clear regarding the days of creation. Did God really say there were 6 literal 24 hours days of creation? According to the PCA, we don’t really know. Since we don’t know, let’s not argue about it.

With the foundations of Creationism and Prophecy in shambles, many parishioners in Reformed churches left without the hope of Christ’s literal Second Coming and they are left with doubts about the veracity of God’s Word. Did God really say?

If Genesis and Revelation are in question, then what about the rest of scripture? The next logical step in the progression is to adopt full-blown liberal theology which teaches that the Bible is not the inerrant Word of God, but rather a collection of writings from fallible men. It’s no wonder that church-goers in the U.K. and Europe are leaving their churches in droves.

The Reverend J. Willans, chairperson for the Church Survey, writes:

As a Vicar and writer in the Church of England who has served in various parts of the Anglican Communion, I welcome the present debate about the state of Christianity in the U.K.

The blame is being placed upon materialism and an increase in science, but this doesn’t explain why, for instance, Christianity is so powerful in the USA, (which is the wealthiest and most scientifically advanced nation on earth), that in many areas nearly 50 per cent of the population attend church. Nor does it explain why at a global level, Christianity is continuing to grow. Clearly the reason for the decline of Christianity in the UK must lie with something else.

Thriving Christianity, no matter where it may be located in the world, has always one thing in common; along with its teaching, evidence is always regularly presented so as to explain why such teaching should be believed. Living in an age of reason, these churches realized long ago it is not enough to tell people what they should believe; it needs to be backed up with factual information as to why it makes sense.

These congregations, for example, are given regular reports on the latest archaeological discoveries which back up the Bible. They are frequently told about the numbers of scientists who now accept that living organisms are far too complex to have occurred by chance and that it is, therefore, more logical to believe the universe has been designed by a creator.

Or again, they hear sermons on how Jesus fulfilled hundreds of Old Testament prophecies, and that the return of the Jews to the Middle East and the revival of the Jewish nation, after 2,000 years of worldwide dispersal, was all predicted in Bible prophecy.

The Vicar points to Creationism and Prophecy as being vital to the growth of a healthy church. If these two crucial doctrines are neglected, then the growth of believers will stagnate. If they are totally abandoned, as they are in some circles of Christianity, then the congregation will eventually starve to death.

Did God really say that creation took place in literal 24 hour days? Did God really say that Christ would establish a literal millennial kingdom and reign on earth for a thousand years? A literal interpretation of scripture answers these questions with a resounding, "YES!" But allegory leaves us scratching our heads and wondering about the veracity of the Word of God. It's no wonder that Christianity in Europe and the U.K., the birthplace of Reformed Covenant Theology, is dying an agonizing death. The same grim future can be expected for all who abandon these foundational truths of scripture.

People are hungering for the undiluted Word of God. Only literal interpretation presents the Scriptures in a manner that does not call into question the integrity of Divine inspiration. Let's all heed Paul's challenge: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, *accurately handling the word of truth* (2 Tim. 2:15)."

¹ Dictionary of Premillennial Theology, Kregal Publications, 1996, p. 67-70

² The American Heritage® Dictionary Online;

<http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/Origen>

³ Jay Tolson, "European, Not Christian," U.S. News & World Report, May 30, 2005, p. 52

⁴ Jonathan Petre, "Churches on road to doom if trends continue," The Daily Telegraph, 03/09/2005

⁵ Don Batten, "Voting with their feet," <http://www.answersingenesis.org/creation/v28/i1/voting.asp>

⁶ Church Survey UK, <http://www.churchsurvey.co.uk/>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ The Presbyterian Church in America — Report of the Creation Study Committee, 2000, http://www.reasons.org/resources/apologetics/pca_creation_study_committee_report.shtml

⁹ Ibid