



The Differences between Premillennial & Amillennial Hermeneutics: Literal vs. Figurative Language; All Messianic Prophecies Were Fulfilled in Christ

III. The Differences between Premillennial & Amillennial Hermeneutics:

1. The dispensationalist system of hermeneutics is based on the principle of “literal-historical-grammatical” interpretation of Scripture. This standard is defined by:

Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *Dispensationalism Today*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 86-89:

Literal interpretation gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. This is sometimes called the principle of **grammatical-historical** interpretation since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations. The principle might also be called **normal** interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated **plain** interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech. Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. The *literalist* is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols*, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted according to the received laws of language, as any other utterances are interpreted. (pp. 86-87)

There are many reasons given by dispensationalists to support this hermeneutical principle of **literal**, **normal**, or **plain** interpretation. Three are worthy of mention:

1. Philosophically, the purpose of language itself seems to require literal interpretation. Language was given by God for the purpose of being able to communicate with man. (p. 87)

If God be the originator of language and if the chief purpose of originating it was to convey His message to man, then it must follow that He, being all-wise and all-loving, originated sufficient language to convey all that was in His heart to tell man. Furthermore, it must also follow that He would use language and expect man to use it in its literal, normal, and plain sense. The Scriptures, then, cannot be regarded as an illustration of some special use of language so that in the interpretation of these Scriptures some deeper meaning of the words must be sought.

If language is the creation of God for the purpose of conveying His message, then (the interpreter) must view that language as sufficient in scope and normative in use in accomplishing that purpose for which God originated it.

2. The prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the first coming of Christ—His birth, His rearing, His ministry, His death, His resurrection—were all fulfilled literally. There is no nonliteral fulfillment of these prophecies in the New Testament. (p. 88)
3. If one does not use the plain, normal, literal method of interpretation, all objectivity is lost. What check would there be on the variety of interpretations which man's imagination could produce if there were not an objective standard which the literal principle provides? To try to see meaning other than the normal one would result in as many interpretations as there are people interpreting. (pp. 88-89)



2. Ryrie then takes up principles of interpretation utilized by the nondispensationalist which include the allegorical approach:

Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 90:

Perhaps the distinction between the dispensationalist and nondispensationalist can be seen by noting what the latter has to say about this matter of hermeneutics, especially as it relates to the application of the principle of literal interpretation to prophecy. For instance, Oswald T. Allis, a vigorous opponent of dispensationalism, says:

One of the most marked features of premillennialism in all its forms is the emphasis which it places on the literal interpretation of Scripture. It is the insistent claims of its advocates that only when interpreted literally is the Bible interpreted truly; and they denounce as “spiritualizers” or “allegorizers” those who do not interpret the Bible with the same degree of literalness as they do. None have made the charge more pointedly than the dispensationalists.

In his words, the issue between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists is “the same degree of literalness.” More specifically this has to do with the interpretation of prophecy. The dispensationalist claims to apply his literal principle to all Scripture, including prophecy, while the nondispensationalist does not apply it to prophecy. That he does not apply it to prophecy is evident, for if he did he would not arrive at amillennialism.

3. It is assumed that the nondispensationalist, who interprets Old Testament prophecies as allegorical for the church and are fulfilled “spiritually” in the church, would not accept the idea of a literal millennial kingdom. The view of the amillennialist is summed up by:

Couch, 37:

AMILLENNIALISM. The view that the kingdom promises, or prophecies, in the Old Testament are fulfilled spiritually rather than literally in the New Testament church. Those who hold this view believe that Christ will literally return, but they do not believe in His thousand-year reign on the earth. According to the amillennial view, the kingdom of God is present in the church age, and at the end of the church age the second coming of Christ inaugurates the eternal state. The book of Revelation is interpreted as a description of those events that take place during the church age.

4. Nevertheless, the amillennialist is forced to agree that if the literal-grammatical-historical system of hermeneutics is applied to the Scripture then a premillennialist view emerges:

Ryrie, 92-93:

Theoretically at least, the application of the literal principle is not debated. Most agree that this involves some obvious procedures. For one thing, the meaning of each word must be studied. This involves etymology, use, history, and resultant meaning. For another thing, the grammar or relationship of the words to each other must be analyzed. For a third thing, the context, immediate and remote, must be considered. This means comparing scripture with scripture as well as the study of the immediate context. (p. 92)

However, in practice the theory is often compromised or adjusted and in effect invalidated. The amillennialist does this in his entire approach to eschatology. Floyd E. Hamilton, for instance, who is an amillennialist, confessed:



Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures. That was the kind of Messianic kingdom that the Jews of the time of Christ were looking for, on the basis of a literal kingdom interpretation of the Old Testament promises. (pp. 92-93) [Hamilton, *The Basics of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1942), 38.]