

Biblical Hermeneutic for the Kingdom of God: A Dispensational Understanding

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Rivaling Factions in Eschatology

Covenant Theology: The system which is Covenant Theology was formulated in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The system teaches that prior to the fall God entered into covenant with Adam through a covenant of works. This covenant promised eternal life if obeyed and death if disobeyed. When Adam fell, him being humanities head, plunged the entire human race into a state of sin and death.

In Covenant Theology there are two or three main covenants through which all of Scripture is interpreted. The three covenants are 1) The Covenant of Works, 2) the Covenant of Redemption and 3) the Covenant of Grace. These are theological covenants as opposed to biblical covenants. There is much emphasis placed on the Covenant of Grace. All who place faith in Jesus Christ enter into this covenant and form one people of God, the church or the true Israel.

Dispensational Theology: Dispensation comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*. It is a word that means *stewardship* or *economy*. The definition of a dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's plan. According to Charles Ryrie, Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time."¹

The *sin qua non* of Dispensationalism is three-fold. First, there is a distinction between the church and Israel. Second, the distinction is born out of the literal interpretation. Third, concerns the purpose of God in the world which is His own glory. This is not to say that the Covenant Theologian does not believe in the glory of God. The emphasis in Covenant Theology is salvation. In dispensationalism, salvation is just one way in which God is being glorified. Scripture in this way becomes God-centered due to God's glory being at the center.

Why Study the Prophetic Plans of God?

The Prophetic Plans of God are a part of Scripture. Jesus informed us in the Gospel that man should not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the

¹ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 34.

mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). Prophecy is a part of “every word” we are called to live by. Therefore, it is not something Christians can afford to skip over. We cannot settle for a “pan-millennialists” position. It will all ‘pan’ out in the end. We must seek to understand through Scripture what God plans on doing in the end and we must be diligent in doing so.

The Prophetic Plans of God have a sanctifying influence on the believer. 1 John 2:1 informs the reader of the reason for John’s writing of this epistle. He writes namely, “that you may not sin.” Later on he declares, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure” (1 John 3:2-3). Contextually, the coming of the Lord is connected to personal holiness of life. Notice, the reason why the believer is to purify himself is mentioned in light of the Lord’s coming “*everyone who thus hopes purifies himself*”. Having a faith rooted in the rescuing plan of Christ is used as a motivation for holiness.

These reasons serve as ample encouragement to study prophecy. In addition, God be praised for in His kindness, He has not left us in the dark as to what He intends to do. To the contrary, He has given to us a detailed account of what will take place in the future so that we will not be in the dark (1 Thessalonians 5:4). Therefore, let us take courage as we examine the prophetic plans of God.

Views that Give Way to an Understanding of Prophecy

There are several different views concerning eschatology. There are different views regarding the millennial reign of Christ, three to be exact. There are Premillennialist, Amillennialist, and Postmillennialist. The prefixes to each millennial position speaks to the time to which Christ will reign. Thus ‘pre’ means Christ comes back before the millennium. ‘Post’ means Christ comes back after the millennium. ‘A’ which serves as a negation means “no” millennium or better, the millennium is not limited to a thousand years.² Rather, this last position teaches an inclusion of the entire period of time between the first and second coming of Christ.³

Not only are there views on the millennial reign of Christ, there are several different rapture views. The rapture or the translation of the church is the belief that

² Kim Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism: A Case for Understanding The End Times*. (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2013), 29.

³ Ibid.

Christ will supernaturally remove His church out of the world.⁴ The term rapture comes from the Latin word *rapturo* and is the translation of the Greek word “caught up” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).⁵

There are as many as five views on the translation of the church. Some argue for a pre-tribulational understanding which simply means that Christ will rapture His church before the tribulation. This is position which will be argued for in this study. The second formidable position is a posttribulational rapture view (Christ returning after the tribulation). Then there are less popular positions i.e. Partial rapture (some believers will be taken, but not all), Midtribulational Rapture (believers taken halfway through the tribulation), and Pre Wrath (the church being rapture three-fourths of way through the tribulation) rapture views.

How to Arrive at a View of the End Times

How one arrives at an eschatological position is due to how one interprets Scripture. The discipline of interpretation is called hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the art and science of biblical interpretation. Bernard Ramm comments on this discipline stating that “it is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation.”⁶

I. A Spiritualized Method to Interpreting Prophecy

- A. Defining the allegorical method of interpretation. Allegorical interpretation is the belief that beneath the letter or the obvious is the real meaning of the passage.⁷ In other words, when this method is employed it is not necessarily the meaning of the words which the interpreter is after. Rather, the meaning behind the words. Roy B. Zuck states that in “allegorizing...the literal is a sort of code, which needs to be deciphered to determine the more significant and hidden meaning. In this approach the literal is superficial; the allegorical is the true meaning.”⁸

⁴ Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995), 208.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants*. (Boston: W.A. Wilde Company, 1956), 1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*. (Colorado Springs: David Cook, 1991), 29.

Much confusion regarding prophecy exists due the implementing of this method. The inherent danger is found in the historical import of the biblical passage being lost in interpretation.⁹ What is meant by this is that Scripture sits in a context and if imported into our understanding without it's context meaning is lost. In this way, we are not looking for meaning beneath the words. We are seeking to glean our understanding from the actual words. Allegory uses the literal sense of the text as a conduit for a secondary or spiritual meaning.

B. Issues with in the allegorical method of interpretation. Pentecost lists 3 problems with the allegorical method of interpretation. 1) It does not interpret Scripture. 2) Interpretive authority is not in the Scriptures, but in the mind of the interpreter and 3) there is no way to test the conclusions.¹⁰

When one understands that prophecy is high in symbolism especially in books i.e. Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelations, the problems with allegory are readily comprehended.

C. Allegory as used in Scripture. One passage of Scripture used as a proof-text for the espousing of the allegorical method is found in Galatians 4:21-31. Paul writing in 4:21-26 states,

(21) Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?
(22) For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. (23) But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. (24) *Now this may be interpreted allegorically:* these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. (25) Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. (26) But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

The argument follows along the lines of Paul presenting a case for the allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. In responding to this, is should be understood that Paul is not giving a mandate to interpret the Old Testament or any Scripture in an allegorical way. What Paul does in Galatians is explain an allegory. There is a difference.

⁹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 4.

¹⁰ Pentecost, 7-8.

II. A Literal Method to Interpreting Prophecy

The literal method of interpretation has been called the literal-historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture. To grasp the idea each word is deserving of explanation. Literal simply means the plain sense of a word. It is the normal, ordinary, customary usage, whether employed in writing, speaking to thinking.¹¹ The historical aspect can be understood as what the word meant when it was used originally. The grammatical idea picks up the reality that words mean something. Words are the fundamental basis of context and understanding context is the best way to arrive at correct meaning.

- A. *As biblical.* The first place to start as it pertains to the literal method of interpretation is the Bible itself. It is Scripture which shows us how Scripture should be interpreted. Though we do not have a biblical mandate to ever interpret the Bible in an allegorical fashion, we do have a biblical mandate to interpret Scripture literally.

Observe Nehemiah 8:1-3,

(1) And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. (2) So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. (3) And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.

The Law is said to be brought to people who could understand it. Thus from the outset of this reading it becomes clarity of Scripture is seen. Notice the conclusion of the narrative.

Nehemiah 8:6-8,

(6) And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. (7) Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. (8) They read from the book, from

¹¹ Ibid.

the Law of God, clearly, *and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*

The last phrase speaks of the goal of exegesis in all of Scripture. It is to giving the sense. This is particularly true for prophecy. God has not written a book meant to be partially understood. Some truths are harder to understand than others, but all of Scripture can be understood through the help of the Holy Spirit and hard work. Both Jesus and the Apostles treat the Old Testament in such a way that no one should come to the understanding that Scripture is to be taken in any other way than literal.

B. *As Normal.* There are some guidelines to follow in effort to arrive at the proper meaning of prophecy.

1. Take prophecy literal. What does Isaiah mean when he speaks of people living beyond the age of 100 in the millennium (Isaiah 65:20)?
2. Make a habit of recognizing figurative or symbolic language. Consider Genesis 3:15 or John 1:29.
3. Look for the interpretation in the Scripture itself. Making a good use of context in prophecy will keep you from many errors.
4. Have a Christo-centric focus with regards to the fulfillment of prophecy.
5. Seek to understand aspects of prophecy which have been fulfilled and those that have not.