



## “Literalism” to Combat Liberalism

False teachers often take advantage of other false teachings to promote themselves. They start by pointing out what is unbiblical about what others are saying, and this prepares their listeners or readers to listen to them when they suggest their own theological system as an alternative. With this in mind we turn to consider some of the false teachings that were on the rise at the same time that dispensationalism became popular.

More people began listening to the dispensationalists when new theories arose in science and theology that clearly went against the fundamental teachings of Scripture. The nineteenth century was marked by the rise of what is sometimes called “liberal theology” or “modernism” which embraced the philosophy of the Enlightenment and denied fundamental doctrines such as the fall of Adam, the virgin birth, and the deity of Christ. Dispensationalists took advantage of this situation to set themselves up to be the Bible-believing warriors, fighting off liberal views in theology with their “literal” interpretations of Scripture. Thus to understand the rise of dispensationalism, it is helpful to consider the enemy of liberalism that it was supposed to be able to combat.

### Using “Literalism” against Liberalism

The nineteenth century was characterized by the rising popularity of theories in worldly science and liberal theology that clearly attacked the authority of Scripture. Uniformitarianism in geology, evolutionism in biology, and the higher-critical view of interpreting the Bible, all denied the accuracy of Scripture.

First there was *uniformitarianism*, which arose in the first half of the nineteenth century. According to this geological theory, all the present-day formations and fossils in the earth’s crust can be explained as being brought about by geological processes known to us today—processes which have been operating for a very long period of time. Such a theory was recognized immediately to be a denial of Scripture’s teaching concerning the creation and the flood. First of all, it required the earth to have been around for an extremely long period of time, and thus denied the creation narrative that spoke of a six-day creation taking place only a few thousand years before the birth of Christ. Furthermore, it blatantly denied that there ever was a worldwide flood. The opening of the windows of heaven and the breaking up of the fountains of the great deep would be examples of geological processes that are not seen today. But according to the theory of uniformitarianism, all the geological processes that operated in the past are processes that we still see operating today. Thus this new “scientific” theory was a direct attack upon the authority of Scripture.

Next there arose *Darwinism* or *evolutionism*, which took this idea that the earth and the living creatures on it have been around for an extremely long period of time, and added to it the teaching that the creatures we see today have evolved from simpler creatures in the very distant past by means of what Darwin called “natural selection.” In addition to denying the six-day creation, this new theory denied the following fundamental doctrines of Holy Scripture:

1. There was a first man named Adam, who was created on the sixth day.
2. Adam’s wife was built by God out of Adam’s rib.
3. God created the first man out of the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.
4. Man was uniquely created by God in His image.
5. Death entered the world as the punishment for sin, which means that no living creatures died before the fall of Adam.

Uniformitarianism and evolutionism were two popular theories of modern science, and they both emphatically denied the accuracy and authority of Holy Scripture. Prior to this, many professing Christians had thought that the findings of this world’s scientists would always serve to confirm what the Bible teaches. Now the scientists of the world were coming up with theories that were clearly contrary to some of the most fundamental doctrines taught in the Scriptures.

Some who professed Christ opted not to fight against these new theories, but to embrace them. But this

meant they would have to find some way to argue that these new teachings were not really in conflict with Scripture. One method that was commonly adopted then, and that is still adopted by many today, is to take the beginning chapters of Genesis and make them into fictional stories written to get across certain ideas and not meant to be read as an actual account of real historical events. Whether they called these stories allegories, myths, or something else, one thing was clear—they denied that these stories were literally true.

This brings us to a third enemy that arose, known as *higher-criticism*. Those who adopted the methods of the higher critics treated the Scriptures as though they originated with man, and not God. They subjected to critical analysis not only the beginning chapters of Genesis, but the whole of the Scriptures, as though the writers of Scripture were inventing stories to express their own religious experiences. The references to miracles were seen as simply mythical ways of expressing one's faith. As for our Lord Jesus Christ, He was often made out to be merely a man who taught moral principles, and who served as an example to others by the way He was willing to lay down His life for what He believed.

During a time when these blatant denials of Scripture were becoming increasingly popular—not only in the world, but also in the churches—many began to listen to the dispensationalists. At the same time that more and more people were referring to the Scriptures as myths, there were also many that were reacting against this. During these circumstances many found the dispensational method of interpreting the Scriptures “literally” to be appealing.

The enemies to which dispensationalists pointed could be easily seen, and dispensationalists took advantage of this to promote themselves as the ones called by God to sound the alarm. Proclaiming themselves to be the only ones consistently holding to the literal meaning of Scripture, they urged people to leave the apostatizing churches and to join their interdenominational movement of independent Bible-believing fundamentalists.

Now in fairness we must say that there were, after all, certain things the dispensationalists were correctly pointing out. First, they were rightly and loudly proclaiming that the rampant apostasy in the churches was an indication that Christ was soon going to return to execute judgment. Secondly, they showed from Scripture that contrary to the teachings of the postmillennialists, things were not going to get better and better, but worse and worse.

But the dispensational method of interpreting Scripture “literally” was actually a deadly error in disguise. For all their boasts about holding to what Scripture literally says, they were actually denying what Scripture teaches. The recognition of this fact is extremely important.

### ***The Illusion of Dispensational “Literalism”***

Repeatedly dispensationalists proclaim themselves to be the only ones who consistently interpret the Scriptures literally. They acknowledge, of course, that many others claim to hold to the literal meaning of what Scripture says. But dispensationalists insist they are the only ones who hold to the literal meaning *consistently*.

The difference, in their mind, has to do with how one interprets God's promise to give Israel the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. If one interprets this to be a promise of heavenly land to the church in Christ, the dispensationalists call this “spiritualizing” the text. The consistent literalists, they say, will interpret this to be a promise of earthly land only to the physical descendants of Jacob.

Now by using this argument they are actually rejecting what Scripture literally says. In the Bible we find not only God's promises, but also the *interpretation* of these promises. So holding to the literal meaning of Scripture involves holding to the literal meaning of God's own interpretation of His promises.

For example, God says that this promise to Israel was a promise of heavenly land. God speaks of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Hebrews 11, and says of them:

*These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to*

*have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: (Hebrews 11:13–16a)*

The promise referred to here was of a heavenly land, and the patriarchs knew it. Furthermore, Scripture says this promise was to Christ (i.e. Abraham's Seed), and to all who are in Christ by faith:

*Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.*

*And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:16,29)*

So one who truly holds to the literal meaning of Scripture will hold to the literal meaning of God's own interpretation of His promises, and will maintain that the promise of the land of Canaan was a promise of heavenly land to Christ and all those who are in Christ by faith.

Furthermore, God promised the land of Canaan as an *everlasting* possession. Yet dispensationalists say this promise will be fulfilled when Israel possesses the earthly land for a thousand years—hardly a literal interpretation.

The following passages clearly refer to the glorious everlasting age, in which we will live with God forever in the new heaven and the new earth. But the dispensationalists claim that they refer to the coming carnal millennial age:

*Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And the heathen shall know that I the LORD do sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary shall be in the midst of them for evermore. (Ezekiel 37:26-28)*

*The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the LORD shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the LORD shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended. (Isaiah 60:19-20)*

When they take these passages and claim that they refer to a future millennial kingdom for the Jews, they are left with a problem. These passages speak of the coming age as everlasting, but they claim that it will last only for a thousand years.

So how do they attempt to get around that? By attributing this to the inaccurate view of the prophets—although dispensationalists would not put it quite this way. They say the prophets viewed the millennium to be everlasting, even though it really was going to last for only one millennium. Dwight Pentecost, one of the leading dispensationalists of the recent past, writes:

**That which characterizes the millennial age is not viewed as temporary, but eternal.<sup>1</sup>**

But how can this be said to be a "literal" interpretation of Scripture? The passages quoted above, and many others like them, clearly refer to the coming age as everlasting. To take these passages and claim that the prophets *viewed* the age that way, when really it was only going to last a thousand years is clearly to reject what Scripture literally says. A thousand years is not forever. To use the language of the dispensationalists, when God says forever, He means forever. Thus to hold to the literal meaning of Scripture one must confess that the real Seed of Abraham will possess and rule the heavenly promised land forever and ever.

In other words, dispensationalism's "literalism" is actually an illusion, which a believer can clearly see when he looks at it more closely. Yet it became very popular in an era characterized by the rise of liberal theology, with its outright denial of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. When Scripture's teachings were being so blatantly rejected, many were persuaded to grab the imaginary weapon of dispensationalism's "literalism" to combat the foe.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (1958; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Dunham Publishing, 1966), 490.

## "Literalism" and the Crucifixion of Christ

The dispensational view of interpreting Scripture is partially rooted in their carnal longing for an earthly kingdom. In other words, their hermeneutical method does not determine their view of the kingdom, but their carnal view of the kingdom determines their hermeneutical method. Their longing for a carnal, earthly kingdom is first, and their "literal" method of interpreting the Scriptures is used in an effort to make the Scriptures teach that God has promised such a kingdom.

Thus the "literalism" of the dispensationalists is not only deceptive, but also very dangerous. As some have pointed out before, this is really the same carnal view of the kingdom that was held by the Jews that crucified our Lord:

Then as to *what* this modern system of teaching is, it will be a surprise to most of those who love the Lord Jesus Christ to learn that, in respect to the central and vitally important subject of the *Kingdom of God*, twentieth century dispensationalism is practically identical with first century *rabbinism*.<sup>2</sup> For the cardinal doctrine of the Jewish rabbis of Christ's day was that, according to the predictions of the prophets of Israel, the purpose and result of the Messiah's mission would be the re-constituting of the Jewish nation; the re-occupation by them of the land of Palestine; the setting up again of the earthly throne of David; and the exaltation of the people of Israel to the place of supremacy in the world.

Now, seeing that a doctrine is known by its fruits, let us recall what effect this doctrine concerning the Kingdom of God had upon the *orthodox Jews* who so earnestly believed it in that day. And in view of what it impelled those zealous men to do, let us ask ourselves if there is not grave reason to fear its effect upon the *orthodox Christians* who hold and zealously teach it in our day? The effect then was that, when Christ came to His own people, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand, but making it known that that Kingdom did not correspond at all to their idea of it; when He said, "My Kingdom is *not* of this world," and taught that, so far from being Jewish, it was of such sort that a man must be *born of the Spirit* in order to enter it, then they rejected Him ("received Him not") hated Him, betrayed Him and caused Him to be put to death.<sup>3</sup>

One who takes note of this similarity is not surprised to see how dispensationalists are so supportive of the carnal dreams of the Israelis still today.

What dispensationalists call the "literal" interpretation is really a carnal interpretation—an interpretation that appeals to the sinful flesh of fallen man. Seeing as such a view has led to great evil in the past, we should not be surprised when we see its evil fruit in our own day.

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There are a number of other aspects that could be written about in this historical introduction to dispensationalism, but I think it is time to move on. Lord willing, there will be an opportunity to refer to a number of these along the way.

Starting with the next article, we will begin to go through the main teachings of the dispensationalists, endeavoring to show not only what is wrong with what they teach, but also what the truth is over against what they say. For God raises up false theological systems for a reason, that in the way of considering and refuting their arguments we ourselves might grow in our understanding of the truths concerning the last things.

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2. Rabbinism is a name for the beliefs, practices, and precepts of the Jewish rabbis of that time.

3. Philip Mauro, *The Gospel of the Kingdom with an Examination of Modern Dispensationalism* (Boston: Hamilton Brothers, 1928), 21–22.