

*A Brief Discussion about Literal vs. Allegorical Interpretation of Scripture.*

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*“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>9</sup>*

*“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.”<sup>10</sup>*

First, I confess my bias about Scripture:

- It is God’s breathed, sacred, authoritative, and inerrant Word.
- It is his revelation to mankind which contains that portion of his intended will about himself, his doxological plans for man’s redemption through his Son – Jesus Christ, and the eternal destiny of every human.
- It contains the information necessary for men to learn of their depravity, God’s holiness, and his offer of forgiveness of sins and eternal life to everyone that believes in his son, Jesus Christ.
- Every aspect of Scripture is intended to display some awesome aspect of God.
- It is meant to be understood only by continual personal study, illumination by the Holy Spirit, and applied consistent with its original intentional meaning.

I acknowledge these biases to clarify my position on the literal interpretation of Scripture.

I theorize that, in addition to the doctrinal and theological dangers caused by the presence of false teachers and false professors in local churches, failure to interpret scripture literally deceiving and weakening the individual believer and the local Church.

*<sup>11</sup> And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. <sup>11</sup>*

Historically, all communicators use figurative language (allegory, metaphor, simile, etc.) to assist in getting their point across to their audience. Using illustrations, comparisons, and word pictures has been a time honored practice allowing the audience to understand the communicator’s message. Pastors, preachers, and teachers (even Jesus Christ) use figures of speech to communicate biblical truth, doctrine, and theology to their audience. However,

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<sup>9</sup> *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), 2 Pe 1:20–21.

<sup>10</sup> *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), 2 Ti 3:16–17.

<sup>11</sup> *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Mt 24:11.

there is also a historical record of abuse when it comes to figurative language. Specifically with Scripture, men have fallen away from literal hermeneutical practices to find (exegete) the text. Instead they Allegorize or Spiritualize the text of Scripture to give (or to read in - eisegesis) definition to the text. When we suggest that Scripture has a hidden or alternate meaning which Scripture does not support. (Scripture interprets Scripture. The Holy Spirit Illuminates Inspirations)

An Allegorizing hermeneutic sees the entire Bible as potentially figurative in nature not literal. This means make changes where we disagree or add meaning to fit our personal bias. Allegorizing is not a literary device, it a method which allows the reader to determine the meaning of Scripture. It says there is a hidden (other) meaning to Scripture, However, that meaning is out of context with primary meaning of the passage. Augustine taught that the four rivers in Genesis 2:10–14 are four cardinal virtues and that in the Fall the fig leaves represent hypocrisy and the skin covering is mortality (3:7, 21). Noah’s drunkenness (Gen. 9:20–23) represents Christ in His suffering and death. The teeth of the Shulamite in Song of Songs 4:2 speak of the church “tearing men away from heresy.”<sup>12</sup>

A Spiritualizing hermeneutic is similar to allegorizing but it looks for deeper meaning in the text. The focus here is deeper meaning not noted anywhere in Scripture.

Allegory as a literary device is “a statement, story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one”. It is an extended metaphor using comparison and symbolism to communicate meaning. This meaning can be transferred to a literal circumstance or idea. Aesop’s “The Tortoise and the Hare” is an allegory which teaches that strong and steady wins the race. In Scripture, Dr. Christopher Cone describes allegories as a narrative or word picture which may or may not be true-to-life, with many parts pointing symbolically to spiritual realities.”<sup>13</sup> Paul intentionally uses Sarah and Hagar as an allegory to teach the realities between spiritual freedom and spiritual slavery.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus’ address to the disciples in John 15:1-6 uses allegory. He says:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every *branch* that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye *are* the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in

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<sup>12</sup> Donald K. Campbell, “Foreword,” in *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 39–40.

<sup>13</sup> Donald K. Campbell, “Foreword,” in *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 221.

<sup>14</sup> *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Gal 4:21-31.

me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast *them* into the fire, and they are burned.<sup>15</sup>

What makes this passage a true scriptural allegory? Christ mentions himself as the 'True Vine', the Heavenly Father is the 'husbandman', branches, and fruit. These are agricultural terms being used to explain spiritual truth. The husbandman expects fruit from the branches in the vine. If there is no fruit he casts these branches aside where they dry up and wither away, and eventually are thrown in the fire. Meanwhile, the branches which bear fruit are 'purged' in a way to make the bear more fruit.

The passage gives us the allegorical symbols: Jesus as the True Vine, the Heavenly Father as the Husbandman and the disciples as the Branches. Now Christ does not specifically state the disciples are the branches, but the entire passage in context does. In verse 3 he tells the disciples they are "clean through" after explaining how branches which bear fruit are purged, which is a thorough cleaning. Then in verse 4 that he says a "**branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye except ye abide in me**". And so we can confidently identify the disciples as being the 'branches in this passage.

Also consistent with allegory is the process of purging. Christ says the disciples are 'clean' through "the word" he spoke to them. This word is the cleaning agent used to make them fruitful as long as they 'abide' in Christ the True Vine. If they do not abide in Christ by not keeping his word, they will become fruitless and could be removed from the opportunity to bear any more fruit. If that happens they would become useless in ministry and would dry up and wither away just like the branches.

We must also consider what is absent in this allegorical passage. Christ doesn't provide a definition of the 'men' or the 'fire' in verse 6. This would prevent us from searching for a hidden meaning behind the text. (Allegorizing or Spiritualizing) The process of men using dried branches to make cooking fires is documented in Mat 6:30. There it depicts what happens to the "grass of the field" after it flowering (or fruit bearing) time has ended. Like the fruitless branches in John 15, once they wither up they're only remaining use is fuel. But there is no a direct or indirect reference to the men representing angels throwing fruitless believers into the fires of Hell or eternal destruction.

Viewed in context these passages primarily teaches Christ's expectation of the disciples and what can happen if they fail to follow his instructions. Christ is the sources of the disciple's ability to grow and serve him. They will be subjected to purging to become more fruitful, and will be subjected to loss of the ability to bear fruit if they fail to abide in him by following his instructions. A secondary application of this passage would suggest the believers today are subject to the same expectation of Christ. Either we will be abiding, fruit bearing, and purged

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<sup>15</sup> *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), Jn 15.

to bear more fruit, or we will be fruitlessness, withered, and cast aside as useless for future fruit bearing opportunities.

The use of allegory is always intentional on the part of the author. We would do well not to create or invent meanings for Scripture where none is identified. The tool of “Spiritual Imagination” used by men like Rev Emanuel A. Johnson, is not the same as allegorizing or spiritualizing. It is an intentional and legitimate practice of using contemporary examples to give understanding of the ancient text. It is not meant to be interpretive in itself, rather it is meant to bridge the gap between the original author and audience with contemporary exegetes and believers.

The following points are offered to help the biblical interpreter properly identify and explain genuine allegorical scripture, and avoid assigning allegorical meaning where it does not exist:

*Note the Points of Comparison That Are Explained or Interpreted in the Passage*<sup>16</sup>

- These are the explicitly defined or demonstrated comparisons contained in the immediate passage and the relevant verses surrounding it.

*Do Not Attempt to Interpret Details in Allegories That Are Not Explained*<sup>17</sup>

- As intelligent humans we hate to leave something unresolved. We also tend to be creatures of form and format and use a particular style comprehensively. Mature and professional communicators excel in their use of literary and oratory style. We should honor their concrete intentions rather than force their communications to conform to our thinking. In other words we should look for definitions, explanations, or illustrations which interpret key symbols and ideas of an allegory. We should not try to force meaning where none has been expressed or indicated.

*Determine the Main Point of the Teaching*<sup>18</sup>

- The point of an allegory is not the allegory, the point is the point of the author. As in Christ’s allegory of the “True Vine, Husbandman, Branches, and Fruit” in John 15:1-6 – Christ is teaching on fruitfulness and fruitlessness. He is not dealing with carnality, backsliding, or eternal security. There are other allegories, parables, and teaching which may deal with these subjects but they aren’t present in this passage. We must derive the main point by examining the context of the passages and those which surround it. We must look at the background of the moment of delivery as well as what led up to and

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<sup>16</sup> Donald K. Campbell, “Foreword,” in *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 223.

<sup>17</sup> Donald K. Campbell, “Foreword,” in *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 225.

<sup>18</sup> Donald K. Campbell, “Foreword,” in *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 226.

followed that moment. We must respect the primary emphasis of the passage, even when it is expressed in figurative language or symbolism.

Clearly this process requires study, prayer, investigation, and patience – but the rewards are worth the effort. We can better equip believers when we explain Scripture the way it was intended to be experienced by the original audience. We can properly bridge the gap of time between them and contemporary believers with literal historical interpretation of the text instead of contemporary accommodations which lack correct context. Once we've explained and clarified the historical text, then we can (and we should) seek to connect people to the proper secondary application – rather than invent our own.

People can grasp and defend what is objective based on God's intentions far better than what is on the subjective ideas of men.