

APPROACHES TO INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

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Soli Deo Gloria!

Covenant (Reformed) Theology and Dispensational Theology have long debated the proper hermeneutic to use when interpreting Scripture¹. While both use a literal method for much of Scripture, Dispensationalism (especially so-called Revised Dispensationalism under Charles Ryrie) has emphasized the consistent use of literal interpretation for all of Scripture. This is seen most clearly in that both Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology interpret historical narratives literally, whereas Covenant Theology often interprets prophetic passages of Scripture allegorically. Forgotten in this discussion is that Classical Dispensationalism as developed under the Plymouth Brethren, Scofield, Chafer, and especially Arno Gaebelein, while not denying the literal historicity of historical passages, also allowed for a **typological** understanding of them (see the CHART: Philosophies of Interpretation under the Biblical Studies tab). They viewed many of the Bible's historical accounts as establishing patterns having prophetic significance (cf. Eccl11:9-10; 3:15; Cp., Rom5:14; Col2:17; Heb8:5; 10:1; 11:19). Indeed, the Apostle Paul affirmed that O.T. historical accounts "were written for **our** learning, that we, through patience and comfort of the scriptures, might have hope" (Rom15:4), and that "all these things happened to them for ensamples, and they are written for **our** admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1Cor10:11). The word translated "ensamples" is from the Greek **τύπος** (i.e., types). **Typology is a rich and fruitful feature of Scripture that should not be neglected!**

A Word of Warning. Typology can be taken to two unbiblical extremes. First, there are those who take typology too far, creating fanciful interpretations that are not grounded in and consistent with the whole testimony of Scripture (cf. Isa28:9-10; 1Cor2:13); this concern, however, warrants caution, not neglect. Second, there are also those who refuse to accept any type that is not explicitly denoted as such by Scripture. In this case, Adam is accepted as a type of Christ (Rom5:14), but Joseph is not. This extreme seems obviously incorrect as well. A better approach to understanding types in Scripture would be analogous to interpreting parables. Jesus gave over 30 parables in the synoptic Gospels, but He only provided the interpretation of 2 (cf. Matt13:18-23,36-43). Does that mean Bible students should not attempt to interpret the remaining parables? Of course not; rather, the interpretations Jesus gave for the 2 parables should be used as a model/pattern for how to interpret the remaining parables. In a similar way, those occasions when Scripture points out types should be used as a model/pattern for how to identify others.

¹ Liberal Theology denies the literal truth of even the historical portions of Scripture and must be categorized as sub-Christian. In his book *Christianity and Liberalism*, J. Gresham Machen wrote: "[W]hat the liberal theologian has retained after abandoning to the enemy one Christian doctrine after another is not Christianity at all, but a religion which is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a distinct category", and "despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology modern liberalism not only is a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions".