

“Defining and Practicing Literal Interpretation and Theological Method”

presented at the Pre-Trib Research Center 25th Annual Conference Dec 5–7, 2016:

The Promise of Israel's Glorious Future, Dallas, TX

by Dr. David Mappes

# Defining and Practicing Literal Interpretation and Theological Method<sup>1</sup>

By Dr. David Mappes

## Introduction

In 1961, Peter Yarrow wrote the classic folk-song “Puff the Magic Dragon.” A year later Peter, Paul and Mary released this cherished folk-song in their second hit album. Initially, the song was written as a poem in 1959 by Leonard Lipton. The lyrics portray a little boy named Jackie Paper who plays with his imaginary friend named Puff; Puff was a magic dragon living in the imaginary land of Honalee. The song was an instant success as it paints the picture of how Jackie Paper (and all children) grow up and loose their imagination. With the instant fame of this song also came criticism. Critics alleged that “Puff the Magic Dragon” was really about promoting the drug culture in America.

These critics suggested that “Puff” was a song about smoking marijuana. "Dragon" was viewed as a cultural variation of "dragin" as in taking a drag from a joint to inhale the smoke and Jackie Paper was viewed as a veiled reference to rolling papers. Even the imaginary land of Honalee was portrayed as part of the drug culture and said to represent a very small town in Hawaii called Hanalei; this small town was alleged as having a reputation for its potent marijuana plants and culture. Some suggested the “autumn mist” represented that actual drug or perhaps an induced state of being in the land of Honalee.

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Both the initial writer, Leonard Lipton and the musician Peter Yarrow insisted the song was simply about the loss of innocence as children grow up and face the harsh realities of life. However, critics continued to promote their own cultural nuanced view of this childhood classic song. During the Peter, Paul and Mary 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary concert, Peter Yarrow introduced this wonderful folksong with his own little musical comment when he sang “There never was another meaning other than the obvious one. ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ is only about the loss of innocence in children. And now you can tell your friends that you heard it from the dragon’s father’s mouth.”<sup>2</sup>

This humorous introduction surfaces serious hermeneutical questions: 1) Who determines the meaning of a text? Does the author determine the meaning of a text? Or does the reader determine the meaning of a text? Does the reader become a “meaning maker” as alleged by many postmodern language theorists? Or perhaps the meaning of a text is a fusion of both the reader and the author? Does the text have a single meaning or can a text have multiple-meanings based upon each reader’s context? Other questions revolve around how to validate meaning. What context has priority in determining and validating textual meaning? In the case of “Puff the Magic Dragon” should the interpreter only consider the text or does the interpreter look beyond the text to possible veiled references and allusions that correspond to other contexts such as the drug culture? How can one validate if little Jackie Paper really is a little boy or perhaps an allusion to rolling paper for marijuana cigarettes.

These hermeneutical questions are critical issues today that directly impact studies in eschatology. As just one example of scholars who deny single authorial-meaning of a text, Daniel Treier concludes his book on theological method by articulating nine theses points referred to as the “Scripture Project.” These nine-points surfaced after four years of structured conversations hosted by the Center of Theological Inquiry:

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<sup>2</sup> “Peter, Paul and Mary 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary concert,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg2RcXC8KSk> (accessed Nov 14, 2016).

1. Scripture truthfully tells the story of God’s action of creating, judging, and saving the world.
2. Scripture is rightly understood in light of the church’s Rule of Faith as a coherent dramatic narrative.
3. Faithful interpretation of Scripture requires an engagement with the entire narrative: the New Testament cannot be rightly understood apart from the Old, nor can the Old be rightly understood from the New.
4. Texts of Scripture do not have a single meaning limited to the intent of the original author. In accord with Jewish and Christian tradition, we affirm that Scripture has multiple complex senses given by God, the author of the whole drama.
5. The four canonical gospels narrate the truth about Jesus.
6. Faithful participation of Scripture invites and presupposes participation in the community brought into being by God’s redemptive action-the church.
7. The saints of the church provide guidance in how to interpret and perform Scripture.
8. Christians need to read the Bible in dialog with diverse others outside the church.
9. We live in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of the kingdom of God; consequently, Scripture calls the church to ongoing discernment, to continually fresh rereadings of the text in light of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in the world.<sup>3</sup>

This presentation overviews the nature of literal interpretation and provides examples of how we as pastor-scholars can help our parishioners and students embrace and practice literal interpretation. First, we will explore how to define literal interpretation and how to validate an author’s message; second, we will consider how to

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 199-200.

practice a legitimate theological method. The presentation is designed to help us as pastor-scholars assist our parishioners and students to embrace and practice literal interpretation.

#### Defining, Describing and Practicing Literal Interpretation<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most important aspect of Ryrie's *sine qua non* of dispensationalism entails a consistent practice of literal interpretation even though dispensational scholars, including Ryrie are not always consistent in how they define and describe literal interpretation. Far too often, literal interpretation is simply defined in a contrastive manner with the allegorical or figurative sense; literal interpretation is said to not be the allegorical or spiritual sense; this contrast then leads to such assertions as to "take the literal sense unless the literal sense makes no sense." Others describe literal interpretation as the clear sense, the normal sense, the plain sense, the obvious sense or the straightforward sense.

These generic qualifiers are too nebulous and place far too much emphasis on the readers' perspective rather than on the author's intent within the author's own historical timeframe. What is clear and obvious to one reader may not be so clear and obvious to another reader. In the case of "Puff the Magic Dragon," the listener simply needs to focus on the entire text of this allegory within its own historical framework to discern its meaning. This song is an allegorical portrayal of a little boy who grew-up and lost his

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<sup>4</sup> Much of this presentation is extracted or modified from the following articles and presentations: David Mappes, "An Overview of Contemporary Challenges to Sustaining a Model of Literal Interpretation" presented at the Ninth Annual Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana September 14, 2016; "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism" *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2013), 11 by David Mappes and H. Wayne House (all rights reserved to Dr. H Wayne House) and "How to Think about and Practice Theology" in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2014), 65-85 by Dr. David Mappes; "Current Trends in Hermeneutics and Theology: Certainty and Simplicity," *Paraklesis* (Summer 2010), 1, 6 by David Mappes.

imagination. Even though the song is an extended allegory it none-the-less requires a literal interpretation; the listener literally understands its allegorical intended message. The whole of the allegory helps to interpret the various parts. Therefore, Honalee and Jakie Paper and Puff are defined by the entire allegory and not through some type of veiled cultural correspondence to the drug culture. The listener allows the entire allegory to define the individual parts.

E.D. Hirsch, a well known language theorist uses a phrase called intrinsic genre to posit how the entire message a text has the highest priority in governing the meaning of individual parts of a text. In his book, *Validating Interpretation*, Hirsch emphasizes that textual meaning is understood and validated by this notion of intrinsic genre. Rather than focusing on individual parts of a text for meaning or interpreting part of a text through the lens of the reader, or looking for contemporary cultural correspondence, Hirsch insists the entire text always provides the controlling context to determine meaning. Hirsch emphasizes the “idea of the whole must arise from an encounter with the parts.”<sup>5</sup> For Hirsch the essential context is always the whole of the document being interpreted so “the essential component of a context is the intrinsic genre.”<sup>6</sup> The reader begins to share in the intended meaning of the author, as the reader discovers how the meaning of individual textual parts contributes to the whole of text. Interpreters who minimize or ignore the intrinsic genre are prone to misinterpret individual parts of a text by looking for meaning outside of the whole of the text. Meaning is then discerned and validated by examining what the author asserts by his text through the textual design.

Prioritizing the immediate historical-textual parameter of the human author is essential since the historical-textual parameter limits meaning to the author. The very essence of dispensational theology entails preserving the authorial meaning of a text

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<sup>5</sup> E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), 76.

<sup>6</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* 87.

within its own deposit of special revelation. Since pastor-scholars are called to compare, synthesize, and accumulate Scripture to provide a comprehensive answer of what the Bible teaches on any given subject, care must be exercised to preserve the *sensus literal* meaning of a text. Since eschatology is such a vast subject occurring in all different genres, time periods, and covenants, the interpreter must use a theological method that does not conflate the meaning of one text with another text.

The general parameters of this [dispensational] theological method include a stratified process that collates and analyzes data first at the exegetical level to form a biblical theology which then serves as the basis for systematic theology.... Once the human authorial meaning is determined, then that meaning becomes fixed in time and does not change. The reader then examines how a later author uses that historically conditioned meaning in subsequent writings. Since the OT provides the foundational building block for NT theology, the traditional dispensationalist argues that the OT literal interpretation must be preserved in light of later progressive revelation.<sup>7</sup>

Students often wonder why dispensational theology has so many complex issues for resolution and why the system is so nuanced; the answer of course is that dispensational theology seriously considers all 66 books of biblical revelation and does not utilize a theological method that changes the historical-conditioned meaning from one passage to another passage.

Prioritizing the immediate historical-textual parameter also controls textual meaning by dispensational scholars who posit a *sensus plenior* or *reference plenior* view of the divine and human authors' intention.<sup>8</sup> These views allow distinction between what the human author fully comprehended his text to mean and what the divine Author intended. However, the immediate historical parameter of the initial text always provides

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<sup>7</sup> Mappes and House, "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism" 12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Mappes and House, "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism," 10-11.

a textually controlled extension of any fuller meaning a New Testament author might provide. The divine intent always includes the human authorial intent and is controlled by the human authorial intent though subsequent revelation is said to clarify and reveal the fuller sense of the divine Author. Most importantly, any fuller NT explanation is only an extension and development of the OT authorial verbal meaning and thus always governed by the initial pattern of authorial meaning; therefore any *sensus plenior* or *reference plenior* remains a textually controlled extension of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation.

Prioritizing the immediate historical-textual priority further guards the textual meaning against scholars who seek to interpret a text based upon a broader context. Many of us are familiar with oft-quoted phrase "a text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof text." The essential question of course is what constitutes the primary context. Is the primary context the text itself? Or is the primary interpretative context the historical and cultural milieu learned primarily through examining the social setting about a passage obtained through background studies? Or is the essential context a relevant body of knowledge obtained primarily through general revelation.

Literal interpretation needs to have a level of sophisticated underpinning to address the aforementioned discussion. Some scholars have suggested we avoid using the term *literal* but rather use the term *literary*; this is a grave oversight that can lead to denying or de-historicizing events and eroding the factuality of the Scripture. The term *literal* includes such literary conventions as similes, hyperbole, etc. while at same time sustaining the historical meaning of the author. However, the term *literary* does not necessarily preserve the historical truthfulness of the author's assertion. The term *literal* includes literary constructs and genres to affirm the author's intention and truthfulness though the term *literary* does not necessarily affirm the historical trustworthiness and truthfulness of the author.

Unfortunately, some scholars today use the term *literary* to suggest the Scripture authors created literary figures and literary events that may or may not be true and construe that these literary constructs have veiled meaning foreign to the textual context. It is not uncommon to read the assertion that the authors of Scripture allegedly acquiesced to their social-cultural setting and adopted neighboring mythological and cultural viewpoints in constructing their *literary* argument; accordingly, the uniqueness and truthfulness of Scripture is denied; the interpreter is then flooded with background material, sophisticated literary studies, and hermeneutical theories that defy understanding. The esteemed former Dallas Theological Seminary professor Eugene H. Merrill describes this literary hermeneutic as he laments that the “Defenders of a ‘Bible uniqueness view’ have found themselves foundering about in a morass of data, debate, and sadly, defection from the time-honored views . . . of faith in the inerrant word . . . [with its] aversion to literal readings of a text.”<sup>9</sup>

Other scholars suggest omitting both the terms *literary* and *literal* as modifiers of interpretation positing interpretation be defined as the *historical-contextual sense* of a passage. Rather than referring to *literal interpretation*, we should use the phrase, *historical-contextual interpretation*. The meaning of a passage is then the historical-contextual sense. This phrase does portray the historical-contextual sense of the author and limits the author’s meaning to an immediate context. However, given the rich tradition of using the phrase *literal interpretation* and roots of dispensationalism as being within the church and Bible conference movement (not the academy), I favor continuing to use the term *literal* to describe interpretation though perhaps with a parenthetical explanation.

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<sup>9</sup> Danny R Falkner and Lee Anderson Jr, *Created Cosmos: What the Bible Reveals About Astronomy* (Green Forest, AR, 2016), 8-9.

Perhaps when referring to the literal interpretation we might add a parenthetical explanation to better nuance the term literal. The phrase, the *authorial-historical-contextual sense* or simply the *authorial-historical sense* or the *immediate contextual-sense* or the *historical-contextual sense* all correctly nuance literal interpretation. Any definition or description needs to limit meaning to the historical author and his writing. I suggest the practice of literal interpretation be described as “*discern[ing] the intention of the human author by examining what the author affirms in the historical context of his writing.*”<sup>10</sup> The literal meaning (*sensus literal*) of a text then is limited by its immediate historical-textual parameters as Hirsch correctly emphasized.

### Example of Using Intrinsic Genre

Many times students struggle to integrate individual sections of a text to obtain the essential message of the author. Far too often students look for interpretative clues outside the overall text. The following three steps can be helpful to discern the essential message of the author: 1) Outline the major sections of the text to demonstrate the textual design of the author; 2) Write a purpose statement of what the author is attempting to do with his text that encompasses each major section; 3) Use the subject-compliment construct to discern the overall message statement of the book (subject-what is the text about; compliment-what the author says about the subject or how or why the author develops the subject). This process is designed to help students actually study the text and not simply study about the text; the process further helps students to focus on textual meaning before moving application or synthesis with other texts.

The following example from Daniel demonstrates how we might use the intrinsic genre model.

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<sup>10</sup> Mappes and House, “A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism,” 8.

## Simple Outline of Daniel:

- I. Personal History of the Prophet and Protection of the Remnant outside the Land (1).
- II. Prophetic History of Israel through four Gentile empires (Babylon; Medo-Persia; Greece; most-likely Rome and most-likely the revived Roman Empire (2-7).
- III. Prophetic History of Israel through Intense Persecution during the time of Gentile Domination (8-12) Demonstrating YHWH'S Protection and Fulfillment of Covenant Promises to Israel.

## Theological Descriptive Purpose Statement:

Daniel provides encouragement to the exilic community that YHWH is able to preserve and protect His people even in a foreign land. The book reveals that YHWH had not abandoned His people and that He did indeed have a program for both the remnant and for the nation Israel. Almost all the events in the book illustrate the sovereignty of YHWH which serves to encourage the Jews that YHWH is in full control during gentile domination.

Daniel informs the Jews that while restoration to their land would occur after the seventy years of Babylonian captivity, this restoration should not however be equated with complete covenant fulfillment nor with the establishment of God's earthly kingdom. Daniel informs the nation that it still faced *gentile domination* and oppression for 490 years (70 x 7 in chapter 9) before the kingdom age begins. Daniel clarifies that the nation would still face ongoing gentile domination and oppression before Messiah's kingdom would appear to end all human rule.

Thus, Daniel instructs the Jews to trust in God by living a life of faith throughout the *time of the gentile domination*. Daniel aptly assures the nation of its survival by focusing on YHWH'S divine intervention of Daniel and his three friends (pious Jews), His administration of gentile nations and kings, the future prophecy of Israel, Michael's angelic ministry of intervention, and final resurrection.

## Message Statement of Daniel:

Subject:

Daniel narrates YHWH's protection of the faithful remnant while in Gentile captivity by recording prophecies of the harsh gentile domination of Israel (though not extinction) until YHWH ushers in the kingdom age.

Compliment: to encourage the Hebrew exiles and future Hebrews in covenant faithfulness.

Message Statement of Daniel:

Daniel narrates the divine protection of the faithful remnant while in Gentile captivity by recording prophecies of harsh Gentile domination of Israel (though not extinction) until YHWH ushers in the kingdom age to encourage the Hebrew exiles (and future Hebrews) in covenant faithfulness.

The message statement is constructed solely by looking at the whole of the Daniel text. Since the message statement is a summary of the entire book, this statement becomes a controlling feature of interpreting parts of the book. This exercise can help students learn how to discern the meaning of an entire text by integrating parts of text into the whole of a text.

#### Prioritizing the Historical-textual Meaning within Canonical Development

The immediate historical-textual parameter also disallows a progressive resignification of a passage or progressive re-interpretation through later revelation sometimes referred to as the Historical Progress of Revelation or Christocentric Model of Exegesis.<sup>11</sup> This reformed model of hermeneutics incorrectly allows the New Testament author to alter and change the historic verbal meaning of the OT text based upon a broader, fuller NT context.

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<sup>11</sup> This section is modified from modification of "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism" by David Mappes and H. Wayne House, 11-13

The basis for this Christocentric Model entails a distinction between what the human author intended by his text as opposed to what the Divine author intended. This A/author distinction of the text becomes the basis for a New Testament priority hermeneutic. Poythress correctly argues that any statement interpreted must be based on the context of the author; Poythress then incorrectly argues that since Scripture has both the human and divine author and since their contexts are never *exactly* the same, the reader must consider the fuller revelation of the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> He posits the grammatical-historical-literal model is inadequate since he alleges, “the NT authors characteristically do *not* aim merely at grammatical-historical exegesis of the OT.”<sup>13</sup>

He advocates for a progressive meaning of a passage. The passage is first understood “in the context of the particular book of the bible in which it appears and in the context of the human author and historical circumstances of the book” and then this same passage is later understood “in the context of the total canon of Scripture available up to that point in time” and then eventually this same passage is understood “in the context of the entire Bible (the complete canon).”<sup>14</sup> The Christocentric Model of interpretation allows the initial verbal historically determined meaning to change through various iterations of progressive revelation.

The issues of intertextuality and NT use of the OT are too complex and too varied to justify a hermeneutic that allows a re-interpretation or resignification of an OT text based upon the NT usage. The use of the fulfillment formula in the NT is simply too broad to suggest that its mere appearance indicates a historical completion of a prophetic

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<sup>12</sup> Vern S. Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” *WTJ* 48, no. 2 (Fall 1986), 249–279.

<sup>13</sup> Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” 276.

<sup>14</sup> Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” 241–79, esp. 267.

promise. The context and use of each passage must be compared to the antecedent historical promise to validate a fulfilled prophecy.<sup>15</sup> Zuck who allows for a controlled *sensus plenior* view describes ten different ways in which a NT author may use an OT text without altering historical meaning or claiming exhaustive, complete fulfillment. Zuck correctly asserts that a NT authors use the OT text in the following manner: (1) to point up to the current accomplishment or realization of a prediction; (2) to confirm that a NT incident is in agreement with an OT principle; (3) to explain a point given in the OT; (4) to support a point being made in the NT; (5) to illustrate a NT truth; (6) to apply the OT to a NT truth; (7) to summarize an OT concept; (8) to use OT terminology; (9) to draw a parallel with an OT incident; (10) to relate an OT situation to Christ.<sup>16</sup>

The author of the text is the one who sets the parameters of when actual fulfillment occurs- the author cannot control how a later author might use his text though he can set the parameters for the fulfillment of his text. Each aspect of a promise is historically governed by the textual parameters of that initial promise. Therefore a strict one-to-one correspondence between details of a prophetic prediction and fulfillment of a prophecy must occur.<sup>17</sup> This correspondence includes the details and “essentially the same message expressed in both passages.”<sup>18</sup> Fulfillment does not occur until all aspects of the initial promise have been satisfied.

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<sup>15</sup> See Charles H. Dyer, “Biblical Meaning of Fulfillment,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Welsey R. Willis and John R. Masters (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 51-72; “A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism” by David Mappes and H. Wayne House

<sup>16</sup> Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991), 260-67; “A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism” by David Mappes and H. Wayne House.

<sup>17</sup> Mappes and House, “A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism.”

<sup>18</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, “Premillennialism Introduced: Hermeneutics” in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 19.

The original promise should not be reinterpreted apart from the intention of the initial promise-covenant; *Prophetic fulfillment* occurs only when all the commitments and provisions in a promise have been realized. Kaiser correctly states, "The theological interpretation or exegesis of a given piece of text must be understood only in light of the antecedent revelations of God to that biblical author and those writers of scripture who historically preceded him . . . and who shared the same technical terms or analogous concepts in the progress of revelation . . . [and analogy of faith principle must not be used] until the present text's author has had a chance to indicate his own distinctive verbal meaning and theological contribution in light of the Bible available to him up to the time of writing."<sup>19</sup>

In order to help preserve the author's historical textual meaning, pastors and scholars should develop mini-biblical theologies of eschatological truth assertions before moving to synthesis. Biblical theology here is understood as the study to discover the particular viewpoint of a biblical author (e.g., Pauline theology) or the study of revelation in particular historical period (e.g., theology of wisdom literature) and not the view that biblical theology is the search for the inner unity or controlling motif of the entire Bible.<sup>20</sup> This method helps the pastor-scholar to clearly understand the authors' message within his own historical framework. Yarbrough provides a very clear definition of this sense of Biblical theology when he asserts Biblical theology is the "Study of the Bible that seeks to discover what the biblical writers, under divine guidance, believed, described, and

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<sup>19</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Reader's Understanding," *TJ* 6 (1977): 192.

<sup>20</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, "Biblical Theology," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 84.

taught in the context of their own terms.”<sup>21</sup> Consequently, “analytic study leading to synthetic understanding is required . . .”<sup>22</sup>

Practicing this sub-discipline of Biblical theology will help to discern each author’s unique contribution to eschatological studies and also help resist the notion to re-interpret or re-signify meaning. As an example what does Isaiah contribute to the future kingdom age or what does Zechariah contribute to the future time of wrath called the Day of the Lord. Once biblical theologies are developed, these biblical theologies contribute to a fuller understanding of what the Bible teaches on any given subject. Legitimate theological method helps in synthesizing and applying these biblical theologies.

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<sup>21</sup> Robert W. Yarbrough, “Biblical Theology,” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 61.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

## Introduction to Theological Method<sup>23</sup>

Any orthodox theology begins with serious reflection and interpretation of the Scripture. Serious reflection requires using a legitimate theological method that guides the reader to understand the author's meaning as revealed in his writing. The biblical authors presumed that their intended meaning would be discernible and knowable through reading their text. They repeatedly directed believers to focus on what was revealed and to avoid speculation or worse, divination to acquire what was not revealed.<sup>24</sup> A proper Theological Method differentiates hermeneutics, interpretative practices, theological method and theology.

### A Self-Correcting Theological Method

A correct (and self-correcting) model for how to theologize (theological method) is necessary since the Scripture is progressively revealed, and no one topic is fully addressed by any one author in any one-time era. Secondly, a self-correcting theological method is required since interpreters grow in their knowledge and understanding of Scripture. Many times interpreters ask the wrong questions or ask the right question in the wrong way about a particular subject matter or text, which then creates difficult interpretive issues; these difficult issues take both time and proper exposure to resolve. A theological method exhibiting the following characteristics will help ensure a biblically balanced and self-correcting approach:

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<sup>23</sup> Much of this section is copied and adapted from "How to Think about and Practice Theology" in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2014), 65-85 by Dr. David Mappes and the article, "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism," in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2013), 5-56 by Dr. David Mappes and Dr. H. Wayne House.

<sup>24</sup> As an example see Deut 29:29; Eph 3:1-6; Gal 1:6-24.

### ***Canonical.***

First priority and authority is always given to the canonical books of Scripture (*canonical* refers to all 66 books of the Bible and not to canonical interpretation) over personal experiences, personal sensibilities, other writings, background studies, speculation, etc. In sum, Scripture is used to interpret Scripture in its proper context of progressive revelation. Scripture possesses a kind of inherent clarity to allow its central message and truths to be self-evident. Rather than this maxim being circular reasoning, this principle of the self-authentication of Scripture simply provides the right for Scripture to speak first and provide a context for understanding.

Background information and knowledge gained through general revelation can be helpful though priority should always be placed upon the meaning of Scripture in its immediate context; the primary context is always the text itself. The interpretation is first validated by the immediate text and then through other Scripture within its own era of progressive revelation. Theologians refer to this as the perspicuity (or clarity) of Scripture. Critics of perspicuity of Scripture assert that since everyone has pre-understanding, then there can be no valid authoritative interpretation of Scripture—only various views based upon one’s pre-understanding. This assertion, however, is patently false and self-contradictory—while these critics claim that non-objectivity is universal, they themselves then affirm an alleged universal truth of non-objectivity. Furthermore, they expect their readers who may have different pre-understanding and presuppositions to fully understand, alter, and even embrace their own arguments.

Everyone has pre-understanding and assumptions which should be honestly acknowledged and brought into submission to the Scripture. Pre-understanding is simply a personally acquired knowledge that either consciously or unconsciously influences one’s view of life, including interpretation. Scholars have identified three categories of presuppositions for the interpreter to examine: (a) theological presuppositions—doctrinal beliefs that affect interpretation of individual passages of Scripture; (b) philosophical

presuppositions-beliefs about reality, about the nature of truth, the nature and direction of history, etc.; (c) methodological presuppositions, the use of logic, deduction, inferences, etc.

A valid theological model will promote examination and alteration of these presuppositions by the full canon of Scripture. Unfortunately, some interpreters either ignore pre-understanding to their own peril or exaggerate pre-understanding well above the knowability of the text of Scripture which leads to mere perspectivism. A wise interpreter of Scripture will reflect and actually write down and critically examine previous significant experiences and views related to a passage being studied. This examination process can help to adjust pre-understanding with the meaning in the Scripture text. Wise interpreters ask themselves if the specific passage supports their views and experience. They work through a process of evaluating and understanding their own pre-understanding. Then they adjust their pre-understanding to the text of Scripture.

Many times interaction with others is helpful in this process of identifying pre-understanding. It is helpful to balance one's study of Scripture to include more than a powerful and dominate personality so be sure to read good balanced material. The careful interpreter must learn the plot line of the entire Bible. This general plot line is referred to as the meta-narrative, which is the grand overarching story line in Bible of how God is glorifying himself. Another phrase often and more correctly used to describe this overarching story is the unfolding drama. The unfolding drama begins in Genesis 1 with God glorifying himself through creating the earth, and the drama is completed in Revelation 21 with his creation finally acknowledging and fully glorifying him as Creator God. The drama includes five principal parts: (a) the Creator God, (b) the creation (primarily mankind), (c) the corruption and chaos resulting from sinful rebellion, (d) promise of redemption (Christ) and (e) the final consummation or completion of the drama.

These five aspects of the drama are intertwined much like a rope is intertwined with cords and they are progressively revealed throughout Scripture and serve as overarching themes in the various books throughout the Bible. Careful interpreters learn how each book further advances the Bible's plotline. Many times it is helpful to evaluate and validate an interpretation within this overall plotline of the Bible. Many believers will read the Bible through each year and at the same time focus on a more detailed monthly reading in a specific Bible book or topic. Attending a good church with a commitment to an expositional teaching ministry will help one to understand the meta-narrative of the Bible and practice valid interpretation of Scripture.

### *Comprehensive.*

All biblical teaching on a topic must be examined with greater weight given to the clearest and most definitive passages rather than selective or vague passages. This comprehensive process helps avoid mere proof-texting. Proverbs 18:17 says, "The first to plead his case seems just, until another comes and examines him." Thus any theological model must entail extensive examination and interaction with all Scripture. Partial and fragmented knowledge will lead only to a distorted view and shallow ministry and life. Some passages require extensive examination of nuanced interpretative views from those who agree with a view as well as with those who disagree. In other words, wise interpreters seriously interact with both detractors and with supporters of a position as long as both groups share a similar high view of the inspiration of Scripture. Wise interpreters continue to examine both primary literature (the Bible) and secondary literature (commentaries, theology books, etc.). Further reading and interaction helps to unpack the issues and surface a number of sub-related themes and questions related to the initial question. Careful students are sure to restate and refine the initial question as they study. Many times properly defining the issue or question provides a path for healthy resolution. The overall goal is to become more sensitive to the literary features of these

passages and allow a comprehensive view of a truth to shape one's understanding and life with God.

***Consistent hermeneutical approach.***

Hermeneutics comes from the Greek term *hermeneuo* which carries the idea of explaining, interpreting, or translating the sense of one language to another. It is the science of interpretation. The interpretive philosophy must be consistently used rather than allowing a shifting hermeneutical philosophy to vary from topic-to-topic, or passage-to-passage, or even from the Old Testament to New Testament. The goal is to always understand and validate the author's affirmed meaning by examining the historical-cultural meaning of the passage within the context of the author's book. God did not give all his revelation in one exhaustive act. Rather, he provided revelation through distinguishable stages in many literary styles or genres of writing. Each text of Scripture must be read in light of its own historical setting rather than simply superimposing later revelation onto earlier revelation. While the entire Bible is for Christians, it is not all directly addressed to Christians. The grammatical-historical-cultural-literal interpretation allows for figures of speech (hyperbole, similes, metaphors, etc.) as well as various forms or genres of writing (poetry, wisdom literature, narrative, etc.). These various genres, however, do not negate the historical accuracy of an event nor do they deny the factuality and truthfulness of Scripture. The interpreter should seek to determine and validate the original authors' intended meaning by examining the writing within its own historical context and literary genre. Believers should seek to understand the literal meaning of a text by its immediate historical-textual parameters. This interpretative method allows the immediate historical context of a passage to define and limit textual meaning.

### ***Congruency.***

The method of study must allow for harmony, complexity, and tension of Scripture without creating direct contradictions or forced harmonization. Valid interpretation does not minimize or worse, deny, one truth while holding firmly to another truth. Some truths simply exist side-by-side which the biblical authors never try to resolve. As an example, it is disingenuous to claim that God is love while then ignoring that God is also holy or wrathful. Scripture teaches that God's nature entails both holiness and love. Interpretative questions should come from the text of Scripture rather than create a false dichotomy between two polar choices. The statement that "if God loves me, then why did He allow this event in my life" is a classic example of not allowing the complexity and tension in Scripture. The Scriptures clearly teach that God does love us and that he is sovereignly orchestrating events in our lives; thus this question denies both these central truths. A theological method should not create false contradictions.

### ***Coherence.***

Any theological method must demonstrate a logical, clear ordering of investigation which provides the greatest weight of direct teaching material to address a topic. Some practices are described in the Bible (e.g., betrothal in marriage or washing feet before entering a home) while other truths are prescribed (e.g., how a husband should treat his wife). A coherent approach recognizes this "prescriptive vs. descriptive" or the "is vs. ought" differences and allows the weightiest, clearest passages to address a topic. Descriptive truths describe things that simply existed while prescriptive truths prescribe a higher moral and ethical standard of what life ought to be.

### ***Call of Response/Application.***

The call for personal response(s) must relate to the verbal meaning of the Scriptural truth/passage that is being considered. The authorial meaning of Scripture

always controls this specificity for personal response (or the significance of Scripture). The extent to which a truth can be applied to the contemporary reader is measured by the degree of transfer.<sup>25</sup> The degree of transfer is the extent to which the current reader is similar to or different from the originally intended recipients. If the passage is specifically addressing Christian husbands, is it legitimate to then apply and transfer that meaning to wives or to children? If a passage does not have a high degree of transfer, then broader Scriptural principles from the passage may apply. However, these Scriptural principles should always be measured by other Scripture that directly address the topic. Principles should not serve as the final weight of a truth or an application but rather be used to illustrate a truth taught elsewhere in Scripture. Most importantly, careful interpreters must pray that God would illumine their minds to personally apply the truth you are studying. Illuminating insight from the Holy Spirit is directly linked to the interpreter's appetite for following the Lord. A prayerful attitude of obedience to the truths being studied indicates a reverence and adoration of the truth giver, God himself.

As the interpreter forms tentative conclusions about a topic, those conclusions should be tested through time and careful interaction with the Christian community. Careful interpreters continue to evaluate the amount of literary evidence in the Scripture that supports their conclusions. In particular, they look for multiple, larger blocks of Scripture which might support their conclusions. They also look for other biblical texts which address similar issues that support their interpretation and application of Scripture. The Bible is always its own interpreter.

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<sup>25</sup> See Daniel Estes, *Learning and Living God's Word* (Schamburg, IL: Regular Baptist, 1993) for further discussion.

The following chart illustrates how I use these components to have students evaluate how theological systems view specific truth assertions.

<b>Theological View: <i>Land Promises to Israel.</i></b>	<b>Reformed</b>	<b>Dispensational</b>	<b>Historic Premil</b>	<b>Roman Catholic</b>	<b>Progressive dispensational</b>
<b>Canonical</b>					
<b>Comprehensive</b>					
<b>Consistent hermeneutical approach</b>					
<b>Congruency</b>					
<b>Coherence</b>					
<b>Call of Response/Application</b>					

### Summary

This presentation as discussed the definition and practice of literal interpretation along with over-viewing theological method to sustain the historic author's verbal meaning.