

The Literal Interpretation of Ephesians 3:6 and Related Scriptures

STEPHEN L. LORTZ

Introduction

One of the essential factors of normative dispensationalism is the idea that the Church is distinct, absolutely separate and discontinuous from Israel.¹ Dispensationalists say that this distinction arises as a result of applying the principle of literal interpretation to the Scriptures.² This article will demonstrate that the absolute distinction dispensationalists draw between the Church and Israel is not a result, but rather a prior assumption, of dispensationalist interpretation. Furthermore, literal interpretation leads to the conclusion that the Church is not a wholly new thing, but an extension of the believing remnant of Israel, under the New Covenant, with believing Gentiles grafted in.

Background

The school of theology known today as dispensationalism arose in the mid-1800s among a group of people who were intensely interested in the interpretation of Bible prophecy.³ Their major strength sprang from their insistence on applying what they called “the hermeneutical principle of literal interpretation” to sections of the Bible they considered to be

¹ Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1992. The second chapter of this work (pp. 23-44) is an exposition of normative dispensational theology.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists*, Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 1978.

prophetic. Their major weaknesses resulted from their failure to apply the same principle of literal interpretation to other issues of the Scripture, such as resurrection versus immortality of the soul, or the Lordship of Jesus Messiah versus the doctrine of the Trinity, or even the origin of the Church.⁴

Dispensationalism's hermeneutical principle of literal interpretation was a radical departure from the principle of allegorical interpretation that had dominated Christian thinking for fifteen hundred years.

The very earliest people who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of Israel considered themselves to be the believing remnant of Israel⁵ under the New Covenant.⁶ Their hope was in the establishment of the Kingdom of God promised to Israel in the Old Testament.⁷ By the time of chapters 10 and 11 of the book of Acts, Gentiles were being added to the Church without first having converted to Judaism. It was given to the apostle Paul to explain this new situation.

As the first century progressed, a rift developed between the Christian churches and the Jewish synagogues from which they sprang. The Jewish revolts hastened this process, and the Bar Kokhba revolt that ended in 135 AD marked the final, irrevocable separation between the institutions that have come to be known as Judaism and Christianity.⁸

The Christian Church from this point forward was composed primarily of Gentiles, people whose views had been formed by Hellenistic culture, who did not understand the Jewish heritage of their new religion. They read the Scriptures through a filter of Platonic idealism. They replaced the scriptural hope of bodily resurrection with a pagan hope of an immortal soul going to

⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2nd ed., 1994. Poythress's fifth chapter, "The Near Impossibility of Simple Refutations," examines the double standards dispensationalism uses in deciding *when* to apply the principle of literal interpretation.

⁵ Romans 9:22-29; 11:1-5; Philippians 3:3.

⁶ Everett Ferguson, "Covenant," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990, 239, 240. See also Matthew 26:27, 28; Mark 14:23, 24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25; 2 Corinthians 3:3-6; Hebrews 8:6-13; 9:11-15.

⁷ Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31; Romans 14:17; 1 Corinthians 4:20; 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 1:13; 4:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:5; 2 Timothy 4:1, 18; Hebrews 1:8; 12:28; James 2:5; 2 Peter 1:11; Revelation 1:9; 12:10.

⁸ James D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991.

heaven after the body's death,⁹ and they reinterpreted the Messiah of Israel as a Hellenistic god-man incarnation.¹⁰ But many Christians still looked forward to the coming Kingdom of God, prophesied in the Old Testament writings.¹¹

In the fourth century, Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire, and adapted the religion to suit his political purposes. It was a time for theologians to do even more reinterpretation. What need was there for Christ to come and establish his Kingdom over the earth when "Christianity" was already the only religion officially recognized by the world government? And what about those embarrassingly concrete promises God made to Israel in the Old Testament?

Many fourth-century theologians solved their problems by turning to an allegorical or "spiritual" method of interpreting Scripture that gave them great freedom in attaching whatever meaning appealed to them to the words, and in playing down the importance of what was literally written.¹² Thus they declared that God had totally rejected Israel and replaced it with the Church, and that the promises originally given to Israel were ultimately being fulfilled "spiritually" in Christianity. The prophecies regarding the return of Christ and the establishment of his millennial kingdom came to be understood, under the principle of allegorical interpretation, as purely spiritual, not carrying any expectation of actual physical fulfillment.¹³

From time to time during the succeeding centuries, individuals would propose that this prophecy, or that one, should be taken literally, but it wasn't until dispensationalism arose in the nineteenth century that considerable numbers of theologians began to develop a systematic approach to the literal interpretation of prophecy. In championing a literal method instead of the traditional allegorical method, the pioneers of dispensationalism went far toward recovering the accuracy and integrity of God's Word. It's a shame that their system became so inflexibly bound to their working assumptions that they didn't apply the principle of literal interpretation to sections of Scripture other than the prophetic, and that they didn't realize that some of

⁹ William B. Halliday, *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity*, New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1970, 210-233, chapter entitled "Union with God and the Immortality of the Soul."

¹⁰ Acts 4:8-18.

¹¹ Brian E. Daley, "Chiliasm," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990, 193-196.

¹² Denis Farkasfalvy, "Interpretation of the Bible," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990, 466-469.

¹³ Brian E. Daley, "Chiliasm," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*.

their assumptions were violating the integrity of God's Word by carving it into an ever-proliferating number of artificial, meaning-tight compartments.

The Hermeneutical Principle of Literal Interpretation

How do dispensationalists define "literal interpretation"? According to Charles C. Ryrie:

This means interpretation which gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking . . . The principle might also be called normal interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated plain interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech . . . Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.¹⁴

Paul L. Tan states, "To 'interpret' means to explain the original sense of a speaker or writer. To interpret 'literally' means to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to normal, customary, and proper usage of words and language. Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language."¹⁵

Ephesians 3:6

In the third chapter of Ephesians, Paul wrote about a secret that God had only recently made known to His apostles and prophets. Paul went on to write that God had committed the stewardship¹⁶ of this secret to himself, to make

¹⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1965, 86-87.

¹⁵ Paul L. Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974, 29-30.

¹⁶ When it comes to understanding the word *oikonomia*, dispensationalists depart from their hermeneutical principle of literal interpretation. The word *oikonomia* is variously translated as "stewardship," "dispensation," "administration" and "economy." The literal meaning of the word indicates the function, office, or duty of a steward. Every occurrence of *oikonomia* in the Bible can be properly understood in the plain, normal sense of "stewardship."

Dispensationalists, however, allegorize *oikonomia*, saying that, by metonymy, it means *the period of time* in which a steward exercises his function. Then they go on to use *oikonomia* interchangeably with any synonym for time. Thus, by abandoning the

it known to all men. Verse six is a subordinate clause that literally tells the exact content of the secret Paul was to steward, “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” (Eph. 3:6). The content of this mystery bears on our understanding of the relation between Israel and the Church.

Dispensationalists nearly universally refer to Ephesians 3:6 as revealing the secret nature of the Church’s origin, claiming that this verse proves that the Church is absolutely distinct, completely separate and discontinuous from Israel. But only rarely do dispensationalists approach anything even remotely resembling a literal analysis of this verse. The nearest anyone comes is C.I. Scofield’s note on Ephesians 3:6 in the *New Scofield Reference Bible*:

That Gentiles were to be saved was no mystery (Rom. 9:24-33; 10:19-21). The mystery “hidden in God” was the divine purpose to make of Jew and Gentile a wholly new thing — “the Church, which is his [Christ’s] body,” formed by the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12-13) and in which the earthly distinction of Jew and Gentile disappears (Eph. 2:14-15; Col. 3:10-11). The revelation of this “mystery” of the Church was foretold but not explained by Christ (Mt. 16:18). The details concerning the doctrine, position, walk and destiny of the Church were committed to Paul and his fellow “apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:5).¹⁷

It is interesting to notice that, in this rather lengthy note, Scofield never actually discusses the literal content of Ephesians 3:6. First, he sidesteps the literal words used by substituting “saved” for the words “fellow heirs,” “of the same body” and “partakers,” thus missing some important distinctions God makes with His words. Then, without warrant, Scofield changes the subject of the clause from the literal “Gentiles” to “the divine purpose.” Scofield goes on to expound his conception of God’s purpose at some length.¹⁸ This is an example of “eisegesis,” or “reading a meaning into,” rather than “exegesis,” which means “reading the meaning out from.”

principle of literal interpretation in this crucial matter, dispensationalists blur a very important distinction that God Himself has drawn in His own words.

¹⁷ C.I. Scofield, *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, 1275.

¹⁸ In describing the Church as “a wholly new thing,” Scofield ignores the truth set forth in Ephesians 5:28-32, that the believing remnant of Israel, represented as the Bride, becomes the Body of Christ through the “one flesh” relationship of marriage.

According to the normal, customary usage of words and language, the subject of Ephesians 3:6 is the word “Gentiles.” Dispensationalists point to 1 Corinthians 10:32 and say that there are three groups of people in God’s sight: “Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the Church of God.” By their own principles of interpretation, it is impossible for the direct content of the mystery proclaimed in Ephesians 3:6 to be the Church as a whole. Literally “Gentiles,” not a “divine purpose” or “a wholly new thing,” is the subject of the secret revealed here.

True, the context makes it clear that these are not just any Gentiles. Rather, they are the Gentiles who believe. But if we’re going to recognize the distinctions God makes in His own use of literal words, we cannot ignore the truth that the mystery revealed to the apostle Paul was dealing directly with Gentiles in the Church, not with the whole Church itself.

Scofield dismisses the literal interpretation of Ephesians 3:6, saying, “That Gentiles were to be saved was no mystery . . .” It is true that the Old Testament revealed that Gentiles were to be blessed, but there are no passages anywhere in that book revealing that believing Gentiles would be included in the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 on an equal basis with the remnant of Israel. Let’s look at the literal words in Jeremiah 31:31 and 33: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah . . . But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel . . .”

The literal, normal or plain interpretation of Ephesians 3:6 is that “Gentiles are included,” not that some “wholly new thing” has come into existence.

Romans 11:17, 18

The literal interpretation of Romans 11:17, 18 agrees perfectly with the literal interpretation of Ephesians 3:6. In Romans 11:17, 18, God presents a great truth concerning the Church in the form of a figure called a “metaphor.” But remember what Ryrie said about literal interpretation: “It might also be designated plain interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech . . . Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal or plain

meaning that they convey to the reader.” From the context of these verses in Romans, we can gather the plain meaning of the metaphor in Romans 11:17, 18:

And if some of the branches [unbelieving Israel] be broken off, and thou [believing Gentiles], being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in [included] among them [the believing remnant of Israel], and with them [the believing remnant of Israel] partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree [God’s promises to Israel]; boast not against the branches [Israel]. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root [God’s promises to Israel] thee [believing Gentiles].

Daniel P. Fuller writes regarding these verses:

When Paul says that Gentile believers “were grafted in their place to share the fat root of the olive tree,” his only possible meaning is that Gentile believers come to share jointly, along with Jewish believers who still remain in the tree, the blessing of Abraham, which Paul equates elsewhere (Gal. 3:14) with the promise of the Spirit received through faith. Since this analogy is very much akin to the theme of Ephesians chapter 2 and 3, that “Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6), it makes explicit some aspects of Paul’s thinking which shows exactly what he meant by Gentiles becoming fellow heirs. In that he said that Gentile believers share “the fat root of the olive tree,” he could not have subscribed to the dispensational interpretation of Ephesians 3:6 that Gentiles as members of the Church belong to “a wholly new thing.”¹⁹

Paying attention to the normal, customary, proper usage of words and language shows us the remarkable agreement between Romans 11:17, 18 and Ephesians 3:6.

¹⁹ Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum?* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1980, 190-191.

Colossians 1:27

Some dispensationalists misquote Colossians 1:27 as follows: “the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”²⁰ Then they infer that the content of the mystery is “Christ in you”! But let’s look at what Colossians 1:27 literally says: “To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery *among the Gentiles*; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

The mystery that Christ would be in his followers was not first revealed to the apostle Paul. Jesus, praying as recorded in John 17:23, speaking about those who would believe in him, said, “I [Christ] in them [the believers], and thou [God] in me [Christ], that they may be made perfect in one.” At the time Jesus spoke these words, all of his followers were Judaeans.

If we read Colossians 1:27 literally, the verse says it was a mystery that *Gentiles* would have “Christ in you.” This also agrees with Ephesians 3:6 and Romans 11:17, 18. When we look at the plain, normal and proper usage of words in these three Scriptures, we see that they are clearly in perfect harmony. The literal content of the mystery revealed to the apostle Paul was not that God had made some wholly new thing, but that believing Gentiles were to be included on the same footing with the believing remnant of Israel under the New Covenant.

Conclusion

As we have seen from our literal analysis of the normal, plain language used in Ephesians 3:6, Romans 11:17, 18 and Colossians 1:27, the idea that the Church is completely separate and discontinuous from Israel could not have arisen from a literal interpretation of all Scripture. Dispensationalists could make the Church and Israel absolutely distinct only by ignoring the literal content of these three important Scriptures. The dispensationalist distinction was a faulty assumption that has led to eisegesis and circular, rather than literal, interpretation. The Church is indeed the believing remnant of Israel under the New Covenant with believing Gentiles grafted in, and much of dispensationalism’s rigid, seemingly endless compartmentalization of the Scripture is unwarranted.

²⁰ John Schoenheit, “The Mystery Revisited,” bimonthly audiotape for Sept./Oct. 1996, Indianapolis: Christian Educational Services.