The Hermeneutics of Dispensational Premillennialism: A Critique

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**Introduction**

The dispensational system of premillennial eschatology has significantly influenced Christian thought and practice since its development and systematisation by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) in the mid 1800s. One only needs to observe – in our time, some 150 years or so later - the vast array of books in bookstores capitalising on what Gary DeMar has called *Last Days Madness* \(^1\) to perceive just how pervasive this eschatological system has become. The dominance of dispensational premillennialism through the medium of television and record selling books such as Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series \(^2\) also reveals the influence this perspective has at the congregational level of Christianity. \(^3\) Such television programs and books build on the legacy of Darby’s work, and more recently on Hal Lindsey’s 1970s multi-million-copy seller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. \(^4\) Despite the fact that many dispensational scholars would, and do, cringe at the speculative excesses of these programs and books (though they build on the basic dispensational system), adherence to the belief system expressed within them has for many sincere Christians become the litmus test of true Christianity. \(^5\) This is true at the level of congregational Christianity. However, many, indeed most, in scholarly circles continue to question dispensationalism as a viable system of thought – whether in its classical form with


\(^2\) This series of 10 novels (with more to come) by LaHaye and Jenkins had sold approximately 32 million copies as at July 2002 – *Time Magazine*, July 1, 2002.

\(^3\) The writer experienced this while leading a Bible study recently. A participant adamantly declared that in the book of Revelation John saw 21st century aeroplanes and that he described them as locusts. When asked how he knew this he responded that he had heard this on television.

\(^4\) Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

\(^5\) The writer is aware that this is a generalization noting that there are exceptions to this from the ‘mainstream’ protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches who do not hold to dispensational theology. Clarence Bass, however notes that despite his affirmation of the “cardinal doctrines of the faith – the virgin birth, the efficaciousness of Christ’s death, the historicity of the resurrection, the necessity of the new birth, even the fervent expectancy of the personal, literal, actual, bodily return of the Lord to earth” – some of his dearest friends were convinced that he had departed from the evangelical faith. Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), 9.
its offspring of highly speculative and literally novel extremes, or that of the more recent progressive dispensationalism espoused by scholars such as Blaising and Bock.\textsuperscript{6} There is therefore a need to bring to this system of thought an analysis that will test its value. As one discusses this system of eschatology with those who hold to this viewpoint one will immediately find it difficult to persuade them to a change of view as Vern Poythress emphatically notes.\textsuperscript{7} This writer has experienced Poythress’s point first hand so as to conclude, with him, when he writes that, “... nearly all the problems associated with dispensationalist-nondispensationalist conflict are buried beneath the question of literal interpretation.”\textsuperscript{8} Discussions concerning various differences of understanding without first considering the interpretive principles embraced by adherents of the differing viewpoints will only see the disputants and their discussions going around in circles. For any discussion between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists to be of value it must first deal with this all-important issue of hermeneutics as it relates to eschatological thought.

For that reason, after giving a brief overview of dispensational premillennialism, the goal of this essay will be to identify the hermeneutical principles of the dispensationalist system, to examine these to determine their strengths and weaknesses, and then to make some conclusions as to their value in forming a biblically sound eschatological understanding. Focus will be primarily on the traditional, early, or normative dispensationalism of Scofield, Ryrie, Walvoord, et al. for two reasons. Firstly, this is the form that any later developments, modifications or departures in contemporary dispensational thought stem from. Secondly, the relatively recent

\textsuperscript{6} Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, \textit{Progressive Dispensationalism} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) and Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (eds.), \textit{Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). While still referring to themselves as dispensationalists these writers have made significant movement from their predecessors to a more covenantal view of the Bible and more toward the understanding of amillennial, postmillennial, and historic premillennial interpreters in a number of key elements of eschatological thought. However adherents of these latter positions still look to see a further progression.

\textsuperscript{7} Vern S. Poythress, \textit{Understanding Dispensationalists} (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., 1994), 52.

\textsuperscript{8} Poythress, \textit{Understanding Dispensationalists}, 78.
dispensationalist developments in scholarly circles (e.g. the progressive dispensationalism of Blaising and Bock) appear to have not yet reached or impacted the understanding of people at a local level of the church; the tenets of traditional dispensationalism continue to lie behind and form the assumptions and beliefs of many. This research into dispensational hermeneutics will be limited in scope by making primary use of Charles C. Ryrie’s, Dispensationalism (published in 1995) — a revised and expanded version of his 1965 Dispensationalism Today. His view appears to be representative of the understanding of most normative dispensational thinkers.10

Overview of Dispensational Premillennialism

A Brief Historical Overview
Premillennialism, vis-à-vis dispensational premillennialism, has been on the theological landscape since the early days of the Christian church with church fathers as Papias and Justin Martyr holding to the return of Christ as premillennial (i.e. prior to the millennium - the thousand-year period mentioned in Revelation chapter 20). However, as Alan Boyd discovered when researching Ryrie’s historical claims for the longevity of dispensational thought, the dominant understanding of the early church was more akin to what is now known as amillennialism. Papias and Justin Martyr, whilst holding to a premillennial return of Christ, should not be referred to as dispensationalists: this designation is to be reserved for those holding to the later premillennial system of thought formulated by Darby in the nineteenth century. Philip Mauro states that,

The entire system of dispensational thinking … a system of doctrine that contradicts what has been held and taught by every Christian expositor from the beginning of the Christian era … suddenly made its appearance in the latter part of the nineteenth century.13

10 As one views the writings of both proponents and critics of dispensationalism one finds in their discussions and footnotes repeated reference to either the early or latter version of Ryrie’s book.
13 Cited in Bass, Backgrounds, 15.
While this nineteenth century development of dispensationalism is widely accepted, scholars such as Ryrie have sought to authenticate a longer history for dispensationalism by appealing the evident historicity of “dispensational-like concepts” espoused by others prior to Darby who recognized that God has managed His dealings with the world in different ways in different eras (the general meaning of the term “dispensation”). This appeal is misleading, however, as all systems of eschatological thought recognise this understanding of dispensations to one degree or another. Covenant theology, the primary rival of dispensationalism, recognizes at least two economies by which God has worked with his world, i.e. the covenants of works and grace. Therefore, while crucial to Darby’s system, dispensations are not, nor are they capable of being, the defining hallmark of the dispensational system due to this loose commonality with other views and because of there being disagreement within dispensational scholarship as to how many dispensations there are. This inconsistency within dispensationalism is a strange irony in light of Ryrie’s insistence that, “Dispensational theology [recognises] definite and distinguishable distinctions”. This begs the question: How can the dispensations be distinguishable and at the same time indistinguishable to the point of causing a multiplicity of views within the dispensationalist camp regarding their number? It seems these definite and distinguishable dispensations are in reality indefinite and indistinguishable. This inconsistency does however raise some concerns as regards the hermeneutical processes adopted by dispensationalist interpreters.

Ryrie admits, as he must, that “a person can believe in dispensations … without being a

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14 Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 63f.
15 Economy is derived from the Greek οἰκονόμος (oikonomos)- translated as dispensatio in the Latin Vulgate and refers to the administration or management of a household (οἶκος meaning house and νόμος meaning law).
16 Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 46. Ryrie writes, “Most dispensationalists see seven dispensations in God’s plan (though throughout the history of dispensationalism they have not always been the same seven). Occasionally a dispensationalist may hold as few as four and some hold as many as eight. The doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary (Article V) mentions only three by name.”
17 Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 32.
18 It is to some degree amusing that Ryrie can claim that, “Dispensationalism avoids confusion and contradiction.” Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 37.
dispensationalism”. In fact, one can recognise dispensations and hold to a premillennial return of Christ and yet not be a dispensational premillennialist – the term therefore does not accurately reflect the sine qua non of the system known by that name. Paradoxically, the central tenets of dispensational premillennialism, as derived from the system’s hermeneutical principle, reside outside of its being dispensational and premillennial. It is these tenets that cause Darby’s dispensationalism to be both a unique and recent development in eschatological thought: uniqueness and recentness being further reasons to test the reliability of the interpretive principles of dispensationalism.

Despite the above noted irregularities, others, such as Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843-1921) soon accepted Darby’s system of thought. He then proceeded to intersperse dispensational distinctives into his Scofield Reference Bible – first published in 1909 followed by revisions in 1917 and 1967; the latter by others after his death. This endeavour was undertaken by Scofield despite his having no formal theological training. The Scofield Reference Bible became very popular and widespread among the general public with the result of disseminating dispensationalism more quickly and geographically further than perhaps even Darby could have imagined. Its popularity among the theologically uneducated meant that they could now easily understand eschatology – albeit in the dispensational manner – without the discipline of in-depth study and without having to consult with other writers. The result: dispensationalism gained widespread, yet uncritical, acceptance. Lewis Sperry Chafer, whose thinking was influenced by Scofield, soon pioneered what became Dallas Theological Seminary – the seminary that would aid the spread and acceptance of dispensationalism by producing

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19 Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 38.
20 Ryrie states, “Is the essence of dispensationalism in the number of dispensations? No, for this is in no way a major issue in the system.” Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 38.
21 As Ryrie notes, dispensationalism’s newness does not imply wrongness. The crucial factor, he writes, is whether it is Biblical (Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 67). This writer agrees. However, the fact that this view was unheard of for the first eighteen and a half centuries of the Christian era should cause one to at least bring some questions to examine its validity.
dispensationalist scholars such as Walvoord, Pentecost, and Ryrie. Through Scofield’s Bible and the writings of such men, dispensationalism has continued to shape the eschatological understanding of many people, churches and denominations to the extent that it, even today, holds great sway, and is presently impacting the lives of hundreds of thousands of Christians. This is so despite the fact that only a relatively small segment of Christian scholarship adheres to dispensationalism today and that it was unheard of for the first eighteen and a half centuries of the Christian church era.

A Brief System Overview
Dispensationalism, despite the presence of some disagreement, in its most common form regards human history as divided into seven periods (dispensations) of time – each administered by God using differing means to test human obedience according to some specific revelation of the will of God. The present dispensation, the sixth, - the period between the first and second coming of Christ - is labelled the “Dispensation of Grace.” During this time God’s purposes for Israel are postponed due to their rejection of Jesus’ offer of an earthly kingdom with himself as king. This dispensation will end with seven years of tribulation directed toward the Jews that will begin immediately after the Christian church has been raptured out of the earth to meet Christ in the air which will in turn allow God’s purposes for Israel to resume. The ‘great tribulation’ will reach its climax by ending at Christ’s second coming at which time He will establish the seventh dispensation – the Millennium. This will be a thousand-year period during which Christ will rule the earth from Jerusalem with Jews as the predominant nation. Central to the dispensational system, as can be seen from the above description (and diagram below), is the

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23 Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God,* 11.
24 Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow,* 126. Gunn states that Alan Boyd (a fellow student of Gunn at Dallas Theological Seminary), in his Masters thesis (see page 3), explained his finding a lack of evidence of dispensationalist thought in the early church as “an example of the rapid loss of New Testament truth in the early church.” Perhaps Boyd should have accepted that his research is more likely to prove that dispensationalism had never been conceived of in order to be lost. One can’t prove the loss of something by discovering a lack of evidence for its prior existence.
maintaining of a radical distinction between God’s two peoples, Israel and the Church.  

The Dispensational Hermeneutic

A Literal Hermeneutic

A lengthy quote from Crenshaw and Gunn (both ex-dispensationalists trained at Dallas under Ryrie) detailing a description of the millennial period by drawing from the writings of Walvoord and Pentecost demonstrates the type of conclusions that stem from the dispensational hermeneutic:

Dispensationalists are expecting literal and cataclysmic topographical changes in the land of Palestine. The Mount of Olives will be split in two to form a new valley running east and west. Mount Zion will be elevated above all the surrounding hills and the rest of Palestine will be transformed from a mountainous terrain to a great fertile plain. There will be an earthly Jerusalem from which Jesus will exercise his earthly Davidic rule and a heavenly Jerusalem hovering over Palestine from which Christ will co-reign with the church. The heavenly city will have a foundation 1500 miles square and will

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This view understands the Old Testament prophecies concerning a future glorious kingdom to have been postponed due to the Jewish rejection of Christ. For a view counter to the postponement theory see N. T. Wright, The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991). As the title suggests Wright proposes and demonstrates a climax of the Old Testament prophecies rather than a postponement. Discussion of this view is beyond the scope of this essay but will be addressed in later work.
be either a cube, a pyramid, or a sphere that is 1500 miles high. The land in general and the temple area will be enlarged. The land will be redistributed to the twelve Jewish tribes, and the temple described in Ezekiel's vision will be built. The Old Testament priestly and levitical orders will be reestablished under the sons of Zadok, and the offering of bloody sacrifices will be reinstated. From the temple a small flow of water will come forth whose volume will progressively increase with distance from the temple, becoming a mighty river within a little over a mile from the temple. The river will flow south through Jerusalem and divide to flow west into the Mediterranean Sea and east into the Dead Sea, the Dead Sea being transformed into a fresh water body full of fish and surrounded by vegetation. Jerusalem will be the center of a world government system, national Israel will be exalted, and the Gentile nations will be subordinated as Israel's servants. This is the millennial situation as described by Dr. John F. Walvoord and Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, who are influential and respected dispensational authorities.  

The above quotation exemplifies what is the essential hermeneutical principle claimed by dispensationalist interpreters if we are to rightly understand the Scriptures. J. Dwight Pentecost writes,

> … the original and accepted method of interpretation was the literal method, which was used by the Lord, the greatest interpreter, and any other method was introduced to promote heterodoxy. Therefore the literal method must be accepted as the basic method for right interpretation in any field of doctrine today.”  

Pentecost’s statement, though very strongly worded in an accusing manner is however debatable at almost every point in regards to its accuracy. Despite this, his statement does reveal precisely the vigour by which dispensationalists value their governing interpretive principle. Any interpretive principle other than theirs is, according to Pentecost, introduced to further unorthodox teaching. The entire dispensational system is built on the hermeneutical principle of a literal interpretive methodology equated by Ryrie with the grammatical-historical method and is claimed to be consistently applied to the text. Consistency in its application is what sets

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27 Crenshaw and Gunn, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*, 132f. It will be demonstrated later in this essay that despite the literal interpretation of Scripture evidenced in this quotation there are occasions when dispensationalists, contrary to their commitment to a literalistic interpretive principle, are willing to interpret in a non-literal manner. These occasions, as will be shown, appear to be in order to maintain a prior commitment to the dispensational belief system.


29 There are numerous occasions in the gospels where Jesus appears to use non-literal language. This will be considered later in this essay.

30 Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 80.
them apart from non-dispensational interpreters. This is one of the three indispensable conditions of dispensationalism listed by Ryrie.\textsuperscript{31} He states, “To be sure, literal/historical/grammatical interpretation is not the sole possession or practice of dispensationalists, but the \textit{consistent use of it in all areas of biblical interpretation} is.”\textsuperscript{32} This, he says, “is the strength of dispensational interpretation”.\textsuperscript{33} That this interpretive principle is without doubt, for Ryrie, the core indispensable element of dispensationalism is evidenced when he affirms that, “The first tenet of dispensationalism is that the Bible must be interpreted literally”\textsuperscript{34} and that, “consistent literalism is the basis for dispensationalism, and since consistent literalism is the logical and obvious principle of interpretation, dispensationalism is more than justified.”\textsuperscript{35} He further writes that, “If plain or normal interpretation is the only valid hermeneutical principle, and if it is consistently applied, it will cause one to be a dispensationalist.”\textsuperscript{36} If these statements are correct then by Ryrie’s own terms the validity of dispensationalism, as a system of understanding the Biblical teaching of God’s purposes, rests squarely on the literal principle of interpretation being able to withstand the critique of non-dispensational interpreters.

From this “consistent” literal interpretive principle Ryrie states that there flows a second indispensable condition that is the “most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist”\textsuperscript{37}; it is that Israel and the church must be kept distinct from each other. This Church/Israel distinction is the fundamental tenet of dispensationalism and constitutes its point of departure from historic Christian thought.

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31 Ryrie, \textit{Dispensationalism}, 38-41. The other two indispensable conditions being: the distinction of Israel and the church, and the underlying purpose of God in the world regarded as ‘the glory of God.’ The latter being also prominent in non-dispensational thought negates this as a dispensational distinctive. The former will be addressed in this essay.
33 Ryrie, \textit{Dispensationalism}, 40.
34 Ryrie, \textit{Dispensationalism}, 89.
35 Ryrie, \textit{Dispensationalism}, 90.
\end{flushright}
This separation of Israel and church leads the dispensationalist to conclude that “God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity”. 38 Each of these two, Israel and the church, have separate eternal destinies – Israel’s is on earth, the church will be in heaven. 39 It is recognized by this writer that the progressive dispensational development now rejects this aspect of classical dispensationalism. However, as stated at the outset the concern of this essay is with the earlier system of dispensational thought that still appears to influence the belief system of many Christian people, despite the current modifications by some dispensational scholars.

With this distinction in mind, along with their claimed consistently applied literal interpretive principle, dispensationalists propose that all Old Testament prophecy given to Israel must be fulfilled in the literal nation of Israel, in an exact literal manner. Therefore there can be no application to or fulfilment of these in the church – in fact, say dispensationalists, the Old Testament prophets knew nothing of the church age. 40 God’s primary purposes are with Israel, however, due to their rejection of an earthly kingdom offer by Jesus at his first coming in fulfilment of the prophets, the fulfilment (i.e. the kingdom), was postponed until the millennial

38 Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 39.
39 This radical distinction in this essential dispensational tenet appears to be in contradiction to the global nature of God’s promise to Abraham that from his seed blessing would be appropriated to all nations (Gen 12:1-3) and the emphasis of Paul in Ephesians that gentile Christians are no longer stranger to the covenants of promise but are in fact fellow citizens with the Jews by becoming one new humanity in the place of two (Eph 2:11-22). In Galatians he states that there is no longer Jew or Greek for all are one in Christ, and if a person belongs to Christ they too are Abraham’s offspring therefore heirs of the promise (Gal 3:28-29).
40 Cox, An Examination of Dispensationalism, 38. This will be addressed later in this essay, however it is of value to note that Peter in his Pentecost address sees a fulfilment of Joel’s Old Testament prophecy in the then present outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14ff.) On this occasion he tells the Jewish people present that the promise is for them and for all who are afar off - the nations (v.39). This indicates clearly that Old Testament prophecy spoke of things pertaining to the church age contra the claim of dispensationalism. It also affirms the global nature of prophecies specifically spoken to Israel.
period. Consequently, the Christian church era that emerged as a result of this rejection is a parenthesis or more accurately, an intercalation – a time period completely undisclosed in the Old Testament - in God’s programme for Israel.\textsuperscript{41}

For dispensationalists, due to their literal hermeneutic, Israel means Israel, and the church means the church – never should the two be confused. The offshoot of this is that when interpreting the Bible one must first determine if a text is for Israel or for the church. Poythress highlights this dichotomous hermeneutic by quoting Darby,

First, in prophecy, when the Jewish church or nation (exclusive of the Gentile parenthesis in their history) is concerned, i.e., when the address is directed to the Jews, there we may look for a plain and direct testimony, because earthly things were the Jews’ proper portion. And on the contrary, where the address is to the Gentiles, i.e., when the Gentiles are concerned in it, there we may look for symbol, because earthly things were not their portion, and the system of revelation must to them be symbolical. When therefore facts are addressed to the Jewish church as a subsisting body, as to what concerns themselves, I look for a plain, common sense, literal statement, as to a people with whom God had \textit{direct} dealing upon earth.\textsuperscript{42}

This dichotomous hermeneutic eliminates all Old Testament prophecy spoken to Israel as being relevant to the church – after all it was addressed to Israel. Further, this quote contains a further specification regarding prophecy as a domain where a non-plain symbolic interpretation is acceptable (\textit{contra} Ryrie’s consistently literal principle applied to all areas of biblical interpretation) but only when not directed to Israel. This in turn begs several questions: Does the literal principle really determine the Israel/Church distinction, as Ryrie says, or does a prior commitment to this distinction determine how one approaches and interprets the biblical text?

\textsuperscript{41} Crenshaw & Gunn, \textit{Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow}, 133f. A parenthesis is usually connected in some way to the surrounding context. An intercalation is a totally unconnected interruption. This theory again appears counter to the global nature of Gen 12:1-3 and the evident fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy within the very period labelled as an intercalation or parenthesis as noted above from the Joel/Acts promise and fulfilment theme of Acts 2.

\textsuperscript{42} Poythress, \textit{Understanding Dispensationalists}, 17. The 1948 restoration of Israel to land and nationhood provided for dispensationalists an historical verification of the literal interpretative method due to the dispensational belief in the earthly nature of promise for the nation. The significance accredited to this event by dispensationalists in support of their belief system has been convincingly refuted by Don K. Preston in his booklet titled, \textit{Israel: 1948 Countdown to Nowhere} (Ardmore: Don K. Preston, 2002).
Why is literal interpretation only permissible when prophets are addressing things that concern Israel, and not always permissible when speaking about gentiles? (This again seems to be an interpretive principle originating from a prior commitment to an already adhered to system of belief in two peoples of God with some built in assumptions as to how God communicates with each of them.) Why, according to Scofield, is “absolute literalness” found in prophecy whereas symbols and figures are only to be found in Old Testament history\(^{43}\) when the former genre of prophetic oracle is mostly written in poetry form – a form of literature where symbolism and non-literal forms of expression are much more likely to be found? This would appear to be overly presumptuous without any literary basis to make such an interpretive rule and once again would imply a prior commitment to a principle of interpretation governed by an already established set of beliefs. It seems from the above that Darby and Scofield are, despite the latter’s heavy dependence on the former’s writings,\(^{44}\) at odds in their interpretive approach in regards to when and when not to apply the literal principle of interpretation. They are, further, both at odds with Ryrie who, as previously quoted,\(^{45}\) claimed that the literal principle is consistently applied by dispensationalists in all areas of Biblical interpretation. The fact of three leading dispensational scholars and yet three applications of the literal principle should again be cause for doubting the reliability of dispensational interpretation and the resultant theology.

The remainder of this essay will focus on examining Ryrie’s claim that a literal interpretive methodology consistently applied in all areas of the Bible is the only valid principle for the interpretation of the Bible. The outcome of this examination will in turn assess whether the Israel/Church distinction is also a valid outcome of that interpretive principle or whether it is perhaps the basis for that interpretive principle, and thereby to make some suggestions as to the

\(^{43}\) Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 78.


\(^{45}\) See quote on page 9 above.
validity/reliability of the entire dispensational system of eschatological thought. Ryrie, by the force of his statements already noted above, appears to imply that dispensationalism stands or falls on the credibility of his interpretive claim.

**Defining ‘Literal’**
The first hurdle one faces when examining the validity of dispensationalism’s literal principle of interpretation is the word ‘literal’ itself. What does it mean? When should it be applied? It has already been observed that this latter question is answered in different ways within the dispensational scholarly circle; however, before it is applied to any text of Scripture one must first establish what is meant by literal.

Ryrie, in defence of the literal interpretive principle upon which the dispensational system is built, states that literal interpretation, “gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking.” He refers to this as the “normal or plain interpretation” that is, interpreted “according to the received laws of language.” He further equates his terms “normal” and “plain” with the “grammatical historical” method of interpretation.⁴⁶

Difficulty in understanding what is meant by literal, even with Ryrie’s definitions, still remains. His first definition of giving “to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage” is open to what Poythress terms “first thought meaning”.⁴⁷ That is the meaning most likely to enter one’s mind when a word is used in isolation from other words. This could be the meaning of a word as presented in a dictionary or a meaning influenced by the hearer’s own circumstances. People in prison might understand the word ‘free’ as meaning being out of jail. For a bargain-hunting shopper it could mean getting something for nothing. Both are

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⁴⁶ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 80f. This essay will later address factors related to grammatical historical interpretation that appear to be ignored by Ryrie.

⁴⁷ Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 82.
interpreting the word by normal everyday usage yet the two are hearing it differently due to
their differing life settings. What is normal or plain for one appears not to be normal or plain to
another. When engaging in the task of interpretation all interpreters bring to the text a pre-
understanding, both from their own different contemporary contexts of life and their array of
knowledge or prior perception of the Bible. Each of these influences in varying degrees what is
to them a “normal” or “plain” understanding of a text. Ryrie’s definition is therefore unhelpful.
His term, “the received laws of language”48 is equally vague and speaks of laws that are untold
and assumed rather than stated and proven. By equating his use of normal with the term
“grammatical-historical” Ryrie is adopting a term well understood in hermeneutical studies and
this further elucidates what he seems to mean by normal and plain. Poythress describes
grammatical-historical interpretation:

In this type [of interpretation] one reads passages as organic wholes and tries
to understand what each passage expresses against the background of the
original human author and the original situation. One asks what understanding
and inferences would be justified or warranted at the time the passage was
written. This interpretation aims to express the meanings that the human
authors express.49

That is when an interpreter utilizing the grammatical-historical method asks, “What does this
mean?” the real question being brought to the text is “what did this mean to the original author
and hearers/readers.” However, from what Poythress goes on to point out, Ryrie’s equating this
method with plain meaning is still unhelpful. “Sometimes”, Poythress writes,

… the grammatical-historical meaning is not at all “plain” to us because we
must work hard to reconstruct and appreciate the differences between then and
now. Moreover, for lay dispensationalists the plain meaning will be the
meaning that occurs to them in the context of their already existing knowledge
of the prophetic system of dispensationalism.50

Ryrie’s claim to use of the grammatical-historical method is commendable but he limits the
scope of the interpreter’s use of this method by his insistence that they must apply to every word

48 Ryrie quoting J.P. Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (New York: Charles
Scribners, 1872), 98.
49 Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 84.
the same meaning it would have in normal usage. Such an insistence confines the interpreter to limitations that may or may not have been appropriate at the time of writing. Important as it is for interpreters to utilise the grammatical-historical method of interpretation by understanding as much as is possible the “historical” setting in which words were spoken/written the interpreter must give equal weight to the word “grammatical” by asking how the words and sentences are used by the writer and in what way were these words understood by the readers who first read them. Does the author intend the “normal”, i.e. the dictionary type meaning or first thought type meaning, or does he make use of various literary tools such as metaphor. Even Ryrie would allow for clear or obvious figures of speech, but what about the less obvious uses? Could a figurative literary form be obvious to the original readers/hearers yet not be obvious to the modern interpreter? The use of non-literal language may be more obvious at some times than it is at other times (e.g. dragons and horns as symbols in Revelation), but writers seldom give warning by saying, “Interpret with care, I’m using a metaphor here.” Interpreters, such as Ryrie, advocating a supposed flat rule of literal, normal, plain or obvious meaning assume that a writer’s use of words is obvious and agreeably plain in meaning to all and neglect to integrate much that is widely accepted practice in the field of hermeneutical studies. One such aspect of crucial import is that of genre.  

Grant R. Osborne in his comprehensive study in the field of hermeneutics notes,

The presence of genre is an important point in the debate as to whether one can recover the author’s intended meaning... Every writer couches his message in a certain genre in order to give the reader sufficient rules by which to decode that message.  

W. Randolph Tate in his *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* echoes Osborne’s view. He writes:

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51 The writer is aware of the enormous scope for discussion possible having raised the issue of genre, particularly with its implications as it relates to prophetic and apocalyptic literature. Such extensive discussion is however beyond the scope of this essay. For the immediate purposes of this essay it is sufficient to note the force by which hermeneutic scholars stress the importance of genre considerations as it relates to the interpretive task.

The most plausible understanding of a text and its subsequent explication is best actualized when the reader has an adequate grasp of the literary genres and sub-genres by which an author operates.\textsuperscript{53}

Anthony C. Thiselton in \textit{New Horizons in Hermeneutics} also emphasises the importance of genre when he notes that,

“All texts presuppose code. … To make a mistake about the semiotic code, therefore, violates the text and distorts its meaning.”\textsuperscript{54}

Joel Green in his book concerning the interpretation of prophecy says,

Because of the diversity of literary forms, then, it is certainly too simplistic to assert a literalistic method as the one guiding rule of interpretation.\textsuperscript{55}

Ryrie does acknowledge that the study of genre “promises a better understanding of the historical and cultural background of the Bible” as part of grammatical-historical interpretation but then immediately states that,

… one of the pitfalls [of genre considerations] is to claim that “each genre represents truth in its own way and makes unique demands for how it should be read,” and that “meaning is genre dependant.”\textsuperscript{56}

It seems that Ryrie wishes to acknowledge the benefit of genre study as an important element of the grammatical-historical interpretive method but then in his immediately subsequent sentence he seems to cancel out the very reason for that interpretive benefit. He does this in order to assert, counter to Green’s warning, that the literal principle is sufficient as a single guiding rule of interpretation. In saying this Ryrie is at odds with the current trend in hermeneutical studies in not acknowledging the weight the distinctive literary conventions the various genres carry in approaching and seeking to understand both written and oral communication. Further, he has failed to be clear in defining “literal” even when we interpret his words by adopting his own terms (normal/plain) for interpretation; his terms that were written in contemporary times are


\textsuperscript{54} Anthony C. Thiselton, \textit{New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Bible Reading} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 80-81.


\textsuperscript{56} Ryrie, \textit{Dispensationalism}, 80.
not easily understood even by those who live in a similar time and culture to Ryrie. This in itself highlights the difficulty of hearing what an author is seeking to communicate to their readers, but also that the locus of meaning needs to be found by taking into considering the whole process of literary communication - the author and his world, the text and its form, and the context and pre-understanding of the intended readership.\(^{57}\) The difficulty experienced in understanding clear meaning from Ryrie’s words, written in the same historical times as his present readers but nonetheless being unclear in meaning and purpose, should caution interpreters to be slow to conclude what the “normal” or “plain” meaning is when interpreting a biblical text written in very different historical and cultural settings to the present time.

The use of grammatical-historical interpretive principles by dispensationalists is a commendable element of their interpretive method. However, it must be concluded that in itself the grammatical-historical method, especially with the further controls dispensationalists add to it, is inadequate as a hermeneutical method for establishing meaning. As Poythress writes, “Grammatical-historical interpretation is only one moment in the total act of interpretation.”\(^{58}\) There are many other factors that the interpreter must take into account alongside, and as part of, this method when seeking to find the meaning of Biblical passages, but before this is addressed there are other questions that need to be asked: Are dispensationalists faithful to their own terms of interpretation? Do they always interpret with a literal/normal meaning? Do they, as Ryrie insists they do, consistently apply this principle in all areas of Biblical interpretation? Are there biblical examples where New Testament authors do not adopt the literal “normal/plain sense” principle in their interpretation of Old Testament passages? To these issues this discussion now turns.

\(^{57}\) W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, xxv.

\(^{58}\) Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 91.
Testing Dispensational Literalism

*Are Dispensationalists Consistently Literal?*

It was noted earlier that dispensationalism insists, due to a consistent literalism whereby one gives to each word the meaning it would have in normal usage, that when the Bible uses the word Israel it means Israel (i.e. the physical nation). However, in the *Ryrie Study Bible* ⁵⁹ notes for Gal 6:16, Ryrie explains the meaning of the phrase “the Israel of God” in this way:

_the Israel of God_. I.e., Christian Jews, those who are both the physical and spiritual seed of Abraham.

Ryrie has, in this explanation given a meaning that betrays the demands of his literal principle of interpretation. He has in fact redefined the meaning of the word ‘Israel’ by restricting its referents to only those descendants of Abraham who are Christians. Non-Christian Israelis are excluded. This is not the “normal” or “plain” everyday use of the word ‘Israel’. Not only has he violated his own interpretive principle but also he appears not to have considered how the immediate literary context clarifies for readers how Paul is using the term “the Israel of God” in this instance – a meaning quite different to what Ryrie suggests. When the text interprets itself in this way one is not at liberty to give it a different meaning. Context reveals that, believing Jews have already been included in the words ‘all who follow this rule’. ⁶⁰ To follow Ryrie’s interpretation would see a reading of the passage as follows; Peace and mercy be upon Christian Jews and Christian gentiles (i.e. all) who walk by this rule and upon the Christian Jews. This makes no sense and in fact makes the phrase under discussion utterly redundant. The sad irony of this is that the passage containing this phrase is concerned to show that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision (i.e. being Israelite or non-Israelite) is of any relevance and therefore for Ryrie to impose such distinctions is counter to the purpose of the text in that it sets up a distinction where the text seeks to remove such a distinction. It seems that Ryrie’s interpretation is concerned to maintain his commitment to the dispensational distinction

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between Israel and the church and yet to do so he has had to sacrifice his commitment to the literal hermeneutic. It appears out of the question for Ryrie to allow that ‘Israel’ in this context could be a reference to all believers – a legitimate understanding whereby the phrase functions as a further description of the ‘all who walk by this rule’.\(^{61}\) If Ryrie was to be faithful to the literal ‘normal’, ‘everyday usage’ principle, he in fact should understand the word Israel as being as a reference to Israel the nation, but this would have the meaning of pronouncing blessing on Christian Israelites, Christian Gentiles and upon ‘the Israelites’ – yet ‘the Israelites’ includes the Christian Israelites already mentioned. Again the phrase ‘the Israel of God’ becomes unnecessary. The ‘normal usage’ meaning is just not possible in this use of the word ‘Israel’. Its meaning must be found by other considerations.

A further betrayal of his literalism is seen in his actual definition of the term “Israel of God” in which he speaks of both the physical and spiritual seed of Abraham. By making this distinction of two kinds of seed Ryrie has permitted the word ‘seed’ to have both a literal meaning and a spiritual/non-literal meaning. How is this consistent with his claim to being consistently literal in all areas of Biblical interpretation? It does appear then that Ryrie himself is in fact inconsistent with the application of his literal method and that the dispensational commitment to two peoples of God has had some bearing on his interpretation and in fact demonstrates the dispensationalist’s inability or unwillingness to adhere to a consistent application of literalism. There is, at least to some extent, a selective and inconsistent application of their hermeneutical principle.

Keith Mathison notes,

"John Walvoord, another prominent dispensationalist, insists that when an Old Testament prophecy refers to Israel, it must mean the literal nation of Israel;"

\(^{61}\) The word kai can be understood as meaning ‘even’ as in the NIV. This interpretation seems preferable in light of the context and supports the idea of the phrase functioning as a further descriptor of the ‘all who walk by this rule’.
but when the same prophecy speaks of other nations, such as Assyria or Philistia, it refers only to the land once inhabited by these nations. Who ever may be inhabiting these lands may fulfil these prophecies.

He concludes, “This is not consistent literalism”.62 This once again gives the appearance of selective literalism that is dominated by a prior commitment to a controlling belief system.

A further example of Ryrie breaching his literal hermeneutic is seen in his notes for Matthew 24:34.63 Here he states that the word ‘generation’ can mean “race” or ‘family’ and he understands its use in Matthew 24:34 as referring to the Jewish race and its preservation in spite of persecution until the Lord comes. The consistent prior use of Matthew when he speaks of ‘this generation’ is undoubtedly a reference to the people living at that time. It is a strange form of a consistent literal interpretive principle that applies a different meaning to a term than its writer’s consistent meaning. Whatever ones understanding of what ‘this generation’ might mean Ryrie has not applied a normal, plain sense, or every day usage meaning to the word and has once again acted counter to his claim of consistent literal interpretation.

It must therefore be suggested that Ryrie’s statement that “literal/historical/grammatical interpretation is not the sole possession or practice of dispensationalists, but the consistent use of it in all areas of biblical interpretation is” 64 is inaccurate. Ryrie himself has shown that even he cannot abide by it. Further, when he writes that this consistent use of literal interpretation “is the strength of dispensational interpretation”65 he in fact weakens, rather than strengthens, the case for dispensationalism by his own lack of consistency in his application of this principle. He instead shows that it is in actuality impossible for any interpreter to adhere to absolute literalism and evidences that at times the intent of biblical writers allows for a non-literal

62 Mathison, Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God, 6.
64 Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 40 (Emphasis added).
65 Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 40.
understanding of their writings. It must also be suggested that if literal interpretation consistently applied is one of the indispensable building blocks of the dispensational system then that system for understanding Scripture is built on an interpretive foundation that cannot be sustained – even by its advocates. Subsequently, dispensationalism may be deemed questionable as a legitimate mode of understanding.

**Do New Testament Writers Themselves Always Interpret Literally as Defined by Ryrie?**

Understanding based on a strict literalism often saw Jesus need to correct and occasionally to rebuke his hearers for their inability to hear what he had really said. In Matthew 16:6-12, Jesus said to his disciples, “Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”  

Taking Jesus literally the disciples began to discuss the fact that they had no bread with them. Jesus responded to this by saying (v.8), “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread?” He then asks (v.11), “How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread?” Jesus appears not to intend his words be understood with strict literalism - in their ‘normal everyday usage meaning’ - and seems surprised that the disciples had done so. He explains what he meant, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!” Then we are told that they then understood that he was not telling them to guard against yeast as used in making bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. In this context ‘yeast’ did not mean ‘yeast’ but instead its use and purpose was to warn the disciples by means of metaphor and to provoke by the inherent imagery a response or action from them. It should be noted that Matthew has made no significant redactions to Mark’s account of this event but appears along with Mark to accentuate the disciple’s lack of ability to perceive the intent of Jesus words more than Luke does. Their inability to hear the metaphor is thus highlighted in Matthew and Mark reinforcing the need for interpreters today to interpret with the possibility of figures and genre considerations in mind.  

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66 All biblical quotations will be taken from the NRSV unless otherwise mentioned.
In John 2:19 Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." His Jewish hearers replied (v.20), "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" Once again by understanding Jesus through giving to each of his words their normal everyday meaning his hearers had missed the point of what Jesus was saying. John explains that, "the temple he [Jesus] had spoken of was his body" and specifically spoke of his resurrection from the dead.

It is clear from these examples drawn from within Scripture that to interpret in a woodenly literally manner without consideration of the circumstances surrounding the act and purpose of speaking, the progress of the development of God’s purposes, various literary devices (particularly genre as noted above) and the multi-faceted conventions of language communication can lead to a misunderstanding of what is said or written. The narrowing of the interpretive process to a single literalistic rule betrays the highly modernist nature of the dispensational hermeneutic. We can therefore propose that these biblical examples suggest that Ryrie’s literal principle is unwarranted and in fact is not a principle that Jesus Christ adhered to in his use of language communication. Even if a literalist was to agree with this writer’s understanding of the above passages the simple fact remains; interpreters cannot always apply to every word their every day normal usage meaning in order to hear the message of a text. Literalism by Ryrie’s definition is therefore unsustainable; the above mentioned examples - examples that could be multiplied from the Bible itself - won’t allow for such a rigid principle of interpretation. The latter example from John 2 also highlights the fact that Jesus took an Old Testament term (temple) and reinterpreted it in light of himself. The temple took on new meaning now that Christ had come thereby indicating a fluidity of meaning – in this instance within the context of progressive revelation. To continue to understand temple as in the Old Testament understanding was to miss all that it had and would come to mean as God’s

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68 Grant R. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral, 11.
69 Contra Walvoord’s statement quoted above.
redemptive purpose was unfolding in the world. There is, throughout the New Testament, a pervading continuity between the story of Israel’s history, the person of Jesus Christ, and the emerging global church that validates a hermeneutical principle of progressive development.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthian church, states that the gospel, which he proclaims to the gentiles, is “in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4). Consequently, Paul sees continuity between Israel’s story recorded in those Scriptures and the inclusion of gentiles as they respond to the gospel. Likewise, in the second chapter of Acts, Peter recounts Israel’s history by way of explaining how this history leads to the Christ event and the fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy. This pattern stressing continuity and development of Israel’s history in the events surrounding Christ and the emerging first century church is repeated by Phillip (Acts 6), Stephen (Acts 7), and Paul (Acts 13). The Old Testament was interpreted by these early Christians in light of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. These recent historical events advanced their understanding of the ancient writings of Judaism. It is reasonable to conclude from the New Testament that the early church adopted a Christological hermeneutic as they now read and interpreted the Old. Matthew in his gospel frequently makes use of fulfilment formulae, e.g. “This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah” (Matt 8:17), or “This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet…” (Matt 21:4). This linking of present events to the prophets’ words indicates that Matthew also saw a continuation of Israel’s story rather than postponement as proposed in dispensational thought. Things spoken by the prophets were being brought to pass in Matthew’s time as they are brought to their climax in the life of Christ.

Therefore, a generally accepted and safe principle of interpretation is *analogia fidei* with the correlative of progressive revelation - to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.\(^73\) In view of this unfolding progressive nature of biblical revelation it seems reasonable to permit the New Testament to enlighten our understanding of the Old Testament. Jesus himself stated the Old Testament in its entirety spoke of him.

> Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe *all* that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with *Moses* and *all the prophets*, he interpreted to them the things about himself in *all the scriptures* (Luke 24:25-27, emphasis added).

The Christ event in history therefore should shape an understanding of the Old Testament that Jesus said was about himself. That which spoke of him (the Old Testament) can be more fully understood now that Christ has come in order to fulfil the law and the prophets (Matt 5:17). Many of the institutions and themes of the Old Testament come to a heightened significance in the New Testament and find their ultimate or fuller sense of meaning as Christ brings fulfilment to them.

How then do New Testament writers understand and make use of the Old Testament? Do they apply a consistently literal principle of interpretation? One biblical example often referred to when discussing the literal approach of dispensationalism is the quotation of Amos 9:11-12 as quoted by in Acts 15. In Amos the passage reads:

> On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the Lord who does this.

When reading these verses from Amos at face value there appears to be little reason to expect anything other than a physical rebuilding of David’s booth, however, in Acts 15:15-17 James states that the present (i.e. at the time James spoke) incoming of Gentiles into the people of God

\(^73\) Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 273.
through the ministry of Peter, Paul and Barnabas is in agreement (συμφωνεῖν) with these words of Amos. “In the NT sumphônein means “to correspond,” “to be at one,” “to agree.”” 74 James’ use of this word suggests that there is a complete harmony (symphony) between what Amos the prophet said would happen and what was in fact happening. It appears that ‘booth’ (house) is not a reference to the dwelling place of David but is a reference to the people of the kingdom. The connectedness between the events taking place in James’ time and the words of Amos is clear – people from the nations are being incorporated into the people of the true Davidic king. There is a direct correspondence of the two; therefore, James equates the present events as being fulfilment of Amos’ words. In doing so he has interpreted Amos in a non-literal manner and therefore establishes within the text of Scripture itself an interpretive principle that is in contradiction to Ryrie’s literalism.

It should also be noted from this example that James is willing to attribute the fulfilment of the prophet’s words within the church age despite the dispensational insistence that what is spoken to national Israel must be fulfilled in national Israel. James allows for a fulfilment in the church as Gentiles come to share in its life. It is therefore appropriate to reason that the intended meaning of Amos 9:11-12 included meaning as nuanced by the further revelation of Acts 15:15-17 – a meaning that may not be apparent by use of the literal-grammatical-historical method without the proviso of allowing for the nuances of later New Testament revelation to inform the Old Testament text.75 The non-literal fulfilment of the Amos prophecy, originally couched in language familiar to the original hearers, shows both a connectedness with the expectation but also an exceeding of that expectation. The fulfilment surpassed that which a literal understanding may expect. Joel Green’s comment is helpful,

Given in particular, historical circumstances, prophecy uses words and ideas appropriate to its day. A different historical situation at the time of fulfillment, however, may involve a realization in updated terms beyond the literal meaning of the original prediction.  

Despite this evident dimension as regards the interpretation of prophecy, Walvoord writes that, “James was not saying the church fulfills the promises to Israel in Amos 9:11-12. He was saying that since Gentiles will be saved in the yet-to-come Millennium, they need not become Jews in the Church.” Walvoord has allowed his literalism and tenets of his dispensational system of belief (especially the distinction of two peoples of God, and the idea of a future millennial reign) to attribute the fulfilment to a time future to James’ time – to a 1000 year period of time not mentioned in either Amos or Acts – and then to read supposed implications of that fulfilment back into the church age.

The 1917 revision of the Scofield Bible has as a heading for these verses in Amos:

Future kingdom blessing (1) The Lord’s return and the re-establishment of the Davidic monarchy.

This heading points its readers to understand Amos as speaking of Christ’s return and a supposed subsequent 1000-year reign of Christ on earth neither of which is mentioned, and so to conclude this meaning is, as Walvoord has done, to allow the dispensational system to govern how it is understood. By the inclusion of this heading between the previous verses and those under discussion Scofield has pre-disposed the reader to understanding the passage in a manner consistent with dispensational thinking. No longer can they approach these verses without this understanding of its meaning in mind. This has been the subtle influence of the Scofield Bible. Readers are influenced by human interpretive additions within the pages of the biblical text. What this Amos passage does speak of is restoration. How is this restoration worked out?

76 Joel Green, How To Read Prophecy, 104. Green proceeds to provide a helpful illustration of this principle.

15 tells readers how (this is a different understanding than that demonstrated by Scofield’s heading) and thereby highlights the errors of a strict literalism and of failing to allow the New Testament to inform one’s understanding of the Old Testament.

Conclusion
It can be said then that the literalistic hermeneutic of dispensationalism as defined and advocated by Ryrie warrants critique. Is it really a reliable principle by which to interpret Scripture? It was noted above that Ryrie has stated that, “consistent literalism is the basis for dispensationalism, and since consistent literalism is the logical and obvious principle of interpretation, dispensationalism is more than justified”78, and that “plain or normal interpretation is the only valid hermeneutical principle.”79 Ryrie, by such statements, is making bold claims; claims that categorically places the viability of dispensationalism squarely on a consistently applied literal hermeneutic. However, despite such bold claims, it has been shown above that:

1. Consistent literalism is in fact not ‘the logical and obvious principle of interpretation.’
   Neither is it the “only valid hermeneutical principle” as seen in the gospels, the New Testament usage of Old Testament Scripture as well as from other studies in the field of hermeneutics.

2. The terms “normal”, “plain” and “everyday usage” as used to describe the literal method of interpretation increases the potential for eisegesis due to the influence of a reader’s contemporary culture, life circumstances and the degree and nature of pre-understanding. These defining terms open the way for the imposition on to the biblical text an alien framework of understanding - such as the dispensational system.

3. There is substantial disagreement within dispensational scholarship as to when the literal approach should be applied. Ryrie says always, Walvoord says in prophecy directed only to Israel, and Scofield specifies in prophecy but never in history. If this

78 Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 90.
79 Cited in Crenshaw and Gunn, Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow, 234.
literal principle is the foundational element for the development of the dispensational viewpoint then it would seem eminently reasonable to expect that there be greater consensus among dispensational scholars as regards its application.

4. It is equally apparent that, despite the above point, Ryrie’s insistence that dispensationalists consistently apply the literal principle in all areas of biblical interpretation is unsustainable. All interpreters, including dispensationalist interpreters (even Ryrie himself), interpret the Bible in a non-literal manner at times – often, it appears, in order to fit in with prior commitments to dispensational tenets and at times counter to the essential purpose of a passage. It has been seen that Ryrie is willing to allow a single word to have both a literal and a non-literal meaning in order to maintain his Israel-Church distinction therefore invalidating his consistent literalism. Walvoord is happy to attribute literalism when prophets speak of Israel but to allow non-literal interpretations when speaking of other nations. Both these dispensational scholars are, it seems, inconsistent literalists thus significantly weakening the correctness of their own foundational interpretive criteria for the theological position they seek to construct and uphold.

5. New Testament writers, as shown in the Acts 15 example above, do not consistently interpret using the literal principle as described by Ryrie when they make use of Old Testament passages. That within the Bible itself there is evidence of an interpretive principle counter to that which Ryrie proposes should suggest that as an overarching principle of interpretation literalism is inadequate.

6. In the gospel narratives, literalism can be shown to be inadequate on a number of occasions.

7. If the principle of consistent literalism is a defining hallmark of dispensationalism and the central principle upon which the dispensational system is built, it then follows that the dispensationalists’ own lack of consistency in its application must call into question the system of thought that is derived from that principle.
8. The second indispensable dispensational condition of a distinct separation between Israel and the church, which, as Ryrie states, flows from the literal interpretive principle, must therefore be potentially invalid. If this is correct the key tenets of the dispensational system that stem from that distinction are also brought into the arena for questioning. Dispensational timelines of God’s future purposes depend on the validity of the distinction between an earthly people (Israel) and a heavenly people (the church).

9. That Old Testament prophecy spoken to Israel can at times find its fulfilment in the church – as seen in the Amos/Acts example above – thereby suggesting a connectedness between the two groups rather than an absolute separation such as proposed by dispensationalists. This same example also reveals that the Old Testament prophets spoke of things concerning the church age and so demonstrates that the church is not an intercalation interrupting God’s plan for Israel but rather included as the focus of His redemptive work. Classic dispensational interpreters however, do not believe that the prophets spoke of this age – it was unforeseen and is a parenthesis in time that will end with God’s resumption of His dealings with Israel. This claim has important implications for the interpretation of Old Testament prophetic passages and is directly related to the literal principle.

10. Dispensational literalism fails to take into consideration many aspects that are both necessary and widely accepted practice in the field of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics within dispensationalism is governed by the one rule of normal and/or plain meaning consistently applied and as a consequence neglects the value of many crucial elements necessary for the formation of an appropriate interpretation of a written text. By reducing interpretation to a single principle dispensationalism has to some degree declared many hermeneutical principles commonly applied to other literary works as being irrelevant as regards the interpretation of the Bible. This inevitably creates a false framework for understanding and perhaps equates to constructing a set of interpretive principles in order to achieve a pre-desired result.
It was noted at the outset of this essay that dispensationalism has gained a considerable degree of acceptance within congregational Christian thought, but that the majority of those within scholarly circles question its legitimacy as a system of understanding. Much of its early acceptance has been attributed to the widespread use and influence of the Scofield Reference Bible in its various versions. However, perhaps its popularity may also due to the apparent simplicity of the dispensational hermeneutical principle along with the sense of the immediacy and relevance of Scripture to a readers’ own context or immediate future that emerges from that principle. The principle – interpret using the normal meaning of words - has the appearance of being reasonable, uncomplicated, and relatively simple to apply, and therefore attractive as a principle to work from. However, as has been seen above, communication, whether verbal or written, is not necessarily straightforward so as to allow a single principle to govern its interpretation. The simplicity of one’s interpretive principle does not necessarily imply its correctness, nor does it mean that it can be consistently applied without encountering complications as noted above.

Comprehensive studies in the field of hermeneutics, such as those noted earlier by Green, Osborne, Tate, and Thiselton have shown compellingly that a single literal interpretive principle claimed to be consistently applied to all areas of biblical interpretation is insufficient if one is to be comprehensive and careful when seeking to understand the biblical writings in their various genres along with complexities of the conventions that govern them. Bearing in mind all that is deemed to be necessary practice concerning the interpretation of the Biblical genres a ‘one size fits all’ principle is too restrictive and places inappropriate boundaries around the interpretive task. In light of the effort required to participate in such a careful and thorough study it is understandably tempting to resort to a simpler interpretive principle such as that proposed by dispensationalism – yet in the end the cost appears to be greater than the gain. Ultimately, that cost may well be the potential loss of truth and the subsequent correlative of living the life of
faith based on what may in fact be a non-biblical world-view.

The inadequacies of the dispensational hermeneutical principle enumerated above suggest that literalism is profoundly problematic as a basis from which to construct a biblically sound eschatological understanding and conversely they call attention to the need for a constructive alternative. A better interpretive framework for approaching and understanding the text of Scripture, especially the prophetic and apocalyptic books that form much of the dispensationalists’ eschatological comprehension is necessary. This will be the focus of further research and writing.
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