

STUDY PACK 5

THE LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

"... Hold it for a most infallible rule in expositions of sacred Scripture, that, where a literal construction will stand, the farthest from the letter is _____."
~~ Richard Hooker ~~

I. DEFINITION

- A. To interpret means to _____.
To interpret literally means to explain according to the _____,
_____ and _____ and language.
This is also referred to as the _____ - _____.
- B. This is the true and honest method of handling the Scriptures.
This is consistent with the method of Bible interpretation used by _____.
- D. This is consistent with the warnings in the Bible not to tamper with _____,
_____ Rev. 22:18-19; Deut. 4:2, 12:32; Prov. 30:5-6.
William Evans writes:

"The true meaning of any passage of Scripture is not every sense which the words will bear, nor is it every sense which is true in itself, but that which is intended by the inspired writers, or in some cases by the Holy Spirit, though imperfectly understood by the writers themselves."

~~ *Book of Books*, p. 129 ~~

II. LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE

- A. This method does not rule out recognizing the figurative use of words - as long as that is the _____.
- B. Solomon Glassius explains:

"The literal sense is that which is directly intended by the Holy Spirit or by Christ in the Sacred Scriptures. This literal sense is _____ (_____) or _____. For since the words of any writing or text must be taken in either a strict or loose sense, it is necessary that the literal sense of the words be of two kinds. The *strict literal sense* obtains when the words are taken according to their _____ and _____ meaning. Thus, in the words of the Lord's Supper, 'Take and eat; this is My body,' the strict literal sense obtains, because in this case no word occurs in a modified sense or affected by a trope. 'Take' is understood according to its common usage as meaning to take

with the mouth or the hand. 'Eat' denotes the usual eating done with the mouth. 'This' in its normal sense denotes that which Christ gave the apostles to eat. 'Is' normally connects the predicate with the subject and points to the substance of the Eucharistic sacrament. 'Body' denotes properly the Lord's body itself, which subsists in the most glorious person of the Logos. 'My,' taken strictly, denotes the personal pronoun. A *figurative literal sense* obtains when the words are taken figuratively or in a modified sense, when very obviously in the writings and text of the Scripture to be explained there occurs some sort of trope. In this case we say that the appropriate and stylistic intention is sought, whereas in the text whose sense is strictly literal we say only that the words in their natural and ordinary meaning are taken into consideration. Thus when Christ in John 6 speaks of eating the bread of life, the literal sense is figurative. For 'bread' is not to be understood as bread in the strict sense but means the life-giving flesh of Christ, which is called bread metaphorically. Neither is the eating to be understood in the ordinary sense as eating done with the mouth, but it is a spiritual eating done with the heart; that is to say, the eating is to be taken as faith in Christ. All this can be proved abundantly from the intention of Christ, from the connection of the context, and from analogy of Scripture."

~~ *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, Vol. 1, p. 322 ~~

C. Paul Lee Tan explains:

"The word *literal* is often taken to mean that which is _____.
Interpreters often set the literal over against the figurative. This is a serious misapprehension of the method.

Everyone agrees that great literature properly uses both figurative and nonfigurative languages. Figures of speech are legitimate, charming ornaments of language. They help to liven writing and conversing. Like all great literature, the Bible contains both figurative and nonfigurative languages. For instance, Christ describes Himself as "the light of the world" (John 8:12). Figurative language helps make God's Word linguistically more interesting.

The presence of figures in Scripture, however, does not militate against literal interpretation. Since literal interpretation properly accepts that which is _____ and _____ - and figurative language is _____ - literal interpreters are not hindered by that which is figurative. There is no necessity to change to a different method of interpretation.

As George N.H. Peters explains: When employing the word literal,' we are to be comprehended as also fully acknowledging the figurative sense, the beautiful ornaments of language; we cordially accept all that is *natural* to language itself, its naked strength and its charming adornments, but object to *additionally* forcing on it a *foreign* element, and enclosing it in a garb that hides its just proportions.'

Although the Scriptures contain figurative language, the interpreter must be careful not to identify as a figure that which is actual. This is true especially of

prophecy. The statement 'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem' (Ps. 122:6) is a request concerning the earthly city of Jerusalem, not figurative of praying for the Christian church."

~~ Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, pp. 30-31 ~~

III. IMPORTANCE OF THE LITERAL METHOD EMPHASIZED

Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) "It is necessary in the church diligently to investigate and adhere to the simple, natural, grammatical sense of Scripture. We are _____, not to _____. We must not play tricks with it by fanciful interpretations, as many in all ages have done. The plain, natural sense of Scripture always carries with it the richest and most valuable instruction."

~~ William B. Evans, *The Book of Books*, p. 119 ~~

Luther (1483-1546) "The literal meaning of Scripture is the whole foundation of faith, the only thing that stands its ground in distress and temptation."

~~ William B. Evans, *The Book of Books*, p. 120 ~~

IV. THE SCRIPTURES ARE CLEAR WHEN INTERPRETED LITERALLY

"In a word, if the Scripture be obscure or ambiguous, what need was there for its being sent down from heaven? Are we not obscure or ambiguous enough in ourselves, without an increase of it by obscurity, ambiguity, and darkness being sent down unto us from heaven? But I fear I must already be burdensome, even to the insensible, by dwelling so long and spending so much strength upon a point so fully clear; but it was necessary that that impudent and blasphemous saying, 'the Scriptures are obscure,' should thus be drowned."

~~ Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, pp. 108-109 ~~

John Milton in *Reformation in England* says: "The very essence of truth is plainness and brightness; the darkness and ignorance are our own ... We would believe the Scriptures protesting their own plainness and perspicuity, calling to them to be instructed, not only the wise and the learned, but the simple, the poor, the babes."