Did You *Mean* That Literally?

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First published in ***The Voice of Elijah***®, January 1993

Mesquite, Texas

Boldfaced segments of scriptural passages represent the emphasis of the author.

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A notion has been floating around Christian circles for some years now that would be downright humorous to any True Believer who knows Early Church history, if it weren't for its incredibly sinister downside. You've probably heard it eloquently propounded by some fervent proponent at one time or another. Some of you may even think you believe it, not knowing exactly to what you have acceded. I'm referring to that nebulous belief that masquerades as a legitimate and viable Christian doctrine under the rubric "literal interpretation of the Bible." If you have uncritically accepted that belief in one of its more irrational, metamorphic stages where everything in the Old Testament can only be understood "literally," perhaps you'll think differently after a short survey of the history of biblical interpretation. Of course, you may be one of those so enamored by current tradition that you place no value at all on what the Early Church believed. In that case you should stop reading right now. You'll find little to interest you in this article.

Not only did Early Church leaders not hold such an absurd belief, they rejected it outright. Furthermore, belief in the validity of what is today known as "literal interpretation" held no widespread currency in the Church until just over a hundred years ago. That's right, the absolute insistence on literal interpretation of the Scriptures is a relatively new idea as far as Christianity is concerned. So if you place any value at all on the beliefs of traditional Christianity, especially those held by the Early Church, you'd best look closely at what you have read or heard about literal interpretation. This particular tenet is not an outright lie, but in some of its current formulations, it's certainly a gross distortion of the Truth.

Traditionally Speaking

Before we begin our investigation into the history of biblical interpretation, a few words about tradition are in order. There are three things anyone seeking the Truth should keep in mind regarding tradition. The first is that, to some degree, we have all grown up as the intellectual product of our religious environment (or lack thereof). Most people are open-minded enough to admit that. It's rather difficult to deny inasmuch as the facts are rather obvious. Most Christians remain Christian in their beliefs, Jews remain Jewish, Muslims cling to Islamic doctrines, etc. That predisposition holds true for various divisions within a religion as well. Therefore, the Catholic often remains Catholic, the Sunni Muslim remains Sunni Muslim, the Reformed Jew remains Reformed, etc.

All the above being the case, we can say generally that the tradition we learn first tends to determine what we believe. Therefore, if the religious belief system you now have includes literal interpretation as a foundational tenet, you may find it difficult to read this article. If you love the Truth, however, you'll just have to face the facts: The tare seeds sown in the Church by the Adversary can sometimes be found in the most unlikely places. Although fundamentalist Christian beliefs most nearly represent the historic truths of Christianity, those beliefs are not entirely free from Satan's corruption.

The second point that should be obvious to any student of religion is that every religious tradition changes over time. There are at least two sources for the transformation of religious beliefs. There is, first of all, an external threat posed by new converts. Former religious beliefs and old social customs can sometimes

prove hard to relinquish. That's why converts who switch from one religion to another often take with them a bit of their old mind-set. Consequently, you can find in the history of the Christian Church numerous cases where one individual or group of individuals produced a distortion of Christian tradition by syncretistically blending it with some other religion or using it for their own psychological gain. Christianity, and Protestant Christianity in particular, being as missions oriented as it is, has had a fairly steady influx of new converts over the last three hundred years. Every convert has had the potential to take traditional Protestant Christian belief in some new direction. Many did just that. We'll find that to be the case with the different beliefs concerning interpretation of the Scriptures. (See "The Origen of Folly," ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1993.)

The second source of change can be an internal impetus originating within a particular Christian tradition. Adherents of a religion are sometimes influenced by the beliefs of another religion. Therefore, they can appropriate alien concepts which they integrate into their own religion in much the same way as new converts. We will find examples of this also in connection with the origin of the Church's varied beliefs concerning methods of biblical interpretation. For the most part, they borrowed their methodology from Greek philosophy and from the Jews.

Although the internal push for change can be detrimental to the integrity of the tradition, it has often had a positive effect. So we can also find adherents of Christianity who realized the Church had lost something. Seizing on that perceived deficiency, they set out to reform the tradition they received and restore the tradition of an earlier time. For example, the Protestant tradition itself was established by men like Martin Luther (ca. 1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) during the Protestant Reformation because they realized the Catholic Church had strayed from the tradition of the Early Church. (See "The Protestant Confession: The Church Lost The Teaching," ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1992.) Hence, they sought to reform the Catholic Church from within, and they continued to work within the Church until they were finally forced to separate from their mother tradition. They then established churches that adhered to the reformed tradition of the new Protestant Church.

The reformation mind-set of the founders of the Protestant Church is still an integral part of the Protestant heritage. That's why the Protestant Church has continued to spawn reform movements. Quite often these new reformers have sought to recover more Truth than what was regained during the Protestant Reformation. For example, from the time of Johann Arndt (1555–1621), and especially since John Wesley (1703–1791), holiness-minded folk have argued that True Believers should not only adhere to the Truth recovered during the Reformation, but should also return to an even earlier Christian tradition. (See "One Train. One Track. Two Rails." ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1992.) That is the basic call issued in this article. Now is the time for all who love Truth to return to their Root(s).

The Fathers of the Protestant Reformation based their reform movement to some degree on the writings of St. Augustine, a prominent theologian who lived around A.D. 400. However, John Wesley (1703–1791) sought to take his converts all the way back to the "New Testament Church." He failed. Yet nearly two hundred years later his ideas about holiness and sanctification were foundational to the Pentecostal movement's attempt at Church reform. That's why you see Pentecostal churches today bearing the appellation "Full Gospel Church." They thought that what they found described in the Book of Acts was the totality of that other "something" the Early Church had lost. That is not so.

The Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal movements were part of the last major attempt by the Holiness Movement to restore the original tradition of the Early Church. It should be obvious to all (but isn't) that all factions of the Holiness Movement of last century, including the Pentecostals, have now settled into a contented reliance on their traditional beliefs and church norms. For many, Christianity has become nothing more than the ultimate "feel good" experience, with little if any of the Holiness Movement's original emphasis on the holiness of the Believer.

Although all the reformers in the history of the Protestant Church who emphasized personal holiness failed to restore the tradition of the Early Church, they should be commended for recognizing that the Church had lost more than what the Protestant Reformation was able to restore—a certain something which robbed the Church of the spiritual vitality of that first generation Church.

The suspicion that the Church lacked something special most often came from True Believers' who had an "inner yearning" for a fuller spiritual life than what they were able to experience by worshipping among Pretenders. That is, those who were perfectly content to trust in a particular doctrinal or liturgical tradition rather than trusting in a personal relationship with the Living God.

Over the last fifty years the Protestant reform movement has faltered. Now Pretenders talk about "church renewal" as though more whitewash on the wall were the answer. In contrast to the thousands of new converts who joined the reform movements of past centuries, it has become increasingly more common for a small group of just a few poor souls to set out on their own, trying to re-establish the New Testament Church. Most have succeeded only in establishing a single independent church. Sadly enough, even these people soon grew weary of their quest for Truth because they had no idea where to look. Most often, even the most ardent reformers returned to established church norms. Unfortunately, along the way these "seekers" often fell prey to hucksters and charlatans who offered only the widespread "feel good" religion you see all around you.

The third and final thing to remember about tradition is that God does not always have the same positive feelings toward it that we do. That is especially the case when it is nothing but the tradition of men. Isaiah warned us about blind adherence to tradition:

Then the Lord said,
*"Because **this people draw near with their words***
And honor Me with their lip service,
But they remove their hearts far from Me,
And their reverence for Me consists of tradition
***learned** {**by rote**},*
Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously
with this people, wondrously marvelous;
And the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
And the discernment of their discerning men
shall be concealed."
(Isaiah 29:13–14)

Jesus seconded that opinion in some of His statements to the Pharisees, leaving us little doubt that tradition founded on anything other than God's Truth falls far short of God's favor:

*And the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "**Why do***
Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of
***the elders**, but eat their bread with impure hands?" And*
He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,
'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.
BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'
Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the
tradition of men**." He was also saying to them, "**You
nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to
***keep your tradition**. For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER;' and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, LET HIM BE PUT TO DEATH;' but you say, 'If a man says to {his} father or {his} mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given {to God}),' you no longer permit him to do anything for {his} father or {his} mother; {thus} **invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that**."*
(Mark 7:5–13)

We can see from these two passages that God does not have a problem with tradition as such, but with man's tradition when it differs from the Truth of the Word of God. We should keep that in mind. God's tradition is acceptable. Man's tradition isn't. Isaiah said as much in another passage as well:

Seek the LORD while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.
***Let the wicked forsake his way**,*
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
*And **let him return to the LORD**,*
And He will have compassion on him;
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.
"For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
***Neither are your ways My ways**,"*
declares the LORD.
"For {as} the heavens are higher than the earth,
***So are My ways higher than your ways**,*
And My thoughts than your thoughts."
(Isaiah 55:6–9)

There are a few key words in that passage which one needs to understand before the full import of Isaiah's statements is felt. But the only term significant for our purposes here is the term *way*. Although it isn't obvious, Isaiah has in mind one particular *way—The Way* of the Lord. (See the series, *The Mystery of Scripture* and the seminar tape series, *The Way, The Truth, The Life*.) For now, just think of *way* as meaning "tradition" and you'll come close to Isaiah's meaning.

You see, God has a *way*—a tradition—to which He has always intended His people would adhere, but they haven't. He established it in Israel through *The Teaching of Moses* at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. Israel constantly abandoned God's tradition, however, so God found it necessary to send His Prophets to restore it time and again during Israel's long history in the Promised Land. The Jews "turned away from" God's tradition for the last time at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (167 B.C.). But God re-established His tradition in the Church when Jesus Christ revealed *The Teaching* to His Apostles. Unfortunately, the Church soon "turned away from" God's tradition just as Israel had done so many times before. The current, prevalent belief in literal interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures is little more than mute testimony to that sad fact.

Interpretation, Smurpretation

Before 1850, the origin of a new Protestant denomination or doctrinal emphasis could often be traced to the separation of True Believers from cold orthodoxy after an outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. (See the illustration on p. 8 of ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1992, as well as the two articles, "The Protestant Confession: The Church Lost The Teaching" and "One Train. One Track. Two Rails." in that same issue.) But from late last century until now, the source of denominational division has most frequently been rooted in disagreement over doctrine. These disputes have invariably boiled down to a difference of opinion regarding whose method of interpreting Scripture was (or is) correct. And don't you know that Satan loves that controversy.

The argument regarding the rectitude of one interpretive methodology or the other is interesting only because the basis for the claim regarding the orthodoxy of one position over another seldom goes back more than a few hundred years. Lutheran theologians appeal to the writings of Martin Luther (ca. 1483–1546); Reformed theologians appeal to the writings of John Calvin (1509–1564); and Methodists appeal to the writings of John Wesley (1703–1791).

Virtually no one in Protestant Christianity today bothers to base his/her interpretive methodology on the writings of anyone prior to the Protestant Reformation (1519). Those who do rummage around in earlier writings of the Christian Church normally halt at the writings of Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274), although a few will also throw a line around the views of John Chrysostom (A.D. 349–407) and Jerome (ca. A.D. 347–420). The tendency to not venture back much beyond Aquinas is not surprising since the publication of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (1266–1273) provided the basis for modern theories of interpretation, including the literal interpretation theory. (Note the date well folks; that's twelve centuries *after* the Apostle Paul wrote his letters now found in the New Testament. It's also nearly six hundred years *before* the literal interpretation theory gained widespread acceptance.)

Most people don't even bother appealing to the views of Thomas Aquinas because the theory of biblical interpretation he propounded in his *Summa Theologica* was not a strictly literal approach. It only emphasized that the literal sense of Scripture should be the basis for any of three other possible meanings. However, the Protestant Reformers took the basics of Aquinas' interpretive methodology as it existed in their day and forged it into what has been called a "grammatical-historical" method. Unfortunately, that method was later distorted into a strictly literal method of interpreting Scripture. The adamant insistence on the literal interpretation of Scripture is unfortunate because, unless you are able to set aside that theory as it is understood by many today and see things from the perspective of Early Church writers, many of the statements made by them seem to be plucked right out of thin air. Nothing could be further from the Truth.

It would seem that if one is serious about one's claim to an orthodox method of biblical interpretation, one would base that claim on the method of interpretation to be found in the Early Church. I'm not talking about thirteenth century Christianity (Aquinas), or even late fourth century Christianity (Jerome and John Chrysostom). I'm talking about Christianity from the time of the Apostles to the late second century. If we're going to be reasonable about it, let's be reasonable.

Interpretive methods could easily have changed even by the end of the second century. Facts are facts. Two hundred years is a long time. But twelve hundred? Don't be ridiculous!

Therefore, let's say we are truly interested in determining whether a current tradition which pins its hopes on a strictly literal interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures is founded on the Truth of God's Word. Where should we begin? The obvious place to start is by comparing the earliest written records left us by the Early Church with *The Teaching* we find in the Scriptures. Why so? Because even if the Early Church lost *The Apostolic Teaching*—as I have repeatedly asserted—it would probably have taken some time for that loss to occur. (See "The Protestant Confession: The Church Lost The Teaching," ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1992; "Where Are Jesus' Disciples?" ***The Voice of Elijah***, April 1991; and "Jesus Talks About The Mystery," ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1991.) Therefore, not only are the chances fairly good that some remnant of the Truth of *The Apostolic Teaching* could be found in the writings of the Early Church Fathers, it is even more likely that we could find some evidence of the method of biblical interpretation preferred by Early Church leaders. So let's take a look.

In this short survey of the history of biblical interpretation, I have chosen for the most part to quote from R. Grant & D. Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, Fortress: Philadelphia, 1984; and K. Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984. The bolding found in those quotes is my own (for emphasis). If you are interested in reading further on the subject, I recommend you read these two first. Then continue your study by reading any of the others listed in the bibliography on page 11 of ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1993.

The Big Three

Three Church Fathers have long been recognized as having stood firmly on the side of Christian Orthodoxy during the second century. These three are Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 100–165), Irenæus (ca. A.D. 130–200), and Tertullian (ca. A.D. 155–after 220). However, we should also mention that Tertullian tarnished his reputation somewhat later in his life by quitting the Orthodox Church in disgust and joining the Montanist Christians. As we will find later, he may well have had good reason. And contrary to what has been thought, that action may well represent his strong convictions that the Truth of *The Apostolic Teaching* he understood was being irretrievably contaminated by error taken over from Greek philosophy. (See "The Origen of Folly," ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1993.)

All three of these Early Church Fathers are unanimous in their belief that the only legitimate interpretation of the Scriptures is no interpretation at all. Did you get that? They believed that the solemn duty of the Church leaders of their day was not to "interpret" Scripture at all but to accurately "understand" and teach *The Apostolic Teaching*. Furthermore, these three are unanimous in their belief that the only way to acquire an accurate "understanding" of *The Apostolic Teaching* was to be taught by a Teacher who stood in the apostolic succession. By that they meant a Teacher who had been taught the Church's accurate understanding of the Scriptures by a Teacher who was recognized and accepted as having been taught accurately himself:

> *Above all for Irenæus, who is defending the mainstream of Christian faith against able enemies, there is one standard of correct interpretation. The standard is the rule of faith as preserved in churches in the apostolic succession….* ***The teaching of the apostles is the true understanding of the Bible, and if anyone wishes to learn this true understanding he should read the scriptures with the presbyters of the church, with whom is the apostolic doctrine … All other interpretations have fallen from the truth****.*
> *(Grant & Tracy, p. 50–51)*

Notice that the authors of this quotation, in spite of what Irenæus has written, want to view what he has written from their own perspective, i.e., from the perspective that interpretation of Scripture was viewed as necessary and good by the Early Church. Taking that as their starting point, they believe Irenæus must have had some personal method of interpreting the Scriptures. These scholars fail to understand that the "rule of faith" mentioned by Early Church writers had nothing at all to do with interpretation; it had only to do with the standard the Early Church applied in its quest for the recognition and rooting out of false teaching. Tertullian's view, like that of Justin Martyr, agrees with Irenæus:

Since the Lord Jesus Christ sent the apostles to preach, (our rule is) that no others ought to be received as preachers than those whom Christ appointed; for "no man knoweth the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him." Nor does the Son seem to have revealed Him to any other than the apostles, whom He sent forth to preach—that, of course, which He revealed to them. Now, what that was which they preached—in other words, what it was which Christ revealed to them—can, as I must here likewise prescribe, properly be proved in no other way than by those very churches which the apostles founded in person, by declaring the gospel to them directly themselves, both viva voce [Editor: i.e., by the spoken word] as the phrase is, and subsequently by their epistles. If, then, these things are so, it is in the same degree manifest that ***all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches—those moulds and sources of the faith must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the (said) churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God****. Whereas all doctrine must be prejudged as false which savours of contrariety to the truth of the churches and apostles of Christ and God. It remains, then, that we demonstrate whether* ***this doctrine of ours, of which we have now given the rule, has its origin in the tradition of the apostles****, and whether all other doctrines do not ipso facto proceed from falsehood.* ***We hold communion with the apostolic churches because our doctrine is in no respect different from theirs****. This is our witness of truth.*
(Tertullian, On Prescription Against Heretics, *21)*

You can see from this that Tertullian, who was writing some one hundred and seventy years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (ca. A.D. 200), had no interest in interpreting Scripture for himself. He wanted to learn the Truth of the Old Testament Gospel of Jesus Christ from those who taught in churches established by the Apostles themselves. His arguments against the Gnostics clearly demonstrate that he had no interest in interpreting Scripture for himself:

According to Tertullian, arguing with Gnostics about scriptural interpretation is useless. Even an agreed canon and common exegetical methods do not guarantee unambiguous results for there is always room for heretical intentions to dictate the agenda. Thus, the true battlefield is not interpretation but the very right to use Scriptures at all. Apostolic Scriptures belong to the apostolic Church. The Gnostics with their claim to secret traditions have no right to use them, for ***only the public succession of teaching in the apostolically founded churches can be the measure of apostolicity and therefore of correct interpretation…. We meet here a profound suspicion toward a professional exegesis which made the unending search for truth a methodological principle****. The Gnostics used Matt. 7:7 as their warrant: "Seek, and you will find." For Christians, Tertullian maintains, the search has ended; true faith has been found and must only be defended against its erosion by illicit curiosity.* ***For both Irenæus and Tertullian, illicit curiosity is the true danger of a Gnostic hermeneutics of inquiry…. The protest of the late-second-century fathers, however, could not stem the tide of the times. Professional, scientific hermeneutics was the wave of the future****.*
(Froehlich, p. 14–15)

Tertullian, like Justin Martyr and Irenæus, argued that the unity of belief exhibited by the apostolic churches was proof of their apostolic descent. All three saw the apostolic churches as the only legitimate repository of *The Apostolic Teaching*. What then was these three men's understanding regarding that teaching? Did they believe, as many believe today, that the message of Scripture could be easily understood by any Christian (scholar or unlearned layperson alike) who wanted to read and interpret Scripture on his/her own? Absolutely not.

All three of these men forthrightly state that the message of the Old Testament had been concealed in parables and enigmatic statements. Furthermore, they believed that an understanding of that message was definitely known only in the churches founded and taught by the Apostles because Jesus had revealed the meaning of Scripture to the Apostles alone (Lk. 24:27, 44–45). Scholars have long recognized that, for Irenæus:

The Old Testament is full of types. The "treasure hidden in a field" (Matt. 13:44) is Christ hidden in the scriptures and made known through types and parables.
(Grant & Tracy, p. 48)

Not only did Irenæus believe the meaning of the Scriptures had been hidden, he also did not believe anyone could uncover that meaning by doing his/her own interpretation:

> ***The Old Testament texts themselves speak of hidden truth that must be unlocked. Jews are reading them but do not have the explanation. Christians possess the key in the coming of Christ which unlocks all the mysteries … from beginning to end****…. The same argument refutes the Gnostics. If the Jews have no key, the Gnostics fabricate their own. Irenæus first criticizes their hermeneutical principle: they cut up the beautiful mosaic of God's revealed economy and reassemble the pieces into their own myths …*
> *(Froehlich, p. 13–14)*

The same belief in the hiddenness of the Scriptural message was held by Justin Martyr:

> *By many passages of scripture, understood typologically, Justin shows that Jesus was … Messiah.*
> *(Grant & Tracy, p. 45)*

To give you some idea of the understanding of Old Testament prophecy these men had, Justin Martyr says this:

> *Again in Isaiah, if you have ears to hear it,* ***God, speaking of Christ in parable, calls Him Jacob and Israel****. He speaks thus: "Jacob is my servant, I will uphold him; Israel is mine elect, I will put my Spirit upon Him, and He shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry, neither shall any one hear His voice in the street: a bruised reed He shall not break, and smoking flax He shall not quench; but shall bring forth judgment to truth: He shall shine, and shall not be broken till He have set judgment on the earth. And in His name shall the Gentiles trust."*
> *(Justin Martyr,* Dialogue With Trypho*, 123)*

Those of you who have read *Not All Israel Is Israel* can understand why Justin Martyr would say the Prophets refer to Jesus Christ as Israel. But even without that understanding it is obvious that Justin Martyr, like Irenæus and Tertullian, did not believe that God intended the prophecies of the Old Testament to be understood "literally" in the way that many claim today. These three men believed the Prophets made *parabolic statements* which were to be understood allegorically. That agrees with the Apostle Paul's statement concerning his understanding that the story of Sarah and Hagar had some sort of allegorical meaning:

> *Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise.* ***This is allegorically speaking: for these {women} are two covenants****, one {proceeding} from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. For it is written,*
> *"REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR;*
> *BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR;*
> *FOR MORE ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE*
> *THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND."*
> *And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him {who was born} according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the Scripture say?*
> *"CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON,*
> *FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN."*
> *So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.*
> *(Galatians 4:21–31)*

In explaining his understanding of this passage, Paul used the Greek term *allegoroumena*, here translated "allegorically speaking." That term refers to a type of allegorical interpretation that was well known in his day:

> ***The word meant allegorically (*allegoroumena*) is from a verb commonly used by Greek interpreters, especially by Stoics who interpreted allegorically*** *and explained away the myths concerning the gods. According to these exegetes, some of whom were Paul's contemporaries, "saying one thing and signifying something other than what is said is called allegory." They proceeded to interpret Homer, for example, as if it were an allegory.* ***They looked for hidden mysteries under the outward forms****.*
> *(Grant & Tracy, p. 19)*

It should be clear that Paul did not mean, by his use of that term, to imply that he used any allegorical methodology to interpret the Scriptures himself. Why

would he? He plainly says he gained his understanding of the Old Testament by revelation:

> *For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but {I received it} through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:11–12)*

Note carefully what Paul says about preaching the things which had been revealed to him by Jesus Christ. The understanding he gained by revelation was not limited to the things he wrote in his letters to the churches. By no means! He taught the Early Church far more than those few things we find recorded in the New Testament Scriptures. That is an important point to keep in mind if you are seeking Truth.

There is an unstated assumption today that the Early Church, like us, had no certain understanding of the message of the Old Testament other than what we find recorded in the New Testament. That is not so. The New Testament had not even been written when Paul first started preaching. Consequently, Paul taught from the Old Testament because it was the only Scripture available. And the message he taught the Early Church will soon be seen by True Believers to be both intricate and detailed. We will show how that is in future publications.

The point to be remembered here is not that the Apostles and Early Church Fathers understood the Scriptures to have no literal meaning at all, because they certainly did. The point is rather that they understood there was also, alongside passages with literal meaning, passages containing an allegorical meaning which had been intentionally hidden in *parabolic images*—images that have long been called "types" even by those who insist on literal interpretation.

Moreover, many of the Old Testament passages with literal meaning describe historical events that were themselves orchestrated by God as *parabolic pantomime*. (See "The Parabolic Pantomimes of Jesus Christ," ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1991; "The Passover Parable," ***The Voice of Elijah***, July 1991; and "They've Put God In A Box! (Or So They Think)," ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1993.) Consequently, those who want to insist on a "literal interpretation" of the Scriptures while advocating a "typological interpretation" are not only demonstrating their ignorance of the history of biblical interpretation, they are also contradicting themselves.

The evidence for the Early Church belief in the *parabolic meaning* of Scripture is overwhelming. It is stated repeatedly throughout the earliest Christian writings. But you don't even have to go outside the New Testament to find that view expressed. The writer of the Book of Hebrews knew it to be so as well:

> *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten {son}; {it was he} to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." He considered that God is able to raise {men} even from the dead;* ***from which he also received him back as a type****. (Hebrews 11:17–19)*

The words here translated "as a type" say literally (if you want to insist on the literal sense of Scripture) "in a parable" (en parabolh). That is because the biblical account to which this passage refers sets forth a *parabolic pantomime* orchestrated by God just as many of the passages in the Old Testament record historical events that are *parabolic pantomimes*. (See the articles last referenced.) Along those same lines, the author of the Book of Hebrews also understood that the Tabernacle itself was part of a parable (parabolh) ordered by God (Heb. 9:9).

From all this one can clearly see that for nearly two centuries the Early Church Fathers did not believe their task was to interpret the Scriptures. Instead, they were committed to teaching the understanding of the Old Testament that Jesus Christ had revealed to His Apostles—*The Apostolic Teaching*. Their testimony is equally clear as to their understanding that the Old Testament Gospel message concerning Jesus Christ had been hidden in parables. That does not offer much encouragement to those today who want to insist on a strictly literal interpretation of the Scriptures. As a matter of fact, it's enough to discourage anyone who seeks the Truth from offering his/her own off-the-cuff opinion as to the *meaning* of Scripture. But fools walk in …..

Now, after this brief survey of the Early Church Fathers and the New Testament, you should be ready to take a quick tour of Church history to see how we got to where we are today. For that tour, see "The Origen of Folly," ***The Voice of Elijah***, January 1993. ■

