

Interpretation Errors: Spiritualizing, Allegorizing, Moralizing A Tutorial for Teachers

But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of *one's own interpretation*, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Pe 1:20-21, NASB95, emphasis added)

This is a reverse tutorial of sorts, a tutorial on what not to do. It looks at three inappropriate ways to interpret a text. All three are inappropriate because they remove the text from its historical and grammatical context in order to interpret it. It begins with a quick definition and example of each, then studies each one in more detail:

- **Spiritualizing** is converting the text into a spiritual analogy. As God helped David to slay the giant, so God will help you slay the giants in your life.
- **Allegorizing** is looking beyond the immediate meaning of the text to find a deeper, hidden, more spiritual meaning. The love and wisdom of the Lord (represented by David) destroys false teaching (represented by Goliath) in order to protect true teaching (the armies of Israel).¹
- **Moralizing** is drawing simple morals from the text, emphasizing “do’s” and “don’ts.” David was courageous when he faced Goliath, so you should be courageous, too. David was willing to fight his enemies, so you should be willing to fight your enemies, too.

Spiritualizing

What is spiritualizing? Spiritualizing takes the main point of the text and makes it **analogous** to some point in the lives of your class.²

What are some examples of spiritualizing?

- God knocked down the walls of Jericho, and he wants to knock down the walls in your life.
- God helped Nehemiah rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and he wants to help you rebuild the walls of your life.

¹ http://www.swedenborg.org/messenger/2007_01/story1.html

² Spiritualizing does not mean that we attempt to interpret the Bible without the help of the Holy Spirit. His ministry of illumination is critical to right interpretation.

- Jesus calmed the storm on the sea, and he wants to calm the storms in your life.
- Jesus cast demons out of the people, and he wants to cast out the demons in your life.

What's the problem with interpreting the text by spiritualizing? The primary problem has to do with authorial intent. If your teaching is to be faithful to the text, then it must be faithful to the **intentions of its author**, the Holy Spirit. The narratives of the Bible are designed to teach truth, often about the character of God (e.g., his faithfulness, his grace) or the character of man (especially his need for redemption). Spiritualizing leaps from the "then" of the text to the "now" of your class without considering the truth that the text was intended to teach.

Allegorizing

What is allegorizing? Allegorizing ignores the obvious, literal meaning of the text and finds another meaning behind it. The historical features in the text are clues that point to hidden spiritual meanings. The Greeks often allegorized religious texts; in this they were influenced by Plato's ideas of **dualism**. As man was comprised of flesh (which was evil) and spirit (which was good), so religious texts, including the Bible, were comprised of a literal meaning (which was worthless) and a hidden meaning (which was valuable). The most famous allegorists were Philo, a Jewish philosopher, and Origen, an early church father. This method of interpretation infiltrated the church, and eventually it was believed that only a mature Christian could find these hidden meanings. Allegorizing continued virtually unchecked into the Middle Ages until the Reformation.

What are some examples of allegorizing?

- The love between Solomon and the Shulammitte woman in Song of Solomon is a picture of the love between Christ and the church.
- Philo said that Abram's journey to Palestine was really intended to portray the story of a stoic philosopher who leaves Chaldea, which signifies "understanding by the senses." Upon becoming Abraham he enters into the condition of being a truly enlightened philosopher.³
- Origen interpreted the parable of the Good Samaritan to mean the traveler (Adam) journeyed from Jerusalem (heaven) to Jericho (the world) and was

³ Paul S. Karleen, *The Handbook to Bible Study*, ch 4.

attacked by robbers (the devil). The priest and the Levite (the law and the prophets) passed by, but the Samaritan (Christ) helped him. He took him to an inn (the church) and promised to come back (the second coming).⁴

Although allegory is not useful for biblical interpretation, it is a legitimate tool for teaching and communicating ideas. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* are examples of allegories that can be helpful.

What's the problem with interpreting the text by allegorizing? Allegorizing is completely subjective. Because it removes the text from its context, there is **no objective standard** by which to determine if an interpretation of a text is correct. Because it is so individualized, interpretations vary widely among interpreters. In short, an allegorical interpreter sets himself up as the final authority over Scripture itself.

What about Gal 4:21-31? "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" (Ga 4:24, NASB95). Some have argued that since Paul interpreted the Old Testament by allegory, you should as well. To understand what Paul was doing, you need to understand the meaning of this Greek word, *allegoreo*. Paul did not use it in the same sense that Philo, Origen, and others used the word allegory, nor did he use it in the modern sense of the word allegory. This is why some of the newer translations use other words, such as symbolic (NKJV), illustrations (HCSB), and figuratively (NIV). Paul did, however, use the word in the same sense that the Jewish rabbis of his day used it. That is, he did not remove the text from its context to find a deeper truth, but rather he saw a situation that happened under the Old Covenant that forecast and was repeated by another situation under the New Covenant.⁵ There are three conclusions about Paul's use of *allegoreo* in this text. One, it is probably misleading to translate this Greek word as "allegory." Two, Paul did not allegorize the Sarah and Hagar story as allegorizing was defined above. Three, Gal 4:21-31 does not validate allegorizing as a method of interpretation.

⁴ Sydney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 159-160.

⁵ Richard Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, 209.

Moralizing

What is moralizing? The general idea is that some Bible character has displayed a great virtue so you should have the same virtue, or the Bible character performed some great activity so you should do the same activity. It emphasizes “virtues and vices, do’s and don’ts” without “properly grounding these ethical demands in the Scriptures.”⁶

What are some examples of moralizing?

- Boaz – Boaz was kind to Ruth, so you should be kind, too.
- Nathan – When Nathan confronted David he used a very clever parable; so when you confront people, you should devise a clever parable, too.
- Nehemiah – When Nehemiah led the people to build the wall he was a great leader; so when want to help your church accomplish things for God, you should develop leadership in your life.
- The healed leper – Ten lepers were healed, but only one was thankful; you should be thankful, too.
- Paul – When Paul went to Athens, he went to the marketplace to reason with the Gentiles; so when you develop an evangelism strategy, you need to look for likely places where non-Christians hang out.

What’s the problem with interpreting the text by moralizing? After all, the facts presented are true, the virtue or activity is probably commended or commanded somewhere else in Scripture, and Paul told us to learn from biblical examples (1 Cor 10:6, 11). There are two problems with this type of teaching:

- The first problem has to do with authorial intent. If your teaching is to be faithful to the text, then it must be faithful to the **intentions of its author**, the Holy Spirit. Moral lessons of this sort are rarely (if ever) the intention of the author, so they are rarely the main point of the text. Is David and Goliath in the Bible in order to teach you to be courageous, or is it there to teach you that God is still living, the battle belongs to him, and he does not deliver by sword or spear (1 Sa 17:26, 46-47)? Is Nathan’s parable of the lamb in the Bible to teach you effective confrontation strategies, or is it there to teach you that God hates sin and won’t let you remain in it (2 Sa 11:27)? It’s fine to mention these sort of peripheral items in the lesson, but

⁶ Sydney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 163-164.

if they aren't the main point of the text, then it's better if they are not the main point of your lesson.⁷

- The second problem is more serious because it concerns the very nature of this type of lesson. A lesson that merely advocates good virtues and moral behavior is **sub-Christian**; it reduces the Bible to the same value as Aesop's fables ("and the moral of the story is..."). Moralizing is sub-Christian and subverts the message of the gospel because it ignores two things:
 - First, it ignore the **sinfulness** of man. The Bible takes great care to tarnish the heroes of the faith: Abraham lied about Sarah, Moses struck the rock, David had Bathsheba, and Paul needed a thorn in his flesh to stay humble. All of these show that even the very best people are spiritually flawed, and human behavior can never earn God's acceptance.
 - Second, it ignores the **grace** of God. You are saved by grace. And once saved, you still need more grace; you can't be good on your own. Even when you have good examples like David and Paul before you, you still must depend upon God's grace if you are to be holy.

Conclusion

So how can you avoid spiritualizing, allegorizing, and moralizing?

- First, understand that they tends to occur in narratives and biographical texts, those which are centered on the life and actions of biblical characters.
- Second, be careful to find the main point of the text and make that the main point of your lesson.⁸
- Third, remember that the hero of every narrative is God. The characters may accomplish amazing things, but the glory always belongs to God alone.

⁷ What if you want to teach a lesson on one of these virtues? That's ok; simply find a text where the virtue is the main point of the text and teach from that text.

⁸ The tutorial "Teaching with Scriptural Authority" teaches how to find the main point of the text and make it the main point of the lesson.

- Fourth, be careful to relate your text to the message of Jesus and the gospel. Every text stands in some relation to him, and this relationship must be emphasized.⁹

⁹ The mini-tutorial “The Gospel of Jesus” explains this concept and provides help on finding the correct relationship to the gospel.