

***LEGAL AND DISPENSATIONAL HERMENEUTICS: The Grammatico –Historical  
Method – Andy Woods Th.M., J.D.***

***Introduction***

What makes someone a dispensationalist? While many view Dispensationalism as a mere theological system, this assessment is inaccurate. In actuality, Dispensationalism has more to do with commitment to a particular hermeneutic than it does to adherence to a theological model. The Dispensational theological system arises out of a hermeneutic rather than from a theology imposed upon Scripture. The purpose of this paper is to describe this hermeneutic and explain how Dispensationalism is its natural by-product.

First, the literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic will be defined. In addition to its basic elements, its philosophical goals will be explained. Second, it will be shown that the literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic is the same approach used in ordinary communication. In fact, American jurisprudence rests upon this interpretive approach. Third, it will be established that Dispensationalism is simply the outworking of an application of this interpretive approach to the totality of biblical revelation. The historical forces giving rise to the consistent literal approach will be briefly examined.

***Literal, Grammatical, Historical Methodology***

**Definition**

Post-reformation biblical interpretation employs what is called the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation. Let us break this phrase down into its component parts. The dictionary defines *literal* interpretation as that type of interpretation that is “based on the actual

words in their ordinary meaning...not going beyond the facts.”<sup>1</sup> Two concepts seem to be in view. First, according to Ram, literal interpretation encompasses the idea of assigning to every word the same meaning it would have in its normal usage, whether employed in speaking, writing, or thinking.<sup>2</sup> Cooper’s “Golden Rule of Interpretation” incorporates such an understanding of literalism:

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

Second, literalism resists going beyond what is written. Because literalism resists “going beyond the facts,” when interpreting a given text, literal interpreters resist the temptation to import foreign ideas from outside the text. A classic example of going beyond what the text says is the ancient interpretation that the four rivers in Genesis 2, the Pishon, Havilah, Tigris, and Euphrates, represent the body, soul, spirit, and mind.<sup>4</sup> Such an idea is not readily apparent from studying the text in Genesis 2. One must go outside the text of Genesis 2 and bring into it foreign concepts in order to arrive at this conclusion.

It should be noted in passing that literal interpretation has been unfairly criticized on the basis that it adheres to a wooden, inflexible literalism that fails to allow for types, symbols, figures of speech, and genre distinctions.<sup>5</sup> Such a straw man argumentation is easily recognizable by simply reading how those advocating a literal hermeneutic define the term literal. Charles Ryrie

---

<sup>1</sup> *Webster’s New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, unabridged, 2d ed., s.v. “literal.”

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d ed. (Boston: W.A. Wilde, 1956; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 89-92.

<sup>3</sup> David L. Cooper, *The World’s Greatest Library Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), 11.

<sup>4</sup> One need only examine the works of Philo to find numerous examples of such a hermeneutical methodology. Philo, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge, New updated ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> For an example of a work that levels this charge, see D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 2002).

specifically notes that literalism "...does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within the basic framework of literal interpretation."<sup>6</sup>

Ryrie further explains that literal interpretation "...might also be called plain interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech."<sup>7</sup> Ryrie

buttresses this point by appealing to the following quote from E.R. Craven:

The literalist (so called) is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols are used in prophecy, nor does he deny the great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly figurative so regarded.<sup>8</sup>

The absurdity of the notion that a literal hermeneutic fails to encompass basic figures of speech is also illustrated by the fact that the most extensive scholarly treatment of figures of speech available today<sup>9</sup> was completed not just by a dispensational literalist, but by a hyper dispensationalist! E.W. Bullinger, the creator of this work, was not only a literalist and a dispensationalist, but a hyper dispensationalist who believed that the age of the church began after Acts 28:28. Thomas Ice observes, "Bullinger's work demonstrates that literalists have at least thought about the use of figures of speech in a detailed and sophisticated way and do not consider such usage in conflict with literalism."<sup>10</sup>

*Grammatical* interpretation observes the impact that grammar plays in any given text. Thus, bible interpreters must correctly analyze the relationship that words, phrases, or sentences have toward one another. Such an analysis entails the study of lexicology (meaning of words), morphology (form of words), parts of speech (function of words), and syntax (relationship of

---

<sup>6</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 86.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> E.R. Craven and J.P. Lange, ed., *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (NY: Scribner, 1872), 98 (cited in Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 87).

<sup>9</sup> Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas D. Ice, "Dispensational Hermeneutics," *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, gen. eds. (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 42.

words).<sup>11</sup> *Historical* interpretation takes into account historical context, setting, and circumstances in which the words of Scripture were written. Milton S. Terry explains:

The interpreter should, therefore, endeavour to take himself from the present, and to transport himself into the historical position of his author, look through his eyes, note his surroundings, feel with his heart, and catch his emotion. Herein we note the import of the term *grammatico-historical* interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

In essence, the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation is designed to arrive at authorial intent by allowing the ideas plainly found within the text to speak for themselves.

## Philosophy

Why should biblical interpreters employ the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation? J. Dwight Pentecost cites four dangers when such an approach is not used.<sup>13</sup> First and foremost, the authority transfers from the text to the interpreter. In other words, the basic authority in interpretation ceases to be the Scriptures, but rather the mind of the interpreter. Early church father Jerome warns, “that the faultiest style of teaching is to corrupt the meaning of Scripture, and to drag its reluctant utterance to our own will, making Scriptural mysteries out of our own imagination.”<sup>14</sup> F.W. Farrar adds, “...once we start with the rule that whole passages and books of scripture say one thing when they mean another, the reader is delivered bound hand and foot to the caprice of the interpreter.”<sup>15</sup> Bernard Ramm observes, “The Bible treated allegorically becomes putty in the hands of the exegete.”<sup>16</sup> Walvoord observes:

---

<sup>11</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), 100.

<sup>12</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (NY: Philips and Hunt, 1883; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 231.

<sup>13</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 5-6. It is instructive to note that Pentecost begins his mammoth work on eschatology with a discussion of literal hermeneutics. Pentecost’s methodology is clear. If the interpreter applies a consistent literal approach to eschatological truths, then the other prophetic concepts found in his book will become readily apparent to the interpreter.

<sup>14</sup> Jerome; Quoted by F.W. Farrar, *History of interpretation* (NY: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1886), 232.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 238-39.

<sup>16</sup> Ramm, 30.

It's not too difficult to account for the widespread approval of the spiritualizing method adopted by many conservative theologians as well as liberal and Roman Catholic expositors. Fundamentally its charm lies in its flexibility. The interpreter can change the literal and grammatical sense of Scripture to make it coincide with his own system of interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, scripture becomes held hostage to whatever seems reasonable to the interpreter when the literal, grammatical, historical interpretive method is dispensed with. The text becomes swallowed up in the personal theology of the interpreter rather than allowing the one's theology to be built from the text.

Second, the Scripture itself is not being interpreted. The issue becomes not what God has spoken but what the interpreter thinks. In other words, the text becomes servant to the interpreter rather than the interpreter being subservient to the text. Terry explains:

...it will be noticed at once that its habit is to disregard the common signification of words and give wing to all manner of fanciful speculation. It does not draw out the legitimate meaning of an author's language, but foists into it whatever the whim or fancy of an interpreter may desire."<sup>18</sup>

Third, one is left without any means by which the conclusions of the interpreter may be tested.

When the objective standard of language's common meaning is dispensed with, one man's personal interpretation becomes just as valid as anyone else's. In such an environment, there is no way to determine whose interpretation is correct because there is no longer an objective standard that personal interpretations can be compared to. Fourth, there is no mechanism to control the imagination of the interpreter. Ramm notes:

...to state that the principal meaning of the Bible is a second-sense meaning, and that the principle method of interpretation is "spiritualizing," is to open the door to almost uncontrolled speculation and imagination. For this reason we have insisted that the control in interpretation is the literal method.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 60.

<sup>18</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (NY: Philips and Hunt, 1883), 224.

<sup>19</sup> Ramm, 65.

Thus, literal interpretation properly constrains the dictates of the carnal imagination by allowing it to roam only so far. Otherwise, interpreters (to borrow the language of the great New York jurist, Chancellor James Kent) would be able to “roam at large in the trackless fields of their own imaginations.” In sum, traditional maxims of biblical interpretation have as their underlying goal the pursuit of authorial intent by first and foremost observing the ideas plainly presented in the text. A related goal is to shift the authority in the interpretive process away from the subjectivity of the interpreter’s ever-vacillating imagination and back toward the objectivity of the static text. In essence, the goals of the literal, grammatical, historical method is to dethrone the interpreter in the interpretive process.

### ***Similarities to Legal Interpretation***

The above-described hermeneutical philosophy should come as no great surprise. It is the same hermeneutical philosophy that is used in the everyday communication. If the above-described hermeneutic were not adhered to then everyday communication could not take place. Stopping at a stop sign, ordering from a menu, and paying taxes on time could not be accomplished if the literal, grammatical, historical method is dispensed with. The literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic is the same method that is used to decipher any sane piece of literature.

### **Contracts and Other Devices**

This same rationale also exists in the domain of legal interpretation. For the same reasons described above, when interpreting a contract, courts first of all observe the plain meaning of the contract language. Because courts understand that parties have a right to enter into contractual terms of their own choosing, courts understand that they are not in the business of rewriting contracts in a way that is contrary to the expressed wishes of the parties. Therefore, courts allow the authority in

the interpretive process to reside in the contract language rather than in their own opinions regarding what the contract should or should not say. Justice Flaherty succinctly summarized the philosophy behind literal interpretation in contract law:

...the rationale for interpreting contractual terms in accord with the plain meaning of language expressed is multifarious, resting in part upon what is viewed as the appropriate role of the courts in the interpretive process: This court long ago emphasized that the parties have the right to make their own contract, and it is not the function of the court to re-write it, or to give it a construction in conflict with...the accepted and plain meaning of the language used...In addition to the justifications focusing upon the appropriate role of the courts in the interpretive process, the plain meaning approach to construction has been supported as generally best serving the ascertainment of the contracting parties mutual intent...In determining what the parties determined by their contract, the law must look to what they clearly expressed. Courts in interpreting a contract do not assume that its language was chosen carelessly. Neither can it be assumed that the parties were ignorant of the meaning of the language that they employed...<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, because courts desire to honor the wishes of the testator, they also allow authority to rest in the testamentary document itself by utilizing a literal approach when interpreting such documents. Moreover, because the judiciary traditionally has not desired to transform itself into a super legislature, it has attempted to follow the plain language of statutes whenever possible when interpreting legislation.

## **U.S. Constitution**

Because jurists have traditionally not desired to amend the Constitution from the bench, they have typically followed the plain language of the Constitution's drafters thus allowing authority to abide in the constitutional text rather in their own ideological predilections. Traditional principles of constitutional interpretation recognize that the maxim of following the plain language of the text is indeed the best insulation against an overly ideological judiciary. If jurists approached these

---

<sup>20</sup> Justice Flaherty; Quoted by E. Allan Farnsworth and William F. Young, *Cases and Materials on Contracts*, 5th ed. (Westbury, NY: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1995), 603-4.

documents any other way, they would not be interpreting. Rather, they would be amending and rewriting them.

Joseph Story, who was Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, and the leading constitutional scholar of the nineteenth century, echoed these sentiments. In his influential *Commentaries on the Constitution* (1833), he called for interpreting the constitution according to the intent of its authors as revealed in the plain meaning of their language. He noted, “The first and fundamental rule in the interpretation of all instruments, is to construe them according to the sense of the terms, and the intention of the parties.”<sup>21</sup> Upon informing the readers of the preface of his commentary of his own approach to constitutional analysis, he indicated:

The reader must not expect to find in these pages any novel views and novel constructions of the Constitution. I have not the ambition to be the author of any new plan of interpreting the theory of the Constitution, or of enlarging or narrowing its powers, by ingenious subtleties and learned doubts... Upon subjects of government, it has always appeared to me that metaphysical refinements are out of place. A constitution of government is addressed to the common sense of the people, and never was designed for trials of logical skill, or visionary speculation.<sup>22</sup>

Story also noted:

In construing the Constitution of the United States, we are in the first instance to consider, what are its nature and objects, its scope and design, as apparent from the structure of the instrument, viewed as a whole and also viewed in its component parts. Where its words are plain, clear and determinate, they require no interpretation... Where the words admit of two senses, each of which is conformable to general usage, that sense is to be adopted, which without departing from the literal import of the words, best harmonizes with the nature and objects, the scope and design of the instrument.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, John Marshall, our nation’s third Supreme Court justice, noted:

To say that the intention of the instrument must prevail; that this intention must be collected from its words; that its words are to be understood in that sense in which they are

---

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1858), 1:283, 400.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Story; quoted in Edwin Meese, III, Address to American Bar Association, 1985; adapted in “Toward a Jurisprudence of Original Intention,” *Benchmark* Vol. II, no. 1, (January-February 1986): 10.

generally used by those for whom the instrument was intended; that its provisions are neither to be restricted into insignificance nor extended to objects not comprehended in them nor contemplated by its framers, is to repeat what has been already said more at large, and is all that can be necessary.<sup>24</sup>

Thomas Jefferson similarly observed, “The Constitution on which our Union rests, shall be administered by me according to the safe and honest meaning contemplated by the plain understanding of the people of the United States, at the time of its adoption.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Milton Terry’s above-described definition of historical interpretation bears much resemblance to Thomas Jefferson’s admonition to return to the Constitution’s original intent. Jefferson said that we must:

Carry ourselves back to the time when the Constitution was adopted, recollect the spirit in the debates, and instead of trying what meaning may be squeezed out of the text, or invented against it, conform to the probable one in which it was passed.<sup>26</sup>

Although there are similarities in approach when comparing maxims of legal and biblical interpretation, the similarities do not end there. The philosophy of interpretation is also shared between the two disciplines. The underlying goal of both legal and biblical interpretation is to transfer the authority away from the subjective impulses of the interpreter and instead toward the objective standard of the author’s meaning. Although many in today’s theological climate demean the literal, grammatical, historical, method, it is this very method that our judicial system and political institutions are founded upon. When dispensationalists insist upon the literal, grammatical, historical method, all they are doing is asking that the same interpretive approach routinely used in ordinary communication and in the legal system be applied to Scripture.

---

<sup>24</sup> Chief Justice John Marshall in *Ogden v. Saunders*, 6 L. Ed. 606, 647 (1827).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Jefferson; quoted in John Eidesmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 392.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Albert Bergh, ed. (Washington D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), Vol. XV, p. 449, in a letter from Jefferson to Justice William Johnson on June 12, 1823.

## ***The Relationship of the Literal, Grammatical, Historical Method to Dispensationalism***

### **Consistent Literalism**

What makes Dispensationalism unique as a theological system is not merely its emphasis upon a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic. Many theological systems selectively incorporate this hermeneutic. Rather, Dispensationalism remains unique in its insistence in consistently applying this literal hermeneutic to the totality of biblical revelation. Thus, Ryrie includes consistent literal interpretation in his *sine qua non* of dispensational theology when he says, “the distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation.”<sup>27</sup> Notice that Dispensationalism does not have as its starting point the Israel/Church distinction that is then read back into the Bible. Rather it has as its starting point a consistent literal approach to Scripture. This approach causes the interpreter to recognize that Israel and the church are unique. Ryrie is clear that the system known as Dispensationalism did not originate from forcing a theological grid upon the biblical text. Rather it arose when interpreters became committed to a consistent use of the literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic. For example, if the same literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic that is used to interpret other sections of Scripture is applied to Biblical prophecy, then the interpreter will naturally see a distinction between Israel and the church.

### **Historical Rise of the Consistent Literal Approach**

Let us briefly examine the historical forces giving rise to this consistent, literal approach to Scripture. This brief historical analysis will emphasize the legal background of the leading advocates of literalism. This background is important in grasping that these interpreters simply took the hermeneutical approach necessary to interpret legal documents and applied them to Scripture.

---

<sup>27</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 40.

Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, both students of the law in their formative educational years,<sup>28</sup> played integral roles in rescuing the church from the Alexandrian allegorical method of interpretation that was introduced in the second century and grew to dominate the church throughout the middle ages.<sup>29</sup> Luther denounced the allegorical approach to Scripture in strong words. He said: “Allegories are empty speculations and as it were the scum of Holy Scripture.” “Origen’s allegories are not worth so much dirt.” “To allegorize is to juggle the Scripture.” “Allegorizing may degenerate into a mere monkey game.” “Allegories are awkward, absurd, inventive, obsolete, loose rags.”<sup>30</sup> Luther also wrote that the Scriptures “are to be retained in their simplest meaning ever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids” (*Luther’s Works*, 6:509).<sup>31</sup>

Calvin similarly rejected allegorical interpretations. He called them “frivolous games” and accused Origen and other allegorists of “torturing scripture, in every possible sense, from the true sense.”<sup>32</sup> Calvin wrote in the preface of his commentary on Romans “it is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.”<sup>33</sup>

Both reformers rejected the use of church tradition as a guide for spiritual truth and instead advocated returning to scripture alone or “*sola scriptura*” as the source of Christian belief and practice. To put this into legal terms, Luther and Calvin rejected the case law approach as a guide to

---

<sup>28</sup> Alan W. Gomes, *Reformation & Modern Theology and Historical Theology Survey Course Syllabus* (La Mirada: Biola Bookstore, 1999), 23; Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985), vol. 2: 62.

<sup>29</sup> Although this paper takes the position that Calvin and Luther to some extent “rescued” the church from the allegorical method of interpretation, it does *not* seek to communicate the notion that all components of reformed Soteriology are accurate. This writer strongly repudiates many ideas typically associated with a reformed understanding of Soteriology such as “lordship salvation” as well as the idea that a person must persevere in deeds in order to know that they are justified.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther; Quoted in Farrar, 328.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther; Quoted by Zuck, 45.

<sup>32</sup> John Calvin; Quoted in Zuck, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Scripture.<sup>34</sup> The case law method places more emphasis on studying what legal authorities have said about a given legal source than on studying the legal source itself. In addition, both reformers recognized the value of knowledge of biblical Hebrew and Greek due to the fact that a return to scripture inevitably required knowledge of the original languages of Scripture.

However, despite their emphasis upon literally interpreting some aspects of Scripture, Luther and Calvin did not go far enough in applying a literal hermeneutic to all areas of divine truth.

Regarding Luther, Roy B. Zuck observes:

Though Luther vehemently opposed the allegorizing of scripture, he too occasionally allegorized. For instance he stated that Noah's Ark is an allegory of the church. For Luther, Bible interpretation is to be centered in Christ. Rather than allegorizing the Old Testament, he saw Christ frequently in the Old Testament, often beyond what is legitimately provided for in proper interpretation.<sup>35</sup>

Because the reformers were primarily concerned with soteriological issues, they failed to apply the same literal interpretation that they used to interpret soteriology to the areas of ecclesiology and eschatology.

Such a selective and inconsistent application of a literal hermeneutic was not rectified until the budding of the dispensational movement centuries later. Dispensationalists took the literal hermeneutic applied by the reformers in the area of soteriology and applied it to all areas of theology, including eschatology and ecclesiology. By insisting on the application of a literal hermeneutic to all of Scripture, Dispensationalism, in essence, completed the hermeneutical revolution begun by the reformers.

Emphasizing the legal background of the early dispensationalists is important for two reasons. First, it shows that the early dispensationalists did what the reformers did in applying the same hermeneutic used to interpret legal documents to biblical truth. The only difference between

---

<sup>34</sup> John Eidesmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 402.

<sup>35</sup> Zuck, 45.

the reformers and the early dispensationalists is that they applied this method more consistently. They applied it not only to soteriological issues but also to ecclesiology and eschatology. Second, according to Charles Clough, the legal backgrounds of the early dispensationalists allowed them to see more clearly than earlier interpreters the nature of a contract or covenant as expressed in Scripture. A major ingredient of Dispensationalism is a proper understanding of the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic Covenant. If this covenant is unconditional and unfulfilled, then a future for national Israel remains and the church cannot be said to have replaced Israel. Someone trained in the realities of contract law and with an understanding of contract language and the force of a contract would be more sensitive to seeing similar concepts when they occur in Scripture. Clough explains:

Both Nelson Darby and C.I. Scofield studied law in their early years, so they certainly recognized the hermeneutics of contract law. Thus, after uncovering the contractual structure in the Bible through which God governs His relationships with His creatures, these dispensational theologians insisted upon a strict literal and conservative interpretation of contractual (covenantal) terminology.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, just as Calvin and Luther, the two men most credited for introducing a literal hermeneutic to soteriological issues in the reformation era, were trained in the law, many of the leaders of the dispensational movement were heavily influenced by their legal training and thinking. For example, John Nelson Darby, the man mostly credited with rediscovering the scriptural doctrine of the pretribulation rapture, planned to enter the field of law after graduating from Trinity College in Dublin. He was called to the Irish Chancery Bar in 1822. However, after a spiritual struggle that

---

<sup>36</sup> Charles Clough, "A *Meta Hermeneutical* Comparison of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 7 (April-June 2001): 76-77.

led to his conversion he opted to give up the law in order to become a priest in the Church of England.<sup>37</sup>

Another key dispensational thinker was Sir Robert Anderson. Though more recent work may shed new light on Anderson's prophetic calculations,<sup>38</sup> his work *The Coming Prince* is considered a classic in the area of biblical chronology because of its detailed explanation of the literal fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks. Anderson, like Darby, was also heavily influenced by the legal profession. After receiving his law degree from Trinity College, Dublin in 1863, he became a member of the Irish bar and worked drawing up legal briefs on a traveling circuit. He served as chief of the criminal investigative department of the Scotland Yard. After retiring with distinction, he used his investigative training and ability to think logically to study the Scriptures.<sup>39</sup>

Cyrus Ingerson Scofield was yet another influential dispensationalist who also happened to be a lawyer. Following the Civil War he studied law and received his law degree. He then entered politics in Kansas. President Grant later appointed him to the office of District Attorney. Scofield's best-remembered contributions include his influence as a Bible teacher as well as *The Scofield Reference Bible*, which advocated a pretribulation rapture, a literal return of the Jews to the homeland, premillennialism, and Dispensationalism.<sup>40</sup> In sum, great hermeneutical strides have been made in church history when the same literal, grammatical, historical method that is used in ordinary communication is applied to Scripture. Application of such an interpretive approach to soteriological issues ignited the reformation. Dispensationalists finished the hermeneutical

---

<sup>37</sup> Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics: A Guide to the History and Practice of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 112; Floyd Elmore, "Darby, John Nelson," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 82.

<sup>38</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 115-39.

<sup>39</sup> Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics: A Guide to the History and Practice of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 119.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-120.

revolution begun by the reformers by the applying this hermeneutic to the totality of biblical truth, including ecclesiology and eschatology.

### *Conclusion*

This paper has sought to explain the hermeneutics of dispensationalism. First, the literal, grammatical historical hermeneutic was defined. In addition to its basic elements, its philosophical outlook was explained. This outlook includes allowing meaning to be determined from the text and transferring authority from the interpreter to the text in the interpretive process. Second, it was shown that the literal, grammatical historical hermeneutic is the same approach used in ordinary communication. In fact, American jurisprudence rests upon this interpretive approach. Third, it was established that Dispensationalism is simply the outworking of an application of this interpretive approach to the totality of biblical revelation. The historical forces giving rise to the consistent literal approach were briefly examined. Far from being the product of reading the Bible through an a priori theological grid, Dispensationalism is the product of a consistent, literal approach to Scripture.