



## Radmacher: Adding & Subtracting: The Confusion Caused by the Allegorical Method in the Ministries of Origen & Augustine

19. The first attack by Lucifer in the human phase of the Angelic Conflict is directed at the veracity of the Word of God. Dr. Radmacher addresses this point:

### Radmacher, "The Nature and Result of Literal Interpretation":

The ink had scarcely dried on the vellum before Satan began enticing God's servants to tamper with His holy word. It shouldn't surprise us, however, since that was precisely the strategy he used to immerse mankind in sin. "Has God indeed said?" [Genesis 3:1a.] We still hear the arch deceiver today! "Surely, there must be a deeper, more spiritual meaning than the crass, literal meaning of the text." And, yet, it seemed so pietistic in the beginning rationale. The literary culprit I am referring to is allegorical interpretation which really results in the banishment of the author in its practice of multiple meanings (something that flourishes in a less formal way, more than we would like to admit, in many current bible studies and sermons). Though it wasn't invented by Origen of the Alexandrian School (ca. 185-254), his threefold meaning (literal, moral, and spiritual/allegorical) through his great learning and magnetic personality certainly popularized it. For him the literal meaning was simply the immature or carnal level for the unsophisticated but to rise to the moral meaning and hopefully to the hidden spiritual meaning (allegorical), for those who had been truly initiated, was to achieve greatness.

Not everyone bought into the charmed method of Origen, however. While his "fantasy unlimited" [Milton S. Terry. *Biblical Hermeneutics*. Reprint. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 609, n. 1.] thrived in Alexandria, the church leaders in Antioch of Syria, [Where the early disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).] that emphasized historical, literal interpretation, sensed the rampant disregard for the literal meaning of the scriptures in the Alexandrian Fathers. Roy Zuck claims:

They (Antioch) stressed the study of the Bible's original languages (Hebrew and Greek) and they wrote commentaries on the Scriptures. The basis for uniting Old and New Testaments was typology and predictive prophecy rather than allegorizing. For them, literal interpretation included figurative language. [Roy B. Zuck. *Basic Bible Interpretation*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1991), p. 37.]

Of this fine school, Bernard Ramm states:

It has been said that the first Protestant school of hermeneutics flourished in the city of Antioch of Syria, and had it not been crushed by the hand of orthodoxy for its supposed heretical connections with the Nestorians, the entire course of Church history might have been different.



The Christian community was influenced by the Jewish community and the result was a hermeneutical theory which avoided the *letterism* [**hyperliteralism: the interpretation of words in their most basic sense without allowing for metaphor**] of the Jews and the *allegorism* [**beneath the obvious is the real meaning of the passage**] of the Alexandrians. It (Antioch) boasted of such names as Lucian \lü' shan\, Dorotheus \da-räth' ē-as\, Diodorus \dī-a-dōr' as\, Theodore of Mopsuestia \mäp-sü-wes' chē-a\ and Chrysostom \kris' as-tam\. As a school it influenced Jerome and modulated the allegorism of Alexandria in the West. It also had an influence on medieval exegesis, and found itself again in the hermeneutics of the Reformers.

The Syrian school fought Origen in particular as the inventor of the allegorical method, and maintained the primacy of the literal and historical interpretation of the Scripture. It is true that in practice some of the Antiochenes were found dipping into allegorizing, nevertheless in hermeneutical theory they took a stout stand for literal and historical exegesis. They asserted that the literal was plain-literal and figurative-literal. A plain-literal sentence is a straightforward prose sentence with no figures of speech in it. "The eye of the Lord is upon thee," would be a figurative-literal sentence. According to the Alexandrians the literal meaning of this sentence would attribute an actual eye to God. But the Syrian school denied this to be the literal meaning of the sentence. The literal meaning is about God's omniscience. In other words literalism is not the same as *letterism*."

[Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Revised Edition (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1956), p. 48-49.]

In spite of all of the excellencies attributed to the hermeneutical excellence of the School at Antioch by all writers on the subject, they lost the battle for literal interpretation because of a chink in their armor, on the one hand, and a great name, on the other hand, Augustine (354-430). Not only was he a leading theologian with a great influence on the church for centuries and a primary influence on John Calvin, but he became the father of amillennialism.

[The great historian of hermeneutics, Frederic Farrar, sighs over the demise of the school: "Unhappily for the Church, unhappily for any real apprehension of Scripture, the allegorists, in spite of protest, were completely victorious. The School of Antioch was discredited by anathemas. And we soon descend to allegorical dictionaries of the threefold sense. [*History of Interpretation*. 1886 reprint. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), pp. 239-40.]

NOTE: The "threefold sense" refers to the system of hermeneutics developed by Origen at Alexandria. These "three senses" define the approach to Scripture popularized in the mid fifth century and which remained the norm for almost 1500 years. First of all, its inventor:

Douglas, J. D. (gen. ed.). *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 733:



ORIGEN (c.185-c.254). Alexandrian theologian. Born in Egypt and raised by Christian parents, studied under Clement in the Catechetical School in Alexandria. *De Principiis* is among his important works, being one of the first systematic theologies. Book 4 of *De Principiis* deals with biblical hermeneutics and the literal-moral-allegorical interpretation of Scripture.

A summary of Origen's system is provided by:

Ramm, Bernard. *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*. 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 32-33:

Origen wanted to escape the crudities of lay people who were literalists to the point of taking everything symbolic, metaphorical, or poetic literally. He wished to eliminate what were absurdities or contradictions in Scripture and make Scripture acceptable to the philosophically minded. His approach can be summed up as follows:

The *literal meaning* of Scripture is the preliminary level of Scripture. It is the "body," not the "soul or "moral sense," nor the "spirit" or the "allegorical sense" of the Bible. The literal sense is the meaning of Scripture for the layman.

The literal in Scripture is to provoke us to a deeper and more spiritual study of the Bible. History, for example, is to be taken symbolically. (p. 32)

The true exegesis is *the spiritual exegesis of the Bible*. The Bible is one vast allegory, a tremendous sacrament in which every detail is symbolic. The Bible is a spiritual book, and its meaning is found only by spiritualizing it. (pp. 32-33)

Dr. Radmacher continues:

But notice the event that turned the tide for Augustine. Ramm states:

Augustine was driven to the allegorical interpretation of Scripture by his own spiritual plight. It was the allegorical interpretation of Scripture by Ambrose which illuminated much of the Old Testament to him when he was struggling with the crass literalism of the Manicheans [Persian dualism founded by Mani \mä' nē\ that syncretized Zoroastrian dualism and Christian soteriology]. Augustine justified allegorical interpretation by a gross misinterpretation of:

**2 Corinthians 3:6 -** God made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter [ **meaning the Law** ], but of the Spirit; for the letter [ **the Law** ] kills [ **reveals sin & spiritual death** ], but the Holy Spirit gives life [ **salvation** ].

Augustine made it mean that the *spiritual* or *allegorical* interpretation was the real meaning of the Bible; the literal interpretation kills. For this experimental reason Augustine could hardly part with the allegorical method. (Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 35.)