

The Problem with Allegory in Preaching

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Preaching and Allegory

When the evangelist announced his text -- Genesis 24:63-64 -- I was intrigued at the uncommon prospect of hearing a revival sermon preached from the first book of the Bible. But as I listened to the Scripture, my curiosity changed to wonderment: "And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide: and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, the camels were coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel."

Though poetic and picturesque, the brief narrative seemed homiletically unpromising. How could anyone find a message -- evangelistic or otherwise -- in these isolated verses?

I didn't wonder long. For without elaborating on his interpretation, the preacher explained that Isaac symbolized Christ; Rebekah, the church; and the camel, whose physical characteristics would be the focus of his message, represented the grace of God. Then he delivered a seven-point exposition based on an allegorical interpretation as classic as any I've ever heard.

The camel's nose, he said, can detect water from far away and lead its rider to drink. The spiritual lesson, he added, is that God's grace can lead us to spiritual water. He similarly interpreted and applied six more of the camel's characteristics, none of which was mentioned in the text. (See the accompanying sermon outline.)

As the preacher's message illustrates, allegorical interpretation seeks some implicit, symbolic meaning hidden in the explicit, literal meaning of Scripture.

Allegorists consider this perceived "deeper" means of communication. Only when Scripture itself indicates a text is other than literal should we interpret it non-literally.

For instance, nothing in Genesis 24 indicates Isaac, Rebekah or the camels represent anything other than themselves, so the narrative should be taken literally. On the other hand, in John 15:1, Jesus clearly was speaking metaphorically when he said, "I am the true vine,..." and his words should be interpreted as such.

It is true that in Galatians 4:21ff. the Apostle Paul interpreted the Genesis account of Sarah and Hagar allegorically even though the Old Testament text nowhere indicates that story is allegorical. But Paul received his interpretation from the Holy Spirit as he wrote a New Testament letter. We don't have his inspired prerogative.

Since the Bible never suggests it regularly has more than one meaning, additional interpretations should not be assumed.

2. The allegorical method obscures the true meaning and legitimate application of Scripture.

Allegorists generally see the literal meaning of a text only as a tool for unlocking the perceived allegory. Their pursuit of an illusion, then, causes them to ignore the truth which is there.

When interpreted literally, the Song of Solomon exalts the joy of sexual love in a marital

relationship. However, generations of Christian allegorists have interpreted it as symbolic of the relationship of Christ to His bride, the church.

Embarrassed by the sexual nature of the text, they have obscured its meaning, even though nothing in the Song indicates an allegory. Their inhibitions have caused them to conceal what God and the author meant to praise.

3. Allegorical interpretation is open to almost unlimited subjectivity.

The allegorist can make Scripture say whatever he wishes. Although his interpretation may seem reasonable and be consistent with what Scripture teaches elsewhere, who can know if it is the right one for a given passage?

For instance, a camel's nose not only can detect water from afar, it also cleanses the animal's sinuses by discharging phlegm. Does Genesis 24:63-64, then, also teach that God's grace cleanses sin from our lives? What other spiritual truths can we learn from the camel's nose? What might we learn from the hairs on the tip of its tail? How do we know what is taught and what isn't?

Despite its obvious illegitimacy, the allegorical method has plenty of advocates and by no means is endangered.

The preacher of the Genesis 24 message was a rural, bi-vocational pastor who never attended seminary and likely learned allegorical interpretation from another pastor. Each time he allegorizes a text, he perpetuates his interpretive method among uncritical listeners.

But the allegorical method isn't limited to the theologically uneducated. Several seminary-trained pastors I know have used it without apology.

A popular British Bible teacher now living in the United States holds that in Genesis 1:16 the sun symbolizes God the Father. The moon, which reflects the sun's light, represents Jesus, who of course reflects the glory of the Father, he says.

Despite dispensationalism's claim always to adhere to literal interpretation unless the text indicates otherwise, the Scofield Bible also yields to the allegorical temptation.

In its introduction to the Old Testament book of Ruth, we read, "Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer, points to Christ; Ruth portrays those who enter into a new life through trust in Him." However, nothing in the book itself or anywhere else in Scripture indicates that Boaz, Ruth and their relationship are allegorical. Perhaps the best-known and most widely accepted of the Scofield Bible's allegorical interpretations is that of Jesus' messages to the seven churches in Revelation 1:4 - 3:22.

According to the notes, the churches correspond to "phases in the spiritual history of the church." For example, we read that the church at Sardis, described in the text as dead but having a faithful remnant, represents the church during the Reformation. But nothing explicit in the text itself indicates that Jesus is speaking allegorically.

Twentieth-century allegorists are by no means the first to use this fanciful method. Greek philosophers in the sixth century B.C. apparently originated it as a way of interpreting mythology. And Philo, a Jewish philosopher during the time of Jesus, seems first to have applied it to the Old Testament.

But it was Origen, whose influence extended long after he died about 254 A.D., who popularized allegorical interpretation in the church. And once it became established, it dominated until the Reformation, when the grammatical-historical method re-emerged and regained priority under the

leadership of Martin Luther and others.

The question remains, however, as to why allegorical interpretation still enjoys significant use, even among those who should know better. What are the keys to its endurance? And, more importantly, how can contemporary preachers avoid it? Here are some explanations, followed by some suggestions:

1. As we saw with the Song of Solomon, the allegorical method helps an interpreter deal with Scripture which embarrasses or otherwise offends him. It also allows him to avoid ethical implications of texts he might prefer not to obey.
2. Allegory appeals to human nature, which delights in the discovery of something previously hidden. How wonderful to locate in Scripture some new insight not formerly found.
3. The allegorical method can strengthen the pastor's role as the authoritative interpreter of Scripture for a congregation. The more obscure a perceived allegory, the more dependent are people upon the pastor for interpretation and application. And the more dependent the people, the more authoritative the pastor, a prospect some cannot resist.
4. Some allegorical interpretations have the appearance of spiritual depth -- and consequently give that appearance to the preacher.

The first time I heard a preacher interpret the book of Ruth as symbolic of Christ's redemption of the church, I was impressed. I thought, "How insightful!" and wondered how he could discern this marvelous meaning which I had overlooked.

5. Some may resort to the allegorical method out of laziness or lack of study time. It usually is easier to allegorize a difficult text than wrestle with it and emerge with its true interpretation and application.
6. Many interpretive conclusions and applications reached by the allegorical method actually are consistent with what Scripture legitimately teaches elsewhere.

Though absent from Genesis 24, none of the rural revival preacher's applications was unbiblical. God's grace will indeed lead us to spiritual water. His grace also keeps us from sinking in sin and shields us during the storms of life (other applications from his message).

7. At a purely subjective level, some allegorical interpretations seem to make sense -- they just "feel" right.

Although it has no objective basis in the text, Scofield's interpretation of the seven churches nevertheless has something about it which causes us to say, "Yes!" In some ways, the contemporary church does seem to be "Laodicean" -- materially prosperous, yet lukewarm and fit only to be spewed from God's mouth.

But despite its attractiveness, preachers must resist turning to allegorical interpretation. To that end, here are some suggestions to keep in mind:

Lash yourself to the grammatical-historical method of interpretation and don't untie yourself. Interpret non-literally only if the text itself clearly calls for it. This doesn't depart from the grammatical-historical method but simply acknowledges that grammar and historical background may objectively call for a non-literal interpretation.

Remember the interpretive ends never justify the means. An allegorical interpretation may be

consistent with what the Bible teaches elsewhere, but that doesn't mean it is the correct interpretation of a particular text.

If you're still tempted, be sure you aren't perceiving an allegory because the literal reading of a text makes you uncomfortable, presents you with an ethical dilemma or otherwise challenges you. And make certain your urge to allegorize isn't prompted by exegetical laziness or because the text seems to make no sense otherwise. Keep seeking the truth.

As always, check your interpretation with recognized authorities who aren't given to flights of fancy. Even then, don't believe everything you read!

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ALLEGORICAL SERMON OUTLINE

Genesis 24:63-64

Isaac symbolizes Christ; Rebekah, the church; and the camel represents the grace of God.

1. The camel's nose detects water from far away and enables it to lead its rider to a place in the desert where he may drink.

God's grace can lead thirsty seekers to spiritual water.

2. The camel's hooves are such that they will not sink in the sand.

Grace keeps God's people from sinking in the sin of the world.

3. The camel's kneecaps allow him to kneel so a rider can dismount and hide behind the camel during a sandstorm.

Grace shields us during the storms of life.

4. The camel's teeth can bite into cactus and eat its meat without getting stuck by its thorns, which symbolize the curse.

Grace allows hungry seekers to receive spiritual food in a sinful world.

5. The camel's humped back is ridiculed as being ugly, but it carries supplies which meet people's needs.

The world ridicules God's grace, but grace meets our needs.

6. The camel's saddlebags carry healing balms, treasure and fruit.

God's grace heals us, provides for us and sustains us.

7. The camel is unattractive in appearance, but is of great importance to those who live in the desert.

God's grace expressed in Christ on the cross was not a pretty sight, but is precious to those who trust him.