

# Systematic Theology for the Local Church

## #6—Interpreting the Bible—Part V<sup>1</sup>

### Figurative Language: Be Careful When You Jump

Paul Karleen  
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One of the things that make communication interesting, powerful and even fun is the use of figurative language. Mary's lamb with *fleece as white as snow* is figurative language, as is *grasping an idea* and *his feet felt like ice* and *the foot of a hill*. Students of language and literature have classified the many types of figurative language. There are many books available on this and many available on the use of figurative language in the Bible. It is not my purpose to examine all or even many of these types. I want to explore one of them and use it as a springboard for understanding how we can misinterpret the Bible when we look for figurative language too much. We need to be alert to figurative language in the Bible but we also need to be careful to let the text speak for itself.

### Metaphor

Let's explore metaphor, a type of figure of speech that we all use often and easily. When we use a word or phrase that ordinarily refers to one thing to refer to another, we are using metaphor. In doing this we are implicitly comparing the two things and bringing the features of one thing to another. Shakespeare used metaphor when he spoke of "a sea of troubles" or "all the world's a stage." Troubles don't come as Atlantics or Pacifics, but when we bring the features of an ocean to the concept of troubles, we see them in a new light. Saying I have a sea of troubles is much more interesting than saying I have a lot of troubles. And so we say you are my sunshine, break the ice, wolf down the sandwich, count on a friend, ace the exam and we talk about a cheesy looking outfit, a head that is spinning and tabling a proposal.

Here are some expressive metaphors from [knowgramming.com](http://knowgramming.com):

- This joke is aging quickly.
- Don't be such an airhead!
- It's anarchy on the freeway today!
- Bursting with flavor!
- Caged emotions
- An electron chooses the path of least resistance.
- Their philosophies would eventually collide.
- The clouds are just determined to ruin our picnic!

In the Bible a person's life is a walk or a race, God is a consuming fire, Christians are farmers and builders, Jesus is a lamb, Israel is a vineyard, God redeems sinners and Jesus drinks the cup.

The question arises, however, of how to interpret metaphor. In thinking about "literal" or what I like to call "normal" interpretation, some people have wondered where such language might fit in. But when we view the communication process as we did in the previous study, the issue becomes clearer. Metaphor involves variation from the most expected meaning. It is designed to be graphic, to startle, to alert and to portray in unexpected ways. One writer speaks of this as creating "new meaning which is not merely decorative but is a new perception of the relationships within one's world."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Carol A. Newsome, "A Maker of Metaphors—Ezekiel's Oracles Against Tyre," *Interpretation* 38 (1984):153.

An illustration might help here. The phrase *on the horns of* occurs in the following two sentences:

1. He's working on the horns of his Buick.
2. He's caught on the horns of a dilemma.

In the case of the first sentence, knowledge of the world will lead most readers to take *horns* to refer to automobile parts. In fact, it is likely that this association between the sound or letter sequence *horn* and a noise-producing mechanism is the first we are likely to make. We might subsequently associate it with the appendages found on some animals. But initially for the first sentence we are unlikely to think of anything other than a part for a car. There is a good reason for this: the occurrence of *working* and of *Buick* on either side of *on the horns of*. However, in the case of the second sentence, the words *caught* and *dilemma* on either side of *on the horns of*, along with our knowledge of the world, immediately clue us to the likelihood that *horns* is not to be associated with noise or animals. Instead, we are to make a leap to a less expected meaning, and this leap is to be made for shock value; at least someone made the leap when the expression was initially coined. We are, by the words surrounding *horns* in the second sentence, made to transfer our expectations to an unanticipated meaning.

The value of metaphor in the second sentence is that it brings the properties of an animal's horns to the situation of being in a dilemma. I assume that whoever coined the phrase intended us to think of a dilemma as having two alternatives, neither of which is comfortable!

The question in interpretation is how do we know when to make that leap? With any message, we are not to make it unless we are forced to. We are to consider the *expected* meaning first, since speakers and writers use figurative language for certain purposes. Stated differently, since metaphor is a representation of one thing in terms of another, the issue is when to know that this representation is taking place. For example, when Paul speaks of people in the latter days as having "itching ears" (2 Tim. 4:3) are we to think of the kind of itching that we put lotion on or take the phrase as referring to a spiritual condition?

In a certain sense the decision is no different from understanding the meaning of *bank* as discussed in the previous study, where the leaning on two wheels could be viewed as some kind of metaphorical variant of the use involving the side of a river. It is the element of the unexpected that is crucial.<sup>3</sup>

This is all tied in with the issue of probability in messages. We make decisions about meaning on the basis of what we expect to be communicated.<sup>4</sup> Also involved is the matter of how much information individual parts of the message carry. It is axiomatic in the field of linguistics that the meaning to be chosen for an individual part, say a word, is normally the one that contributes *the least* to the message, that is, it gives the most expected information in the light of what its neighboring words are.<sup>5</sup> Figures of speech are less expected, and so contribute more to the message, unless they are overused and worn out—sometimes to the point of being clichés—in which case they carry less information than they did in earlier usage.

Literary critics tell us that an overused metaphor can quickly lose its surprise/shock/graphic quality, and then speakers no longer make the transfer. It is then a "dead metaphor." *Bank*, with the meaning "traverse a bend

<sup>3</sup> The problem of formalizing procedure to show how we decide when to take an element metaphorically, or, rather, of how we know (usually quite well in normal conversation) to make the jump, is for literary critics one of the central issues in the analysis of metaphor. See Monroe C. Beardsley, "Metaphor" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan and the Free Press, 1967) 5:285.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler, *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (London: Longman, 1981), 8, 9, 40, 88, 139, and 144.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene A. Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972):86.

on an incline,” is probably such a metaphor and is undoubtedly newer in the English language than the other uses, since it involves a mechanical apparatus, a vehicle. This is how many new meanings enter languages. As one writer points out, “What was novel becomes commonplace, its past is forgotten, and metaphor fades to mere truth.”<sup>6</sup>

We need to deal with metaphor whenever we read the Bible, but the leap involved in interpreting the text can sometimes be misused. To understand better how this can be so, we need to think in terms of analogy.

## Analogy

Metaphor is just one type of the analogical use of language. Analogy is the setting up of a relation between two things that says they are alike in certain ways. If I say that I have a blond son Dan and a blond son Ben, I have stated an analogical relationship between the two: they are both males, my offspring and blond. I can make this metaphorical by speaking of one in terms of the other: Ben is another Dan. I can make it a simile by using the word *like*, but the analogical content is the same: Ben is like Dan.

Cognitive scientists and linguists speak of the *target* (the item trying to be understood better) the *source* (the basis of comparison) and the *ground* or *connection* between the two. In the example *Ben is another Dan*, Dan is the source, Ben is the target and their blondness and sonship is the ground or connection between the two.

Jesus’ parables are analogies in story form as is the allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*. The visions and dreams in Daniel involve analogical thinking (trees, animals and statues) as does John’s use of the term word (logos) to describe the incarnate Son of God.

Analogical reasoning is a gift that God has given to human beings and it involves both creating analogies and interpreting the analogies that others have created. I can make analogies and I can interpret analogies. When I create them, I have an intention that I want my reader or hearer to catch. When I interpret analogies, I attempt to understand how someone else may be making a comparison using interesting features of language.

Sometimes I interpret as analogical or metaphorical something that another person intends to be analogical. For example, if my wife says “That’s a sharp tie,” I don’t look for a dangerous point of some kind. But sometimes I interpret as being analogical or metaphorical something that someone does not intend to be metaphorical. We make a leap to the analogical in our thinking when the speaker or writer did not intend us to do so. Many jokes are built on this false step.

There are many instances in biblical interpretation where we are faced with the problem of interpreting a term or phrase. In doing the interpreting, we may stay away from analogical thinking or we may think of a possible analogy. Any interpretation situation that could possibly involve analogy involves the issues of expectation of information and the probability that the author/speaker intends us to see a frequent meaning or a less frequent one.

The tabernacle is an example of a huge analogy. It is a physical picture of the spiritual realities of holiness, sin and the work of Christ that opens the way to God. It is a metaphor in life. Hebrews 8:5 says that the tabernacle is a copy of what is in heaven. The heavenly pattern is the target term, the one we are trying to understand. The earthly tabernacle is the source term, the one that we understand better—in this case, because it could be seen (at least by people who were alive when it existed).

<sup>6</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 80.

When I read about the tabernacle in Leviticus, I interpret it as being the source term, a physical entity. However, when I read about the tabernacle in Heb. 9, I am faced with a problem. Do I understand this as a physical reality or perhaps a building that is visible in some way in the spiritual realm (like the new Jerusalem of Rev. 20) or do I take it to be a spiritual reality, the target entity? Since other biblical information tells me that heaven is a not a 'place' as we know it, and since the text tells me that Jesus entered the Most Holy place (Heb. 9:13), which we know is part of the tabernacle, and also entered heaven itself (9:24) to appear in the presence of God, we should conclude that the target term, the heavenly tabernacle, is actually the presence of God. The analogy between the earthly tabernacle and the heavenly tabernacle helps us to see what the relation between the Father and Son is like and that the cross involved a transaction between them.

In any linguistic situation our choice of interpreting an element as analogical or metaphoric is greatly affected by context. This is no less so with the Bible's metaphor. In the example of *horn* above, two speakers of English with roughly equivalent knowledge of American culture would have no difficulty operating successfully as sender and receiver of the two sentences. The second would be taken as metaphorical, the first not. In the case of Heb. 9, the context helps us to determine how we should interpret the tabernacle.

However, in the case of biblical interpretation, we are always faced with time, language and cultural gaps. In addition, expectations of metaphor or any kind of analogy vary according to the kind of literature we are reading. Reference to a lamb in connection with Temple sacrifices in the Old Testament is likely to be taken (and intended) as a physical animal. However, if a lamb is mentioned in Rev. 22, we are not likely to look for any bleating animal, but instead would be inclined to see a metaphorical reference to Christ as the Lamb, since we know that this soteriological image is prominent elsewhere in the book (chs. 4-5, etc.).

### **The crucial step**

Now we come to a crucial point in the matter of biblical interpretation. We may make that transfer to the metaphorical or analogical without enough warrant to do so. In effect we are saying that *the meaning that is most probable according to the context* is not the one that we should arrive at. Instead, we decide that the text points to something else, which we may or may not have in mind already. The great spiritual danger with this is that we can use this approach to justify rejecting what faces us in a text.

That is exactly what Origen did. He usually attempted to look for something analogical, to go for the unexpected meaning first, believing that the text required him to go beyond the normal, beyond the most probable in light of the total message. It apparently was more interesting to do that. However, it was clearly out of keeping with normal human communication, for we do not expect heavy use of analogy. A person who does so in everyday conversation is often known for using cliches. Too much metaphor ruins the effect.

This issue of when to take certain parts of texts at face value (as information expected within a context), versus analogically or metaphorically (thus envisioning source and target entities with connections between them), is an important one in biblical interpretation today.<sup>7</sup> I will provide three examples that involve a leap to a less expected meaning. I claim that the leaps are made to satisfy existing presuppositions and are thus an attempt to make a text say what we would like it to say. In these instances the most normal way of interpreting a passage is violated or abandoned because of assumptions brought from elsewhere. It is certainly true that we are to interpret any portion of the Bible so that it fits with the rest of the Bible, but face the danger of not allowing the text in front of us to correct our assumptions from elsewhere.

<sup>7</sup> See de Beaugrande and Dressler, 140, regarding expectation of information.

**1) The kingdom and the return of Christ.** A good example of this is the interpretation by some of Rev. 20:4—and surrounding verses—to mean something other than a kingdom on earth with some time period assigned to it. The amillennialist has no place for an earthly kingdom in his system, because the unity of all believers in all ages rules out a separate track for Israel.<sup>8</sup>

Our first inclination in reading this text as any other is to take the reigning on the earth at face value—as a kingdom of some kind on the earth as we know it (or in some way similar to what we know). Also, we are initially inclined to take the *thousand years* as referring to a period of time as we know it. I am well aware that in this book we are dealing with apocalyptic literature, with the heavy use of symbolism. Yet, it is not difficult to demonstrate at numerous points in the book that the symbols that John sees and describes are linked to real events and personages. Thus while I would not argue that *thousand years* is not 999 or 1001, but 1000, I would argue that, taken with *reign* and *earth*, it describes a monarchy of Christ on this earth for a definite period of time.

But most amillennialists take the reigning with Christ for a thousand years as unexpected information, that is, as metaphorical, and assign it a meaning other than a physical kingdom of approximately a thousand years as we know years. Instead, they take this as referring to the present Church Age and interpret the *reigning* as living as Christians during the period of time between the cross and the second advent of Christ.

Of course, in doing so, they are taking the text figuratively. But is this justified? The key issue is not whether it is exactly 1000 years of 365 days each, but whether this is a definite period of time different from the church age and from the eternal state. Assigning 1000 years to the church age, as the amillennialist does, is a kind of metaphorical interpretation, although we might not think of it that way at first. He has made the leap from normal interpretation to analogical, concluding, of course, that John intended the reader to take the 1000 years as descriptive of a nebulous period of time and the reigning as referring to the life of the Christian.

The issue becomes particularly important when this is done consistently in patterns. This has often been called in biblical studies spiritualizing or mystical interpretation. In that it is regularly looking for a meaning other than the expected, it can be described with these terms, and is really no different in principle from Origen's allegorical interpretation. Suffice it to say here that unusual assumptions are involved in the decision to take such passages metaphorically. We will return to this topic and spell the process out more fully in the next study

**2) Headship in 1 Cor. 11:3**—Many evangelical feminists take 'head' (which is metaphorical to start with) as meaning 'source' (as in the 'head' of a river), so that the man is the 'source' of the woman, not his leader. This is not at all expected in the context, and actually violates the other parts of the 4-part parallel in v. 3. I do not see any way that this interpretation with regard to men and women can do anything but teach that the Father is in some way the 'source' of the Son. Assumptions about the roles of men and women in Scripture lead these interpreters to keep the text from speaking at this point and to damage key doctrines of orthodox Christianity.

**3) 'Overseer' in 1 Tim. 3**—The term 'overseer' is arbitrarily taken to refer to the 'pastor,' even though the New Testament never does this elsewhere. This is not exactly metaphorical interpretation like taking 'bread of life' to refer to something other than a loaf that we actually eat, but it is a shift of meaning, a leap to an unexpected meaning, nevertheless, and that is the essence of metaphor. In a sense this approach takes 'overseer' to be a term used instead of 'pastor.' So it shifts from the most likely meaning in context to one that isn't there, but should be substituted instead. It says, without any explanation, "Paul didn't mean

<sup>8</sup> Please see my *Understanding Covenant Theologians: A Study in Presuppositions*. This appeared in the *Grace Theological Journal*, Fall 1989.

‘overseer’ here; he meant something like an overseer, or someone who is an overseer, the pastor.” The same approach is used with 1 Pet. 5, which refers to elders. Many times I have heard people actually substitute the word pastor for ‘overseer’ or ‘elder’ in such passages—a leap unjustified by the text. Let’s let the Bible say what it says.

What might lead to such approaches to the Scriptures, methods that are really part of a system of interpretation? To answer this we must turn in the next study to another issue—theology and the discovery process. How is theology related to interpretation? As we do so, we will also be dealing more explicitly with the issue of presuppositions.

We must all be careful not to jump away from expected meanings within biblical texts because we don’t like what we see there. Guarding against this is simply a way of allowing the text to speak for itself. We all have errors somewhere in our theologies. Letting the text speak provides correction that we all need.

**Preparation for Bibliology:** Begin to get familiar with Sections 6-12 in House’s *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Read all of Packer’s *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Packer’s book was written against the background of the debate with Fundamentalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, his presentation of the systems of authority (reason, tradition and Scripture) is timeless. Also, begin to read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Part I.

## Study Questions

1. Explain the metaphorical transfer in each of the following, i.e., how is one thing being spoken of in terms of another? These are from knowgramming.com.

Examples of doing the exercise:

a. The clouds are just *determined* to ruin our picnic!

The transfer: People have a will and in this metaphor it is transferred to clouds.

b. That gymnast is a *diamond in the rough*.

The transfer: One’s abilities are a workable material with an intrinsic value.

- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1. She sought a new direction in her life.                | 6. That new worker is pretty green. |
| 2. They were about to disembark on a journey of the soul. | 7. To harness the power of the sun. |
| 3. He was a drifter, working odd jobs.                    | 8. Ideas in motion.                 |
| 4. I’m dying to meet her.                                 | 9. A moving speech.                 |
| 5. Freedom of expression.                                 | 10. The guy is a rock.              |

2. Explain the transfer in the following biblical metaphors:

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. I am the bread of life       | 5. I am the resurrection and the life.   |
| 2. I am the light of the world. | 6. I am the way, the truth and the life. |
| 3. I am the gate.               | 7. I am the vine, you are the branches.  |
| 4. I am the good shepherd.      |  |

3. Find as many uses of figurative language as you can in 1 Cor. 9.

4. What information in Rev. 20 (or elsewhere) argues for or against making a leap to some kind of figurative interpretation of the 1000-year reign described in Rev. 20:4? Some things to consider: Who is involved? Who appears in the passage? Where does the passage occur in the book? What is the meaning of the reigning that Christians do today in the Church age?