DISPENSATIONALISM & AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

Week Two

The Hermeneutical Divide

How Do We Read the Bible?

Student Handout · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*

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Session Overview

Last week we traced the history of dispensationalism from Darby to the present. This week we dig into the engine that drives the entire system: its hermeneutic—its method of reading Scripture. The disagreement between dispensationalism and confessional Lutheranism is not primarily about isolated doctrines like the rapture or the millennium. It is about *how the Bible is read*. If you understand the hermeneutical divide, every other difference follows logically.

Session Goals

> **1:** Understand what dispensationalists mean by a "literal" hermeneutic and what it requires
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> **2:** Understand the christological hermeneutic confessed in the Lutheran tradition
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> **3:** See how the two hermeneutics produce radically different readings of the same texts
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> **4:** Recognize that the hermeneutical question is not neutral—it has confessional and pastoral consequences

I. What Is a Hermeneutic and Why Does It Matter?

A hermeneutic is a method of interpretation—a set of principles and assumptions that guide how you read a text. Everyone who reads the Bible has a hermeneutic, whether they know it or not. The question is never *whether* you have an interpretive framework but *which one* you have and whether it is faithful to what Scripture itself teaches about how it should be read.

Dispensationalists and Lutherans both claim to take the Bible seriously. Both claim to read it faithfully. Both claim to honor the authority of Scripture. The difference is not in their reverence for the Bible but in their principles for interpreting it. And those principles produce two fundamentally different Bibles—not in terms of the text itself, but in terms of what the text *means*.

An analogy may help. Imagine two architects looking at the same blueprint. One reads every measurement as a literal specification to be followed exactly as written. The other reads the blueprint as part of a larger design vision, where some measurements are precise, some are conventional symbols, and some are schematic representations of a more complex reality. Both are reading the same document. But they will build very different buildings.

II. The Dispensational Hermeneutic: "Consistent Literalism"

Dispensationalists describe their hermeneutic as "literal," "plain," or "normal." The most influential formulation comes from Charles Ryrie, who identified the *sine qua non* (the essential, non-negotiable core) of dispensationalism as three commitments:

> **1:** A consistent distinction between Israel and the Church
>
> **2:** A consistently literal (or "plain") interpretation of Scripture
>
> **3:** The glory of God (not salvation) as the unifying purpose of history

Notice that the hermeneutic is not merely one feature of the system—it is the load-bearing wall. Without the insistence on "consistent literalism," the Israel/Church distinction collapses, and without the Israel/Church distinction, the rapture, the rebuilt temple, and the entire dispensational prophetic scheme collapse with it.

What "Literal" Actually Means in Practice

When dispensationalists say "literal," they do not mean that every word in the Bible is devoid of figures of speech. They acknowledge metaphor, simile, and symbolic language within individual passages. What they mean is something more specific and more consequential:

Prophecies addressed to Israel must be fulfilled by and for national, ethnic Israel. They cannot be "spiritualized" or "transferred" to the Church. When Isaiah speaks of Israel's restoration, it means the physical restoration of the Jewish nation in the land of Palestine. When Ezekiel describes a rebuilt temple with renewed animal sacrifices, it means a physical future temple with actual animal sacrifices. When Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant with "the house of Israel and the house of Judah," the primary referent is ethnic Israel, not the Church.

Typological and christological readings are suspect. If a Lutheran says that the Passover lamb *is* Christ, a dispensationalist will agree—the New Testament makes this explicit. But if a Lutheran says that the promises of land and kingdom made to Israel find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ and His Church, the dispensationalist will object that this "spiritualize" the text and empties it of its "plain meaning." The dispensational hermeneutic allows typology only where the New Testament explicitly states it, and resists extending it further.

The Old Testament is interpreted on its own terms first. Dispensationalists insist that the Old Testament must be understood as its original audience would have understood it before the New Testament was written. An Israelite hearing Isaiah's prophecies would have understood them as referring to a physical kingdom, a physical land, and a physical restoration. To read them as ultimately about Christ and the Church is, in this view, to impose a meaning that the original text does not carry.

III. The Lutheran Hermeneutic: Christ Is the Key

The Lutheran hermeneutic begins not with a general theory of interpretation but with a confession about who Jesus is. If Jesus is the Christ—the one to whom all of Scripture points—then He is the interpretive center of the entire Bible. The Old Testament is not a standalone document that must be read apart from Christ. It is a book *about* Christ, and it is read rightly only when it is read *through* Christ.

This is not a principle that Lutherans invented. It comes from Jesus Himself.

> *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me."*
>
> — John 5:39
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> *"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."*
>
> — Luke 24:27

Notice what Jesus does on the road to Emmaus. He does not say, "The Old Testament has some passages about Me and other passages about national Israel." He says that *all the Scriptures* concern Himself. Moses, the Prophets, the Psalms—all of it points to Him. This is the christological hermeneutic in its most basic form: Christ is what the whole Bible is about.

Key Principles of the Lutheran Reading

Scripture interprets Scripture. The clearer passages illuminate the less clear. The New Testament, as the fulfillment of the Old, provides the authoritative interpretation of Old Testament promises, types, and prophecies. When the New Testament says that Christ is the Passover lamb, the true temple, the seed of Abraham, and the heir of David's throne, it is not adding foreign meaning to the Old Testament. It is revealing what the Old Testament always meant.

The distinction between Law and Gospel. Luther's most fundamental hermeneutical principle is that all of Scripture must be understood in terms of the distinction between Law (what God demands) and Gospel (what God gives in Christ). This is the "master key" of Lutheran interpretation. A passage may be about Israel, about David, about the exile, about the temple—but it is always, at its deepest level, about humanity's need for salvation and God's provision of it in Christ.

Typology is not "spiritualization." When Lutherans read the Old Testament typologically—seeing Adam as a type of Christ, the Exodus as a type of baptism, the temple as a type of Christ's body—they are not emptying the Old Testament of its historical meaning. The his-

torical events really happened. But they happened within a divine economy that was always pointing forward to Christ. The type is real; the fulfillment is more real. This is not allegory or spiritualization. It is the New Testament's own way of reading the Old.

Promise and fulfillment, not prediction and fulfillment. Dispensationalism tends to read Old Testament prophecy as a set of predictions that must be fulfilled in a one-to-one, literal correspondence. The Lutheran tradition reads prophecy as promise—God's commitments to His people that are fulfilled in ways that often exceed and transcend the original hearers' expectations. The promise of a Davidic king is fulfilled not in a restored political monarchy but in Christ's eternal reign. The promise of a new temple is fulfilled not in a rebuilt building in Jerusalem but in the incarnate body of Christ and in His Church. The fulfillment is greater than the promise, not less.

IV. Reading the Same Texts Two Ways

The best way to see the hermeneutical divide in action is to look at specific passages and ask: how does each tradition read this text? The following table is not exhaustive, but it illustrates the pattern.

Passage	Dispensational Reading	Lutheran Reading
Gen. 12:1–3 (Abrahamic Covenant)	God's promise of land, nationhood, and blessing to Abraham's physical descendants (Israel). This covenant is unconditional and permanent, and it is fulfilled in the modern State of Israel.	God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ, the true seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16). All who are in Christ are Abraham's offspring and heirs of the promise (Gal. 3:29). The "land" finds its ultimate fulfillment in the new creation.
Jer. 31:31–34 (New Covenant)	The new covenant is made with "the house of Israel and the house of Judah"—that is, ethnic Israel. The Church participates in the spiritual blessings of this covenant, but its primary fulfillment is with national Israel in the millennium.	Jesus explicitly institutes the new covenant at the Last Supper ("This cup is the new covenant in My blood," Luke 22:20). The new covenant is fulfilled in Christ and distributed through the means of grace to all believers, Jew and Gentile alike.
Ezek. 40–48 (Ezekiel's Temple)	A literal future temple will be built in Jerusalem during the millennium, with renewed animal sacrifices as memorial offerings. The	The New Testament teaches that Christ is the true temple (John 2:19–21), the Church is God's temple (1 Cor. 3:16), and animal

	detailed measurements confirm a literal fulfillment.	sacrifices have been rendered obsolete by Christ's once-for-all sacrifice (Heb. 10:1–18). Ezekiel's vision is fulfilled in Christ, not in a rebuilt building.
Rom. 11:26 ("All Israel will be saved")	This is a future mass conversion of ethnic Israel during the tribulation period, confirming God's distinct program for national Israel.	Interpretations vary among Lutherans, but the verse is read within the context of Romans 9–11, where Paul redefines "Israel" ("not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel," Rom. 9:6). Many Lutherans read "all Israel" as the full number of God's elect—Jew and Gentile—gathered through the Gospel.
Rev. 20:1–6 (The Millennium)	A literal 1,000-year earthly reign of Christ in Jerusalem after His visible return. Saints will rule with Christ over the nations, and Israel will be the center of this kingdom.	Following Augustine and the Reformers, the "thousand years" refers to the present age of the Church between Christ's first and second coming. Christ reigns now through His Word and Sacraments. This reading is consistent with the Augsburg Confession's rejection of millennialism (Art. XVII).

V. The Apostles as Interpreters: How the New Testament Reads the Old

The strongest evidence for the christological hermeneutic is that the New Testament authors themselves read the Old Testament this way. The apostles, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, consistently interpret Old Testament promises, types, and institutions as fulfilled in Christ and His Church. Consider the following examples:

Hosea 11:1 → Matthew 2:15. Hosea writes, "Out of Egypt I called my son," referring in its original context to Israel's exodus. Matthew applies it to the infant Jesus returning from Egypt. In a strict dispensational framework, this would be a misapplication—the original referent is Israel, not Christ. But Matthew, writing under inspiration, sees Jesus as the true Israel, recapitulating in His own life the story of God's people.

Amos 9:11–12 → Acts 15:16–17. Amos prophesies that God will "raise up the booth of David that has fallen." In its original context, this sounds like a restoration of the Davidic monarchy. But at the Jerusalem Council, James applies it to the inclusion of Gentiles in

the Church. The "rebuilt booth of David" is not a restored political kingdom—it is the Church of Jesus Christ, into which Gentiles are now streaming.

The Passover → 1 Corinthians 5:7. Paul writes, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." The Passover was a real historical event. The lamb was a real lamb. But its deepest meaning was always Christ. The type was not emptied by the fulfillment—it was completed.

The Temple → John 2:19–21. When Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," John tells us He was speaking of "the temple of his body." The physical temple in Jerusalem was always a type pointing to the reality of God dwelling with His people—a reality fulfilled in the incarnation and, after Pentecost, in the Church (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19–22).

Abraham's seed → Galatians 3:16, 29. Paul argues that the "offspring" (seed) promised to Abraham is Christ, and that all who belong to Christ are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. This directly contradicts the dispensational insistence that Abraham's promises must be fulfilled through national, ethnic Israel. Paul reads the promise christologically.

VI. Why the Hermeneutical Divide Is Not Neutral

It might be tempting to treat this as an academic disagreement—two traditions reading the Bible differently, each with its own internal logic. But the hermeneutical divide has pastoral and confessional consequences that matter for the life of the Church:

If the dispensational hermeneutic is right, the sacraments lose their weight. If the Church is a parenthesis and the Old Testament's sacramental types (the Passover, circumcision, the temple) point primarily to a future Israelite restoration rather than to Christ and His Church, then Baptism and the Lord's Supper are diminished. They become optional ordinances rather than means of grace. We will explore this further in Week 5.

If the dispensational hermeneutic is right, the Law/Gospel distinction is undermined. Dispensationalism tends to divide Scripture by dispensation rather than by Law and Gospel. In some dispensational schemes, the Sermon on the Mount belongs to a future Jewish millennial kingdom and is not directly applicable to the Church. This fragments the unity of Scripture and obscures the central hermeneutical distinction that Luther called the key to all of theology.

If the dispensational hermeneutic is right, eschatology becomes a distraction from the means of grace. When the focus of the Christian life shifts from Word and Sacrament to

prophetic speculation about the rapture, the tribulation, and the millennium, the center of gravity of the faith moves from Christ crucified and risen to a chart of future events. This is not an abstract concern—it describes the lived reality of millions of American Christians.

VII. Discussion Questions

1. When you hear someone say they take the Bible "literally," what do they usually mean? How does the dispensational use of "literal" differ from how most people use the word?
2. Read Galatians 3:16, 29. How does Paul's argument challenge the dispensational claim that God's promises to Abraham must be fulfilled through national, ethnic Israel?
3. Dispensationalists sometimes accuse Lutherans of "spiritualizingthe Old Testament. How would you respond? What is the difference between typological fulfillment and allegory?
4. If the New Testament authors read the Old Testament christologically (as we saw with Matthew, Paul, James, and John), what does that tell us about which hermeneutic is more faithful to Scripture itself?
5. How does the hermeneutical divide show up in practical church life? Have you experienced differences in how Bible studies, sermons, or devotional materials handle Old Testament passages?

Looking Ahead to Week 3

Next week we apply the hermeneutical principles we've discussed to the most visible product of dispensational theology: its eschatology. We'll examine the rapture, the tribulation, the millennium, and the rebuilt temple, showing how each of these doctrines depends on the dispensational hermeneutic we've analyzed today—and how the christological hermeneutic produces a radically different (and, we will argue, more faithful) eschatological framework.

Recommended Resources

For the Instructor:

Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (P&R Publishing, 1987), chapters 3–6. Poythress provides the most careful analysis of what dispensationalists actually mean by "literal" interpretation.

Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* (IVP Academic, 2006). Although written from a Reformed perspective, Goldsworthy's argument for a christological reading of the whole Bible is fully compatible with Lutheran hermeneutical principles.

John W. Montgomery, "Luther's Hermeneutic vs. the New Hermeneutic," in *In Defense of Martin Luther* (Northwestern Publishing House, 1970). A classic essay on Luther's interpretive method.

For the Class:

Read Luke 24:13–35 (the road to Emmaus) and John 5:39–47. In both passages, Jesus teaches His followers how to read the Old Testament. What interpretive principles does He model?

Compare the footnotes on Jeremiah 31:31–34 in a Scofield Reference Bible (or Ryrie Study Bible) with the notes on the same passage in *The Lutheran Study Bible* (Concordia Publishing House). How does each set of notes guide the reader toward a different understanding of the new covenant?