

# The strange case of Harold Camping's hermeneutics

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*This article is adapted from a section of the book 'Truth is the Word' by Dr Christopher Pepler*

Harold Camping is the Calvinist radio Bible teacher based in California. He has sprung to notoriety by predicting that the Rapture would occur at 6 pm on 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2011. The day has come and gone and the Christian world is left puzzling over the question of how he could have got it so wrong.

Apart from radically reinterpreting Jesus words, that no one knows the day or the hour, as applying only to the disciples of His time, Camping fell on the sword of his faulty interpretive method. He uses and abuses a method commonly referred to as allegorical interpretation, but he is not the only teacher who does this. Several years ago I heard the leader of a major church group preach on how the twelve gates in the walls of ancient Jerusalem each stood for a particular church age. He went around the gates in a clockwise direction and concluded that we were currently in the age signified by the Dung Gate – phew!

Camping uses an extreme form of allegorization but there are several variants in today's church, and so it would be useful to examine the issue and come up with a balanced approach to biblical interpretation.

On the one end of the hermeneutical continuum are those who adopt, what I have called, a strict rational-biblicist hermeneutic. At the other end are the allegorical Harold Campings' who believe that every text contains a veiled 'deeper' meaning. The allegorical approach to Bible interpretation was popular in the middle ages but with the reformation came a swing to the other end of the continuum.

Can a text contain more than one meaning and more specifically, can it contain a hidden mystical meaning? Is there a place for allegorical interpretation, and if there is then how do we protect the biblical text from irresponsible interpretation, and what I have called campingitis?

## Sensus Plenior

Sensus Plenior means 'the fuller sense'. A question that theologians often argue concerns whether the biblical authors were always cognisant of the full meaning of what they wrote. For instance, Isaiah wrote of the young woman (virgin) who was to give birth to one who would be called Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14). The prophet might have had in mind the birth of a contemporary king but Matthew 1:23 applies his reference to Jesus.

Why does it matter whether or not the original authors understood the full implications of what they were writing? I understand the Bible to be a divine/human co-operation and contend that in some instances the human author might not have had full or even partial knowledge of the implications or

meaning of what he wrote. Only those who hold to a rigidly rational-biblicist approach to textual interpretation seem to have a problem with *Sensus Plenior* in this sense. In terms of the rational-biblicist hermeneutic model, historical, cultural, and contextual analysis yield the only true meaning of the text. The main question asked by this school of interpretation is 'what did the original author mean when he wrote this?' For this to be a valid question, the author must have had a coherent understanding of what he was writing. However, if there is a fuller meaning, which is independent of the limitations of original historical and cultural context, then the rational-biblicist approach will fail to identify it.

The prophet Hosea wrote, 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' (Hosea 11:1) The immediate reference is to the Old Testament people of God. The prophet would surely have had no idea that he was also forecasting the return of the young Jesus from Egypt. Matthew, however, understood this prophecy as relating to the messiah because he wrote, 'So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."' (Matthew 2:14-15) So what are the options we have for understanding the dynamics of these two passages? Perhaps Hosea knew that he was prophesying about the messiah but he cunningly disguised this fact by pretending to reference Israel alone. This is hardly likely. Maybe Matthew invented the story of Jesus' sojourn in Egypt to be able to apply the prophecy. This is a most unreasonable contention. Possibly Hosea did not understand the full meaning of what he was prophesying. To me, the most reasonable option is that Hosea did not have full insight into what he was prophesying.

Although the *sensus plenior* debate has been going on since Augustine fell off the proverbial chariot, it is once again a current issue. Another currently topical debate concerns whether or not a text can contain more than one meaning. Can a text act as a catalyst for private and existential meanings that may well have little or no similarity to the text's apparent meaning?

## **Can a text contain more than one meaning?**

For those who have a somewhat post-modern approach to hermeneutics, the biblical text in itself does not always contain relevant meaning. For them, the meaning is more in the existential encounter facilitated by the text.

My understanding is that the biblical account can and often does provide a forum for encounter. As we read the scriptures we can, and should, encounter the living God. This encounter transcends intellectual processes. The Holy Spirit may impress something on our conscience, or reveal something in vision or feeling. We may sense things that are essentially inexpressible (2 Corinthians 12:4). These encounters have the power to change us. They can also enlighten us and help us to understand the scriptures more fully. The issue is not either/or. The biblical text is not just the grounds for encountering God existentially, nor is it just the vehicle for conveying propositions, principles, and precedents. It is both ... and more.

An allied question is, 'can the text contain more than one meaning'? Once again, dogmatic rational-biblicists claim that the only meaning a text can have is that which was in the mind of the original

author. I would not argue against the contention that this first intended meaning is indeed a valid meaning, and even the prime meaning. In fact we should always recognise this literal first intended meaning as the anchor and delimiter of any other meanings attributed to a particular text. What I cannot understand is the stubborn insistence by some that this first meaning is the only meaning. What then do we make of the meaning Paul applies to the rock of Numbers 20 (and Exodus 17) when he likens it to Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4)? In addition, what do we make of Hagar and Sarah representing two covenants (Galatians 4:21-31)? Moreover, to bring the matter to a fine point, what was Jesus meaning when he said, concerning himself, that “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life”. (John 3:14-15)?

The early Church Fathers respected the first sense of the text yet they generally assessed its overall spiritual significance in the light of its fuller meaning (*Sensus Plenior*). Augustine believed that the Bible has an inner meaning that only the Holy Spirit can reveal. He contended, however, that this inner meaning had to be consonant with the first meaning of the text. Think of a C tuning fork. Strike it and it emits a constant C note. If you sing anything in the key of C, it will harmonise with the tuning fork’s note. If you sing in a different key, much of what you sing will sound off and will not harmonise with the note produced by the tuning fork. In a similar way, the literal first intended meaning provides the key. Any interpretation that does not harmonise with it is off key.

In the fourteenth century, Nicholas of Lyra spoke of a double sense. He taught that the first sense was the literal-historical sense. The second sense, according to him, was the literal-prophetic sense. This second sense referred to the wider meaning of the text in later and changed circumstances. Those involved in the Pietism and Puritanism movements also acknowledged a spiritual sense beyond the ‘natural’ sense of the text.

The witness of hermeneutic history, right through to the time of Calvin, is that a text can and often does have more than one meaning. However, an equally consistent theme is that there must be harmony between the various meanings attributed to a text.

## Literal or Figurative

When interpreters use the word ‘literal’, they usually mean ‘the plainest and most obvious meaning of the text’. Figurative means, essentially, that which is not literal and includes such things as metaphors, symbols, allegories, and types.

A metaphor is an implied comparison. Jesus spoke metaphorically when he said, “I am the bread of life.” (John 6:48) Taken as a metaphor, we understand that he meant that, as bread is the staple of physical life, so he, in himself, is the source of spiritual life. We could go further and deduce from the fuller passage (John 6:48-51) that Jesus means us to understand that just as bread needs to be assimilated in order to provide nourishment, so we need to internalise his spiritual life. Taken literally, we would have to conclude that we needed to consume Jesus’ flesh if we are to have eternal life. The bizarre doctrine of transubstantiation is a product of this sort of literalism. Don’t only blame the Roman Catholics for this; Jesus’ own disciples understood it this way! (John 6:53-66)

An allegory is essentially an extended metaphor. In an allegory, the story is usually intermingled with its application. John 15:1-7 presents the allegory of Christ as the true vine. Allegories are rich in meaning. In the allegory of the vine, Jesus, God the Father, and disciples of the Lord all feature. Unlike a parable, an allegory does not necessarily have just one meaning. The allegory of the vine presents truth concerning the required connectedness of disciples with Jesus. It also touches on the overseeing role of God the Father. I find it hard to understand how anyone can deny that there is fuller meaning, or layers of meaning, in an allegory such as this. The fact that scholars have produced so many different, yet reasonable, interpretations of this particular passage provides ample evidence of this.

In symbolic language, something represents something else. For instance Revelation 12:1 records how John saw a great and wondrous sign in the heavens; a woman clothed with the Sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. Interpreters generally understand that John selected this picture as a symbolic representation of Israel or possibly the church. Symbolic language implies that the thing described might not exist at all in a material sense.

Revelation 12 illustrates the problems associated with a literalistic, or for that matter an exclusively figurative, interpretation of scripture. If we take the language at its face value alone then John must have seen an actual woman in the heavens. If we take the language figuratively then we can understand the woman as a symbol representing something else. However, what if the passage is both literal, in the sense that John actually saw an astronomical portrayal of a woman in the night sky, and figurative? For instance, John might well have been describing the astronomical constellation of Virgo. From ancient times, astronomers have depicted the major stars constituting this constellation as the image of a woman traced on the backdrop of the night sky. With the naked eye, we can discern twelve stars situated near Virgo's head. So, could it be that John is describing a literal stellar formation that has a figurative meaning? In a more direct sense even, John would have been writing about what he could actually see in the night sky. Yet, he then used this literal image as a symbol depicting the role of the people of God in bringing forth the messiah.

## **Allegorical interpretation**

Allegorical interpretation has had a bad reputation since the middle ages. Most people understand allegorization as an attempt to find deeper meanings in otherwise clear texts. In the past, some interpreters took the allegorical method of interpretation to extremes and as a result largely discredited the method. The early Church Fathers believed that the Bible was inspired. Some held that God had dictated the contents of the scriptures and that, as a result, every word had meaning even in isolation from its immediate context. Most of the Old Testament is historical narrative and the Fathers found great difficulty in recognising its inspiration yet finding current meaning in its historical accounts. Allegorization provided them with a means of attributing spiritual meaning to narratives.

Paul allegorised. Some say he simply employed figurative interpretation of Old Testament passages. The difference is subtle. I think he was allegorising. In Galatians 4:21-31 he states that Hagar and Sarah represent two covenants. Hagar stands for Mount Sinai, from whence came the Law, and

corresponds to the earthly Jerusalem. Sarah, he says, corresponds to the heavenly Jerusalem. Some contend that Paul is not allegorizing but merely employing typology. The argument is not strong and in any event, the differences between analogy, allegory, metaphor, and type are fine and scripturally undefined. In Galatians 4:24 Paul uses the word *allegoroumena* which is translated in various versions of the Bible as figuratively, symbolic, allegorically speaking, or by way of illustration. Some contend that a type differs from an allegory because it is rooted in some literal historic event. As stated previously, I consider a type simply as a specific form of allegory.

When Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:4 that the Israelites ‘...drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ’, is he speaking literally, or allegorically, or is he employing a type? The actual rock in question did not accompany the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness for forty years, so Paul’s statement is not literally factual. The reference is to the rocks that Moses struck both near the start of the forty year period and again towards the end of the journey. A legend developed that the rock was supernatural and travelled with them. The scriptures give no evidence of this. Therefore, by definition this is not strictly a Type. It is however clearly figurative.

The church has all but written off Origen’s hermeneutical method because of the claim that his interpretation of scripture was wildly allegorical. It seems so strange to me that church history reveres Origen as a genius and the greatest systematic theologian of his time, yet also accuses him of irresponsible and fanciful interpretation. However, in his debate with Celsus he takes the critic to task for not paying sufficient attention to the ordinary historic sense of the scriptures. In the same work, *Contra Celsum*, Origen devotes much of books Four and Five to a defence of the allegorical method of interpretation. His main points are, firstly, that we can trace the unbelief of the Jews to their insistence that we interpret the prophecies of the Old Testament literally. Secondly, that interpreting everything in scripture literally leads in many cases to blasphemy or contradiction. Thirdly, that the New Testament, by using allegory, establishes the validity of the method. Lastly, Origen contends that part of the divine plan is to veil the truth (Luke 8:10).

Early Christian theologians like Origen did not use allegorical interpretation arbitrarily. Instead, they viewed it as an important hermeneutical method within a larger interpretive scheme. They argued that unless interpreted allegorically, much of the historical narrative of the Old Testament lacks spiritual and practical significance. In truth, most modern preachers do not hesitate to draw spiritual lessons from Old Testament narrative passages. What is that if it is not a form of figurative, or even allegorical, interpretation?

Of course, allegorizing can lead to some very fanciful interpretations of scripture. For instance, Philo (20 BC–40 AD) claimed that the historical patriarchal narratives in Genesis were allegories of the human soul’s ascent to God. Pope Gregory the Great (590–614 AD) explained the parable of the lost coin in Luke 15:8-9 as follows: The coin symbolises man created in the image of God; Just as the woman lost her coin so man lost the image of God through sin; the candle which the woman lit stands for enlightenment of the conscience... and so on. Harold Camping, the latest of the allegorizing villains, claimed that Genesis 7:4 contains a hidden warning that the Rapture was to occur in 2011. He took the seven days warning of the Great Flood, multiplied by 1,000 (per 2 Peter 3:8), added these to the date he established for the Great Flood (4990 BC), added one year from the change over from BC to AD, and hey presto, we have 2011!

What then should we make of allegorization as a method of interpretation? On the one hand, Jesus himself employed several forms of figurative language, as did Paul. Great theologians of the past allegorised and many of today's leading preachers employ figurative interpretations quite freely. On the other hand, history and current practice are replete with evidence of fanciful and misleading allegorical interpretations. Figurative interpretation is an attempt to uncover deeper meaning within the scriptures so we should not deal with the question of allegorization apart from the broader issue of figurative interpretation and the even deeper issue of *Sensus Plenior*.

I believe that there is more meaning in scripture than its 'surface' meaning, or even its literal first intended meaning. I am not alone in this belief; in fact, I would think that most pastors and preachers believe this. What would be the purpose of teaching anything from the Old Testament narratives if there is nothing more there than the history stories? The real issue is how we should validly interpret the further levels of meaning.

Most biblical scholars are comfortable with extracting principles from narrative passages. For instance, the story of Abraham's planned sacrifice of his son Isaac is replete with values and principles. Once we acknowledge that a passage such as Genesis 22 contains values and principles then we have broken ground from literal first intended meaning to a deeper level of meaning. However, just how deep are we entitled to dig? Moreover, what prescribes the parameters of the deeper meanings we find when we do dig? To use a metaphor, if we start digging a hole in London, how far down may we legitimately go? Perhaps the answer is, until we come out down under in Australia where up is down and down is up. The values and principles of the Kingdom of God are as different to those of this world as Quantum physics is to Newtonian science. In a similar fashion, when we dig down into the scriptures we are often surprised that what we find is so different from what we found on the surface. Because of this, it is imperative that we have some sound digging guidelines.

The usual conservative contention of our day is that we should interpret the Bible literally, unless the text itself suggests a figurative interpretation. The majority of scholars who hold this basic hermeneutical tenet believe in the full inspiration of the Bible. Ironically, the literal interpretation tenet rests on the underlying assumption that the Bible is fundamentally a human literary work. The implied contention is that coherent human communication contains within itself the clues needed for understanding. Therefore, we should examine the text of the Bible for its own imbedded clues and interpret accordingly. For instance if the text states that something is like something else then an analogy is implied and the passage should be interpreted as some form of simile. When the text records Jesus as saying that he is a gate (John 10:9) he must be speaking metaphorically, because his statement is in the context of what is obviously an extended analogy. In terms of this thinking, the 'laws' of human communication govern hermeneutics. But why should God be limited by our current understanding of the science of communication? Why should we expect the multi-dimensional deity to limit himself to our three-dimensional concept of reality? If the Bible were merely a human production then, obviously, we would expect to interpret it from a strictly human perspective. If, however, the Bible is a truly divine-human collaboration then we should expect its meaning to transcend the laws of purely human literary convention. Here is the irony – many of those who ostensibly honour the divine nature of the Bible use a methodology that rests heavily on the Bible being purely human.

In contrast to the 'conservative' approach, Origen adopted an essentially allegorical style of interpretation. He did so because he believed that the Bible was an entirely divine production. His position was that God merely used human authors to record exactly what he wanted to communicate. Because of this, Origen reasoned that everything in scripture must be replete with meaning. Why would God choose to write about the fall of Jericho, for instance, if it were not to impart some deep spiritual truth?

If the Bible is an essentially human production, we should understand it in terms of literary conventions and principles. If it is totally a divine production then we should understand every part of it as a communication of spiritual truth. If, however, we view the Bible as a divine/human collaboration then we should be embracing both concepts and not just one or the other. Nevertheless, even this understanding is lacking in dimensionality. The Bible is a divine/human collaboration but its purpose is not just to impart knowledge, be it literal history or spiritual principle. Part of its purpose is to provide us with an existential means of encountering its ultimate author, God. Yet it also has a further dimension of purpose. Not only is it intended to convey both information and insight while at the same time providing an existential 'place' of encounter, but it also serves both to conceal and to enlighten. It contains 'mystery'. It conceals the 'pearls' of spiritual insight from the 'pigs' of sceptical superficiality (Matthew 7:6). At the same time, it yields insight to those who earnestly seek the truth (Matthew 7:7). We are not meant to understand the Bible either naturally/literally or spiritually/figuratively but both naturally and spiritually, literally and figuratively. But just how are we to do that? I will attempt an answer to this question, but before I do so, I need to take you back to the Church Fathers.

## **The hermeneutics of Origen and Augustine**

Harold Camping claims that the church has abandoned the hermeneutical methods of the Church Fathers and that his allegorical methodology is more in line with them than that of today's theologians. To respond to this assertion we need to examine the ideas of men like Origen and Augustine a little more closely.

I see no evidence of hermeneutical evolution. If anything, hermeneutics seems to have devolved. To those with a scientific bias, this sort of statement seems illogical. After all, have we not developed and honed the science of critical analysis? Yes, we have, but on its own this is not necessarily real progress. Unbridled allegorizing led interpreters up one blind alley, and critical analysis has led us up another. Scientific critical analysis helps us to determine the literal first intended meaning of the text more accurately, no more. I contend, however, that there is more meaning to the biblical text than its literal first intended meaning. Real progress would I feel consist of a return to the purer form of patristic interpretation enhanced by the hermeneutical tools currently at our disposal.

Origen proposed three levels of meaning. Firstly, he proposed a literal meaning, secondly a moral meaning, and thirdly an allegorical/mystical meaning. Almost two centuries later, Augustine proposed four levels of meaning. He also started with the literal sense but he reclassified Origen's other two levels into three categories. He identified a moral sense that applied to the church and a moral sense that applied to the individual. His fourth category was eschatological (end-time

application). I do not think that Augustine's expanded reclassification adds anything to Origen's three-fold model yet I do propose a return to a modified four-dimensional interpretive model.

Augustine also established a set of hermeneutic rules:

1. The literal and historic meaning should be held in high esteem.
2. The task of the interpreter is to understand the meaning of the author and not to bring his own meaning to the text.
3. A verse should be studied in its context, not in isolation from the verses around it.
4. The Holy Spirit is not a substitute for the necessary learning to understand scripture.
5. If the meaning of a text is unclear, nothing in the passage can be made a matter of orthodox faith.
6. An obscure passage must yield to a clear passage.
7. The Old Testament is a Christian document because Christ is pictured throughout it.
8. The interpreter must consult the true orthodox creed.
9. The expositor should take into account that revelation is progressive.
10. Scripture has more than one meaning and therefore the allegorical method is proper and appropriate.
11. Bible numbers are significant.
12. The interpreter must possess a genuine Christian faith.

Most of today's critical-biblical scholars would enthusiastically embrace the first nine rules. Numbers 10 and 11 have to do with figurative meaning and number 12 is, in essence, the requirement for existential encounter. So, here, nearly 1,600 years ago are three levels of meaning – the literal first intended meaning, figurative/mystical meaning, and existential meaning. But I did say that I intended proposing a four-tier system of interpretation.

## Four Levels of Meaning

The four levels of meaning I propose are (a) the superficial meaning, (b) the literal first intended meaning, (c) the mystical meaning, and (d) the existential meaning.

*The Superficial Meaning:* This level of meaning is accessible to anyone who reads the text. It does not require special knowledge and it does not even require that the reader is a genuine believer. For instance, 1 Corinthians 14:2 states that '... anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God.' The superficial meaning is just what the text says. Is it not strange, by the way, that so often people present tongues as a form of interpreted prophecy rather than as prayer? The surface meaning of the text is clear – tongues are TO God, not FROM him.



Sometimes the superficial meaning is misleading. Take for instance Matthew 11:12, 'From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.' A superficial interpretation would be as the TEV translates, 'From the time John preached his message until this very day the Kingdom of heaven has suffered violent attacks, and violent men try to seize it.' I have heard sermons based on this superficial understanding on how the unsaved world is forever attacking the church. I have also heard sermons on how we should be forceful, militant Christians. I think it is regrettable that a Bible translation should be so interpretive. Language transference may necessitate a degree of interpretation in the translation process yet such interpretation should never be as superficial as the TEV handling of this verse. If the meaning of the text as it stands in the Greek (or underlying Hebrew or Aramaic) is not clear, then a literal translation would be far preferable to such an interpretive translation.

A superficial interpretation of Matthew 11:12 fails on a number of counts. Firstly, 'from the days of John the Baptist till now...' was, in the original historic context, just a matter of months. The 'now' is not our day, or the past 2,000 years for that matter, it is the 'now' of Jesus' day. How then can a Bible translation read, as in *The Message*, 'For a long time now people have tried to force themselves into God's kingdom'? Secondly, the context of the verse concerns John the Baptist and his Elijah-like ministry. The point is that John went ahead of Jesus as an 'Elijah'. The subject matter concerns the ministry of John the Baptist, not the forceful nature of the Kingdom of God or its antagonists. Thirdly, we can adequately translate the Greek language used without resorting to extensive interpretation. The New King James version translates the Greek word *beadzo* as 'suffers violence', but the word more literally means 'to crowd into or out of'. A Tokyo subway train at rush hour presents a good visual aid to the meaning of this word.

Sometimes the superficial meaning of a text is both accurate and sufficient but often it is neither. Hermeneutical textbooks are replete with examples of misleading allegorical interpretations, yet it seems to me that superficiality does just as much damage to truth.

*The Literal First Intended Meaning:* This level of meaning is not always accessible to every reader. In order to determine this level of meaning the interpreter may need to apply language, historical research, and analytical skills.

Matthew 11:12 is set within the context of a discourse on John the Baptist. Jesus likens him to Elijah. He ends his discourse with the familiar 'mystery' formula "He who has ears, let him hear." To understand what Jesus' first intended meaning was, the interpreter would need knowledge of the rabbinic commentary on Micah 2:12-13. This Old Testament passage reads, 'I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob; I will surely bring together the remnant of Israel. I will bring them together like sheep in a pen, like a flock in its pasture; the place will throng with people. One who breaks open the way will go up before them; they will break through the gate and go out. Their king will pass through before them, the LORD at their head.' The rabbinic Midrash explains that the Lord God is like a shepherd who builds an enclosure for his sheep. He then enters the enclosure and his assistant closes the entrance with rocks and other loose material. In the morning, the assistant comes and breaks open the entrance. The shepherd leads his sheep out of the confines of the pen into the freedom of the pasture. The sheep 'break out' behind him, pushing, and straining to get out. The assistant, known prophetically as the breach-maker, is Elijah, and the shepherd is Jehovah God. Jesus is saying to those who 'have ears to hear' that he is the divine shepherd and John the Baptist was the

breach-maker, the one who prepared the way for him to lead his people out of the sheep pen of this sinful world into the green pastures of the Kingdom of God. John 10:2-4 helps us understand the truth to which Jesus was alluding; 'The man who goes in through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him; the sheep hear his voice as he calls his own sheep by name, and he leads them out. When he has brought them out, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they know his voice'. (TEV)

A literal and Hebraic translation of Matthew 11:12 would read '... the kingdom of heaven is breaking forth and those who are breaking out, break out in it.' Jesus' intended meaning is to inform his followers concerning who he is as well as the role played by John the Baptist. The text combines the elements of mystery and analogy yet they constitute the literal first intended meaning.

It is at this level of meaning that the church theologians and biblical scholars play their most significant role. This level of meaning is formative and governs any deeper levels of meaning. It is the task of the theologian and other teachers to make plain this first intended meaning. The preacher's first task is also to make plain the first intended meaning of the text. Sadly, many sermons I hear explain the obvious superficial meaning of scripture without ever elucidating the first intended meaning, let alone any deeper levels of meaning.

*The Mystical Meaning:* The word 'mystical' means both 'with divine meaning' and 'mysterious' and that is why I have chosen to name this level of meaning 'mystical'. This is the spiritual meaning that lies beneath the surface of the literal first intended meaning. We access the mystical meaning through analogy, figures, types, symbolism, and sometimes even responsible allegorical interpretation. It is consistent with the literal first intended meaning but it takes the reader into a greater understanding of principle and dynamic.

Other parts of the Bible may disclose, and even elaborate upon, the mystical meaning of a text. I have already referred to the Galatians 4:21-26 passage. Here Paul interprets Old Testament historical narrative in an allegorical way. It does not help, in this context, to argue about whether Paul is employing typological or allegorical interpretation. Either way he is presenting a mystical meaning to Old Testament narrative.

The mystical meaning may indeed be something not disclosed in other parts of the Bible. As I have already pointed out, the Bible is full of mystery. There is no reasonable ground for asserting that we have to interpret all mysteries through referencing other more plain passages of scripture (Ref. Daniel 12:9, Revelation 10:4 and 2 Corinthians 12:4). This begs the question, 'If the mystical meaning of a text is not validated somewhere in scripture, what then actually governs the validity of any given interpretation?' If the reformation maxim of 'scripture interprets scripture' is not always effective then what maxim do we apply?

The Church Fathers had an answer to this question. They do not appear to have adopted a simple maxim but if they had it would probably have read something like 'scripture governs the interpretation of scripture'. The Reformers, on the other hand, held that scripture *interprets* scripture. By that, they meant that we should interpret any relatively obscure text with reference to other clearer biblical texts. I have already shown that in some instances this is an inadequate maxim. We just cannot interpret some texts purely with reference to other texts. However, when I say that

scripture *governs* the interpretation of scripture, I mean that scripture regulates, restrains, and influences any interpretation of other scriptures.

This 'convergence' applies on at least two levels. Firstly, the biblical revelation as a whole must govern any interpretation of a text. The interpretation must conform to what the scriptures reveal concerning the body of revealed truth. We cannot go further and claim that an interpretation must not appear to contradict other scripture because the Bible contains many antinomies. Secondly, the literal first intended meaning of the actual text must govern any mystical interpretation of that text.

For instance, Matthew 11:12 does, I believe, have a mystical meaning. It is that 'In the days prior to his second coming Jesus will lead his church into greater revelation and his teaching prophets will break open the way before him by interpreting the deeper meaning of key scriptures'. Now why should you pay any more attention to this than you would to an allegorical interpretation, or a Harold Camping convolution?

First, apply the wider sense of the maxim 'scripture governs the interpretation of scripture'. I have already referenced examples where New Testament texts give the deeper meaning of Old Testament texts. Jesus stated that he had come to give the fuller and deeper and complete meaning of The Law (Matthew 5:17). He also said, concerning later understanding of his own teaching that 'the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you' (John 14:26). There is also the indication in 1 John 2:27 that the Holy Spirit will continue this teaching ministry in the life of the church.

The John 14:26 text is particularly significant as it focuses us on the Christocentric principle. Not only does the Holy Spirit teach us, but he also centres us on what Jesus said and did. Jesus used figurative language. Jesus gave the deeper meaning to many Old Testament passages. Jesus led his disciples into greater revelation, and his Apostles and Prophets then broke open the way for others by interpreting the deeper meaning of key scriptures. So, I feel that the deeper meaning of Matthew 11:12 that I have given conforms to the biblical revelation as a whole.

We must also apply the second aspect of scripture governing the interpretation of scripture. Is the deeper meaning consistent with the literal first intended meaning of the text? Yes it is. Jesus leads his people into the Kingdom of God and Jesus leads his people into deeper understanding of scripture. John the Baptist broke open the way before him and Teaching Prophets are today breaking open the way to a deeper christocentric understanding of scripture.

There could, of course, be more than one deeper meaning of a text but all given meanings would have to conform to the yardstick of 'scripture governs the interpretation of scripture'.

*The Existential Meaning:* This is the level of meaning where we experientially encounter God. It is difficult to define the exact terms of this sort of encounter. Through the text, we become aware that God is communicating directly with us. It may be a sense of his presence. It may be a prophetic word to us. It may be a specific application of the text to us. It is not, however, a purely mental appreciation or experience. It transcends the soul (mind) and occurs at the level of the spirit. In a sense, it involves a different-from-normal state of consciousness.

## Conclusion

To sum up, we should not base doctrine and practice on the superficial meaning of scripture. The literal first intended meaning of scripture should be the bedrock on which we build doctrine. The mystical meaning sometimes modifies church doctrine and practice and at times it even refines both. The existential meaning normally only influences personal response and application. The literal first intended meaning informs us, the mystical meaning reforms us, and the existential meaning transforms us.

If we adopt this sort of approach to biblical interpretations we are unlikely to fall prey to the Harold Camping allegorising malady, and nor are we likely to get spiritually buried in a dead literalistic interpretation.