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*The Theology of Literalism*  
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Studying the history of Christianity reveals a variety of different beliefs and theologies. Sometimes these differences could be accommodated, but many times they led to division, excommunication, and war. Many disagreements came from different ways of interpreting the Bible, the Christian Holy Book.

It is a truism that Christians believe Christianity is true. And, since there can be only one truth, there can be only one true understanding of the Bible. The existence of many different interpretations suggests otherwise.

To combat this possibility, Fundamentalist Christianity established a principle for interpreting Scripture early in the last century, at the same time it set out its "Five Fundamentals" of belief. The principle was simple:

Read Scripture literally. Do not interpret. The meaning of Scripture did not cause differences, they argued, but the human interpretations that were applied to it did. Readers should stick to the inherent and obvious meaning of Scripture's words and sentences. Since no interpretation takes place, this should eliminate disagreements about Scripture's meaning, and hence display the one truth of the Bible.

Literalism as an approach to understanding the Bible has been remarkably successful. Sure, there are minor disagreements about specific interpretations-and a few led to splintering and new denominations-but most do not prevent broad agreement. So an initial impression is that a literalist approach to Scripture has solved the problem of the Bible's meaning.

The problem is that literalism interprets just as much as any other approach to Scripture, although it does not admit to interpretation and its practitioners do not recognize their reading as interpretation. But a brief explanation should make it clear how this is so.

Parents of elementary school children know that reading is a learned skill. What is being learned is a series of codes. Students learn the code that links letter shapes to specific sounds. They learn the code of how letter combinations form words that have assigned meanings. Students memorize the meanings of many words, but for those they do not know, they check the code book known as a dictionary. They also learn grammar, the code that governs how words can be combined into larger units of meaning known as sentences.

The ultimate goal of reading education is for students to learn these codes so well that they become unconscious, to apply these codes automatically, without thinking about them.

Codes also govern areas of knowledge and skill, areas as widely differing as cooking, auto mechanics, and chemistry. These codes create new words to identify tools, techniques, supplies, and so on. They also redefine existing words for their own use.

To understand expressions in each of these areas, a person must be trained in its principles, techniques and language. Think about how much skill and knowledge is assumed by short instructions such as "Baste the turkey at 375 degrees" and "Tighten the lug nut with a 5/8" crescent wrench to 35 PSI." Learned well, these codes also operate unconsciously.

Biblical literalism has its own code, a theology if you will. While the details of this theology differ, it is in general a dispensationalist theology holding to individual salvation, biblical inerrancy, and Christ's second coming. Literalism's theology has been taught in two main ways. First, it appears in sermons, Sunday school lessons and Bible studies. In other words, the churches that believe in literalism have an ongoing education in it.

Second, it is coded into the Bible itself. Cyrus Scofield devised a code for reading the Bible

that included cross-references, footnotes, headings and introductions. In 1909, this code was first printed in the Bible interspersed with the Scriptural text. The Scofield Bible (and its successors) follows the literalist theology. Its wide use within Fundamentalist and Evangelical Christianity has provided consistent guidance for Bible reading.

The repetitive use of these educational strategies helps believers internalize the code. When they read Scripture, then, they unconsciously apply the code to the text. Thus they interpret the text according to the code's guidelines. What appears to them as its plain meaning is actually determined by the literalism's theological code.

So literalism's success derives not from a single meaning inherent in Scripture, but from its practitioners' knowledge of its theological code. The explicit denial of this interpretive code, despite its use in sermons and its publication in the Bibles used by most literalist Christians, gives the theology power because it treats the theology as God-given revelation.

If believers see only a direct link from their beliefs to the biblical text to God, and fail to acknowledge the interpretation inherent in that chain, then they have a surety of faith that brooks no question.