

Being Christian in the 21st Century Beyond Literalism

The Need to Move Beyond Literalism

(1) In the U.S., more people have left the church because of literalism than for any other reason. And many non-Christians stay away from Christianity for the same reason.

(2) Most of us have heard literalist understandings of Christian language used in dogmatic and sometimes aggressive ways to exclude people.

(3) Many within mainline churches cannot be literalists but are uncertain about what to do with biblical/ Christian language, thus abandoning it to more conservative Christians.

So: How might we understand this ourselves, and help others to see it?

I. Christian Literalism is Modern (not ancient and traditional).

1. It is recent: the product of the last 300 years – because of the collision between the Enlightenment and Christianity.

*Biblical literalism is associated with biblical infallibility/inerrancy

*Infallibility/inerrancy first affirmed in second half of 1600s

*Prior to the modern period, a literal-factual reading of the Bible was not emphasized. What mattered most was the more-than-literal meaning, the metaphorical or symbolic or figurative meaning.

2. The Ambiguity of Literalism. What does it mean to say, “I take the Bible literally”? Is anybody REALLY a literalist?

*Does God have hands (“the right hand of God”). Does God think?

*Do snakes ever talk? (Garden of Eden story)

*A further ambiguity. Some people confuse “taking the Bible seriously” with “taking the Bible literally” *Example:* 48% of Americans think the world is less than 10,000 years old. *Why?* Because they belong to churches that teach that taking the Bible seriously means taking it literally.

II. The Alternative to Literalism: A *Historical-Metaphorical Approach* to Biblical and Christian Language

**Historical.* Not, “Did this really happen?”, but *what did this language mean in its ancient historical context?*

**Metaphorical:* the more-than-literal, more-than-historical, more-than-factual meaning of language. The “surplus of meaning” that language can carry.

*“The Bible is true, and some of it happened.”

*Thomas Mann: a myth is a story about the way things never were but always are

*“*Theology* [the language of theology] *is poetry plus, not science minus*”

III. Beyond Literalism: Our Language about God

*When language about God is understood literally or semi-literally, the result is *supernatural theism* – thinking of God as a person-like being “out there,” separate from the universe, and who relates to the world through intervention.

***Illustrating How Metaphorical Language for God “Works”: An Exercise.**

Below is a partial list of biblical metaphors for God. About each, ask the following question (with each metaphor filling in the blank): **“How is God like _____? What makes _____ a good metaphor for God?”**

God is (like) a rock.	God is (like) light.	God is (like) fire
God is (like) a shepherd	God is (like) a king	God is (like) a father
God is (like) a mother	God is (like) wind	God is (like) breath

***The most adequate language for God: God as *the encompassing Spirit*.** As “the one in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17.28)

*We live within God – the universe is shot through with the presence of God

*God as *transcendent* (more than the universe) and *immanent* (present everywhere). This way of thinking about God is commonly called *panentheism*.

***Finally:** ultimately, God, the sacred, “what is,” is beyond all language....Language can only point, stammer, stutter

IV. Beyond Literalism: Our Language about Jesus

**Jesus as “Son of God” and “Lord.”*

*When taken literally: the historical Jesus was a divine being

*When taken metaphorically: it counters Roman imperial theology which affirmed that the emperor was Son of God, Lord, and Savior. Jesus is this – Caesar is not. Jesus is Lord – the lords of this world are not. It’s about revelation (where do you see God?) and loyalty (allegiance, faithfulness).

**Divine conception – Jesus as conceived by God’s Spirit*

*When this is taken literally: a spectacular miracle

*When this is taken metaphorically: also counters Roman imperial theology and affirms that what happened in Jesus was “of the Spirit,” “of God”

**Jesus as dying for our sins, as sacrifice for sin*

*When taken literally: God requires satisfaction – without the shedding of Jesus’ blood, there is no forgiveness. Somebody must be punished. God as punitive.

*When taken metaphorically: a metaphorical proclamation of radical grace – God has already taken care of whatever we think separates us from God

**Easter: God raised Jesus.*

*When taken literally: a spectacular “once upon a time” miracle

*When taken metaphorically, its meanings are twofold: (1) Jesus lives – he continues to be known. (2) God has vindicated Jesus – Jesus is Lord, and the rulers of this world are not. These are the NT meanings.

[If a church isn’t explicit about not understanding Christian language literally, most newcomers will assume that it is. How to deal with this? PERHAPS a statement in the bulletin like the following: ***Being Christian involves being shaped by the language of the Christian tradition, including the Bible as the foundation of the tradition. Some in this church understand Christian language quite literally and factually. Others understand it symbolically and metaphorically. What we share is a common passion for the more-than-literal meaning of the stories and teachings that shape us.***]