



Biblical Hermeneutics: Principles for Bible Interpretation

8. Speech Forms (2): Metaphors and Colloquialisms

The Bible is a book that can be understood. But it can be misunderstood in the same ways we misunderstand each other in daily conversation. This can occur when we do not recognize a statement as a form of speech.

Metaphors, for example, are not to be taken literally, in conversations or in the Bible. The interpreter's challenge is to discern which statements are to be taken as metaphors and which are to be taken literally. For example, when Jesus said, "I am the door," it is clear that he does not mean he is a literal door, made of wood and metal. His point is that he is the point of entry into the kingdom of God. But is it so clear when Jesus says of the communion elements (bread and wine), "This is my body"? Some, like those in the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions, take a literal view and believe that in the process of receiving the elements the body and blood of Christ are, in some way, actually present. Others, beginning with Zwingli and then Baptists, followed by many evangelical churches, believe that Jesus was using a metaphor to say that the elements represent or symbolize his body and blood. While spiritually beneficial, they do not believe that taking communion gives a sacramental benefit. John Calvin took a mediating position, teaching that when believers take communion the Holy Spirit enables them to feed spiritually on the body and blood of Christ through faith. He maintained, then (along with many reformed and evangelical churches), some sacramental benefit to communion if received in faith.

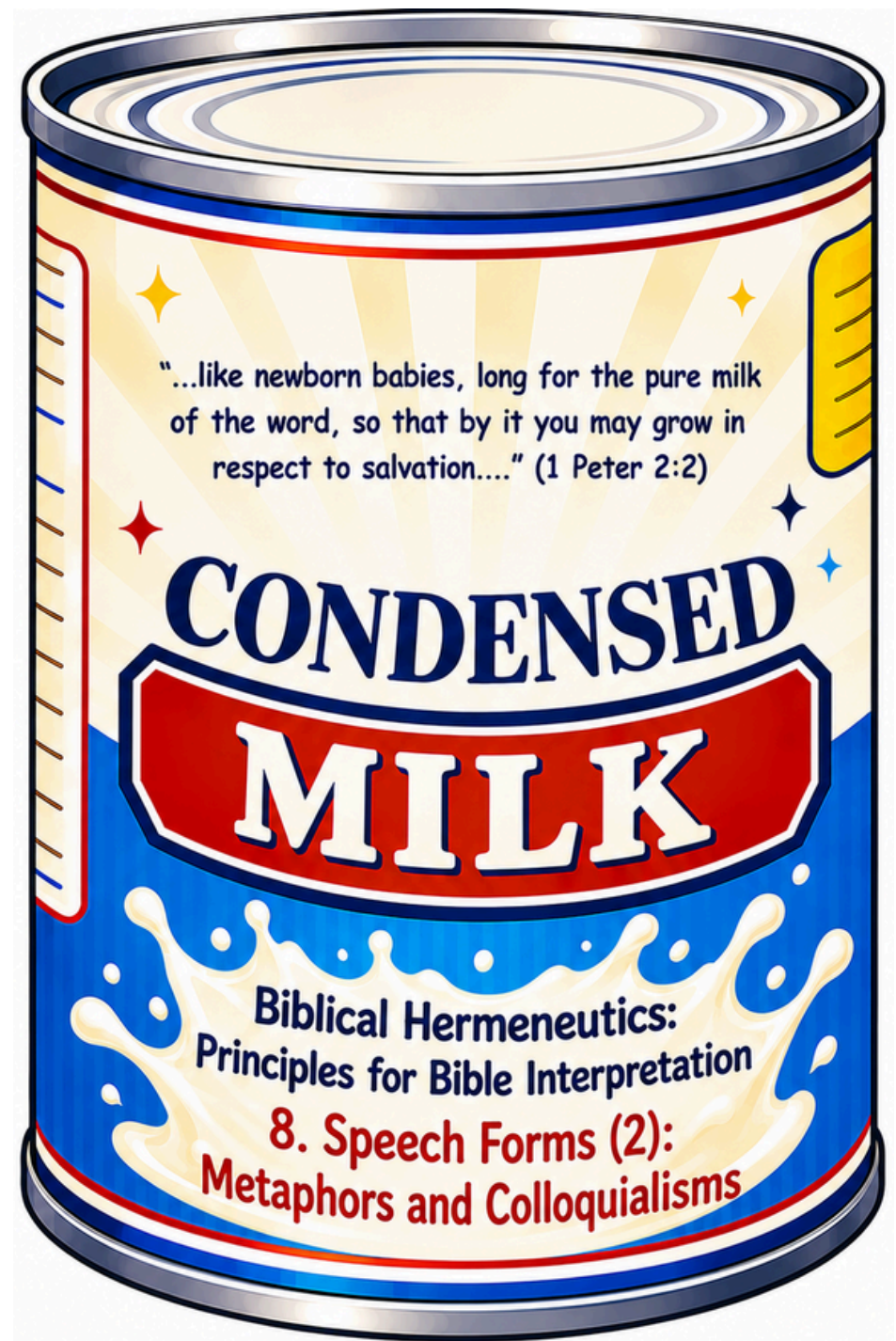
It is not my intention to settle this debate in such a short article, nor could I. I simply encourage a recognition of the Bible's use of metaphors.

It is also important to observe that sometimes the Bible uses colloquialisms, that is, figures of speech or sayings from the time and place of writing. They are not intended to communicate scientific information. Jesus, for example, stated that the kingdom of God is like the mustard seed, and that, "though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants...." (Matthew 13:32). Critics of the Bible point out that, technically, the mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds and that this proves that there are errors in the Bible.

It needs to be remembered that Jesus did not intend to make a scientific statement. He was repeating an expression common in his day to describe something that was proverbially small. Jesus uses the expression, "mustard seed" in the same way when talking about having faith "the size of a mustard seed" (Matthew 17:19-20). The expression is also found in Jewish writings like the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud. And even today an Arab proverb states "No mustard-seed slips from the hands of the miser" to underscore something minuscule.

This is the wonderful "secret" (Matthew 13:11) Jesus was revealing: Contrary to the expectation of Jewish leaders, and so also the disciples, the kingdom of God was not going to explode onto earth suddenly and in its full glory. It would start very small (which it did) and yet it would eventually become the largest religion on earth (which it now is). As this actually unfolded before the disciples' eyes it would have comforted them in their slow and small start. It was contrary to their learned expectation but, they would have recalled, "Jesus said it would happen this way" (Matthew 13:31-33).

We should not lose the wonder of these statements from Jesus by getting lost in the debate about whether he is making an accurate scientific statement. He wasn't trying to. Notice rather that as Jesus spoke, he was leading only a small band of followers, within a minority ethnic group (the Jews), that was within the vast Roman empire. Against all opposition his kingdom has spread throughout the world, becoming the largest religious group in the world, just as he said it would. A large part of the intention of predictive prophecy, which we find throughout the Bible, is to give us reasons to believe the Bible and its message. Who can say what the future will be, and do so accurately time after time, except God alone? We are to be confident that Jesus is in control and will do everything he says he will do.



"...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...." (1 Peter 2:2)

CONDENSED MILK

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