

Digging Deep: Exploring the Joy of Systematic Theology

Class 4: The Doctrine of Scripture, part 3

Sufficiency & Clarity

"... this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

John 17. 3

I. God's Word is Enough (or, the Sufficiency of Scripture)

I began to wonder if I, too, could receive messages during my times of communing with God. I had been writing in prayer journals for years, but that was one-way communication: I did all the talking. I knew that God communicated with me through the Bible, but I yearned for more. Increasingly, I wanted to hear what God had to say to me personally on a given day. I decided to listen to God with pen in hand, writing down whatever I believe He was saying. I felt awkward the first time I tried this, but I received a message. It was short, biblical, and appropriate. It addressed topics that were current in my life: trust, fear, and closeness to God. I responded by writing in my prayer journal.

Sarah Young, Jesus Calling

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed (or the more firm prophetic word – Gr), to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1. 16-21

A. Defining the Doctrine

The doctrine of the "Sufficiency of Scripture" does **NOT** mean that ...

1. The Bible answers any & every question we may have;
2. The Bible gives us what we want to know.

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Deuteronomy 29.29

The doctrine of the "Sufficiency of Scripture" **DOES** mean that ...

1. The Bible gives us everything we need to know about ...
 - Faith (what to believe)
 - Practice (how to live)

"The Scripture is clear enough to make us responsible for carrying out our present responsibilities to God."

John Frame, The Doctrine of the Word of God

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3. 16-17

2. There are no words of God spoken to us at all today except the words of Scripture. Clearly God still speaks. He is not silent. He communicates with us personally & directly. But this ongoing speech is not ongoing revelation.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

Hebrews 1. 1-2

For the word of God is living & active ...

Hebrews 4.12

B. Applying the Doctrine

1. The sufficiency of Scripture keeps both tradition & experience in their place.
2. The sufficiency of Scripture means we do not add to, or subtract from, the Scripture.
3. Since the Bible is sufficient, we can expect it to be relevant to all of life.

Scripture does not give exhaustive information on every subject, but in every subject on which it speaks, it says what is most needful & assuredly true.

James Boice, Foundations of the Christian Faith

4. The sufficiency of Scripture invites & compels us to open our Bibles to "hear" the word (voice) of God.

¹²⁹ *Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them.*

¹³⁰ *The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.*

¹³¹ *I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments.*

¹³² *Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your way with those who love your name.*

¹³³ *Keep steady my steps according to your promise, and let no iniquity get dominion over me.*

¹³⁴ *Redeem me from man's oppression, that I may keep your precepts.*

¹³⁵ *Make your face shine upon your servant, and teach me your statutes.*

¹³⁶ *My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.*

Psalms 119. 129-136

II. God's Word is Clear (or, the Clarity of Scripture)

"For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us & bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us & bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth & in your heart, so that you can do it.

Deuteronomy 30. 11-14

A. Defining the Doctrine

"Well, that's just your interpretation!"

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, & observed for salvation are so clearly propounded & opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain a sufficient understanding of them.

Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7

The doctrine of the "Clarity of Scripture" does **NOT** mean that ...

1. Every passage of Scripture is clear, or has a simple & obvious meaning;
2. The most essential doctrines of the Bible are equally clear in every passage of Scripture;
3. The most important points in the Scripture may be understood perfectly.

The doctrine of the Clarity of Scripture **DOES** mean that ...

1. Some portions of Scripture are clearer than others;
2. The main things we need to know, believe, and do can be clearly seen in the Bible:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality ...

1 Thes. 4.3

... give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thes. 5.18

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6.8

... this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

1 John 5.3

3. The most essential doctrines of the Bible are made clear somewhere in the Bible;
4. That which is necessary for salvation can be understood by the uneducated, provided they make use of the ordinary means of study & learning.

5. The most important points in the Bible can be understood sufficiently.

God communicates to reveal, not to obscure.

John Calvin

The doctrine of the perspicuity of Holy Scripture has frequently been misunderstood & misrepresented, both by Protestants & Catholics. It does not mean that the matters & subjects with which Scripture deals are not mysteries that far exceed the reach of the human intellect. Nor does it assert that Scripture is clear in all its parts, so that no scientific exegesis is needed, or that, also in its doctrine of salvation, Scripture is plain & clear to every person without distinction. It means only that the truth, the knowledge of which is necessary to everyone for salvation, though not spelled out with equal clarity on every page of Scripture, is nevertheless presented throughout all of Scripture in such a simple & intelligible form that a person concerned about the salvation of his or her soul can easily, by personal reading and study, learn to know that truth from Scripture without the assistance & guidance of the church and the priest. The way of salvation, not as it concerns the matter itself but as it concerns the mode of transmission, has been clearly set down there for the reader desirous of salvation. While that reader may not understand the "how" (πῶς) of it, the "that" (ὅτι) is clear.

Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics

B. Applying the Doctrine

1. This doctrine affirms the value of human language.
2. This doctrine affirms the ability & responsibility for each person to read & interpret the Scriptures correctly;
3. This doctrine safeguards the conscience.

The teaching of the perspicuity of Scripture is one of the strongest bulwarks of the Reformation. It also most certainly brings with it its own serious perils. Protestantism has been hopelessly divided by it, and individualism has developed at the expense of the people's sense of community. The freedom to read and to examine Scripture has been and is being grossly abused by all sorts of groups and schools of thought.

On balance, however, the disadvantages do not outweigh the advantages. For the denial of the clarity of Scripture carries with it the subjection of the layperson to the priest, or a person's conscience to the church. The freedom of religion and the human conscience, of the church and theology, stands and falls with the perspicuity of Scripture. It alone is able to maintain the freedom of the Christian; it is the origin and guarantee of religious liberty as well as of our political freedoms.

Even a freedom that cannot be obtained and enjoyed aside from the dangers of licentiousness & caprice is still always so to be preferred over a tyranny that suppresses liberty.

Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics

4. This doctrine safeguards the doctrine of who God is.
5. This doctrine safeguards our understanding of those for whom God came.

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple...

Psalm 19.7