

Digging Deep: Exploring the Joy of Systematic Theology
Class 5: The Doctrine of Scripture, part 4
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 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. 11-1

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 (**example: John 3.16**)
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 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

God, then, does not profess to answer in Scripture all the questions that we, in our boundless curiosity, would like to ask about Scripture. He tells us merely as much as He sees we need to know as a basis for our life of faith. And he leaves unsolved some of the problems raised by what He tells us, in order to teach us a humble trust in His veracity. The question, therefore, that we must ask ourselves when faced with these puzzles is not, is it reasonable to imagine that this is so? but, is it reasonable to accept God's assurance that this is so? Is it reasonable to take God's word and believe that He has spoken the truth, even though I cannot fully comprehend what He has said? The question carries its own answer. We should not abandon faith in anything God has taught us merely because we cannot solve all the problems which it raises. Our own intellectual competence is not the test and measure of divine truth. It is not for us to stop believing because we lack understanding, but to believe in order that we may understand.

J.I. Packer, Fundamentalism

II. God's Word is Needed (the Necessity of Scripture)

⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written,

*"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him" —*

¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

I Corinthians 2. 6-13

A. Defining the Doctrine

*We need the revelation of God to know God,
and the only sure, saving, final, perfect revelation of God is found in Scripture."*

This doctrine makes 3 things clear ...

1. The One we need to know cannot be discovered on our own
2. This unknowable One has made Himself known through His Word.
3. Though all truth is God's truth, all **saving** truth is **revealed** truth.

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." **John 6.68**

The spiritual person, therefore, is the one who accepts the message of the cross. We are truly spiritual if, and only if, the Spirit of Christ has given us the mind of Christ to receive the good news concerning the death and resurrection of Christ. No matter how much you like angels, or how much you pray, or how often you meditate, or how much you are into yoga, or how much you believe in miracles, if you do not understand, cherish, and embrace the cross you are not a spiritual person. The spiritual person discerns spiritual things, starting with the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on the cross for sinners like you and me. To accept this gospel, with all its doctrinal and religious contours, is the beginning of true spirituality. For in the end, our slogans and endless searching do not count for much, neither does our interest in reading Chicken Soup for the Soul. If we reject the message of the cross, we have rejected the Spirit's revelatory work. And when we spurn the Spirit we forfeit the right to be considered spiritual.

Kevin DeYoung, Taking God at His Word