

The clarity of Scripture and its relation to orthodoxy

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15 November 2004
Systematic Theology 3021
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Orthodoxy is a very unpopular concept in 21st century America. In a post-modern climate, the concept of orthodoxy is at odds with the prevailing view that there are no common norms, only individual views and values. Orthodoxy includes the assumption that there *is* a universal norm for truth, and that human statements either align with that norm or violate it. It excludes, it restricts, it defines, it absolutizes, it norms. As a result, it is not becoming any easier to maintain and preserve the orthodox teachings of Scripture.

Meanwhile, there are myriad forces seeking to undermine, chip away at, and ultimately destroy orthodoxy and rob the world of truth. One of the strongest forces that threaten the truth is the critical approach to Scripture. This error certainly exists in the coarse form of negative criticism in heterodox seminaries, universities, and theological minds. But there is a subtler, more prevalent way that an orthodox confession is “up-for-grabs” even among conservative Lutherans. With all the doctrinal disagreement between churches who claim to draw their teaching from the Bible, some are tempted not only to ask, “How do we know we’re right?” but also “Is Scripture clear enough to provide a universal “right” at all when it comes to doctrine?” These are obviously important questions to answer, because the certainty of souls, an orthodox confession, and firm, consistent doctrinal discipline hang in the balance. Our answer is that the Scriptures do indeed convey a clear message of objective truth that can be known with certainty and that serves as a norm for all human statements.

What is scriptural clarity? Franz Pieper writes: “According to Scripture, the perspicuity of Scripture consists in this, that it presents, in language that can be understood by all, whatever men must know to be saved.”¹ There are really two ways to describe the clarity of Scripture. Luther understood this and describes it well. He writes: “The perspicuity of Scripture is

¹ Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950, p.320.

twofold...The first is external, and relates to the ministry of the Word; the second concerns the knowledge of the heart.”² In other words, Scripture is clear in two senses. It has objectively clear meaning in itself as it is proclaimed, taught, and read. Its meaning is also subjectively clear in the individual heart and mind through the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

A more recent theologian describes Scripture’s external, or objective clarity in this way:

This clarity which Scripture ascribes to itself is, first of all, an outward clarity. It consists in this that in the words and sentences of intelligible, comprehensible language Scripture clearly expresses all the truths which it wishes to teach and which we need to know for our faith and life. Any rational human being who reads and studies the statements of Holy Scripture, carefully marking and observing the meaning of the words which it employs, the grammatical construction with which they are joined together in sentences, the figures of speech, if any, in which the statements are clothed, and the context and setting in which the statements are found, will have to say: This and this alone is what Scripture is stating.³

However, many throughout history have categorically denied that Scripture communicates clearly. Prominent among these is the Church of Rome. Chemnitz correctly attributes Rome’s denial of Scriptural clarity to sheer arrogance:

“...the papalists arrogate to themselves also this right, that they are able even in the clearest passages of Scripture freely to depart from the simple and true meaning which the proper significance of the word gives and by such dictatorial authority to patch on another meaning, so that we must believe not what the Scriptures says simply, strictly, and clearly but what they through their power and authority interpret for us.”⁴

In addition, many a doctrinal controversy has been rooted in the deeper issue of scriptural clarity.

At the time of the Reformation, Luther’s debate with Erasmus over the doctrine of free will had its foundation in differing views about Scripture’s clarity. In his *Bondage of the Will* Luther quotes Erasmus:

...if you turn your eyes to Scripture, both sides claim it as their own. Furthermore, our controversy is not merely over Scripture (which is somewhat deficient in clarity at present), but over the precise meaning of Scripture; and here not the numbers, learning

² Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1957, p.73.

³ Carl Lawrenz, “The Absolute Authority of the Word of God in Matters of Faith and Life,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 48, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House) 1998.

⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Vol I., St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971, p. 213.

and distinction on the one side, much less the paucity, ignorance and lack of distinction on the other, can advance either cause.⁵

The widespread lack of agreement with no apparent advantage on either side, both of whom claimed the Bible, led Erasmus to blame Scripture. His specific error regarding free will was closely connected to his denial of scriptural clarity.

Then, in the early 20th century, John Schaller described the link between Lutheran merger-mania and a lack of confidence in Scripture's ability to convey clear, certain truth: "whoever is of that opinion [unionism] will simply set aside all doctrinal differences and declare them to be irrelevant. But in that lies the confession that they regard it to be labor lost to objectively ascertain the truth."⁶ In other words, some consider it an impossible task to find objective truth in Scripture. While the question of objective truth also concerns the verbal inspiration, divine authority, and sufficiency of Scripture, Schaller highlights the issue of clarity: "...we want to say that a man can only possess the truth through Holy Scripture, but *also that Scripture really offers clear truth to every man* [emphasis added]."⁷

Schaller describes how a denial of Scripture's clarity progressively erodes an orthodox confession: "If it is conceded in an important doctrinal point that establishing the truth is impossible, then one calls into question whether the correctness of any doctrine can be shown objectively."⁸ At issue, then, in the question of fellowship and union was not only which teaching aligns with the truth, but whether there *is* even an objective truth that we can all agree on. This is certain: without a firm conviction that Scripture is objectively clear, an orthodox confession falls apart, not only at specific points, but in principle.

⁵ Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, p. 123.

⁶ John Schaller, "The Possession of the Truth," *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. I, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997, p. 134.

⁷ Schaller, p. 135.

⁸ Schaller, p. 134.

The question then arises how this firm conviction about the objective clarity of Scripture is obtained. It is Scripture itself that must make its own case. And what does Scripture say about itself to persuade a believer that the Bible is clear, not only in fundamental doctrines, but in all its teachings? Here Roland Hoenecke's observation is pertinent: "The Bible never argues its clearness; it simply assumes it."⁹ While one searches in vain for a passage that states its clarity in propositional form, there are, of course, statements made in Scripture that provide insight into Scripture's nature, in which clarity is assumed. We will present some of these statements, according to a few basic categories.

First, the Bible includes descriptions of itself in a very broad sense. Scripture is "the word of God" (1 Th 2:13). It is of divine, not human origin, yet was recorded by human writers (2 Pe 1:20, 2 Ti 3:16). Scripture will never be broken or pass away (Jn. 10:35; Lk 16:17; Mt. 5:18,19; Lk 21:33; 1 Pe 1:23ff). These human writers, while they wrote exactly as God inspired them to write, also wrote under the influence of their own personalities, styles, and circumstances (2 Pe 1:16, Col. 4:16). Jesus himself makes this clear when he describes Moses' writings as "what God said to you [the Jews]" and the Psalms as "David, speaking by the Spirit" (Mt 22:31,43). Even in these general statements about Scripture, clarity is simply assumed. Why would God be so careful in inspiring the words and writers with an everlasting message if the result would be mere nonsense? Or, what sense does it make for human writers, though inspired, to record history for posterity, compose didactic and devotional poetry for the people, or write letters to fellow Christians if the message were incomprehensible or garbled to their audiences?

The matter becomes clearer when we consider what happens when Scripture is in action. It is described as illuminating the way like a light (Ps. 119:105; 2 Pe 1:16). It is able to convey

⁹ Roland Hoenecke, *The Doctrine of the Word*, unpublished manuscript, date unknown, p.32

knowledge and salvation (2 Ti 3:15; Ro 1:16; Ep 3:4; Ps 119), life and rebirth (Jn 6:63ff; 1 Pe 1:23), and faith (Jn 17:20; Ro 10:17). It is sharp and powerful like a sword (He 4:12; Ep 6:17), it is able to demolish strongholds, take thoughts and make them captive to Christ (2 Co 10:3-5). It was known since infancy (1 Ti 3:15). How does the picture of an illuminating light or a piercing sword fit the Word if it requires human illumination to understand it? How can a message, a Word, possess and demonstrate the power to bring to faith, regenerate, and save the spiritually dead if that message says one thing to one person and another thing to another?

We receive more insight when we consider the commands that humans are given concerning Scripture. Again and again, people are instructed to hold and keep its teachings and truth as the pattern for what is to be taught (Jn 8:31-32; 2 Th 2:15; 2 Ti 1:13). Peter says that preachers should preach as ones speaking the very words of God. Paul encourages Timothy and the Thessalonians to read Scripture in public (1 Ti 4:13; 1 Th. 5:27). Although compared to the total list of commands concerning Scripture this list is quite short, it speaks volumes about scriptural clarity. For the word and its truths to function as a norm for teaching, it must have a clear message that everyone can agree on; otherwise it would only exacerbate divisions over doctrine. Why read Scripture in public if it's unintelligible to the hearers? Why command those who have ears to hear if the hearing has no hope of yielding understanding?

Or consider the various descriptions and warnings concerning those who hold to the word versus those who don't. When a believer holds to God's Word, he is like a flourishing tree (Ps 1), he is able to refute false teachers (Tt 1:9-11), and he grows spiritually from baby to adult (1 Pe 2:2; Ep 4:14). Contrast that with those who pervert (Ga 1:6-9), distort (2 Pe 3:16), turn their backs on (2 Pe 2:21), do not submit to (1 Th), and reject (Tt 1:14) God's Word. These are described as dogs, beasts, blind guides, liars, antichrists, etc., who will escape as through the

flames (1 Co 3:15), be eternally condemned (Ga 1:17), who cause divisions (Tt 3:9-11; Ro 16:17), etc. God most certainly does insist that his truth can be known, and demands that it be kept, taught, and believed purely and faithfully. There *is* a pattern of sound teaching that serves to evaluate human statements, and there are serious consequences for those who deviate. How pointless and unjust all these commands would be if the Word were not a clear source of teaching and a clear standard for judging teaching! How silly to hold up the Bereans as exemplary Christians (Ac 17:11) if they could not, in fact, determine from a study of Scripture whether what Paul said was true!

Finally, how instructive it is to notice who receives the blame in Scripture for a lack of understanding of the Word, and who receives credit for faith and understanding! Jesus frequently calls people, including his disciples, “foolish,” “slow of heart,” “blind” when they don’t understand the Scriptures (Lk 24:25-26; Mt 22:29). While we would agree that the Old Testament is less explicit than the New Testament, how foreign it would be to Jesus’ outlook to apologize for Scripture or agree with those who felt it was unclear! Jesus told his disciples that they were experiencing the fulfillment of “being taught by God” and that his words were “spirit and life” (John 6:45,63). In the very next breath he says that some don’t believe (Jn 6:64). Who would dare to accuse God of being a poor teacher, or of finding fault with these life-giving words when someone doesn’t believe? Rather, it is the shepherd’s voice that is recognizable to the sheep (Jn 10:27), the Father who reveals his truths to little children (Mt 11:25), and the Spirit who gives faith, and spiritual discernment (1 Co 2:11-16).

There are two things to yet note concerning the case made for clarity in the passages given, as well as in the whole of Scripture. The first concerns the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles. That division is based on the doctrine of salvation:

that man is saved by the grace of the Triune God, carried out in the vicarious atonement of the Divine-Human, virgin-born Son of God, Jesus Christ, and appropriated by Spirit-wrought faith in Christ. That clear, emphatic teaching of Scripture rules out teachings such as fellowship or the Antichrist, or even the Lord's Supper as articles necessary for salvation. And as Franz Pieper's earlier cited definition spells out, Scripture's clarity *is* primarily that Scripture clearly communicates what is needed for salvation. Yet when Scripture assumes its own clarity, the division between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines is simply foreign to the thinking. It simply assumes everywhere that its teachings *can* be understood, compared, judged, and taught.

The second point to note is that external clarity is meaningless without internal clarity. Here the words of Prof. Carl Lawrenz serve well as a reminder of the important distinction between external and internal clarity:

Yet the clarity which Holy Scripture asserts for itself goes much deeper than this outward clarity, vital though it is. The clarity of Scripture is above all a spiritual one and consists in this that it possesses the power to win acceptance for the truths of faith and life which it clearly teaches. It has the power to effect in us a spiritual understanding and comprehension of these truths, a blessed comprehension of faith.¹⁰

Scripture really is objectively clear, in that it is constructed in language that carries a clear meaning (and though not all know the language, the language is capable of being understood once it is learned). But that objective clarity means nothing to a person unless he has also observed its subjective clarity. For instance, someone may recognize that Scripture has a clear message for all, yet refuse to believe it.

One might assume that the opposite is true, that before one can see Scripture's clear message for themselves, they must first acknowledge that Scripture is objectively clear to all. Yet this approach runs afoul of rationalism. Many of the arguments for clarity

¹⁰ Carl Lawrenz, "The Absolute Authority of the Word of God in Matters of Faith and Life," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 48, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House) 1998.

have corresponding opposites equally defensible according to reason. This argument may be made, for example: any divine revelation must be clear; the Bible is not clear; therefore, the Bible is not divine revelation. Finally, any attempt to *prove* objective clarity is unreliable, even an attempt based on arguments from Scripture. For Scripture passages will persuade *only a believer*, since the clarity of Scripture is ultimately embraced only by faith through the working and persuasion of the Holy Spirit.

To present the sequence in order: first, the soul learns the main message of Scripture, i.e., the gospel, by the operation of the Holy Spirit (and not without some study of the language, history, and context of the Bible); second, the soul sees in faith that the Bible is, in fact, a clear writing, not simply based on rational observation of the words and constructions, but because he understands what the Bible says (though certainly not perfectly or in every passage); third, the soul develops the confidence born of the Spirit that the Scriptures are not only clear for him, but that they are clear for all other human readers also (whether he sees evidence of that or not). Only then will a believer come to the conviction that the Scriptures are clear enough to use as a standard in judging all teaching. To summarize: Every true conviction concerning the clarity of Holy Scripture flows from the Scriptures themselves by the operation of the Holy Spirit, and furthermore, flows from that basic comprehension of the Bible's message, or saving faith in the gospel.

Therefore, the best way to undergird this pillar of orthodoxy is simply to read, learn, mark, and inwardly digest Scripture, and encourage the same in others, that the Holy Spirit may further enlighten and illumine the soul with the bright shining light of the gospel. Then when an orthodox confession is made and defended, it is not based on man's wisdom, but on God's power.

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