

**CBC Sunday School**  
**Bibliology: Clarity/Perspicuity**  
**October 17, 2021**

“The entire Scriptures – the Prophets and the Gospels – can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all, although all do not believe them.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.27.1-2

“For among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith and the manner of life.” Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 2.9.14

“The Holy Spirit has, with admirable wisdom and care for our welfare, so arranged the Holy Scriptures as by the plainer passages to satisfy our hunger, and by the more obscure to stimulate our appetite.” Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 2.8

“In its obvious sense, it [Scripture] has food to nourish little ones. In its secret meaning, it can command the admiration of the most learned minds. It is almost like a river, both shallow and deep, in which a lamb may walk and an elephant swim.” Gregory the Great, *Moralia*, “Epistle” 4

“The question is not whether we are haughty enough to think we have peered into the recesses of eternity and understand God omnisciently. The question is whether God is the sort of God who is willing to communicate with His creatures and able to do so effectively. Can God speak? Or is He gagged?... Is God wise enough to make himself known? Is he good enough to make himself accessible? Is he gracious enough to communicate in ways that are understandable to the meek and lowly?” Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*, p. 68-9

## **I. Table Discussion**

Very briefly summarize the meaning of some of the following Bible verses:

- John 3:16
- Romans 8:1
- 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Mark 3:28-30
- 1 Corinthians 15:29
- 1 Peter 3:7
- James 5:15
- 1 Peter 3:18-20

What are we to do with passages of Scripture whose meaning is unclear?

## II. Definitions and Considerations

### A. Definitions:

1. Perspicuity – clearness or lucidity, as of a statement (dictionary.com)
2. “Scripture is always clear enough for us to carry out our present responsibilities before God.” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 207
3. “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 and 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 and guidance of the church and the priest.” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 1*, p. 477
4. “The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God’s help and being willing to follow it.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 108
5. “whether he [Jesus] is speaking to scholars or untrained common people, his responses always assume that the blame for misunderstanding any teaching of Scripture is not to be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but on those who misunderstand or fail to accept what is written.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 106
6. “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, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and 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 unto a sufficient understanding of them.” Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7
7. “Perspicuity is a property of Scripture as a whole and of each portion of Scripture whereby it is comprehensible to all believers who possess the normal acquired ability to understand oral communication and/or written discourse, regardless of their gender, age, education, language, or cultural background. However, the level of people’s comprehension of perspicuous Scripture is appropriate to and usually varies proportionately with various factors, including, but not limited to, spiritual maturity. In addition, the doctrine of perspicuity is always affirmed in the context of a believing community, a context which assumes the assistance of others in attaining a more precise understanding of Scripture, and perspicuity requires a dependence on the Holy Spirit for Scripture to be grasped and calls for a responsive obedience to what is understood. Moreover, perspicuity includes the comprehensibility of the way of salvation to unbelievers who are aided by the Holy Spirit, and it does not exclude some type of cognition of Scripture in general by unbelievers.” Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology*, p. 140 (footnote)

### B. Considerations:

1. Not every part of Scripture is equally clear, or essential for our faith. 2 Peter 3:15-16.
2. Not every Christian will have an equal understanding. Learning in community, from others, is part of the “due use of the ordinary means” by which we might know Scripture.
3. Not everything about God will be known. He is infinite.

4. The Scriptures will not bring clarity to all. To some, who are darkened in mind and understanding, the clear Scriptures will actually bring confusion. See Matthew 13:10-17. This is not by accident, but by God's design. See also Isaiah 6:9-10.
5. The Holy Spirit and Christ Himself are needed to truly understand Scripture. See John 5:39-40; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; 1 Corinthians 2:14.
6. The letters and writings of Scripture are not addressed to only the spiritual elite, but to the whole congregation of God's people.

### **III. The Bible on the Clarity of Scripture**

- A. Deuteronomy 30:11-14 – God's word is "close" – it can be known! Moses is imploring the people to keep the commandments of God, for the sake of their lives. And he is emphasizing that the rules are not impossible. It is not impossible to follow God, because He has made His will clearly known and knowable. Note: they are already redeemed and "saved" as a community, liberated from Egypt. So this is not about salvation, or entering into relationship with God. Moses is saying that for God's redeemed people, God's word is sufficiently clear for them to understand and obey it.
- B. Nehemiah 8:8 – Ezra and the priests were able to read and interpret the law for the people, giving the sense of it, and the people understood it.
- C. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 – God's word can and is expected to be taught to our children.
- D. Psalm 19:7; 119:105, 130 – The law gives light and wisdom to the simple.
- E. 2 Kings 22-23 – Even after losing the law for many years, the people were able to understand and immediately apply it.
- F. James 1:5-8 – We are told to ask for wisdom if we lack it. This reveals God's heart, that He does not want His people confused, but desires to give wisdom and clear instruction.
- G. Matthew 9:13; 12:3-5; 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31; Mark 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3 – Jesus expects the Jewish people to have read and understood the meaning of Scripture. Repeatedly He says, "have you not read?" Jesus assumes there is meaning in the text that is fixed, and should be understood and applied, even if the Scriptures are 500-2,000 years old.
- H. Matthew 4:4 – If man lives on God's word, then every man must be able to know it.
- I. Isaiah 55:10-11 – God's word accomplishes his purpose; thus its purpose is not confused or undecipherable.
- J. 1 Corinthians 2:14 – The Spirit is needed for understanding the wisdom of God, and Scripture will not be understood rightly by those unwilling to receive it.
- K. 1 Timothy 2:5 – There is one mediator between God and man. Though this verse speaks specifically to the reality of reconciliation only through Jesus, it has application for how we understand Scripture and God, affirming that we do not need a human, priestly mediator to connect us to God. All can know God through His Word, Jesus Christ.
- L. Jeremiah 31:34 – In the New Covenant era, in which the Spirit indwells the Church, Christians can truly know God without the necessary help of a "teacher." The "least" in the Church shall know God truly.

### **IV. Objections**

- A. God is mysterious and high above and unknowable, and we are putting "God in a box." Our definitions and assertions limit Him, and He can't be described in human language.

- B. We need tradition and history to interpret Scripture for us. (The Catholic objection – specifically the pope, bishops, clergy, and their rulings are needed.)
- C. If the Bible is clear, why can't we agree on it? Why are there so many differing perspectives? Isn't it arrogant to assume you know something certainly, and that a teaching or doctrine is "clear"?
- D. Scripture is not God's Word to us, but a bunch of human words about God.
- E. Human language and communication is so flawed and broken that it cannot be relied upon to communicate reliable truth.

## V. Discussion and Application

- A. Why might the clarity of Scripture be a doctrine under attack? Why might speech itself, and the trustworthiness of language, be disregarded by some today?
- B. How do we build trust in the reliability of language, the possibility of communicating certain truth, and the clarity of Scripture? Why is it important that we affirm the clarity of Scripture?
- C. If Scripture is sufficiently clear on its own, what is the role of those who teach Scripture?
- D. What would happen to a culture that became convinced that truth was not knowable to all, and not everyone was fit to understand truth? What would be the wider implications? Who would be deemed worthy to be able to understand and know the truth?
- E. What are the potential dangers or concerns that come with asserting that every person can read and know the truth of Scripture? Why were men, like William Tyndale, persecuted and even killed for translating the text of Scripture into a common language?

"The Roman church feared that if laymen were to interpret Scripture for themselves, they would come up with unorthodox, even bizarre interpretations of it. That fear, as we can now observe, was not groundless." John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p 202

"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 of our political freedoms." Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 1*, p. 479

"In no case should we think that persistent disagreements on some subject through the history of the church mean that we will be unable to come to a correct conclusion on that subject ourselves. Rather, if a genuine concern about some such arises in our lives, we should sincerely ask God's help and then go to Scripture, searching it with all our ability, believing that God will enable us to understand rightly." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 109