

The Perspicuity of Scripture

By Gerry Breshears

How did the evangelical church come to insist that the message of the Bible is clear?

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF BELIEF

The Church has not always believed that Scripture is clear enough for everyone to read without an official interpretation. Soon after the apostolic period, allegorical methods with roots in Greek philosophy began influencing the interpretation of Scripture. Many of the Church Fathers found "spiritual" meanings hidden beneath the literal words of Scripture. Often the spiritual meaning bore no obvious relationship to the literal meaning. The Church eventually adopted the view that since the Church was the proper guardian of Scripture, only its representatives could interpret authoritatively what was the true meaning of Scripture. The laity were denied free access to the Scriptures lest they interpret them improperly and disseminate false doctrine.

In the later Middle Ages, the allegorical approach to hermeneutics began to lose its hold. Some theologians promoted a modified methodology, most notably St. Thomas Aquinas. Others threw out allegory and insisted that Scripture was so clear that even an uneducated believer could understand at the very least the Bible's message of salvation and its instructions for holy living. A corollary of this position was that all persons should have access to the Bible in the vernacular. The Reformers of the 16th century began to formulate the doctrine that came to be known as the Perspicuity of Scripture.

Evangelicals are heirs of this doctrine. Evangelicals believe that Scripture is comprehensible enough so that, with the aid of the Holy Spirit and by using a sound hermeneutic that allows Scripture to interpret itself, anyone who desires to do so can understand God's message. This being true, all Christians should have unrestricted access to God's Word in his or her own language.

To a generation of Christians unschooled in the historical reasons for the Reformers' declaring Scripture clear, the traditional name for the doctrine has been perhaps misleading. The implication of the word perspicuity is that any believer of average intelligence should be able to read the Bible and understand what it is talking about. If that is so, then there is no need for any ecclesiastical judge to declare authoritatively the meaning of a scriptural passage. When this position is taken to an extreme—as it has been by some Protestants—the individual becomes the supreme authority on the meaning of Scripture, claiming revelation from the Holy Spirit to authenticate an interpretation not necessarily validated by the Church as a whole. The ludicrousness of this extreme position is quickly seen when multiple contradictory interpretations supposedly come from the same Holy Spirit of truth,¹ with the result that truth is made relative.

A typical Catholic argument runs like this: "If Scripture is clear, why are there so many Protestant denominations? Why can't Protestants agree among themselves about the meaning of Scripture?" If we are to respond honestly, we must admit that the scandal of division among Protestants over supposedly biblical issues does not provide credibility to the assertion that Scripture is clear. It is a charge that cannot be lightly dismissed.

Protestants as well have trouble with the doctrine.² When asked whether Scripture is clear, they will frequently interpret the question as "Do you understand the meaning of Scripture?" The answer will then be an honest "No." There are many passages of Scripture that are hard to understand, a situation made even more complicated by the knowledge that Protestant churches disagree over some major issues while all appeal to Scripture to back up their beliefs. How, then, is it possible to say that Scripture is clear?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to realize that the perspicuity of any message can be viewed from two perspectives: (1) that of the message as it has come from the speaker, and (2) that of the message as it is heard by the listener. Since language always involves two parties, both parties must be playing the same language-game in order for communication to be successful.³

The author of Scripture is also the creator of language. Furthermore, as the omniscient God who chose to reveal himself and his will to man, he knew thoroughly all the rules of the language-game. God is not a cheater. Although his revelation may have been selective, the truth he chose to reveal was disclosed according to the rules of the language-games known by the writers of Scripture.⁴ The message itself, then, was clear. From this perspective, the perspicuity of Scripture means that there is no way whereby the message could have been improved. It was true and it was clear. To say otherwise is to put a limitation either on God's ability to deliver a message or on his ability to choose the appropriate persons to record the message.

From the perspective of the listener, however, Scripture may not be clear. It is this perspective from which most people answer when asked if Scripture is clear. A negative response does not denigrate the quality of the message. Rather, it calls us to recognize that there are factors which can distort or prevent one's understanding of an otherwise clear message.

Although these factors can vary, one element with which everyone must deal is linguistic. In reading Scripture, the language-game that we must play is not the same language-game used when Scripture was written, even though the message was intended for us as much as it was for the original recipients.⁵ We are all dependent upon translations, and every translation is itself the result of interpretation.⁶ The Hebrew scholar, John Sailhamer, writes:

[It] must be recognized that the task of translating the Bible is itself a theological one. Before any text can be translated, it must be understood and interpreted. No matter how distasteful the idea may be to us, the process of understanding a text or a passage and then translating it is latent with theological decisions. It is not an exaggeration to say that a translation is already a rudimentary biblical theology. Translations range from very literal to extreme paraphrases, but in every case they are a reflection both of the original and the theological decisions of the translators.⁷

Martin Luther, who was largely responsible for giving form to the doctrine of perspicuity, also saw more than one perspective for scriptural perspicuity. He defined three categories of perspicuity: grammatical, spiritual, and essential. *Grammatical* perspicuity relates to the use of language itself. Anyone of average intelligence can understand the sentences of Scripture even though he or she chooses not to believe them. *Spiritual* clarity means that only those who have accepted God's grace in Jesus Christ can understand the spiritual concepts.⁸ *Essential* clarity "refers to the understanding of the mysteries of the faith, of which St. Paul speaks in 1 Cor.13:9-12. The Bible thus is grammatically clear to all men of sound mind; it is spiritually clear to all who believe in Christ; it is essentially clear to the saints in heaven, who see God face to face."⁹ It is this last category, essential clarity, that characterizes the nature of Scripture as it came from God. In the perfection of heaven, all barriers to understanding God's revelation will be removed.

We can therefore say that Scripture is clear (1) because perspicuity describes the very nature of the message as it came from God; and (2) because it is indeed possible for all people, and for believers in particular, to understand that message. From this latter perspective, the doctrine of perspicuity is not absolute but qualified. As stated earlier, "Scripture is comprehensible enough so that, with the aid of the Holy Spirit and by using a sound hermeneutic that allows Scripture to interpret itself, anyone who desires to do so can understand God's message." If we break this statement into its parts, several limitations to perspicuity *from the listener's perspective* are immediately apparent.

Scripture is comprehensible enough

Certainly there are many *concepts* within Scripture that are not clear even to the most able exegete. Perspicuity of Scripture does not deny this. Perspicuity, however, is based on a view of God that sees him as the one who reveals, not the one who hides. “Comprehensible enough” means that the teachings of Scripture are presented in straightforward language that can be understood in the normal way that one hears and understands language.

The psalmist calls God’s Word a lamp and a light because of its power to illumine the paths of life.¹⁰ Similarly, the proverbs of Solomon light the way to life: “For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and the corrections of discipline are the way to life . . .”¹¹ Moses, speaking for God, declares that the written Word “is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. . . . No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”¹²

In the New Testament, Paul writes to the Corinthians: “My letters have been straight-forward, and there is nothing written between the lines and nothing you can’t understand. I hope someday you will fully understand us, even if you don’t fully understand us now.”¹³ In these words there is encouragement: Paul’s words—Scripture to us—are clear enough that they can be understood. If not now, then later. He repeats this same idea in Philippians. After comparing his own zealous religious past with the new goals he had in Christ, he counsels his readers: “All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”¹⁴

Even Peter indicated that some things in Paul’s letters weren’t easy to understand.¹⁵ However, the fact that Peter recognized Paul’s ideas were being distorted by others witnesses to their comprehensibility. Otherwise he could not have discerned that the meaning was being twisted.

So that, with the aid of the Holy Spirit

Even persons without faith can understand the sentences of Scripture, assuming that a good translation is being used.¹⁶ This is true, regardless of whether one is reading or listening to Scripture.¹⁷ Without faith, however, the message itself may sound discordant because the spiritual concepts of Scripture are out of tune with the worldview of unbelievers.

The Bible is written in human language, but it is a divine message delivered by the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ The one who has been given life by the Spirit is led by the Spirit and is enabled to understand the spiritual message that only sounds like foolishness to the one who does not know God. Whether the message of a passage is simple or more profound, understanding is indeed a possibility to the one who has the Spirit.

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.¹⁹

Perspicuity requires the Spirit’s activity, not just his presence. In the context of the above passage from 1 Corinthians 2, not everyone had received understanding because not all were allowing the Spirit to work freely. Paul addressed the Corinthian Christians as carnal believers, as mere infants that couldn’t be fed solid food because their spiritual digestive systems had not developed enough to be able to handle it.²⁰ They had been given the Spirit, as attested by the spiritual gifts distributed among them,²¹ but were hindered in their understanding because of their divisive attitudes and worldly behavior. Nevertheless, because the Spirit was theirs, the potential

for understanding was still within their grasp. Paul, in claiming to have the wisdom of God, did not regard this possession as a private privilege but as something to which all were entitled if they would take advantage of it.²²

And by using a sound hermeneutic

It is in the matter of interpretation that some of the major differences have arisen regarding the perspicuity of Scripture. The roots of the disagreement are historical. As described below, allegory became a significant method for interpreting Scripture in the post-apostolic period; this approach required seeking a deeper and more spiritual meaning of Scripture beyond the transparent meaning of the words. Although allegory was not a universally accepted method, it was the method that prevailed into the Middle Ages. It was this allegorical method to which the Reformers objected, especially that which produced fanciful interpretations that seemed to depart so far from the literal meaning of language.

According to the doctrine of perspicuity, Scripture must be approached as a divine document written in ordinary human language, with all due consideration given to the grammatical and historical details of the text. With its companion doctrine, the priesthood of the believer, perspicuity means that every believer has the potential of hearing and reading God's message with understanding. Therefore, ecclesiastical authority is not *necessary* in order to discern the true meaning of Scripture.

The Reformers did not condone interpretive lawlessness with this doctrine. Christians were still to be subject to the Church and be guided by its pastors and teachers. Christians who have used the priesthood of the believer to endorse personal anarchy in interpreting Scripture and to reserve for themselves the right to rebel against the leadership of the Church are not complying with the intent of the doctrine of perspicuity.²³

That allows Scripture to interpret itself

The Bible is a single book with a single divine author. From Genesis to Revelation, from the beginning to the end, there is a unity to the message. With the God of truth as the author, Scripture cannot contradict itself. From the creation of the heavens and earth to the creation of the new heavens and earth, from the creation of the first Adam to the triumphal reign of the second Adam, God's message unfolds in the pages of Scripture. The first chapters set the foundations, the final chapters reveal the climax, and in between are the laws, the prophecies and the wisdom of God, disclosed out of his love for the ones he created in his image.

Scripture interprets itself. An understanding of the beginning is necessary for a proper interpretation of the end. At the same time, a full understanding of the Old Testament is only made possible when coupled with the later revelation of the New Testament. A knowledge of the Law is necessary to understand God's actions in Israel, and an understanding of prophecy for a comprehension of the incarnation. We are not left to figure out all these connections ourselves, for Scripture gives its own explanations. Jesus could say, "It is written . . ." and draw his listeners both into the context of what they had already been taught and into the new teaching that would complete the old; and when we, the present-day readers of Scripture, read the Old and New together, we can see the fuller picture.

Scripture is the beginning and the end of the interpretive method. No interpretation is valid which violates another portion of Scripture.

Anyone who desires to do so

Understanding God and his revelation comes with spiritual growth, and growth comes with the intake of spiritual food. The most lavish food can be offered freely, but if someone has no appetite, the food will go uneaten.²⁴ So it is with spiritual food. Peter urges his readers to crave the spiritual milk of the eternal word of God so they can experience healthy growth, living holy lives patterned after the Lord himself.²⁵

Only the person who truly desires to know God will take the trouble to be consistent in hearing, reading, studying, and meditating upon Scripture.²⁶ The analogy of the newborn baby that Peter uses suggests one who, when fed, does not long remain satisfied but is continually hungry for more. The more the growth, the greater the appetite and the greater the delight in God's provision of words that are sweeter than honey:

I have not departed from your laws,
for you yourself have taught me.
How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
I gain understanding from your precepts;
therefore I hate every wrong path.²⁷

Can understand God's message

Since the message itself is clear, the possibility exists for understanding. Its *grammatical clarity* means that everyone of average intelligence can understand the straightforward instructions on how to be saved from sin or how to live a moral life pleasing to God. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved;" "Repent and be baptized;" "Love the Lord your God with all your heart;" "Love your neighbor as yourself"—these commands are clear.

Long before the Reformation, Augustine taught the same as Luther and Calvin: the Scriptures plainly teach that which is necessary for faith and salvation as well as how the Christian should live. These are the things that should be studied first and committed to memory. Only after the believer is firmly grounded in these necessary doctrines should he go on to delve into the more obscure teachings of Scripture. In this process, as stated above, the clearer passages shed light on the more difficult portions.

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. . . . After this, when we have made ourselves to a certain extent familiar with the language of Scripture, we may proceed to open up and investigate the obscure passages, and in doing so draw examples from the plainer expressions to throw light upon the more obscure, and use the evidence of passages about which there is no doubt to remove all hesitation in regard to the doubtful passages.²⁸

Perspicuity does not rule out the need for study. There are many things in Scripture that need to be searched out because their meanings are not *immediately* clear, especially to new believers who need to grow in their faith. For this very reason, God has appointed and gifted certain persons in his Church to dedicate themselves more diligently to the study of Scripture—not because they are an elite group entitled to spiritual secrets but so that they can be prepared to teach the content of Scripture to others.²⁹ Even as Ezra devoted himself to studying and teaching God's Word when the exiles returned from Babylon, so church leaders in the first century were exhorted to do the same. They were to study the Word (i.e., the Old Testament Scriptures and the teachings of the apostles),

not just to satisfy a private desire to learn but to be equipped to communicate these teachings to others, faithfully and accurately.³⁰

OBJECTIONS TO PERSPICUITY

Essentials of the faith

Some, in explaining the doctrine of perspicuity, have said that it applies only to the “essentials of the faith.” But this description leaves the doctrine more obscure than perspicuous. Just what are these essentials? Unfortunately for arguments defending perspicuity, Protestants do not agree on how to define the essentials of the faith.

David G. Armstrong, a Catholic lay apologist, responds to the idea of *the essentials*:

The usual Protestant reply to this critique [to the multiplicity of denominations] is that denominations differ mostly over *secondary* issues, not *fundamental* or *central* doctrines. This is often and casually stated, but when scrutinized, it collapses under its own weight. . . .

Protestants will often maintain that the Eucharist and baptism, for instance, are neither primary nor essential doctrines. This is curious, since these are the two sacraments that the majority of Protestants accept. . . .

Protestants also differ on other soteriological issues: most Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, pentecostals, some Baptists, and many non-denominationalists and other groups are Arminian and accept *free will* and the possibility of falling away from salvation (*apostasy*), while Presbyterians, Reformed and a few Baptist denominations and other groups are Calvinist and deny free will and the possibility of apostasy for the *elect*. In contrast to the former denominations, the latter groups have a stronger view of the nature of *original sin*, and deny that the Atonement is *universal*. . . .³¹

Armstrong’s description is basically accurate. But does this description invalidate perspicuity as defined above? No, for questions of free will, election, original sin and the host of other arguments in which Christians can become entangled have more to do with the *how’s* and the *why’s* of doctrine rather than the *what’s* of doctrine. Even the disputes over the Real Presence in the Eucharist, as significant as they may be towards a total understanding of what is taking place, pale in comparison to the issue of obedience. The clear teaching is that observing the Eucharist is a scriptural command and that those who ignore Christ’s command to observe this rite in a holy manner are in disobedience.³²

In the final judgment, the amount of understanding one has over the *how’s* and the *why’s* is not as critical as obedience to what is already known. “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”³³

The role of conscience

This scandal of division—and it *is* a scandal in light of Christ’s desire for unity among his followers—is blamed on *sola scriptura* together with the doctrine of perspicuity. Instead of allowing the Church to be the authority using both Scripture and tradition, it is charged that perspicuity has elevated the individual conscience to a place of authority. “Protestant freedom of conscience is valued more than unity and the certainty of doctrinal truth in all matters (not just the core issues alone).”³⁴ When this happens, there is no authority that can definitively decide what the proper interpretation of Scripture should be, and each seeker is left to his or her own devices to determine what the truth is.

There is some truth to this allegation, but the fault is not with the doctrine of perspicuity in itself. In the first place, the phenomenon of multiple denominations cannot be attributed to only one cause after 2,000 years of Christian history in a world of over six billion people. Second, the doctrine of perspicuity is implicated only because of its misuse. Any Christian doctrine, when emphasized at the expense of other teachings of Scripture, can get out of balance and lead to excess.

Third, perspicuity does not enthrone the conscience to be the judge of truth. Conscience is designed by God to decide issues of morality, to know the difference between right and wrong behavior.³⁵ The conscience does not judge Scripture. Scripture judges the conscience and brings it in line with the truth. It is because Scripture is clear that the conscience can be convicted of sin and brought to a state of repentance. A conscience guided by Scripture keeps the Christian walking on the path of holiness. Perspicuity and conscience are two separate issues.

A matter of authority

The core of the disagreements over the doctrine of perspicuity lies with the issue of authority. Who is going to decide the correct interpretation of Scripture? The Catholic position is that the Church decides because of the authority given to the apostles and their successors. That authority is symbolized by one man, the Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic Church. In theory, there is a unified body of doctrine to which the faithful will ascribe.

The doctrine of perspicuity, together with the principle of *sola scriptura*, says that Scripture itself is the authority for the Church. Scripture judges the Church rather than the Church judging Scripture. Christians have the ability to understand Scripture and discern whether the Church has been faithful to the Scriptures. The purpose is not for rebellion and lawless confusion but to keep the Church pure, both the individuals within and the body as a whole.

THE BASIS OF THE BELIEF

The doctrine of *Perspicuity* is integrally tied to three other important doctrines of the Christian faith.

First and foremost, *Perspicuity of Scripture* is based upon the character of God. What kind of a relationship does God want with human beings, the people he personally created in his image? Although he is God Almighty, Ruler of the universe, he is also the Father who loves and cares for his children. He reveals by means of human language what his children need to know so that they can respond toward him in obedience, love and trust.

Secondly, *Perspicuity of Scripture* rises and falls with views about how Scripture should be interpreted. Is the Bible to be taken literally, within the boundaries of its own context? Or is there a deeper meaning, a non-literal (allegorical) sense intended for the spiritually elite? *Perspicuity of Scripture* maintains that the Bible is divine literature that is to be interpreted literally in its historical setting, with attention given to the ordinary rules of language. The main sense is the plain sense, the meaning that the Author intended to convey.

Thirdly, *Perspicuity of Scripture* is linked with the question of who may interpret Scripture. Are Christians untrained in theology able to understand the Word of God, or do they need an official representative of the organized Church to interpret it for them? The evangelical church teaches that the New Testament doctrine of the *priesthood of the believer* makes every believer a priest of God.³⁶ As such, each Christian possesses both the privilege and the responsibility to study the Scriptures, individually and corporately. God has provided teachers within the Church³⁷ to lead the Body into spiritual maturity and to guard it from anti-scriptural doctrine. They are not the only ones, however, who have the ability and responsibility to interpret God's Word. Even as the leaders are responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of the believers, other believers are also responsible to see

that the leaders maintain spiritual integrity and doctrinal purity, using Scripture as the standard for evaluation. *All* Christians are encouraged to hear, read and meditate upon the Word, relying upon the indwelling Holy Spirit to act as teacher in accordance with God's promise.³⁸

Although many *concepts* in Scripture challenge the believer's understanding, all teachings necessary for salvation and righteous living are nevertheless clear enough that anyone of reasonable understanding can comprehend *what* is being said, even if he or she does not know *why* it is being said or grasp all its significance.

THE VIEWS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

A study of the development of the doctrine *Perspicuity of Scripture* will show that it was not a teaching invented during the Protestant Reformation but a resurrected one. In looking at this doctrine in church history, it is of paramount importance to recognize that in spite of its name, *Perspicuity* does not mean that there is nothing obscure in Scripture. The reasons for labeling the doctrine *Perspicuity of Scripture* are more historical than lexicographical. In addition to whatever internal obscurity might already exist, there were external conditions imposed on Scripture that resulted in its meaning being almost totally hidden to the Christian population.

A. The Apostolic Church: Spreading the Light

In the Church of New Testament times, *Perspicuity of Scripture* was assumed, not debated. The apostles used the Old Testament Scriptures to validate their message that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. Such a methodology could succeed because God's message in Scripture was in fact clear to the listener. The apostles could reason with their listeners by appealing to Scriptures they already knew and understood. In this the apostles followed the same methodology as their Master, who repeatedly referred to the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures in order to back up his own. Jesus rebuked his listeners for having trouble understanding him—not because they could not understand the words he was saying but because they were spiritually unprepared. The words were clear enough, but their hearts belonged to Satan and could not receive Jesus' teachings.³⁹

Similarly, the apostles and other leaders of the newly founded Church used the narratives, prophecies and wisdom literature of the Old Testament to convict both Jews and Gentiles of eternal truth. They expected their readers and listeners to understand not just the mere statements but also their spiritual significance. Spiritual understanding is a gift from God to *all* who are redeemed,⁴⁰ a gift that is expected to grow to completeness, even to the point of fathoming the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are in Christ.⁴¹ Believers who remain at the elementary level are rebuked.⁴² The apostles were operating on the principles of *Perspicuity*: all those who truly belong to God are expected to grow in their understanding of what is revealed in Scripture because of the work of God's Spirit within. Unbelievers, on the other hand, are limited in their understanding because their hearts are not prepared to receive spiritual wisdom.

B. The Post-Apostolic Period: Maintaining the Light

When the first post-apostolic authors cited Scripture, they were still referring primarily to the Septuagint version of the Hebrew Bible. Copies of the gospels and epistles circulated among the churches and were considered authoritative as Scripture if genuinely apostolic, but no one had yet gathered these documents into a cohesive collection. The writings of this period were aimed principally at combating false doctrine, especially Gnosticism, that was threatening the purity of the faith as handed down by the apostles. Although a complete doctrine of the *Perspicuity of Scripture*

was not formulated until centuries later, we can still determine what the early writers believed about *Perspicuity* by observing the way they used Scripture in their fight against the aberrant beliefs that arose under the name of Christianity.

Clement, Bishop of Rome

Clement, bishop of Rome in the last decade of the first century, frequently cites the Old Testament in his letter to the Corinthians about 96 AD.⁴³ He does not explain the cited passage but assumes that his readers will understand the plain sense of the words and agree with his use of it. At times he quotes a biblical passage and then makes an application; at other times he uses the passage as proof of what he has just said. At all times he writes on the supposition that his readers are going to understand the words. For example, in his appeals for the Corinthians to demonstrate the kind of love that produces unity, he prefaces a quotation from Exodus 32 with these remarks:

You know the sacred scriptures, my friends; you know them well, and you have studied the Divine utterances. Therefore we write to remind you....⁴⁴

Immediately following the citation, Clement drives home his application:

What immeasurable love! Perfection beyond compare! A minister speaking up boldly to his Lord and demanding pardon for the multitude, or his own destruction along with them!⁴⁵

No other words of explanation are needed. Neither are there any attempts to find a mystical meaning that would be hidden from the average reader. Both the bishop and the congregation are operating on the same level: Scripture is plain enough to be understood and applied by all.

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna

Polycarp, martyred Bishop of Smyrna,⁴⁶ admits there is mystery in Scripture. He cites Scripture in much the same way as Clement of Rome, assuming a literal understanding that will be clear to the readers. However, not *all* things are clear even to the bishop—yet those same things may be clear to the congregation. Near the conclusion of his *Epistle to the Philippians* he writes:

I have no doubt you are well versed in Holy Scripture, and that it holds no secrets for you (which is more than has been granted to me).⁴⁷

The mystery to which he refers, then, is not a mystical, "spiritual" meaning. He is admitting that there still are some things he does not understand. The implication of his words to the Philippians is that these things are indeed understandable, and that the Philippians have studied the Word enough to have gained a greater understanding than he. Here we see another aspect of the doctrine of *Perspicuity* as defined by later theologians: *Perspicuity of Scripture* has boundaries. There are concepts within Scripture that require study. The statements of Scripture are clear, but some of the concepts they are describing will not be understood at first reading. There is a difference between *stating* a concept and *understanding* the concept, a difference between making sense of the words and perceiving their implications.⁴⁸

The Epistle of Barnabas

Another well-known second century document, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, gives the "spiritual meaning" of some Old Testament passages.⁴⁹ The writer is moving away from a position that

Scripture is clear, so much so that he claims the Jews never understood the Scriptures because they took them too literally. Yet this "spiritual meaning" is not a new meaning.

The main part of *Barnabas*...is concerned with elucidating the spiritual meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures (their *gnosis*, as he puts it, or what *gnosis* reveals). His concern is not to show that with the coming of Christ the Old Testament Scriptures now have a new and deeper meaning, but to show that apart from Christ they cannot be understood at all. Their *only* meaning is that revealed in Christ; the Jews have *always* misunderstood their Scriptures by interpreting them literally.⁵⁰

His Christological hermeneutic is allegorical, but it is not the kind of allegory that was to develop in the Alexandrian school. Barnabas uses *types*, in the same way that Scripture uses types. The literal words of the Old Testament stand, but they take on a meaning that can be seen only through knowledge of Christ.

The love of allegory in the epistle which is often claimed to be a decisively "Alexandrian" trait is not really such: allegory means for Barnabas searching for types of Christ and the Christian dispensation, and never, as Philo and Clement do, does he find eternal truths or philosophical commonplaces lurking in the concrete details of Scripture.⁵¹

Irenaeus (c. 140-202)

The second-century Irenaeus objected to the Gnostic practice of ignoring and twisting the clear meaning of Scripture and instead spiritualizing it with fanciful interpretations, as some Greeks did with their ancient literature.⁵² His book *Against Heresies* outlines in detail the beliefs of many heresies prominent in the second century and analyzes their abuse of Scripture to make God's Word say something the original authors did not intend. Regarding the Valentinians⁵³ he says,

Then, again, collecting a set of expressions and names scattered here and there [in Scripture], they twist them, as we have already said, from a natural to a non-natural sense.⁵⁴

Irenaeus acknowledges that "simple-minded" people can be led astray by such twisting⁵⁵ of Scripture, but only because these persons do not know enough of Scripture to keep them from being deceived. When the various passages are put back in their right order and context, the sense is clear to the one who has accepted the truth "received at baptism."

In like manner he also who retains unchangeable...in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism, will doubtless recognise the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them....But when he has restored every one of the expressions quoted to its proper position, and has fitted it to the body of the truth, he will lay bare, and prove to be without any foundation, the figment of these heretics.⁵⁶

Irenaeus readily admits that there are some unclear portions of Scripture. He accuses the heretics⁵⁷ of making use of the unclear portions to develop their own false teachings. In the following case, they have invented another god by not allowing the clear teachings of Scripture to be the basis of interpretation for the more enigmatic portions.

For by the fact that they thus endeavour to explain ambiguous passages of Scripture...they have constructed another god, weaving...ropes of sand, and affixing a more important to a

less important question. For no question can be solved by means of another which itself awaits solution; nor, in the opinion of those possessed of sense, can an ambiguity be explained by means of another ambiguity, or enigmas by means of another greater enigma, but things of such character receive their solution from those which are manifest, and consistent and clear.⁵⁸

Irenaeus deals in particular with the interpretation of the parables. By their very nature, parables call for an interpretation, but that interpretation is not out of reach. It only requires study and meditation on the part of the believer for its meaning to become apparent. A subjective interpretation is not a proper one, for it does not represent the truth God intended to reveal through the parable.

A sound mind, and one which does not expose its possessor to danger, and is devoted to piety and the love of truth, will eagerly meditate upon those things which God has *placed within the power of mankind, and has subjected to our knowledge*, and will make advancement in [acquaintance with] them, rendering the knowledge of them *easy to him by means of daily study*. These things are such as fall [plainly] under our observation, and *are clearly and unambiguously in express terms set forth in the Sacred Scriptures*. And therefore the parables ought not to be adapted to ambiguous expressions....But to apply expressions which are not clear or evident to interpretations of the parables, such as every one discovers for himself as inclination leads him, [is absurd.] For in this way no one will possess the rule of truth; but in accordance with the number of persons who explain the parables will be found the various systems of truth, in mutual opposition to each other, and setting forth antagonistic doctrines, like the questions current among the Gentile philosophers.⁵⁹

Thus Irenaeus sets forth and practices another principle of the doctrine of *Perspicuity of Scripture* that was to be stated more formally in later times: What is obscure in one portion of Scripture is made clear in another portion. The explanations of the more obscure portions are within Scripture itself. The believer needs to study and meditate upon the *entire* Word in order to find the sense that God intended.

Irenaeus interprets types, symbols and parables with Christ as the center of his hermeneutic. For him, the true interpretation of the Scriptures lies with the Church,⁶⁰ because the Church has inherited its doctrines from the apostles of Christ. In the context of *Against Heresies*, the *Church* stands in contrast to those who have broken away from the mainstream, the Gnostic heretics that have either twisted Scripture or done away with the portions that are not suitable to their doctrine. There is no differentiation made among persons within the Church that would indicate some are qualified to read and interpret Scripture while others should be hindered. All are encouraged to learn, and the amount of understanding will vary with the study and meditation given to the Scripture—as well as the measure of love that a person has for God.

For every prophecy, before its fulfillment, is to men [full of] enigmas and ambiguities. But when the time has arrived, and the prediction has come to pass, then the prophecies have a clear and certain exposition. And for this reason, indeed, when at this present time the law is read to the Jews, it is like a fable; for they do not possess the explanation of all things pertaining to the advent of the Son of God...but when it is read by the Christians, it is a treasure, hid indeed in a field, but brought to light by the cross of Christ, and explained, both enriching the understanding of men, and showing forth the wisdom of God...and proclaiming beforehand that the man who loves God shall arrive at such excellency as even

to see God, and hear His word, and from the hearing of His discourse be glorified to such an extent, that others cannot behold the glory of his countenance, as was said by Daniel: "Those who do understand, shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and many of the righteous as the stars for ever and ever." Thus, then, I have shown it to be, *if any one read the Scriptures*.⁶¹

C. The School of Alexandria: Moving Into the Shadows

Philo (c. 20 BC - 50 AD)

During this same century the influence of the Greeks began to be even more strongly felt in Christian apologetics. Many of the Jews in the Diaspora had accommodated themselves and their religion to Greek philosophy. Philo was a Jew who was so thoroughly immersed in Greek thought that he is rightly considered a Greek philosopher as well as a Jewish one. He remained devoted to Torah, but interpreted it allegorically rather than literally.

If something is stated which seems perfectly obvious, there must be a deeper meaning hidden within the statement. And since to Philo as to every Jew of his time the scriptures are the work of God, every expression, every word, and every letter has its meaning. Like the Stoics he discovers this hidden meaning by etymology, often highly forced, and arithmology. The meaning of a word can be discovered in its source, and numbers have special significance.⁶²

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215)

When Christianity spread to Alexandria, this mixture of Jewish and Greek philosophy affected the way that Christians interpreted the Scriptures. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215), thought to be the founder of the Alexandrian school of theology, adopted the allegorical method. In explaining this method, he uses Scripture to proof-text the techniques he had already formed during his studies in Greek philosophy.⁶³ Others in the second century sometimes used allegory based on Scripture, but Clement embraced Philo's method to such an extent that scriptural meaning was based on allegory.

[Clement] had apparently come to Christianity through teaching which he accepted without much question. And when he tries to find this teaching expressed in the words of scripture he begins to develop a theory of the symbols of the Bible. He believes that all scripture speaks in a mysterious language of symbols...just as all those, barbarians and Greeks, who have discussed theology have veiled the ultimate reasons of things; they have transmitted the truth only through enigmas and symbols, allegories, metaphors, and analogous figures.⁶⁴

When symbol and allegory were made the basis for interpretation of Scripture there developed a hierarchy of meaning. The more important meanings were removed from the surface structure of the writing. A literal sense was no longer significant, because although it had some merit for the "simple" in familiarizing them with the narratives of Scripture, the more valuable meanings were hidden beneath this surface structure. Instead of seeing parable as one literary form of Scripture, Clement saw all of Scripture as a parable. Only those who held a *gnosis*-type faith were capable of perceiving these hidden meanings. They are hidden from the multitude lest they be misunderstood and end up being harmful.

For the Lord says, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear,"⁶⁵ declaring that hearing and understanding belong not to all. To the point David writes: "Dark water is in the clouds of the skies. At the gleam before Him the clouds passed, hail and coals of fire;"⁶⁶ showing that the holy words are hidden. He intimates that transparent and resplendent to the Gnostics, like the innocuous hail, they are sent down from God; but that they are dark to the multitude....

For many reasons, then, the Scriptures hide the sense. First, that we may become inquisitive, and be ever on the watch for the discovery of the words of salvation. Then it was not suitable for all to understand, so that they might not receive harm in consequence of taking in another sense the things declared for salvation by the Holy Spirit. Wherefore the holy mysteries of the prophecies are veiled in the parables—preserved for chosen men, selected to knowledge in consequence of their faith; for the style of the Scriptures is parabolic.⁶⁷

Even though Clement applauds the hidden or spiritual meaning, he does not deny the literal meaning, which he says is clear to all. Rather, he propounds levels of knowledge. Scripture itself indicates that divine knowledge is "foolishness" to unbelievers and will not be understood. Clement goes beyond this in indicating divisions within the Christian body. The "simple" can understand the narrative or historical sense. There are other, allegorical senses, though, that are hidden under the words of Scripture and waiting to be discovered only by those who have enough *gnosis* to understand these deeper meanings of Scripture.

Origen (c. 185-254)

Origen further developed what was begun by Clement. Origen is especially significant because his allegorical methods established the hermeneutical methodology for the Church throughout the Middle Ages, and to some extent even to the present. Origen was also from Alexandria and a controversial figure even in his own time. He combined his Platonic philosophy with Christianity, particularly in the interpretation of Scripture, applying a body-soul-spirit theory to the Word of God. Many of the narratives were impossible happenings in his view. If Scripture really was divine literature, such narratives had to have a spiritual or mystical meaning. He did not completely do away with the literal, but nevertheless put his emphasis upon the spiritual.

All Scripture had a spiritual meaning, but not all had a literal meaning. His explanation for this was based in his view of God, who revealed himself "secretly." Most believers can understand the "body" (narrative) of Scripture, and as faith develops they may proceed to the "soul" (spiritual application of narrative).⁶⁸ But the true mysteries of the Scripture were not revealed "bare and ready" lest they be "trodden underfoot" by simple believers who are not capable of understanding the divine words. This "spirit" of Scripture is reserved for the person "who devoted himself to studies of this sort with all purity and continence and careful watching" so that he might "inquire into the profoundly hidden meaning of God's Spirit that [has] been woven together with an ordinary narrative looking in another direction."⁶⁹

However, which narratives were to be understood literally, and which ones only spiritually? The logical outcome of this method would be the giving over to the trained leadership of the Church the responsibility to hear, read and study the Scriptures.⁷⁰ Origen's interpretative methods obscured much of Scripture and removed the possibility of profitable study for the average "untrained" Christian who would not be able to discern "literal narrative" from "spiritual narrative."

But if those who are less trained in divine teachings should see fit to object that the meaning that transcends the human is not immediately evident on the surface of the letter, there is

nothing surprising about that, because divine matters are brought down to men somewhat secretly and are all the more secret in proportion to anyone's disbelief or unworthiness.⁷¹

The power of the gospel, he says, is not in words but in a demonstration of power through the Holy Spirit. It is not appropriate that "base" human language be mixed with this power. Our understanding

is not strong enough to discover in each different verse the obscure and hidden meanings. This is because the treasure of divine wisdom is hidden in the baser and rude vessel of words, as the Apostle points out when he says, "but we have this treasure in earthen vessels"....⁷²

Origen claims that because God reveals himself secretly, he deliberately designs the obscurities of Scripture. God does not freely disclose himself by means of human language to the objects of his grace, i.e., all believers, but throws roadblocks in their way.

[The] divine wisdom has arranged for there to be certain stumbling blocks or interruptions of the narrative meaning, by inserting in its midst certain impossibilities and contradictions, so that the very interruption of the narrative might oppose the reader, as it were, with certain obstacles thrown in the way. By them wisdom denies a way and an access to the common understanding; and when we are shut out and hurled back, it calls us back to the beginning of another way, so that by gaining a higher and loftier road through entering a narrow footpath it may open for us the immense breadth of divine knowledge.⁷³

Augustine (354-430)

Augustine of Hippo was perhaps the greatest expounder of Christian doctrine in the early centuries of Christianity. Both Catholics and Protestants have cited his works in confirmation of their own views. It was allegorism that made Christianity acceptable for him. If the more objectionable Old Testament narratives could be understood as allegory, then he could accept the God of the Jews and Christians. Allegory allowed him to accept passages that seemed to be in conflict with the rule of faith or purity of life.

Three of the four volumes of Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* contain the development of his hermeneutical principles. The second and third volumes deal specifically with the interpretation of the obscurities of Scripture, which Augustine attributes to unknown and ambiguous signs.

Unknown signs are those matters of factual knowledge that can be learned through studying the original languages of Scripture, comparing the various translations, paying attention to the context, and learning relevant historical and cultural facts. *Ambiguous signs* are those related to the use of language, and may be either direct or figurative. *Direct* ambiguities may be resolved by deciphering the grammatical details of the language itself. *Figurative* ambiguities are more difficult, in that one must first decide which passages are literal and which ones are figurative.

[Augustine] lays down rules by which we may decide whether an expression is literal or figurative; the general rule being, that whatever can be shown to be in its literal sense inconsistent either with purity of life or correctness of doctrine must be taken figuratively. He then goes on to lay down rules for the interpretation of expressions which have been proved to be figurative; the general principle being, that no interpretation can be true which does not promote the love of God and the love of man.⁷⁴

In laying down his rules of interpretation, Augustine opposes those who would unravel the obscurities of Scripture by relying totally on the grace of God without any instruction. He does not deny that a person can be instructed by the Spirit, but rather is emphasizing one's foolishness in not taking advantage of teachers whom God has provided.

4. But now as to those who talk vauntingly of Divine Grace, and boast that they understand and can explain Scripture without the aid of such directions as those I now propose to lay down, and who think, therefore, that what I have undertaken to write is entirely superfluous. I would such persons could calm themselves so far as to remember that, however justly they may rejoice in God's great gift, yet it was from human teachers they themselves learnt to read....
5. ...No, no; rather let us put away false pride and learn whatever can be learnt from man; and let him who teaches another communicate what he has himself received without arrogance and without jealousy....
8. In the last place, every one who boasts that he, through divine illumination, understands the obscurities of Scripture, though not instructed in any rules of interpretation, at the same time believes, and rightly believes, that this power is not his own, in the sense of originating with himself, but is the gift of God. For so he seeks God's glory, not his own. But reading and understanding, as he does, without the aid of any human interpreter, why does he himself undertake to interpret for others? Why does he not rather send them direct to God, that they too may learn by the inward teaching of the Spirit without the help of man?...
9. ...So that, just as he who knows how to read is not dependent on some one else, when he finds a book, to tell him what is written in it, so the man who is in possession of the rules which I here attempt to lay down, if he meet with an obscure passage in the books which he reads, will not need an interpreter to lay open the secret to him, but, holding fast by certain rules, and following up certain indications, will arrive at the hidden sense without any error, or at least without falling into any gross absurdity.⁷⁵

True obscurities do exist, but God is the one who put them into Scripture. His purpose was to hold pride in check and increase the respect Christians would give to Scripture.

Some of the expressions are so obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness. And I do not doubt that all this was divinely arranged for the purpose of subduing pride by toil, and of preventing a feeling of satiety in the intellect, which generally holds in small esteem what is discovered without difficulty.⁷⁶

Yet there is no obscurity in Scripture that by necessity remains unfathomable. The darkness of obscurity can be penetrated by studying the rest of Scripture. Augustine sets forth a principle that is resurrected during the Reformation: Scripture interprets Scripture.

Accordingly 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. For almost nothing is dug out of those obscure passages which may not be found set forth in the plainest language elsewhere.⁷⁷

The Scriptures plainly teach that which is necessary for faith and salvation, as well as teaching how the Christian should live. These are the things that should be studied first and committed to memory. Only after the believer is firmly grounded in these necessary doctrines should he go on to delve into the more obscure teachings of Scripture.

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....After this, when we have made ourselves to a certain extent familiar with the language of Scripture, we may proceed to open up and investigate the obscure passages, and in doing so draw examples from the plainer expressions to throw light upon the more obscure, and use the evidence of passages about which there is no doubt to remove all hesitation in regard to the doubtful passages.⁷⁸

Ignorance accounts for much of what is labeled obscure. Thorough study of the Scriptures as well as knowledge from other fields of learning should clear up most of these. When neither context nor general knowledge will clear up an obscure passage, one may apply reason—but, Augustine says,

...this is a dangerous practice. For it is far safer to walk by the light of Holy Scripture; so that when we wish to examine the passages that are obscured by metaphorical expressions, we may either obtain a meaning about which there is no controversy, or if a controversy arises, may settle it by the application of testimonies sought out in every portion of the same Scripture.⁷⁹

The solution to the unsolvable obscure passages may be to interpret the passage figuratively.⁸⁰ Here Augustine is not talking about figurative language but allegorical interpretation. He only uses the word *allegory* twice in *On Christian Doctrine*, and both times it refers to a type of speech within Scripture itself, not a type of interpretation,⁸¹ but he sometimes uses the word "figurative" in the same way that other Church Fathers use the word "allegorical."

Augustine remained an allegorist but he did not take allegory as far as Clement of Alexandria. He retained a deep respect for the literal interpretation and the perspicuity of Scripture, insisting on several points which were later included in the doctrine of *Perspicuity* during the Reformation. He also set up several controls over the use of allegory.

Jerome (c. 345-419)

Jerome was a contemporary of Augustine who initially shared the views of the Alexandrian exegetes but later came to be more in line with the Antiochene school. He affirmed a "deeper meaning" to Scripture, but contended that this spiritual significance must be rooted in the literal.⁸² He considered Origen a heretic but also thought he had done a credible job of explaining some obscure passages of Scripture.⁸³

Jerome played an involuntary role in Scripture's becoming concealed from the Christian population in ensuing centuries. He translated the Bible into Latin because Greek was no longer a *lingua franca* in Europe.⁸⁴ The Vulgate was the result, appropriately named because it was written in the *vulgar* or common language of the time. Approximately 300-400 years later, though, Latin had gone through enough changes that people of southern and western Europe began to realize that the Classical Latin taught in the schools was "perceptibly a different language, rather than merely a more polished, cultured version of their own."⁸⁵

In the meantime, the Vulgate became the recognized authoritative translation of the Scriptures for use in the Church of Rome.⁸⁶ The sacredness ascribed to the Word of God was extended as well to the language into which it had been translated, i.e., the Latin that had become the official language of the Church. The attitude toward Latin was also affected by tradition. Since "the time of Saints Hilary and Augustine the notion prevailed that the three languages used in the inscription on the Cross [Aramaic, Latin and Greek] were sacred."⁸⁷ The common language continued to change over the centuries, but the language of the Church and the Word of God did not. The God who

communicated with mankind to the point of incarnating himself in human flesh became a God who was steeped in mystery, his revelations known only to a select few.

This was not the intention of Jerome.

D. The Antiochene School: An Attempt to Avoid the Shadows

The hermeneutical methods of the Alexandrian School, particular those of Origen, prevailed and eventually became the standard of the Church of Rome. Not all theologians in the early Church, however, agreed with this allegorical approach. Those of the Antiochene school⁸⁸ dissented from the position that there was a spiritual meaning hidden within the text. In fact, they held that allegorical interpretation destroyed the real message of Scripture. They also distinguished between *allegory* as used in Scripture itself, and the *allegorical interpretation* as used by the Alexandrian school.

They were unwilling to lose [the historical reality of the biblical revelation] in a world of symbols and shadows....Where the Alexandrines use the word *theory* as equivalent to allegorical interpretation, the Antiochene exegetes use it for a sense of scripture higher or deeper than the literal or historical meaning, but firmly based on the letter. This understanding does not deny the literal meaning of scripture but is grounded on it, as an image is based on the things represented and points toward it. Both image and thing are comprehensible at the same time. There is no hidden meaning which only a Gnostic can comprehend. John Chrysostom⁸⁹ observes that everywhere in scripture there is this law, than when it allegorizes, it also gives the explanation of the allegory."⁹⁰

Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428)

Theodore of Mopsuestia spoke out against the allegorical approach and defended a literal hermeneutic, one that would recognize the ordinary meaning of words.

Countless students of scripture have played tricks with the plain sense of the Bible and want to rob it of any meaning it contains. In fact, they make up inept fables and call their inanities "allegories." They so abuse the Apostle's paradigm as to make the holy texts incomprehensible and meaningless.⁹¹

He objected to the claim that the Bible's true "spiritual" meaning was only available to a spiritual elite. He supported his argument by noting that the Bible itself did not endorse such a methodology.

If, however, their "allegory" is true, if the Bible does not retain one account of actual events but truly points to something else altogether, something so profound as to require special understanding, something "spiritual," as they wish to call it, which they have uncovered because they themselves are so spiritual, then where does their understanding come from? Whatever they call this type of interpretation, has the Bible itself taught them to read it like this?⁹²

Even as the Alexandrians did not completely dispense with the literal meaning of Scripture, so also the Antiochenes did not dismiss allegory. However, they insisted that any allegorical interpretation must be based on the literal. The Antiochene school's hermeneutic lost out to that of the Alexandrians. Their methods were not forgotten, however, and were later revived in the 13th

century by St. Thomas Aquinas, who greatly admired the work of John Chrysostom and was responsible for restoring the literal meaning to its rightful importance.⁹³

THE MIDDLE AGES

As long as allegorization remained the principle hermeneutic of the Church, Scripture could not be called "clear." By the sixth century, the pattern was set for the Church to continue in that direction.

A. Gregory the Great (540-604)

Elected Pope in 590, Gregory was a profound theologian and extensive writer. Standing at the beginning of the Middle Ages, he, along with Origen, was responsible for the primacy of the allegorical hermeneutic during the following centuries.⁹⁴ Borrowing a phrase from Augustine, Pope Gregory described the journey into the allegories of Scripture as an excursion into a deep, dark forest,⁹⁵ a place of refreshing mystery where spiritual food that could delight the soul might be found in the surrounding obscurity.⁹⁶ This view of Scripture was based on a view of God that made him incomprehensible, a view that emphasized his transcendence at the expense of his immanence. As said later by the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, God was too great to be revealed in human language.⁹⁷

Book One of Gregory's *Moralia*⁹⁸ exhibits his views on the perspicuity of Scripture. He considers Job an obscure book,⁹⁹ from which the allegorical meaning must be "shaken loose" and then directed toward "moral edification."¹⁰⁰ The historical or literal meaning, i.e., that which is clear, can sometimes only lead to error because it is inconsistent with virtue.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, ignoring what is plain in order to find what is hidden is to miss the light God had put into the text.

This is how divine speech sometimes stirs up the clever with mysteries, but more often provides consolation for the simple with the obvious. It has out in the open food for children but keeps hidden away the things that fill the minds of the eminent with awe. Scripture is like a river again, broad and deep, shallow enough here for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough there for the elephant to swim.¹⁰²

B. The Risks of Perspicuity

Perspicuity of Scripture says that the basic message of Scripture is clear because God is a God who *reveals*, not one who *hides*. Every Christian, with proper study and the aid of the Holy Spirit, can understand its meaning. Teachers and pastors are provided for the benefit of the whole body to stimulate growth in understanding and faith—this corporate aspect of learning Scripture should never be set aside. Nevertheless, because every Christian is also a priest in the household of God,¹⁰³ access to the greatest of Teachers is also individual. Those gifted by the Holy Spirit to teach carry out their function in a corporate setting. The individual believer's reading and study is private. Both are to be led by the Holy Spirit; and the Church as a whole, the recipient of the faith handed down by the apostles, is responsible to see that neither teacher nor learner is led astray into false doctrine.

The dissemination of false doctrine was what spurred the Church Fathers both to expound the truth of Scriptures and to argue against the heretics who either twisted Scripture or ignored it. Their writings became the foundation for biblical interpretation in the following centuries and the basis for determining whether some new teaching was heretical or not.

One of the objections for putting the Scriptures in the hands of the laity was the risk of misinterpretation that would lead to false doctrine. The risk was indeed there, as it is any time that people are given the freedom to examine a document and utilize their own powers of reasoning. Tertullian (c. 160-220) argued that the Church should be the legal interpreter of Scripture in order to prevent heretics from using it to promote their own erroneous doctrines.

Therefore it is here above all that we bar their way by declaring them inadmissible to any dispute over the scriptures. If their strength consists in the fact that they are able to possess them, we must see to whom the scriptures belong, so that no one is admitted to them who is not legally competent.¹⁰⁴

On the other hand, investigating the Scriptures outside the immediate authority of the Church could—and did—bring to light both doctrine and practice that needed reform. In the Middle Ages in Europe, whenever there was dissatisfaction with the ecclesiastical structure of the Church, or when immorality and ignorance were rife among the priests, there appeared individuals who would try to right the wrongs. Whether they were considered reformers or heretics depended on the specific beliefs and actions of these persons as well as on who was shaping the definition of heresy.

The Waldensians

One such reform movement began with Peter Waldo of Lyon and his followers in the middle of the twelfth century. Disgruntled with the ecclesiastical establishment, he took a vow of poverty and began to preach directly from the Bible, without any authorization from the Church.¹⁰⁵ He even initiated a translation to be made into Provençal,¹⁰⁶ an act unthinkable to the Church authorities of the time.¹⁰⁷

On every dot of the divine page, noble thoughts are wafted on so many wings, and such wealth of wisdom is amassed that he alone to whom God hath given something [to draw with] may drink from the full [well]. Shall, therefore, in any wise pearls be cast before swine, and the word given to laymen who, as we know, receive it foolishly, to say nothing of their giving what they have received? No more of this, and let it be rooted out!¹⁰⁸

Was it really fear of false doctrine that caused the Church to object to the Scriptures being in the hands of the laity? Undoubtedly there were some to whom this was a major consideration, for there were priests and bishops who were genuinely concerned for the spiritual welfare of their parishioners. For others, however, the nature of the objections suggests that there was also a fear of challenged authority. We must remember that at this time the Church's power was not only religious but also political. Dissension within the ranks threatened stability. In the Church's opposition to the population's receiving and using Scripture, Church leaders revealed contempt for the populace and a guiding fear of challenged power. A document written in 1270 against the Waldensians includes these charges:

And because [the Waldensians] presumed to interpret the words of the gospel in a sense of their own, not perceiving that there were any others, they said that the gospel ought to be obeyed altogether according to the letter: and they boasted that they wished to do this, and that they only were the true imitators of Christ....This was their first heresy, contempt of the power of the Church....They give all their seal [*sic*] to lead many others astray with them: they teach even little girls the words of the Gospels and Epistles, so that they may be trained in error from their childhood....They teach their docile and fluent disciples to repeat the words of the Gospels and the sayings of the apostles and other saints by heart, in the vulgar

tongue, so that they may know how to teach others and lead the faithful astray....[They] are fools, and do not understand that a schoolboy of twelve years old often knows more than a heretical teacher of seventy; for the latter knows only what he has learnt by heart, while the former, having learnt the art of grammar, can read a thousand Latin books, and to some extent understand their literal meaning.¹⁰⁹

Though the Waldensians may have had some questionable doctrine, what they were teaching was not the main concern of churchmen.

The early history of papal dealings with the Waldensians illustrates the general tone of prelatial concern; it was chiefly with unauthorized preaching and reading unauthorized translations of scripture—that is, with matters of ecclesiastical obedience rather than with doctrine—that the popes were concerned in the case of Valdès [Waldo] and his followers.¹¹⁰

The Council of Toulouse in 1229 explicitly forbade the laity from possessing the Scriptures in any language. Certain devotional books were permitted but only in Latin, not in translation.

We prohibit also that the laity should be permitted to have the books of the Old or the New Testament; unless anyone from motives of devotion should wish to have the Psalter or the Breviary for divine offices or the hours of the blessed Virgin; but we most strictly forbid their having any translation of these books.¹¹¹

Scripture is not Enough

A church manual written in the 14th century by Jacopo Passavanti, a Dominican from Florence, explains another reason why Scripture is obscure. Simply stated, Scripture is not enough. Church tradition must be taught along with the basics of Scripture. The laity must receive their teaching from the Church in order to get the complete picture of what is necessary for salvation. Furthermore, there are limits regarding how deep their study of Scripture should go.

Each Christian is bound to have some knowledge of holy scripture, and each according to the state and condition and rank that he holds; for in one manner should the priest and guide of souls know it, and in another manner the master and doctor and preacher, those who ought to step down into the deep sea of scripture, and know and understand the hidden mysteries....And in yet another manner the laity and unlettered parish priests are bound to have it, to whom it is sufficient to know in general the ten commandments, the articles of the faith, the sacraments of the Church, the sins, and ecclesiastical ordinances, the doctrine of the holy gospel, as far as is necessary to their salvation, and as much as they hear from their rectors and the preachers of the scriptures and the faith, not searching them subtly, nor putting the foot down too deeply into the sea of scripture, which not all people can do, nor ought they to wish to scan it, because very often one slips and drowns oneself in incautious and curious and vain researches. But each one ought to know, as much as befits his office, and the status which he holds.¹¹²

In the Middle Ages, then, Scripture became obscure for several reasons, none of which had to do with its inherent nature:

1. The adoption of the allegorical method of interpretation by the Church to the near-exclusion of a literal hermeneutic.
2. The belief that the laity were unable and/or unworthy to comprehend the full meaning of Scripture, particularly without the aid of the Church and Tradition.

3. The Latin Vulgate's remaining the official translation of the Scriptures long after Latin ceased to be the vernacular language.
4. The Church's refusal in many instances to allow translations of the Scriptures into the vernacular. Translations that existed were not prepared with the blessing of the Church.

C. The Latter Middle Ages: A Ray of Light

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Thomas Aquinas, the "angelic doctor" of the Church, moved away from a reliance upon allegorical interpretation toward an appreciation of the literal meaning of Scripture. He still promoted allegory, dividing it into three possible meanings, but insisted that all allegorical interpretation must rise from the literal meaning, not apart from it. All these meanings are possible because God has the power to use human language and adapt it as needed for his own purposes.

Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Writ is God, Who by one act comprehends all things by His intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says (Confess. xii), if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses.¹¹³

Having anchored the allegorical in the literal, Aquinas defends such allegorical manifestations of truth as being necessary. There are spiritual meanings, but man can only learn what is presented to the senses. Yet this "hiding" is not to make the passages obscure but to bring them to light, even for the "simple." Furthermore, whatever is presented in Scripture figuratively is taught elsewhere openly.¹¹⁴ He quotes Dionysius approvingly, "The ray of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sensible imagery wherewith it is veiled."¹¹⁵

It is also befitting Holy Writ, which is proposed to all without distinction of persons...that spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from corporeal things, in order that thereby even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it...Hence those things that are taught metaphorically in one part of Scripture, in other parts are taught more openly. The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds and as a defense against the ridicule of the impious....¹¹⁶

Other exegetes of the latter Middle Ages also began paying more attention to the literal sense of Scripture.¹¹⁷ With a rise in importance of a literal hermeneutic, allegorization began to lose its grip. Some of the reasons for this were not directly related to the Christianity but to philosophical changes that took place during the development of scholasticism.

THE REFORMATION

The Reformers brought the Scriptures into the light of day by insisting that God's Word is clear. Its message is not hidden in obscure allegories but discerned by carefully reading the text. God is not playing hide-and-seek, slipping behind the trees of a mystical dark forest, teasing his children into chasing him through the shadows. The appropriate metaphor for Scripture is not darkness but light.

A. The heritage from John Wycliffe

Before Reformation fires began to burn on the continent, John Wycliffe preached a transforming Gospel in England in the fourteenth century. He was dedicated to confronting the abuses of the papacy, preaching the Gospel to the poor, and giving the people the Word of God in English. He knew that some of the aristocracy had Bibles in French and envisioned the day when both peasant and nobleman in England would have access to the Scriptures in English.¹¹⁸ “Wycliffe complained with much justification, ‘As the lords of England have the Bible in French, so it would not be against reason that they [the peasants and yeomen] should have the same words in English.’”¹¹⁹

In spite of threats and persecution, Wycliffe persisted because of his conviction that the Gospel was being perverted by the established Church. The Scriptures themselves rather than Catholic tradition needed to be the basis of the Church’s teaching, and these truths needed to be in English. As was true of the later Reformers, Wycliffe emphasized the importance of the sermon—not just the form but its content.

He was angry with the preaching of his day which spun stories out of half-digested biblical truths. He observed the power of the friar who pretended to know the Bible and put the fear of God into the minds of ignorant people with most unbiblical threats. He was never in doubt that the truths of the Bible should be available to every Christian.¹²⁰

The Latin Vulgate was of no value to the average English man or woman who spoke only the native tongue. Wycliffe began distributing handwritten translated portions and then dedicated himself to a full English translation of the Scriptures. He knew neither Greek nor Hebrew but was well versed in Latin, so used the Vulgate as his guide, comparing Jerome’s translation with comments in Latin made by the Church Fathers.

Wycliffe and his followers, the Lollards, spread their teachings among the common people, a fact much resented by the Church hierarchy. The reaction was similar to that which the Waldensians experienced.

The Gospel, which Christ gave to the clergy and the doctors of the church, that they might administer it to the laity and to weaker brethren, according to the demands of the time and the needs of the individual, as a sweet food for the mind, that Master John Wyclif translated from Latin into the language not of angels¹²¹ but of Englishmen, so that he made that common and open to the laity, and to women who were able to read, which used to be for literate and perceptive clerks, and spread the Evangelists’ pearls to be trampled by swine. And thus that which was dear to the clergy and the laity alike became as it were a jest common to both, and the clerks’ jewels became the playthings of laymen, that the laity might enjoy now forever what had once been the clergy’s talent from on high.¹²²

Opposition to Wycliffe’s work continued even after his death. John of Gaunt defended Wycliffe in the Upper House in 1390, over five years after Wycliffe’s death: “Are we then the very dregs of humanity, that we cannot possess the laws of our religion in our own tongue?”¹²³ The exhumation and burning of Wycliffe’s remains in 1415 is a familiar story. Nevertheless, his witness and dedication to the necessity of truth being in the language of the people inspired Tyndale in the sixteenth century, whose translation provided the basis for the *Authorized Version of 1611*. These early translators believed Scripture was clear, but it could not be clear if it were only available in a dead language.

B. Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Sola fide, sola scriptura, and the priesthood of the believer—these were tenets of Luther's reforming doctrine. The breakthrough he experienced in his understanding of justification by faith alone came as a result of his personal study of the Scriptures, not through the teachings of the Church or the arguments of scholastic tradition.

Like Wycliffe before him, Luther understood that God wanted to communicate with every person. The Word is supreme. Christ, the Living Word, is the center of the Gospel. The written Word telling his story must be known by every believer, and its promises received in faith each time the believer participates in the sacraments. Luther's continual goal was to bring the people back to the Scriptures that had been largely forsaken by the Church.

What punishment ought God to inflict upon such stupid and perverse people! Since we abandoned his Scriptures, it is not surprising that he has abandoned us to the teaching of the pope and to the lies of men. Instead of Holy Scripture we have had to learn the *Decretales*¹²⁴ of a deceitful fool and an evil rogue. O would to God that among Christians the pure gospel were known....Then there would surely be hope that the Holy Scriptures too would come forth again in their worthiness.¹²⁵

Sola scriptura and *Perspicuity* meant for Luther that the traditions of the Church were not necessary in order to know that pure gospel. He did not hesitate to refer to the Church Fathers when Scripture verified their interpretations, but he rejected fanciful allegory and any interpretation that eclipsed God's clear revelation with the obscure ideas of mortals. God's Word was intended to bring light to God's people, but the Church of Rome had hidden it in darkness.

Luther also believed that the threat to authority was at least one of the reasons behind the Church's suppression of Scripture under claims of its being obscure.

If anyone...should trouble you and say: "You must have the interpretation of the Fathers since Scripture is obscure," then reply: "It is not true! There is no clearer book upon earth than the Holy Bible, which in comparison to all other books is like the sun in its relation to all other lights." They say such things only because they want to lead us away from Scripture and elevate themselves to the place of masters over us, in order that we might believe their sermons based upon their own dreams...It is indeed true, some passages in Scripture are obscure, but in these you find nothing but what is found elsewhere in clear and plain passages.... Be absolutely certain that there is nothing else than the same clear sun behind it.

So if you find an obscure passage in Scripture, do not be alarmed, for certainly the same truth is set forth in it which in another place is taught plainly. If you cannot understand the obscure, then adhere to the clear.¹²⁶

In *Bondage of the Will* Luther attempts to refute Erasmus' arguments about the obscurity of some passages of Scripture.¹²⁷ He differentiates between God and his Word.

Now nobody questions that there is a great deal hid in God of which we know nothing....But the notion that in Scripture some things are recondite and all is not plain was spread by the godless Sophists....And Satan has used these unsubstantial spectres to scare men off reading the sacred text, and to destroy all sense of its value....I certain grant that many *passages* in the Scriptures are obscure...but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not in any way prevent out

knowing all the *contents* of Scripture....[Because of Christ] the entire content of the scriptures has now been brought to light, even though some passages which contain unknown words remain obscure. Thus it is unintelligent, and ungodly too, when you know that the contents of Scripture are as clear as can be, to pronounce them obscure on account of those few obscure words. If words are obscure in one place, there are clear in another.¹²⁸

Perhaps Luther's most important work was his translation of the Scriptures into the German language. *Perspicuity of Scripture* was behind his belief that all persons should read the Word, and to this end he devoted himself to making a translation into the popular German. "Nothing that Luther ever did had more significant repercussions than when he put the Scriptures into the tongue of the common people in his land. The German Bible is his most enduring monument, and it is fitting that what he should be remembered by best of all has to do with the Word."¹²⁹

The same opposition that Wycliffe faced in the fourteenth century came to bear upon Luther as well. It was inconceivable to some that God wanted to communicate with everyone, or that the common person was capable of discerning his meaning. Earlier, in 1486, the Archbishop of Mainz expressed the opinion of the Church quite plainly.

[The Archbishop] issued an edict forbidding any unapproved German version in his diocese. He defended his action on the ground that in his office he was required to guard the purity of the divine Word. Those who were trying their hand at turning the Bible into German were for the most part incapable of doing justice to their task, he thought. In any case, he added, it is most dangerous to place the Holy Scriptures in the homes of ordinary people, where even women might read, if they could, or at least hear, since they are unable to come to a right judgment about them. [Archbishop] Berhold was giving expression to the general mind of the Church....¹³⁰

The common person's having the Bible in German was compared to putting a knife in the hands of an irresponsible child.

It is a bad thing to print the Bible in German. It must be understood far differently from the way in which the text sounds. It is dangerous to put a knife into the hands of children and let them slice their own bread. They can only wound themselves with it. So also the Holy Scriptures, which comprise the bread of God, must be read and interpreted by people who have requisite knowledge and experience and who are able to determine the true sense.¹³¹

Luther's German Bible has been called the keystone of the Reformation. He had the gifts of a translator, being able to express the meaning of the original languages in the popular idioms of German. His goal was to make the German version clear in the same way that the Greek and Hebrew had been clear to the original readers. Luther prefaced his translation of the Old Testament with these words:

Though I cannot boast of having achieved perfection, nevertheless, I venture to say that this German Bible is clearer and more accurate at many points than the Latin. So it is true that if the printers do not, as usual, spoil it with their carelessness, the German language certainly has here a better Bible than the Latin language—and the readers will bear me out in this.¹³²

C. John Calvin

John Calvin insisted that Scripture is necessary for people to know God at all. Since humankind is blinded by sin and cannot know God through natural revelation, it is only through the light of

Scripture that we can know either God or our own sinful condition. Calvin compares the Bible to a pair of eyeglasses.

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips. Not only does he teach the elect to look upon a god, but also shows himself as the God upon whom they are to look.¹³³

Calvin sees language as the key to God's making his revelation known. Commenting upon the earthly use of language, Calvin says

Nothing is more disagreeable than to sojourn among a people with whom we can hold no communication by language, which is the chief bond of society. Language being, as it were, the image and mirror of the mind, those who cannot employ it in their mutual intercourse are no less strangers to one another than the wild beasts of the forest.¹³⁴

God did not want us to remain strangers to him and took the necessary steps to bring about communication between himself and human beings. The exalted and sovereign God spoke in the language of lowly humans so we could know the one who created us. This human language was not so erudite that only the educated elite could understand it. Calvin talks about God's using (through the prophets) the common language of the people.¹³⁵ He compares God's efforts to "lisp," as though he were bridging the gap between him and his creation by inclining himself to the level of a child.

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to "lisp" in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.¹³⁶

According to Calvin, God intended Scripture to be clear so that no may hide behind an excuse that the Bible is obscure. In a comment on Psalm 136:7, he writes that God,

...in proposing instruction meant to be common to the simplest and most uneducated persons, he made use by Moses and the other Prophets of popular language, that none might shelter himself under the pretext of obscurity, as we will see men sometimes very readily pretended an incapacity to understand, when anything deep or recondite is submitted to their notice...[The] Holy Spirit would rather speak childishly than unintelligibly to the humble and unlearned.¹³⁷

Calvin maintained that *Perspicuity of Scripture* was a biblical teaching. The Bible proclaims itself clear. Calvin spoke in harsh terms about the Church's trying to pass the Scriptures off as a book of darkness, a maze of unclear passageways that people should not approach.¹³⁸

However, to Calvin as to other theologians of both the early Church and the Reformation, *Perspicuity of Scripture* has its boundaries. First of all, it is not clear to the unregenerate.¹³⁹ The illumination of the Holy Spirit is necessary for anyone to understand Scripture, because spiritual blindness prevents the unbeliever from seeing what is obvious. Second, not everything is obvious at

once. Diligent study and application are required for anyone who wants to know all that Scripture teaches. Third, there are indeed *mysteries* in Scripture, things that are hard to understand. Calvin's position, contrary to the established Church, was that everyone should be allowed to investigate these mysteries.¹⁴⁰

If Scripture is so clear, why did Calvin consider it necessary to write *The Institutes* and his commentaries? He believed every Christian had the indwelling Spirit as teacher and guide. Nevertheless, not everything was *immediately* clear. *Perspicuity* requires diligent study on the part of the individual, but not apart from the Church. No one is autonomous in the matter of interpreting Scripture.¹⁴¹ The new Christian has much to learn and is guided by those who are more mature in the faith. God provided pastors and teachers as a way of drawing people near to himself, using their lips to teach his own truths.¹⁴²

This is doubly useful. On the one hand, he proves our obedience by a very good test when we hear his ministers speaking just as if he himself spoke. On the other, he also provides for our weakness in that he prefers to address us in human fashion through interpreters in order to draw us to himself, rather than to thunder at us and drive us away.¹⁴³

Calvin's teachings on the Church are definite about the unwavering relationship that should exist between the believer and the Church. The Christian is nurtured by the Church¹⁴⁴ through the ministry of its God-given teachers.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, such learning is a life-long process. "Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from [the Church's] school until we have been pupils all our lives."¹⁴⁶

Even as God accommodated himself to the weaknesses of sinful humanity in order to bring people back to himself, so also Calvin accommodated himself to the capabilities and limitations of his audience. If Scripture is clear, so should the teacher be clear in expounding the Word. This called for use of the vernacular. Calvin's *Institutes* were originally written in Latin. These were intended for scholars, "to prepare and train students in theology for the study of the divine Word that they might have an easy access into it and keep on in it without stumbling."¹⁴⁷ Two years later the French edition appeared. "It was a landmark in the development of the French language, comparable in its effect to the Luther Bible in German or the Authorized Version in English."¹⁴⁸

POST-REFORMATION

The statements that Luther and Calvin made about Scripture's being clear, with their attending rebukes to the Church of Rome, indicate their intentions in choosing the word *perspicuity* to describe Scripture. First, they were objecting to any allegorical or "spiritual" interpretation of Scripture that was not based on the plain, literal sense of the words placed within their own literary and historical context. Scripture was *clear* in contrast to the obscurities that Church history had imposed upon it.

Second, they disagreed with the Church's claiming sole authority for the interpretation of Scripture. As part of the Church, every believer is a priest before God and the proper recipient of God's Word. Authority to interpret Scripture belonged to the *whole* Church, and everyone had a right to read and study it. Therefore the Church was acting improperly in keeping people away from the Word of God. Bible translation into popular languages grew out of this position.

The Church of Rome responded to the drastic effects of the Reformation by calling the Council of Trent in 1545.¹⁴⁹ The Church, "in order to restrain petulant spirits," reaffirmed its authority over the interpretation of Scripture. Anyone who contradicted "holy mother Church" or the "unanimous consent of the Fathers" was subject to punishment under the law.¹⁵⁰

Following the Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation in the 16th century, Protestants and Catholics alike continued to debate the doctrine of *Perspicuity*. The arguments still revolved around the same questions:

1. The question of authority: Who has the authority to interpret Scripture?
2. The question of hermeneutics: What is the proper approach to interpreting Scripture: literal (grammatical-historical) or allegorical?
3. The question of definition: If Scripture is clear, why are there so many things that are difficult to understand?

In the 17th century Protestant scholastics further refined the doctrine while Catholics continued to reject it.

A. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

The Catholic Church continued to reject *Perspicuity*, but there were thinkers within the Church who seemed to be on the border. In addition to being a brilliant French mathematician and physicist, Pascal was also a philosopher. When he was 23, he became a follower of Jansenism,¹⁵¹ a pious sect of Catholicism that stressed religious reform, predestination,¹⁵² and strict observance of ethics. In 1654 he experienced what he called a "second conversion," and resolved "total submission to Jesus Christ."¹⁵³ Not long afterwards he made plans to write a theological work entitled *Apology for the Christian Religion*. The scraps of paper on which he recorded his thoughts were collected after his death and published as his *Pensées*.

In the *Pensées*, Pascal defends both the perspicuity and the obscurity of Scripture as necessary. His reasoning is not that God is unknowable but that knowing such an exalted being too easily can result in dangerous human pride. Perfect perspicuity would be good for the intellect but at the same time be harmful for the will, and it is the will that God wishes to mold.¹⁵⁴

The Christian religion, then, teaches men these two truths; that there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him. It is equally important to men to know both these points; and it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it. The knowledge of only one of these points gives rise either to the pride of philosophers, who have known God, and not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of atheists, who know their own wretchedness, but not the Redeemer.¹⁵⁵

Although man is capable of knowing God, he is at the same time unworthy of knowing him. In mercy, God makes himself known to those who truly seek him, but hides himself from those who "tempt" him.¹⁵⁶ Scripture gives evidence to truth about God, but it is convincing only to the person who has been affected by the grace of God. To all others, the evidence of Scripture is obscure.¹⁵⁷

Scripture has both a "carnal" (temporal) meaning and a "spiritual one." The carnal meaning is obvious, because it does not take a special work of God in order for the reader to understand. The spiritual meaning, however, may be hidden. This is by deliberate divine design, so that carnal persons who do not want to turn to God will be left in their spiritual blindness, unable to understand even that which is clear.¹⁵⁸

Religion is so great a thing that it is right that those who will not take the trouble to see it, if it be obscure, should be deprived of it. Why, then, do any complain, if it be such as can be found by seeking?¹⁵⁹

All things work together for good to the elect, even the obscurities of Scripture; for they honour them because of what is divinely clear. And all things work together for evil to the rest of the world, even what is clear; for they revile such, because of the obscurities which they do not understand.¹⁶⁰

There is sufficient clearness to enlighten the elect, and sufficient obscurity to humble them. There is sufficient obscurity to blind the reprobate, and sufficient clearness to condemn them and make them inexcusable....¹⁶¹

It would appear that Pascal actually comes very close to the Protestant doctrine of *Perspicuity* in that what is obscure is obscure only to the unspiritual, as described in 1 Cor. 2:6-16. There is, however, a major difference. The Protestant doctrine declares that God has indeed revealed himself clearly in Scripture, but that spiritual blindness prevents unbelievers from seeing what has been revealed. Pascal, on the other hand, says that God has deliberately hidden himself.¹⁶²

If there were no obscurity, man would not be sensible of his corruption; if there were no light, man would not hope for a remedy. Thus, it is not only fair, but advantageous to us, that God be partly hidden and partly revealed; since it is equally dangerous to man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing God.¹⁶³

B. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* has been one of the most influential documents of the Protestant Reformed tradition. Its Calvinistic writers demonstrated their belief in *sola scriptura* by making the doctrines of Scripture the first item of faith. Three of the nine articles of Chapter One are related to *Perspicuity*. They declared that Scripture was clear in all things "necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation," and that things less clear can be understood even by the unlearned, given sufficient study of the rest of Scripture.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, the Scriptures are "to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come" so all people may worship God "in an acceptable manner" and be encouraged to hope in him.¹⁶⁵ The last article gives the "infallible rule" that Scripture interprets Scripture. What is obscure in one place will be explained more clearly in another.¹⁶⁶ The *Confession* firmly established for the Reformed Church the doctrine of *Perspicuity*.

C. Francis Turretin (1623-1687)

Turretin¹⁶⁷ is a representative of Reformed Protestant scholasticism that developed in the century following the Reformation. *Sola scriptura* was at the heart of doctrine. Although a professor of theology in Geneva, he was at heart a pastor.¹⁶⁸ "And one of the great pastoral concerns, not peculiar to later pietists but integral to the [Reformation], was putting the Bible into the hands of the laity."¹⁶⁹ Turretin followed in this tradition, holding

"...that every believer can and should read the Bible without interference....God through Scripture speaks to the believing individual, who needs to church or external judge, but can directly appropriate what is given him....The holy, dependable, and understandable Word, in the hands of the believer, is to be read as truth, and a spiritual interpretation is necessary for a spiritual meaning. Allegory is rejected...."¹⁷⁰

Turretin argues against the Church of Rome's claim that Scripture is obscure. He charges the Church with deliberately denying the laity access to it not only to

...support the need for tradition, but, in order to keep the people from reading it, and to hide the light under a basket, the more easily to reign in the darkness, they have begun to argue for its obscurity, as if there can be no trustworthy knowledge of its meaning without the decision of the church.¹⁷¹

He acknowledges that the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary for true perspicuity. To unbelievers, "the gospel is its own concealment."¹⁷² Furthermore, there are certain subjects—mysteries—that seem beyond our understanding and could be called "obscure" as a result. These mysteries, however, are revealed "by the wonderful condescension (sugkatavbasi)" of God that a believer who has enlightened eyes of the mind can comprehend these mysteries sufficiently for salvation if he reads carefully."¹⁷³ With words that sound very similar to the position of the Catholic Pascal, Turretin defends the doctrine of *Perspicuity* against charges put forth by Bellarmine that Protestants thought Scripture needed no interpretation. He writes:

[We] hold that Scripture has its own secrets, which we cannot discover, and which God wills to be in Scripture to awaken the zeal of the faithful, to increase their effort, to control human pride, and to purge the contempt that easily could have arise from too much ease [of understanding]. But the question [of perspicuity] deals only with matters necessary for salvation, and with them only in reference to aspects which must be known....¹⁷⁴

The crux of the matter for Turretin is not whether there are any obscurities in Scripture but whether the Bible can be understood without the traditions that the Catholics held to be of equal weight with Scripture. It is a matter of authority.

The question therefore comes to this: is Scripture so understandable in matters necessary for salvation, not with regard to what is taught but with regard to the manner of teaching, not with regard to the subject [persons], but to the object [Scripture itself], that it can be read and understood for salvation (*salutariter*) by believers without the help of external traditions? The Roman Catholics deny this; we affirm it.¹⁷⁵

If Scripture is to remain clear, translation is necessary. Turretin stresses the need for translations, since reading and meditating upon Scripture is required of all believers, regardless of language. The Church must translate the Scriptures so that every person "may understand in accordance with his ability."¹⁷⁶ He recognizes an inconsistency among the Catholics, noting that the "wiser" ones had already translated the Scriptures in many languages. Others, "having lost their reason, condemn them as evil and dangerous" on the grounds that they become the source of heresy.¹⁷⁷

The gospel is to be preached in all languages; therefore it can and should be translated into all. This is a logical deduction from the preached word to the written, because the significance (*ratio*) is the same, and the reasons that led the apostles to preach in the vernacular make plain the need of translations.¹⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

Almost 500 years after the Reformation, the doctrine of *Perspicuity* is still contested. The evangelical church remains persuaded that Scripture is clear, as defined and refined throughout Church history. In debating the doctrine of *Perspicuity* today, it is necessary to remember the historical circumstances under which the doctrine was hammered out, giving attention to *what* should be clear to *whom*.

Perspicuity has championed free access to the Scriptures in the vernacular so we might have the light God intended to shine upon us. Some persons, however, have misused the doctrine to expound unsound teachings and bolster an unbiblical autonomy. They divorce themselves from the teachings of the Apostles and from present submission to any Church leadership, claiming that only the Holy Spirit may teach them. This is not the doctrine of *Perspicuity* taught by either the Church Fathers or the Reformers.

The doctrine of *Perspicuity* allows us to possess and study the Word that is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. That Word still needs to be approached with a sound hermeneutic and a humble heart that will allow God's Spirit to speak his own message, whether it be directly through personal reading of the Word or mediated through the teachers he has given to the Church.

¹ Jn. 15:26.

² *Protestants* here refers to people in the churches, not necessarily to the theologians who have studied the intricacies of doctrine and the details of church history.

³ The *language-game* is a concept developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein to describe the social aspect of communication. Even as chess players must play according to the same rules in order for there to be a legitimate game, so the speakers of language must have a common understanding about the way their language is used in order for accurate communication to take place. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

⁴ We must think of *language-games* (plural) rather than *game* (singular). Scripture was written in more than one language by speakers of differing cultural perspectives and in diverse genre.

⁵ Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 9:10, 10:11.

⁶ Even those who know the biblical languages do not play the same language-game as the original recipients of God's message. Not only do they approach the text from a different linguistic and cultural background, but also their entire knowledge of the languages has come by means of interpreters rather than native speakers.

⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 17.

⁸ 1 Cor. 2:6-16.

⁹ Theodore Mueller, "Luther and the Bible," in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, ed. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 112.

¹⁰ Ps. 119:105.

¹¹ Prov. 6:23.

¹² Deut. 30:9-14.

¹³ 1 Cor. 1:13-14a, NLT.

¹⁴ Phil. 4:15-16.

¹⁵ 2 Pet. 3:15-16.

¹⁶ Luther's *grammatical perspicuity*.

¹⁷ Objections are sometimes made to the perspicuity of Scripture on the grounds that the doctrine implies the necessity of being able to read. This is a spurious argument. Although there are obvious advantages to being literate, it is the understanding of Scripture that is in question here, not the method by which one comes to that understanding. Understanding is a function of the mind. Whether Scripture enters the mind by the ear or the eye is of little consequence to the validity of the doctrine.

¹⁸ 1 Pet. 1:19-21.

¹⁹ 1 Cor. 2:10-12.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 3:1-2.

²¹ 1 Cor. 1:5-7, 12-14.

²² 1 Cor. 2:12; cf. Col. 1:9.

²³ Integral to this debate is the definition of *Church*. Both the Catholic Church and the Reformers endorsed submission to the Church, but the Reformers believed that the Church of Rome was full of false doctrine and incapable of reform, and thus no longer the true Church.

²⁴ To quote an old proverb: You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink.

²⁵ 1 Pet. 1:14-16; 1:23-2:3.

²⁶ Psalm 119 shows the relationship between longing for God and longing for his Word.

²⁷ Ps. 119:102-104; cf. Ps. 19:10.

²⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.9.14. Note that even with his use of the word *obscure*, the teachings of Scripture do not have to remain obscure. By using what is understood to shed light on what is not understood, the so-called *obscure* can become clear. In this sense, then, obscurity simply means more difficult to understand. It does not mean that understanding is impossible or out of reach.

The doctrine of perspicuity takes exception with Augustine (and others) over issues of allegorical interpretation, which is another matter. In allegory, additional meanings hide under the literal meaning of the words.

²⁹ 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:2.

³⁰ Ezr. 7:10; 1 Tim. 4:13-16; 2 Tim. 2:15. In the context of the New Testament, the written "Word" would have referred primarily to the Old Testament Scriptures. The gospel of Christ as delivered by the apostles was also referred to as the "Word." (See 1 Pet. 1:23-25.)

³¹ David G. Armstrong, "The Perspicuity ('Clearness') of Scripture," 1996. [Online] Armstrong's argument is that baptism and the Eucharist have soteriological implications, thus his use of the word *other* in the first sentence.

³² Lk. 22:17-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-28. There are a few in Christianity who do not see this as a clear command for the present day, most notably the Society of Friends (Quakers).

³³ Mic. 6:8.

³⁴ Armstrong.

³⁵ Rom. 2:12-15.

³⁶ 1 Pet. 2:9.

³⁷ Eph. 4:11-13.

³⁸ Jn. 16:13, 1 Jn. 2:27.

³⁹ Jn. 8:43-47.

⁴⁰ Eph. 1:7-8.

⁴¹ Col. 2:1-3.

⁴² Heb. 5:12-14.

⁴³ *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. by Maxwell Staniforth, introductions and editorial material by Andrew Louth (St. Ives, England: Penguin Books, 1987), 20.

⁴⁴ *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, 53, in *Early Christian Writings*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* The reference is to Moses' pleading with God not to destroy the Israelites.

⁴⁶ The date of his martyrdom is not clear, but was probably in the latter half of the second century.

⁴⁷ *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, 12, in *Early Christian Writings*.

⁴⁸ This is true in other fields of knowledge as well. A person may be able to repeat the rules of a mathematical formula and even perform the function without understanding how it works. The *what* is clear, though the *how* and *why* remain a mystery.

⁴⁹ Neither the author nor the date of *The Epistle of Barnabas* is known. Internal evidence indicates that *Barnabas* was written after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Clement of Alexandria refers to the epistle, which means the latest possible date would be 200 AD. (*Early Christian Writings*, 157.)

⁵⁰ *Early Christian Writings*, 156.

⁵¹ *Early Christian Writings*, 157.

⁵² Irenaeus was appointed Bishop of Lyon in 177 AD.

⁵³ The Valentinians were a Gnostic sect of the second century. According to Tertullian, their leader Valentinus broke with the Christian church after being passed over for the office of bishop. "Valentinus," New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 14 (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1967), 518-519.

⁵⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.9.4. 5/23/99. <http://ccl.wheaton.edu/fathers/ANF-01/iren/iren1.html>. This document (last modified September 27, 1996) from the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* server, at Wheaton College.

⁵⁵ i.e., putting isolated texts together to make a new narrative or teaching.

⁵⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.9.4.

⁵⁷ In particular, the Valentinians.

⁵⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.10.1.

⁵⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.27.1. Bracketed sections are from the translation; italicized portions from this writer.

⁶⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.26. The title of the chapter is "The treasure hid in the scriptures is Christ; the true exposition of the Scriptures is to be found in the Church alone."

⁶¹ *Against Heresies*, 4.26.1. Italics from this author.

⁶² Robert Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 55. Clement discusses the use of symbols in Book 5 of *The Stromata*.

⁶⁵ Matt. 11:15.

⁶⁶ Ps. 18:11-12.

⁶⁷ *Stromata*, 6.15.

⁶⁸ 4.2.6.

⁶⁹ 4.2.7

⁷⁰ It should not be forgotten that the leaders of the Church are indeed required to devote themselves to prayer and the study of the Word and then teach others (Acts 6:2-4, Eph. 4:11-13 *et. al.*) The problem with the release of this responsibility to them by all the rest is that it ignores the commandments of Scripture intended for every believer: to hear, obey, study and meditate upon the Word.

⁷¹ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.1.7. *Classics of Western Spirituality*.

⁷² Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.1.7. *Classics of Western Spirituality*.

⁷³ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.9.

⁷⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (etext version, editor's introduction, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <http://ccl.wheaton.edu/a/augustine/doctrine/doctrine.txt>, June 2, 1999).

⁷⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Preface.

⁷⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, II.6.7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, II.6.8. See also III.26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, II.9.14.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, III.28.39.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, III.29.41.

⁸¹ Allegory is mentioned in III.29.40 and IV.20.39.

⁸² Grant and Tracy, 69-70.

⁸³ Jerome, *To Vigilantus* (Post-Nicene Fathers).

⁸⁴ The Greek Septuagint had been the primary translation used by the Church Fathers.

⁸⁵ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1995 ed., s.v. "Languages of the World."

⁸⁶ The Vulgate's acceptance as the true, authoritative version for the Church was not formalized until the Council of Trent in 1546, but in practice it had already been received as such.

⁸⁷ Josef A. Jungmann, S.J., *The Mass*, trans. Julian Fernandes, S.J. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1976), 242.

⁸⁸ From Antioch in Syria.

⁸⁹ John Chrysostom (c. 349-407), from Antioch in Syria, was made Archbishop of Constantinople in 398. Chrysostom also spoke to the perspicuity of Scripture. In *The Homilies* he states, "What do I come in for, you say, if I do not hear some one discoursing? This is the ruin and destruction of all. For what need of a person to discourse? This necessity arises from our sloth. Wherefore any necessity for a homily? All things are clear and open that are in the divine Scriptures; the necessary things are all plain." *The Homilies, etc. 1 Thess. 2:5*

⁹⁰ Grant and Tracy, 66.

⁹¹ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Galatians*, cited in Joseph W. Trigg, *Biblical Interpretation* (Wilmington, Delaware: M. Glazier, 1988), 173.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 174.

⁹³ Grant and Tracy, 68-69.

⁹⁴ Henri de Lubac, *les quatre sens de l'Écriture* (The Four Senses of Scripture), Vol. 2 (Paris: Aubier, 1954-1964), 587.

⁹⁵ Lat. *opacitas silvarum*.

⁹⁶ de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, 588.

⁹⁷ St. John of the Cross said, "In spite of all their commentaries, the holy doctors, together with all those who could be numbered in their ranks, have never fully interpreted Scripture: human words cannot enclose what the Spirit of God reveals." Quoted in Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: the Four Senses of Scripture*, Vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., and Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1998), 79-80.

⁹⁸ The *Moralia* is a commentary on the book of Job.

⁹⁹ Gregory the Great, *Moralia* (available at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/moralia1.html>, downloaded January 15, 1999) I.2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, I.1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, I.3. The sample passages from Job that Gregory uses to illustrate his assertion reveal that he is looking at hyperbole and other figures of speech, which were not meant to be taken in a woodenly literal sense to begin with. See *Moralia*, n. 6.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, I.4.

¹⁰³ 1 Pet. 2.9.

¹⁰⁴ Tertullian, *De praescriptione*, cited in Grant and Tracy, 75.

¹⁰⁵ This was considered unlawful, as seen in this medieval writing by Etienne de Bourbon: "A certain rich man of the city...called Waldo, was curious when he heard the gospel read [in Latin], since he was not much lettered to know what was said. Wherefore he made a pact with certain priests, the one, that he should translate to him the Bible, the other, that he should write as the first dictated. Which they did; and in like manner many books of the Bible, and many authorities of the saints, which they called *Sentences*. Which when the said citizen had often read and learned by heart, he proposed to observe evangelical perfection as the apostles observed it; and he sold all his goods, and despising the world, he gave all his money to the poor, and usurped the apostolic office by preaching the gospel, and those things which had learned by heart, in the villages and open places and by calling to him many men and women to do the same thing, and teaching them the gospel by heart,...who indeed, being simple and illiterate men and women, wandered through villages and entered houses and preached in open places, and even in churches, and provoked others to do the same." Etienne de Bourbon: "The Waldensians and Vernacular Scripture" in *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe: Documents in Translation*, edited by Edward Peters (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1980), 144.

¹⁰⁶ Provençal is a Romance language of southern France.

¹⁰⁷ It is not our purpose here to examine the doctrinal teaching of the Waldensians. Rather, we bring them up in order to grasp how the Church viewed Scripture that was out of its control.

¹⁰⁸ Walter Map, "On the Waldensians" [1179] in *Heresy and Authority*, 145.

¹⁰⁹ Note the relative unimportance of being able to understand what was being read or recited in Latin. David of Augsburg, "On the Waldensians of Bavaria" [1270], in *Heresy and Authority*, 149-150.

¹¹⁰ *Heresy and Authority*, 166.

¹¹¹ *Canon 14* of the Council of Toulouse, 1229, in *Heresy and Authority*, 195.

¹¹² Jacopo Passavanti, *The Mirror of True Repentance*, in *Heresy and Authority*, 298.

¹¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province; etext provided by *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*; <http://ccel.wheaton.edu/a/aquinas/summa/>), I.1.10. The allusion to Augustine is from *On Christian Doctrine*: III.27.38: "For what more liberal and more fruitful provision could God have made in regard to the Sacred Scriptures than that the same words might be understood in several senses, all of which are sanctioned by the concurring testimony of other passages equally divine?"

¹¹⁴ "It is also befitting Holy Writ, which is proposed to all without distinction of persons...that spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from corporeal things, in order that thereby even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it....Hence those things that are taught metaphorically in one part of Scripture, in other parts are taught more openly. The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds and as a defense against the ridicule of the impious...." *Summa* I.1.9.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349) was one important example. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* calls him the most influential exegete of the Middle Ages ("Order of Friars Minor," *Catholic Encyclopedia* at <http://www.knight.org/advent/cathen/06281a.htm>, downloaded June 2, 1999). Protesting against the unrestrained use of allegorization, he stressed the importance of the literal sense. His own use of literal and allegorical meanings together he referred to as "double literal." (Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 69.

¹¹⁸ In fact, some translation in English had been done much earlier. Aldhelm, a bishop from Dorset, reportedly translated the Psalms about 700. The Venerable Bede was translating the Gospel of John when he died. The rest of the Gospels, the Ten Commandments and parts of the first seven books of the Old Testament were also translated into Old English. However, with the coming of the Norman French under William the Conqueror in 1066, the English language underwent such a drastic transformation that these earlier Bibles were no longer of any use. Douglas C. Wood, *The Evangelical Doctor: John Wycliffe and the Lollards* (Herts, England: Evangelical Press, 1984), 78-79.

¹¹⁹ Douglas C. Wood, 78.

¹²⁰ Edwin Robertson, *John Wycliffe: Morning Star of the Reformation* (Herts, U.K.: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1984), 55.

¹²¹ The reference is to words attributed to St. Gregory (c. 540-604) upon seeing some fair-skinned captives in the Roman slave market. When he inquired as to their origin, he was told they were *Angli*. "'Good', he said, 'they have the face of angels, and such men should be fellow-heirs of the angels in heaven'." Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 133-135.

¹²² G. H. Martin, ed. and trans., *Knighton's Chronicle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 243-245. This section of the *Chronicle* was written in 1382.

¹²³ Robertson, 57.

¹²⁴ i.e., canon law.

¹²⁵ Martin Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospels," in *Luther's Works* vol. 35: *Word and Sacrament* vol. 1, edited by E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 123-124.

¹²⁶ From Luther's exposition of Psalm 37, quoted in Theodore Mueller, "Luther and the Bible," in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, edited by John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 111.

¹²⁷ Luther wrote *Bondage of the Will* in 1525 in answer to Erasmus' *Freedom of the Will* that had been published the previous year. Luther and Erasmus differed about the need for allegorical interpretation in Scripture, yet they both had a desire to make the Scriptures available to everyone. It was he who was the source of the "ploughboy" quotation (in *Paraclesis*) later used by Tyndale: "'If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plough to know more of Scripture than thou dost.' One has to recognize the time period in which Erasmus first uttered that statement for its impact to be grasped....Erasmus was calling for a bold reformation where even common persons could read for themselves the wonderful news of God's gospel." David S. Dockery, "The Foundation of Reformation Hermeneutics: A Fresh Look at Erasmus," in *Premise*, vol. 2, no. 9, Oct. 19, 1995 (downloaded Jan. 30, 1999 from <http://capo.org/premise/95/oct/p950906.html>).

Erasmus did not believe everything in Scripture was obscure. In *Paraclesis* he marvels at God's message of salvation in Scripture, the wisdom of which "can be grasped by anyone who has a 'pious and open mind' ..., for the Scriptures accommodate the message to the level of the most simple without ceasing to be 'an object of wonder to those at the top.'" Even in his use of allegory, Erasmus was cautious. "He deplores the 'frivolous' ...use of allegory by which some import the wildest fictions into the text." He found it useful when the plain sense seemed absurd, as had Origen. Don H. Compier, "The Independent Pupil: Calvin's Transformation of Erasmus' Theological Hermeneutics" (downloaded Nov. 8, 1998 from <http://bsf.bible.org/galaxie/journals/sample/wtuj/9095/wtj220.htm>, Westminster Theological Journal).

¹²⁸ J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnson, *Martin Luther on The Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of De Servo Arbitrio (1525)* (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), 70.

¹²⁹ A. Skevington Wood, 95.

¹³⁰ Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, trans. John Schmidt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 86-87; quoting Karl Mirbt, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Papsttums und des römischen Katholizismus*, 4th edition (1924), no. 332; quoted in Georg Buchwald, *400 Jahre deutsche Lutherbibel* (1934), 4.

¹³¹ Wood, 96.

¹³² Lull, 132.

¹³³ Calvin's *Institutes*, I.VI.1. John T. McNeill, ed., *John Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

¹³⁴ Commenting on Psalm 81:5, "I heard a language which I understood not." John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 3, translated by Rev. James Anderson, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 10-11 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1949), 314.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 3-4. Ps. 91:13: "The Psalmist accommodates his language to this infirmity of our carnal apprehension;" and Psalm 104:29: "[The prophet] could have gone farther, and have asserted, that all things, unless upheld in being by God, would return to nothing; but he was content with affirming in general and popular language, that whatever is not cherished by Him falls into corruption."

¹³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.13.1.

¹³⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, vol. 5, 184-185, (*Commentaries* vol. 12). See also Deut. 27:8 in *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, vol. 4, translated by Rev. Charles William Bingham, in *Commentaries*, vol. 6.

¹³⁸ "Moses, therefore, declares that the Law is not hard to be understood, so as to demand inordinate fatigue in its study; but that God there speaks distinctly and explicitly, and that nothing is required of them but diligent application. More-over, he thus takes away from them every pretext for ignorance, since, with so much light, they cannot err, except by wilfully blinding themselves, or shutting their eyes. Whence, also, we gather, how impious are the babblings of the Papists that the Scripture is beset by thick darkness, and how wicked is their driving away the people from approaching it, as if it were some labyrinth. Surely they thus must needs accuse the Holy Spirit of falsehood, who so abundantly asserts its comprehensibility, (*claritatem*,) or else they malign itself by their blasphemous taunts." Calvin, *Books of Moses*, vol. 4, commenting on Deut. 30:11-14.

¹³⁹ See Calvin's preface to the Book of Romans.

¹⁴⁰ "...when its scarecrow bishops desired to domineer and tyrannize, they used the artifice of declaring it unlawful to inquire into the mysteries of Scripture. Hence it was brought about that they might securely addict themselves to their ridiculous follies, and that the monks, their emissaries, might vent with impunity whatever fables came into their heads. But, in fine, the intention of God was that every seventh year the people should be reminded to meditate diligently on the law." *Four Last Books of Moses*, commenting on Deut. 31:11.

¹⁴¹ Neither Calvin nor Luther would agree with anyone who asserts that each believer is independent of the Church with regard to the interpretation of Scripture. They distanced themselves from the established Church because of the corruption they saw in it, alleging that it was no longer a true Church; but they did not declare either themselves or others independent of the Church as established by Jesus Christ.

¹⁴² *Institutes*, IV.I.1.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, IV.I.5.

¹⁴⁴ Calvin refers to the Church as "Mother of all the Godly." *Ibid.*, IV.1.1.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, IV.1.5.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, IV.1.4.

¹⁴⁷ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 182.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ The council lasted until 1563.

¹⁵⁰ Council of Trent, "Decree Concerning the Edition, and the Use of the Sacred Books," 1546.

¹⁵¹ Jansenism was strongest in France in the 17th and 18th centuries. Its name is taken from the Flemish theologian who became bishop of Ypres, Cornelis Jansen. Jansenism's strict moral code and pietistic religion differed sharply from the practices of the officially sanctioned Jesuits, making the two groups hostile to each other. The French government also opposed Jansenism, sensing political threats within the movement. Pascal boldly defended Jansenism in his *Provincial Letters*. The Jansenists affirmed their continued loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church, but their founder and some of the writings of later Jansenists were condemned by Rome. Timothy N. Tackett, "Jansenism," *Encarta Encyclopedia* (Microsoft Corporation, 1993-1995, and Funk & Wagnalls Corporation). Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), 879-880.

¹⁵² Jansenism's emphasis on predestination was based on the teachings of St. Augustine. Even though the movement remained loyal to the Catholic Church, their insistence on predestination prompted accusations of their being Calvinists. Tackett, "Jansenism," *Encarta*.

¹⁵³ Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 33, *The Provincial Letters, Pensées, Scientific Treatises* by Blaise Pascal (Chicago: William Benton for Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), v-vi.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, VIII.581.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, VIII.556.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, VIII.557.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, VIII.564.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII.571.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII.574.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, VIII.575.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, VIII.578.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, VIII.585.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, VIII.586.

¹⁶⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter One, Article 7.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Article 8.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Article 9.

¹⁶⁷ Francois Turretine was a pastor and professor of theology in Geneva. His monumental work in Latin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, served as a major reference work of Reformed theology into the 19th century, as long as Latin remained the language of scholars. "Above all, the way in which his theology, and the attitudes embodied in it, entered into the structure of the thought that gave form to much of American piety is evident both from the explicit acknowledgments of influential writers—the Princeton theologians, William G. T. Shedd, and others—and in internal evidence based on the nature of their arguments." From the introduction to Francis Turretin, *The Doctrine of Scripture: Locus 2 of Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, edited and translated by John W. Beardslee III (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 8-9.

¹⁶⁸ None of Turretin's sermons survive. They are said to have been "straightforward and practical." *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 185 (17.1).

¹⁷² Ibid., 185 (17.2).

¹⁷³ Ibid., 185-186 (17.3).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 186 (17.4).

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 188 (17.7).

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 151 (13.10).

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 147 (13.2). Turretin particularly attributes this attitude to several named individuals and the order of Loyola.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 148 (13.3).