

The Perspicuity of Holy Scripture

By Rev. Ron Cammenga

In the last issue of The Reformed Witness pamphlet we discussed various objections to the view known as “theistic evolution.” Once again, we would encourage you to re-read that article. In that pamphlet we lodged several objections against the view of theistic evolution which, we believe, show that this view is at odds with the Biblical account of the creation of the world and the origin of all things. At the end of that pamphlet we promised to devote this pamphlet to an examination of theistic evolution in light of the reformed view of the perspicuity of the Bible.

Reformed Christians hold to the perspicuity of the Bible. What do we mean by the perspicuity of the Bible? What we mean by the perspicuity of Holy Scripture is basically clear, lucid, and plain. The meaning of Scripture is not clouded and deliberately concealed. But the meaning of Scripture is distinct. Scripture is understandable. The ordinary, common believer is able to discern the meaning of Scripture and understand Scripture’s basic message. This is not to say that there are not some difficult passages of Scripture. This is certainly the case. Peter says concerning the writings of Paul, “as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction,” II Peter 3:16. Nor does this deny that in their teachings the Scriptures are deep and broad, providing more than enough material for a lifetime of study and meditation. But the perspicuity of the Bible does mean that basically Scripture’s message is plain; the Scriptures mean what they say. Further, this truth implies that the more difficult passages of Scripture must be interpreted in the light of the simpler and clearer passages. Scripture interprets Scripture.

This truth of the perspicuity of the Bible was especially developed by the Reformers of the sixteenth century. On the one hand, they maintained the perspicuity of Holy Scriptures over against the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that the Scriptures were obscure, dark, and ambiguous. Rome maintained that the ordinary believer certainly was not in a position to interpret the Scriptures, but that the interpretation of Scripture must be left to the pope and to church tradition. On the other hand, the Reformers stood for the perspicuity of Holy Scripture against those in the Middle Ages who denied the plain sense of Scripture, and interpreted Scripture in fanciful and allegorical and arbitrary ways.

Martin Luther especially developed this truth of the perspicuity of Holy Scripture. In one place he wrote: “They who deny the all-clearness and all-plainness of the Scriptures, leave us nothing else but darkness. Moreover I declare against you concerning the whole of the Scripture that I will have no one part of it called obscure; and to support me stands that which I have brought forth out of Peter, that the Word of God is to us a “lamp shining in a dark place” (II Peter 1:19). But if any part of this lamp does not shine, it is rather a part of the dark place than the lamp itself. For Christ has not so illuminated us, as to wish that any part of His Word should remain obscure, even while He commands us to attend to it: for if it be not shining plain, His commanding us to attend to it is in vain.”

The truth of the perspicuity of the Bible is in keeping with what the Bible itself is. The Bible is the revelation of God; the Bible reveals. If the Bible is in fact revelation, the Bible must be perspicuous and clear.

The Bible itself teaches about itself that it is perspicuous. In more than one place Scripture refers to itself under the figure of a lamp or a light. The power of Scripture is to illuminate or enlighten men. “The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes,” Ps. 19:8. “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path,” Ps. 119:105. “For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light,” Prov.6:23. Moses says to the children of Israel in Deut. 30:11, “For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off.” The passage in II Peter 1:19, to which Luther appealed, is certainly to the point. There God’s Word is described as “a light that shineth in a dark place.”

II Timothy 3:15-17 is a striking proof of the perspicuity of Holy Scripture. 15] And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. [16] All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for

instruction in righteousness: [17] That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. First, notice that Scripture here is said to be “profitable.” The passage goes on to list all the things for which scripture is profitable. Scripture could hardly be profitable for all of these things if Scripture were not clear and understandable. Second, notice what Paul says in verse 15 concerning Timothy’s knowledge of Holy Scripture. He says concerning Timothy that “from a child thou has known the Holy Scriptures.” That already as a little child Timothy had known the Holy Scriptures certainly brings out the clarity and perspicuity of Scripture. So clear, so understandable are the Scriptures that even a child can understand them.

That the scriptures are perspicuous is plain from the fact that the Scriptures are addressed to the ordinary people of God. The Israelites of the Old Testament were common shepherds and farmers. The members of the churches of Ephesus and Corinth and Thessalonica were ordinary people, like the majority of the members of the church today. Certainly if God addresses His Word to the ordinary believer, He does that because the ordinary believer is able to understand that Word of God.

It is our position, now, that the theistic evolutionist, by his “re-interpretation” of Genesis 1, overthrows the truth of the perspicuity of Holy Scripture. He does this in several ways. He does this especially by making the word “day” mean something other than its common, ordinary, apparent meaning. He makes the word “day” mean something quite different from what the church has understood the word “day” to mean in Genesis 1, something quite different from what a child reading Genesis 1 would conclude the word “day” means, something quite different from the ordinary believer, uninformed by the current scientific theories and discoveries, would conclude that the word “day” means in Genesis 1. Abracadabra, “day” suddenly becomes “millions of years.” Immediately we ask: Why? For what reason in the text of Scripture itself are we to conclude that “day” does not refer to a literal, 24-hour day? And from now on, when, pray tell, are we to know whether in the Bible the word “day” means “day” or something besides “day”?

This same denial of the Bible’s perspicuity is to be charged against those who hold that there were large time gaps between the days of Genesis 1. Apparently, Genesis 1 records the creation of all things on six successive days. One day followed another day as they do still today. Once again we ask: for what reason in the text itself may it be concluded that there were long periods of time between the days of Genesis 1? What reason can there be for setting aside the plain, obvious teaching of Genesis 1 concerning the succession of days?

Or again, what reason can there be for setting aside the clear, forthright teaching of Genesis 1 that when God spoke His creative word every creature appeared, fully formed and developed? How can Genesis 1 be read in such a way that anyone would conclude that when God spoke His creative word the creatures only began to appear in very primitive and undeveloped forms, and that only after millions of years of evolutionary development did they reach their present stage of development? And the men who support these theories are learned men! We are tempted to ask them what kind of fools they take us to be.

The denial of the truth of the perspicuity of Scripture in the Middle Ages put the church in bondage to the pope in Rome and to the wild speculative theologians. The denial of the perspicuity of Holy Scripture by the theistic evolutionists puts the church into a far worse bondage. Now the Roman pope has been replaced by the ungodly and unbelieving scientist. Now science, the findings of science, and ultimately the scientist himself, are exalted above Scripture. The scientist now will tell us what Holy Scripture teaches. We are expected to wait with bated breath for the newest oracle from this self-proclaimed deity. For myself, if I had to choose, I would choose bondage to the pope before I would choose bondage to this infidel.

Because it is a denial of the truth of the perspicuity of Holy Scripture, we reject the view of theistic evolution. The child of God who loves and believes the Word of God cannot accept this false and unbiblical view. Nor will he allow the scientist to exalt himself to a position above the Word of God, so that the believer’s understanding of Scripture depends now on the proclamations of the scientist. But he will bow, in humble, child-like faith before the plain teaching of God’s Word that “In the beginning God created the heaven and earth,” Genesis 1:1.