

# The Perspicuity of Scripture

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There are many aspects of the doctrine of Scripture, such as its inspiration, infallibility, authority, and necessity. All of these aspects of the truth of Scripture have come under attack in one form or another, an attack which in our day is becoming more and more intense. In this article, it is our purpose to concentrate on one aspect of the truth of God's revelation, namely the perspicuity of Scripture, as well as to take note of the attacks being concentrated on it.

Perspicuity means literally to see through something. We would say that a window has the characteristic of being perspicuous. The glass of the window is solid and substantial, yet transparent, allowing one to look upon his surroundings. Perspicuous means clear. When this term is applied to Scripture, then it means that the Bible as the Word of God is understandable in the sense that the reader of that Word is able to know fully what he reads and gain insight into the truths which are set forth in the Scriptures. While this is not a Scriptural term, it is nevertheless a term which the church has historically used to describe the Bible. And a good term it is, for it means that the Bible is clear and understandable to the people of God for whom and to whom it was written. And a good term it is because it implies a very important truth of Scripture, which is that God is pleased to save His elect people through the revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ as the God of all our salvation, and that His people are conscious partakers of that wonderful gift of His grace.

This importance that is attached to the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture may not be minimized, as it often is in our day. Nor may it be denied or mocked, which is even worse. This truth implies that God revealed Himself in such a way that His people are able to understand His revelation of Himself and of His salvation in Christ. The almighty, eternal, sovereign, infinite God spoke in such a way that the creatures of His hand are able to know and comprehend the words of the ever-blessed God. That in itself is a wonder of God's grace. But God added to this revelation of Himself the wonder of man, whom He created as a rational and moral creature. This means that God created man as a thinking, understanding, comprehending, reasoning being who also knows right from wrong. Thus, in a word, God created man in such a way that he was able to receive the revelation which God gave of himself. This makes the doctrine of perspicuity very important, and makes the denial of it very serious. To deny the truth of perspicuity implies a denial not just of the rational character of man, but especially the revelation of God. God has said that His Word is understandable; to deny this or cast aspersions upon it is to contradict the almighty God, and the Scripture assures us that God does not take that lightly. Perhaps the use of a simple example will make clear the importance of this truth. Suppose that one of us Americans is given a document which concerns a matter of life and death, but which is written in the Chinese language. Obviously the document says nothing to us, for we do not understand and cannot read that foreign tongue; and then we are in trouble, for the knowledge of the document concerns life and death. But if the same document is written for us in plain clear English, we understand it and take the appropriate action. So also with the Scriptures. They are a most important document, for they are the speech of God Himself; they concern matters of life and death, in this case eternal life and death. To deny the truth of perspicuity is to say in effect that the Scriptures are useless to the people of God, as well as to say either that man as a rational creature of God is a poor creation, or that God in making Himself known to man did a poor job. The Christian wishes to say neither of these things.

Yet exactly these sorts of things are being said today, either directly or in more subtle ways. For example, doubts regarding the understanding of the Scriptures are being placed in the minds of the people of God. The question is asked, "Do you really understand the Bible? How can you be sure that what you think the Scriptures say is in fact what they do say?" These questions are directed not at the learned in the Scriptures, at ministers, professors of theology, and the educated, but at the common people of God, who place their simple trust and faith in the Scriptures as the Word of God. Such questions not only raise doubts in the minds of God's faithful people, which is in itself wrong, since the Bible stresses that the life of the Christian is not one of doubt, but of faith. But even worse, these questions are meant to lead the people of God to the conclusions that after all the Scriptures are not understandable, contrary to what the church has always taught and thought. What is required to understand them is a great deal of education and learning, as well as intimate knowledge of the methods of interpretation and the historical and cultural conditions under which men wrote the Scriptures. The result of this is the conclusion that only the clergy, the favored few, are able to understand the Word and interpret it, while the laity, the ignorant

masses of common folk, are really in the dark. Thus the door is opened to all sorts of corruption, heresy, and error, which is rampant also today.

This way of thinking is also responsible for the proliferation of Bible translations and versions. It is not our purpose to enter into the whole question of translations and versions here, but to emphasize the perspicuity of the Bible. But the recent attacks upon the King James Version, tested by time and history in the church of Christ, evidence as assumed denial of perspicuity. Because the Bible as we have it is outdated and archaic and not easily read or understood by the people of God (so the argument goes) we must have new, modern translations which the people can understand. There is in itself nothing wrong with new translations, except the ones recently produced are full of errors and heresy because they reflect the unbelieving views of their authors. In contrast to this, we wish to emphasize the Bible as we have it, and that means the King James Version, is perspicuous. Even a little child can read and understand the Word of God, as anyone with children knows.

The Bible itself claims perspicuity. Perhaps the clearest passage in this connection is one such as Psalm 119:105: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." A lamp or a light is that which shows the way, illumines the path of life which the Christian is called to walk. Such words of the Bible are a far cry from the assertion that the Bible is not understandable and leaves the people of God in the dark spiritually. The inspired poet says exactly the same opposite. This is the general truth of Scriptures. All of the Bible is understandable from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. This does not mean that all portions of the Bible are equally clear or understandable. Peter himself says in II Peter 3:15-16 that some writings, especially those of Paul, are hard to understand. But notice that they are understandable nevertheless, and that Peter does not deny, but rather sets forth the truth of the perspicuity of Scripture.

In close connection with this truth, it must be stressed that the understanding of the Scriptures is possible only through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Objectively, the Bible is clear to all who read it, even to the wicked. But spiritually, the Scriptures are understood unto eternal life only by those to whom God has given the Spirit of truth, who leads the people of God into all the truth, John 14:26, Eph. 1:17, I Corinthians 2:14. The people of God believe, then, that the Word of God is perspicuous. And believing, they understand that the Word of God is necessary to their spiritual life and growth in grace and life of sanctification. For in order to grow in grace and knowledge, as in our calling, we must read, understand, know, and believe the Scriptures by the power of the Spirit of Christ.

The calling of the people of God is therefore to oppose the removal of the Scriptures from the people of God through the denial of the truth of perspicuity, and to hold onto the Bible with every ounce of spiritual strength we possess. The calling is then to read, study, know, and believe the Word of God to His saints, and thus to grow in grace and the knowledge of God, until we all come unto a perfect man in the day of Christ, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Then we are faithful to God in Christ, and faithful to His Word, and partakers of the grace of life eternal through the knowledge of God in the Scriptures. To God, then, be the glory for his gift of the Scriptures which we are able to understand even unto eternal life.