

**The Perspicuity of Scripture: *Rehearing the Testimony from Christian History of Those Who
Held to that View as Foundational to Their Evangelical Hermeneutic***
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ABSTRACT - The direction of this paper for this topic included surveying most of the major literature concerning the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture during the history of the Christianity. From before the Protestant Reformation, the pre-Nicene witness of Irenaeus, and the post-Nicene examples of the Paulicians and the Petrobrusians are discussed. Some contrast is made with the magisterial views of Augustine, Gregory and Aquinas.

From the time of the Protestant Reformation those presented, who have written significantly about the perspicuity of Scripture, include the reformers Luther and Hubmaier, the enlightenment evangelicals Francis Turretin and John Owen, and modern theologians Wayne Grudem, Mark Thompson, and Greg Allison. A special emphasis was made to report from these writings any recognition of objective clarity as well as any associations made between Biblical clarity and the application of its authority.

INTRODUCTION

For this historical survey, the working definition for the perspicuity of Scripture is – “Scripture is clear enough” that most of it can be read and understood objectively by anyone “observing the grammatical and historical elements of the text,” though the truth and application of it may be subjectively rejected.²

Most evangelical systematic theologies of the last century do not even mention the phrases “perspicuity of Scripture” or “clarity of Scripture.” Thankfully, this has begun to be addressed and remedied by the recent contribution of theologian Wayne Grudem, who devoted a whole

¹ Presented – August 2, 2018, Bible Faculty Summit, Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC. Much of this paper is an adaptation of material for the author’s dissertation – *Differentiation in the Perspicuity of Scripture and its Effect on the Application of Scripture’s Authority*, Presented to the Faculty of Piedmont International University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy, Winston Salem, North Carolina, May 4, 2012.

² Adapted from the definition used by J. Terry Young, “Bible, History of Interpretation,” *Holman Bible Dictionary*, Trent C. Butler, gen. ed., elec. edn. Parsons Technology, Inc., 1998 (Nashville, TN: Holman, 1991). This paper takes the position that *perspicuity* as it relates to Scripture should be defined both objectively and subjectively. Objective clarity is the innate quality of perspicuity that Scripture possesses, and it is argued that this quality is accessible to the apprehension of the unregenerate, even the rebellious mind. Subjective clarity is also possible for those statements or topics of Scripture that are objectively unclear (i.e., that cannot be universally apprehended) because they are obscure for various reasons. Despite these reasons the willing, teachable believer can be brought to a subjective personal clarity of understanding by the Holy Spirit concerning those obscure passages (cf. 1 John 2:27). Scriptural matters determined to be only objectively clear or judged only as subjectively clear will then aid in the determination of how each matter relates to Scripture’s authority for the application of that matter in faith and practice.

chapter to the clarity of Scripture in his systematic theology.³ A few other separate works, entire books, on the perspicuity of Scripture like Mark Thompson's, *A Clear and Present Word*, are recent positive additions to this theological discussion.⁴ Yet further definition, confirmation and promotion of this doctrine are still needed. It is not the design of this paper to do a thorough expose of Scriptures' teaching concerning its own perspicuity, though that testimony is also an important part of Christian history.⁵

THE PERSPICUITY OF SCRIPTURE NEEDS FURTHER DEFINITION & DEFENSE

The perspicuity of Scripture needs further definition that will aid in accurately setting the authority of Scripture apart from any presumed ecclesiastical authority. For the first fifteen hundred years following the apostolic age, there have been examples of ecclesiastical authority promoting itself as necessary for the proper interpretation of the Scriptures. Even in the age of the apostles themselves there were those individuals or movements who were rejecting or twisting apostolic teachings.⁶

Apostolic authority was not able to be sacramentally transferred to the succeeding generations so that orthodoxy might be judged only by those recognized within that sacramental succession. Apostolic authority was in apostolic teaching: teaching that agreed with Old Testament Scriptures (OT) and preserved inerrantly only in New Testament Scriptures (NT). Paul clearly taught this when he wrote, "that you might learn in us [church leaders] not to think beyond what is written." (1 Cor. 4:6) Paul and Peter in fact taught against the apostolic succession of their authority. Paul said to the Corinthian believers – "Not that we [church leaders] have dominion over your faith but are fellow workers for your joy, for by faith you stand" (2 Cor. 1:24). Peter identified himself, not as the supreme pontiff of the early church, but only as a "fellow elder" [pastor] under the authority of the "Chief Shepherd" [pastor] who is Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 5:1-4). And when Peter knew his death was imminent, his concern was not to solidify any authority in a successor, but to point the church to apostolic teaching, especially as it was preserved in Scriptures. (2 Pet. 1:12-21, 3:1-2)⁷

³ Wayne Grudem, "The Four Characteristics of Scripture: (2) Clarity," *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 105-115.

⁴ Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2006.

⁵ A good start to begin research for such an expose, which includes a brief historical summary of some of the debate concerning the doctrine of perspicuity can be found in the excellent article – "The Perspicuity of Scripture," by Larry D. Pettigrew in the *Master's Theological Seminary Journal*, 15/2 (Fall 2004), pp. 209-225.

⁶ The individual church leader, Diotrephes, with a sectarian spirit rejected the writing of the apostle John (3 John 9-10) and John addresses in his epistles the existence of other false teachers and teachings (e.g., 1John 4:1-4; 2 John 10; and Rev. 2:14, 15, 18). Several harmful leaders and false doctrines are addressed by the apostle Paul in his epistles (e.g., Rom. 16:17; 2 Cor. 12:12-15; and Gal. 1:6-9). The apostle Peter also warns his readers of the presence of false teachers (2Peter 2:1).

⁷ Even if one would concede the current interpretation in Roman Catholicism of Matthew 16:18 that Peter was the "rock" foundation of the early church, and that he alone was given "keys" of authority for the unlocking of

When a part of the professing Church wedded itself to the authority of the state at the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century, interpretations of Scripture could only be declared orthodox if they agreed with the judgment of the magisterium of the new state church and at least inferred somewhere in the teaching of their selected “Fathers”.⁸

The oft repeated words of the monk, Vincent of Lerins, in his 5th century *Commonitory*, written against all those not in submission to this magisterium, illustrate the growing rejection of the perspicuity of Scripture as a sufficient final authority. He said –

. . . it has always been the custom of Catholics, and still is, to prove the true faith in these two ways; first by the authority of the Divine Canon, and next by the tradition of the Catholic Church. Not that the Canon alone does not of itself suffice for every question, but seeing that the more part, interpreting the divine words according to their own persuasion, take up various erroneous opinions, it is therefore necessary that the interpretation of divine Scripture should be ruled according to the one standard of the Church's belief, especially in those articles on which the foundations of all Catholic doctrine rest.⁹

One can only imagine the thousands of unaligned Christian pastors who held to the true gospel and to the sound doctrine clearly taught in Scripture, but who were also, through these early centuries, declared “cursed by God” and “heretics”¹⁰ by these state-appointed judges of “orthodoxy”.

God's revelation, there is not found in that Scripture context or in any other apostolic teaching recorded in the New Testament, that such a designation by the Lord was for Peter to pass on to successors. It should also be noted that the modern Roman Catholic interpretation of Matthew 16:18 does not have the consent of all that are designated as Roman Catholic Church Fathers. See the well documented discussion of the Roman Catholic Fathers' view of Matthew 16:18 by William Webster, http://www.the-highway.com/Matt16.18_Webster.html [accessed February 1, 2012].

⁸ What is obvious from the Council of Nicaea, and the other so-called “ecumenical” councils that followed, despite some worthy Biblical evaluations that were made in them, is that this denomination of Christianity, (i.e., Roman Catholicism), was founded upon the unbiblical and false gospel of baptismal regeneration and proxy faith.

⁹ Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory of Vincent of Lerins for the Antiquity and Universality of the Catholic Faith and Against the Profane Novelties of All Heresies*, trans. by C. A. Heurtley. This was written shortly after the Council of Ephesus, which was held in 431, and Vincent's phrase – “articles on which the foundations of all Catholic doctrine rest” – refers especially to the decisions of that council plus those decisions from previous councils held at Constantinople in 381, and Nicaea in 325. A quick survey of those articles (i.e., definitions and canons, from those councils) and from the following four councils, reveals two evaluations important to the thesis of this paper (i.e., the tying of the perspicuity of Scripture as foundational to a proper hermeneutic to the application of the authority of Scripture in faith and practice). First, direct quotations from the Scriptures are rare in these definitions and canons; the word “Scripture” itself only appearing eleven times in the twenty thousand plus words comprising these definitions and canons. Second, salvation through personal faith in the gospel or in the redemptive work of Jesus is never defined or stated. This stands in contrast to over fifty specific anathemas (i.e., declarations of being cursed by God), which were made against those who also professed Christianity, but who were unaligned to the ecclesiastical authority that was being defined by these councils.

¹⁰ The second council, which was held at Constantinople (381), defined heretics as including those who may profess doctrine that even the council would consider “sound.” In its sixth canon it stated – “**We define**

To be fair, the reputed “Fathers” of Roman Catholicism were not as silent concerning the perspicuity and authority of Scripture as were the documents of their ecumenical councils. Three of Roman Catholicism’s main theologians, Augustine (c. 400), Gregory (c. 600) and Aquinas (c. 1200), spoke to the issue of Scripture’s perspicuity and authority. Augustine said – “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.”¹¹ Gregory said, “But sometimes, he who neglects to **interpret** [in Scripture] **the historical form of words according to the letter**, keeps that light of truth concealed which is presented to him, and in laboriously seeking to find in them a further interior meaning, he loses that which he might easily obtain on the outside.”¹² And Aquinas said, “Hence **those things that are taught metaphorically in one part of Scripture, in other parts are taught more openly.**”¹³ But each of these men, however, relied more on what was called “apostolic tradition,” with only tenuous support from Scripture, to define the sacramental false gospel of Roman Catholicism.¹⁴

‘heretics’ as those who have been previously banned from the church and also those later anathematized by ourselves: and in addition, **those who claim to confess a faith that is sound, but who have seceded and hold assemblies in rivalry with the bishops who are in communion with us.**” Competent histories of such non-aligned, but evangelical, testimony existing throughout the Middle Ages have been produced, such as, *The Pilgrim Church*, by E. H. Broadbent, Grand Rapids: Gospel Folio Press, 1999; *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, by Leonard Verduin, Sarasota, FL: The Christian Hymnary Publishers, 1991; *The Torch of the Testimony*, by John W. Kennedy, Beaumont, TX: The SeedSowers, 1965; and *A History of the Baptists*, by John D. Christian, Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1922.

¹¹ *On Doctrine*, Book 2, Chapter 9, Paragraph 14, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/12022.htm> [accessed February, 1, 2012].

¹² *Moralia*, Introduction, Paragraph 4, <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralia/Epistle.html> [accessed February, 1, 2012].

¹³ *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 1, Article 9, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1001.htm> [accessed February, 1, 2012].

¹⁴ Augustine said,

The Christians of Carthage have an excellent name for the sacraments, when they say that baptism is nothing else than salvation, and the sacrament of the body of Christ nothing else than life. Whence, however, was this derived, but from that primitive, **as I suppose, and apostolic tradition**, by which the Churches of Christ maintain it to be an inherent principle, that without baptism and partaking of the supper of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or to salvation and everlasting life? (*On Merit and the Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Infants*, Book 1, Chapter 34, Paragraph 24,)

Gregory said,

Besides, since with the heart man believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation, I confess that I receive and revere, **as the four books of the Gospel so also the four Councils** . . . These [Councils] with full devotion I embrace, and adhere to with most entire approval; since on them, as on a four-square stone, rises the structure of the holy faith; and whosoever, of whatever life and behavior he may be, holds not fast to their solidity, even though he is seen to be a stone, yet he lies outside the building. . . . Whosoever, therefore, thinks otherwise, let him be anathema. (*Epistles of St. Gregory the Great*, Book I, Letter 25)

And Aquinas said, when discussing an objection made to the question – Whether sacraments are necessary for man’s salvation:

WHAT PRE-REFORMATION DISCUSSION OF PERSPICUITY IS HELPFUL?¹⁵

Other examples throughout Roman Catholic history could be given of those who taught Scriptures are clear enough in essential faith matters. The following have been selected to sufficiently provide a testimony concerning the perspicuity of Scripture that existed outside that magisterial "orthodoxy": 1) the pre-Nicene presbyter, Irenaeus, 2) the Armenian sect of the early Middle Ages, the Paulicians, and 3) the pre-Reformation sect, the Petrobrusians.

IRENAEUS

Irenaeus used three weapons – Scriptures, apostolic tradition, and reason – in his second century polemic, *Against Heresies*. One soon sees that it is the Scripture that was for Irenaeus the main authority with which he fights gnostic heresy.

For Irenaeus, the Scriptures indeed were most important in his defense of the truth, for they were to him "the Sacred Scriptures,"¹⁶ "the authoritative Scriptures,"¹⁷ "divine Scriptures,"¹⁸ "the ground and pillar of our faith."¹⁹ It is especially by this last attribution – "the pillar and ground of our faith"²⁰ – that Irenaeus demonstrated his view that Scriptures are a clear and final authority.

The Gnostics too utilized the Scriptures as an authority from which to "derive proofs for their opinions."²¹ With his denunciation of their gnostic hermeneutic method, Irenaeus began to reveal his own. Scripture for him has "order" and "connection," and though it has ambiguities, resolution for these are found only in passages which are "consistent and clear."²²

Objection 3. Further, given a sufficient cause, nothing more seems to be required for the effect. But Christ's Passion is the sufficient cause of our salvation; for the Apostle says (Romans 5:10): "If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son: much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by His life." Therefore sacraments are not necessary for man's salvation. **On the contrary,** Augustine says (Contra Faust. xix): "It is impossible to keep men together in one religious denomination, whether true or false, except they be united by means of visible signs or sacraments." But it is necessary for salvation that men be united together in the name of the one true religion. **Therefore sacraments are necessary for man's salvation.** (*Epistles of St. Gregory the Great*, Book I, Letter 25)

¹⁵ Much of this chapter was reproduced and modified from the author's article, "The Perspicuity of Scripture: Rehearsing the Testimony from Christian History of Those Who Consistently Held to the View as Foundational to Their Evangelical Hermeneutic," *Journal of Dispensational Theology*, 12:37, (Dec 2008), <http://www.galaxie.com/article/10914>. [accessed February, 1, 2012].

¹⁶ *Against Heresies*, 2.XXVII.1.

¹⁷ 2.XXX.6.

¹⁸ 2.XXXIV.4.

¹⁹ 3.1.1.

²⁰ The context of this phrase -

But in this, the third book I **shall adduce proofs from the Scriptures**, so that I may come behind in nothing of what thou hast enjoined; yea, that **over and above** what thou didst reckon upon, thou mayest receive from me **the means of combating and vanquishing** those who, in whatever manner, are propagating falsehood. (*Against Heresies*, 3. Prologue)

²¹ 1.III.6.

²² Irenaeus describes the hermeneutic method of Gnostics:

They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures; and, to use a common proverb,

This understanding of the perspicuity of Scripture is not just for believers, for he says, ". . . the entire Scriptures, the prophets, and the gospels, can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all, although all do not believe them."²³

That this hermeneutic principle of perspicuity survived in Gaul beyond Irenaeus' time, will require more research, but a cursory investigation of certain non-magisterial, non-sacramental groups in Spain, like the Priscillianists, or in the British Isles, like the Celtic Christians, or even in Gaul, like the Cathari, uncovers that mixed within such groups were some medieval testimonies of those who had a simple faith in a normal understanding of Scripture. They were those who rejected the need for the authoritative hierarchal or ecclesiastical interpretation provided by Roman Catholicism.

PAULICIANS

On the eastern outposts of the Roman Empire, other non-Catholic groups were surviving beyond the ostracization started at the Council of Nicaea. Some of these groups also were maintaining a hermeneutic that reflected an apostolic evangelicalism and was based on a perspicacious view of the Scriptures. One such group was the Paulicians. J.G. Norman summarized their identity as an "evangelical anti-hierarchal sect originating in the seventh century (possibly earlier) on Rome's eastern borders in Armenia, Mesopotamia and N Syria."²⁴

Most of what has been preserved concerning them is in the testimony of their enemies from Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. However, this testimony of them as a heretical Manichaeian or Marcion sect is probably false, though it is still widely held today, even among evangelicals.²⁵

they strive to weave ropes of sand, while they endeavour to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support. In doing so, however, they disregard **the order and the connection of the Scriptures**, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth. (*Against Heresies*, 1.VIII.1.)

For by the fact that they thus endeavour to explain **ambiguous passages of Scripture** (ambiguous, however, not as if referring to another god, but as regards the dispensations of [the true] God), they have constructed another god, weaving, as I said before, 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**. (*Against Heresies*, 2.XI.1.)

²³ 2.XXVII.2.

²⁴ J.G. Norman, "Paulicians", *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, J.D. Douglas, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), p. 755.

²⁵ Norman, op. cit, though introducing them as "evangelical" goes on to accuse them of "rejecting the OT, like Marcion." He adds, "Some, but not all, were dualists, though they repudiated Manichaeism." Philip Schaff, whose church history was standard during the twentieth century calls the Paulicians a "radical heretical sect. . . essentially dualistic, like the ancient Gnostics and Manichaeans, and hence their Catholic opponents called them by the convenient and hated name of New Manichaeans; though the system of the Paulicians has more affinity

Their manual was called *The Key of Truth*, and it provides an opportunity to see what the Paulicians in their own words. It especially demonstrates how they based those beliefs upon the Scripture's perspicuity. It was translated and critiqued impartially by the Oxford fellow, Fred. C. Conybeare, who was a skeptic towards Christianity, though not the historicity of Christ.²⁶ Though *The Key of Truth* presents an Adoptionist Christology, and a Soteriology with sacramental influence, similar to modern Protestantism, it does emphasize the evangelical gospel based on the clarity of Scripture.²⁷

Though several pages and whole chapters of *The Key of Truth* are missing in what still is available for study, there is enough available to counter some of the main accusations leveled against them concerning their view of Holy Scripture. The common view of both Roman Catholic and Protestant scholarship is that "the Paulicians accepted the four Gospels, fourteen Epistles of Paul [which included Hebrews], the three Epistles of John, James, Jude, and the Epistle to the Laodiceans, which they professed to have."²⁸ "They rejected the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament."²⁹ "They rejected St. Peter's epistles because he had denied Christ."³⁰

But as evidence against this defamation of the Paulicians, *The Key of Truth* gives two explicit quotations from 1 Peter, both used perspicaciously in support of their doctrine.³¹ They also believed in the Old Testament revelation as God's Word. One important passage not only demonstrates this, but it stands in stark contrast to the view that Paulicians were dualists, Gnostic, or Marcionites. It can be read in a section entitled – "Concerning the Creation of Adam. . . ." It is there evident that Paulicians saw the Old Testament as "inspired" and the God of the

with that of Marcion." Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, electronic STEP ed. (Cedar Rapids, IO: Parsons Tech., 1999) Vol. 4, Chap. XII, Para. 131.

²⁶ R. E. Nixon, "Conybeare, Frederick Cornwallis", *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, J.D. Douglas, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), p. 260.

²⁷ For instance, the manual begins with a lengthy discussion concerning the necessity of repentance and faith –

St. John [the Baptist], firstly preached unto them; secondly taught; thirdly, induced them to repent; fourthly, brought them to the faith; and after that cleansed them in the flesh from stains. And then our Lord and Intercessor, the Lamb of God. Bestowed on them spiritual salvation. Thus the universal and apostolic church learned from our Lord Jesus, and continued so to do, **as is clear in their Acts** and especially in the traditions of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which he imposes on the universal and apostolic church, saying, Mark xvi. 15: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creatures. Whoever shall believe, shall be baptized, shall live; and he who shall not believe, shall be judged." (*The Key of Truth*, Frederick C. Conybeare, trans. and ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898, unabridged facsimile ed., *Elibron Classics Series* - Adamant Media Corp., 2004, pp. 72-73.)

²⁸ Herzog, "Paulicians," Philip Schaff, ed., *A Religious Encyclopedia or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology*, 3rd edn, Vol. 2. New York, NY: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1894, pp. 1776-1777 (e-source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paulicians>) [accessed February, 1, 2012]

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Adrian Fortescue, "Paulicians", *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XI., New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1911 (e-source: <http://newadvent.org/cathen/11583b.htm>, 12/08/07) [accessed February, 1, 2012].

³¹ *The Key...*, op. cit., p. 83. and p. 112.

Old Testament as “benevolent.”³² It is also apparent that they interpreted this one passage literally, with no hint of allegorical nuance.

PETROBRUSIANS

It appears the followers of Peter of Bruys were also a testimony for the perspicuity of Scripture and its final authority. This was in the 12th century, a whole two centuries before the so-called “morning star,” John Wycliffe. Unfortunately, no writings which could be attributed to Peter of Bruys have survived. Our knowledge of his teaching is based mainly upon one treatise by a contemporary Roman Catholic antagonist, Peter of Cluny, known also as Peter the Venerable. There does not appear to be in print a full English translation of this Latin treatise – *Contra Petrobrusianos Hereticos*. Baptist historian, William Cathcart, provided what appears to be his own translation and commentary of the most important accusations from Peter the Venerable’s view of the teaching of Peter of Bruys’s.³³

³² Ibid., p. 114

First, the heavenly Father, **the true God, fashioned (or created) the heavens with all that belongs thereto, and the earth** with all its kinds; he equipped them. As **is clear in the inspiration of God** (i.e., in the inspired Scriptures). Again, **the benevolent God**, seeing that all things were good, was pleased to make a king over all beings . . . as is proved by the sense of the word which says: ‘Let us make man in our image and likeness.’ Thus in a twinkling of an eye he, by a single word, fashioned heaven and earth. But also by a single word he fashioned (or created) the old Adam, made him king and ruler of all creatures..

³³ Petrobrusians, *The Baptist Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, pp. William Cathcart, ed., Philadelphia, PA: Louis H. Everts, 1881, (e-source: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc. Version 1.0 © 2005).

At the beginning of his pamphlet he [Peter the Venerable] states the five heads of the heresy of the Petrobrusians. In the first he accuses them of “denying that little children under years of responsibility can be saved by the baptism of Christ; and that the faith of another (*alien am fidem*, the faith demanded from popish sponsors when a child was christened) could benefit those who were unable to exercise their own (faith); because, according to them, not another’s faith, but personal faith, saves with baptism, the Lord saying, ‘He who shall believe, and be baptized, shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be condemned.’” This is the abbot’s first and heaviest charge against these ancient Baptists. This accusation means that the Petrobrusians refused to baptize children because they were destitute of faith. The charge is repeated frequently by the abbot of Cluny.

“The second *capitulum* says that temples or churches should not be built, and that those existing should be torn down; that sacred places for praying were unnecessary for Christians, since God when addressed in supplication heard equally those who in a warehouse and in a church deserved his attention, in a market-place and in a temple, before an altar or before a stable.”

By this we understand that the Petrobrusians did not believe in the sanctity of bricks and mortar, and probably thought that as Romish churches were nests of idols and scenes of blasphemous superstition, their destruction would be no crime.

“The third *capitulum* requires holy crosses to be broken and burned, because that frame, or instrument, on which Christ, so fiercely tortured, was so cruelly slain, is not worthy of adoration, or veneration, or of any supplication; but to avenge his torments and death, it should be branded with disgrace, hacked to pieces with the sword, and consumed in the flames.”

The Petrobrusians detested the worship of the crucifix, and prayers offered to it, and, like the Scotch Covenanters, they urged its destruction as a Christ-dishonoring idol.

That the Petrobrusian doctrine was evangelical is clear. Cathcart only mentioned in summary that Peter of Cluny also indicated “that the Petrobrusians wanted Scripture for everything and not the sayings of the fathers. This is admitted in his discussion of their errors.”³⁴ It would be helpful if all of Peter the Venerable’s critique were available in English to see more fully, how the Petrobrusians depended only upon the Scriptures for the defense of their beliefs.

WHAT REFORMATION DISCUSSION OF PERSPICUITY IS HELPFUL?

The Roman Catholic reformers of the sixteenth century began to strip their Christian “orthodoxy” of traditions not found in Scriptures. They emphasized Scripture as the final authority for such orthodoxy. They emphasized that perspicuity of Scripture was for the recognition for the doctrines necessary for salvation. In the three great arenas of Europe where reform was first taking hold (i.e., Germany, Switzerland, and England), the Catholic priests/theologians Luther, Zwingli, and Tyndale presented their defense and understanding of the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture.³⁵

Though their promotion of Scripture’s authority and clarity refocused Christianity back more to individual responsibility for the personal understanding of Scripture truth and obligation, they each failed to a certain extent to consistently apply their teaching, as especially seen in their continued promotion of the doctrine and practice of infant baptism. It would be another contemporary priest/theologian, Balthazar Hubmaier that would be a more consistent teacher and practitioner of the perspicuity of Scripture in those early years of the sixteenth century.

MARTIN LUTHER

Luther thus felt “the Holy Scriptures quoted by” him were sufficient and perspicuous enough to justify his rejection of certain Roman Catholic dogma.³⁶ It was the Scripture that God

“The fourth *capitulum* denied not only the reality of the body and blood of the Lord, as offered daily and constantly in the sacrament (Eucharist) in the church; but judged that it was absolutely nothing, and should not be offered to God.” In this opinion all Protestants concur.

“The fifth *capitulum* holds up to ridicule sacrifices, prayers, charitable gifts, and the other good works performed by the faithful living for the faithful departed.” Peter then states that he had answered “these five heads,” or heresies, “as God had enabled him.” **He might have added a sixth *capitulum*, that the Petrobrusians wanted Scripture for everything and not the sayings of the fathers. This is admitted in his discussion of their errors.**

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Zwingli and Tyndale are not covered in this paper. Some would include John Calvin in this list. They not included because it would add unnecessary length to this paper.

³⁶ Schaff, Vol. 7, Book 1, Chap. 3, Para. 55.

Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the Councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), **I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me**, and my conscience is bound in the

had used to lead Martin Luther to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It was to the authority of Scripture to that Martin Luther had appealed when commanded by the Diet of Worms to recant his teaching. And it was the translation of the Scripture into his mother tongue that Martin Luther strenuously labored to produce so that any layperson could discern for himself the truths of God necessary for salvation and a life pleasing to God. These three examples alone are sufficient to demonstrate indirectly the high regard Luther had for the perspicuity of Scripture.³⁷ But some specific quotations from Luther's writings will easily demonstrate his teaching concerning the perspicuity of Scripture and its relationship to the authority of Scripture.³⁸

In one sermon, in six uses of the phrase - "Scripture(s) alone", Luther demonstrated that he held to clear Scriptures as the final authority for salvation and piety.³⁹ And in Luther's

word of God: I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience.

The saying "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise" though popularly believed to have been spoken at this time, probably was not. Schaff discusses that it was attributed to Luther as early as 1540, without any contradiction by Luther, who was still alive at that time. According to Schaff, it probably was said by Luther off the record after the proceedings of the Diet had closed.

³⁷ Before developing Luther's view of the perspicuity of Scripture further, it is important to comment on Martin Luther's identity of what the term *Scripture* meant when he used it. The expression the "Word of God" can be found around three thousand times in the complete corpus of Luther's writings, where the word "Scripture(s)" is found almost seven thousand times. It is relatively easy to demonstrate that in many contexts Luther was equating the two terms for God's written revelation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate what appeared to be a broader use of the term "Word of God" by Martin Luther. To sum up what one may find when doing more a thorough research of Luther's use of "Word of God", church historian David W. Lotz said – "According to Luther's usage, then the term *Word of God* refers to Jesus Christ as the *personal Word*, eternal and incarnate. It refers to the gospel of Christ as the *spoken Word* which creates and preserves the church because it is the medium of Christ's real presence. It also refers no less to Holy Scriptures as the written Word." David W. Lotz, "Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority," *Interpretation*, 35:03 (2004), pp. 262-263.

³⁸ Luther, *Vol. 32, Career of the Reformer*, p. 11.

This is my answer to those also who accuse me of rejecting all **the holy teachers of the church**. I do not reject them. But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they have erred, as men will; therefore, I am ready to trust them only when they **give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred**. This St. Paul bids me to do in I Thess. 5:21, where he says, "Test everything; hold fast what is good." St. Augustine writes to St. Jerome to the same effect, "I have learned to do only those books that are called the holy Scriptures the honor of believing firmly that none of their writers has ever erred. All others I so read as not to hold what they say to be the truth unless they prove it to me by holy Scripture or clear reason." [Letter 82 to St. Jerome. Migne 33, 286-287]

Holy Scripture must necessarily be clearer, simpler, and more reliable than any other writings. Especially since all teachers verify their own statements through the Scriptures as clearer and more reliable writings, and desire their own writings to be confirmed and explained by them. **But nobody can ever substantiate an obscure saying by one that is more obscure; therefore, necessity forces us to run to the Bible with the writings of all teachers, and to obtain there a verdict and judgment upon them. Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth.** If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for? The more we reject it, the more we become satisfied with men's books and human teachers.

³⁹ Luther, *Vol. 52*, pp. 173, 176, 191, 194.

famous work, *“The Bondage of the Will,”* Luther gave his most detailed understanding of the perspicuity of Scripture.⁴⁰

So **we must cling to the pure Scriptures alone** which teach nothing but Christ so that we may attain piety through him in faith, and then do all our works in freedom for the benefit of our neighbor, as has been frequently pointed out above. . . .

It is not the task of the fathers to throw light on the Scriptures with their own glosses, but **rather to set forth the clear Scriptures and so to prove Scripture with Scripture alone, without adding any of their own thoughts**. It is true they claim, that heretics are produced by the Scriptures. From where else should they come? For there is no book which teaches faith except the Scriptures. Therefore just as no Christian is born except by the Scriptures, so too no one can become a heretic except by the Scriptures. . . .

He [Christ] will not permit himself to be found in holy places, nor in holy guise; nor will the glosses of men yield an answer. **The Scriptures alone and their word of Christ, these and nothing else, must be sought in holy places** and at the doors of holy people. . . .

As was said earlier, the saints frequently err and are a stumbling block with their human doctrines and works. So it is not the will of God that **we should fix our eyes on** their example, but rather **on his Scriptures alone**. . . . For if you do not **look to the Scriptures alone**, the lives of the saints are ten times more harmful, dangerous, and offensive than those of the impious. . . .

Here is determined for all time that Christ, who is the truth that brings salvation, will not permit himself to be taught or found through the teachings or aid of men. **The Scriptures alone and the light of God must show him**, as he says, Matthew 16[:17]: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” In this way Christ clearly condemns flesh and blood and revelation through them, that is, **men and all human reason**, which certainly cannot reveal Christ and therefore are surely nothing but darkness.

⁴⁰Luther, Vol. 33, p. 28 and 90.

To put it briefly, there are **two kinds of clarity in Scripture**, just as there are also two kinds of obscurity: **one external and pertaining to the ministry of the Word, the other located in the understanding of the heart**. If you speak of the internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God. All men have a darkened heart, so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and truly understand nothing of it. . . . If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light, and published to all the world. . . .

What we say is this: the spirits are to be tested or proved by two sorts of judgment. One is internal, whereby through the Holy Spirit or a special gift of God, anyone who is enlightened concerning himself and his own salvation, judges and discerns with the greatest certainty the dogmas and opinions of all men. Of this it is said in I Corinthians 1[2:15]: “The spiritual man judges all things, but himself is judged by no one.” This belongs to faith and is necessary for every individual Christian. We have called it above **“the internal clarity of Holy Scripture.”** Perhaps this was what those had in mind who gave you the reply that everything must be decided by the judgment of the Spirit. But **this judgment helps no one else**, and with it we are not here concerned, for no one, I think, doubts its reality.

There is therefore another, an **external judgment**, whereby with the greatest certainty we judge the spirits and dogmas of all men, not only for ourselves, but also for others and for their salvation. This judgment **belongs to the public ministry of the Word and to the outward office, and is chiefly the concern of leaders and preachers of the Word**. We make use of it when we seek to strengthen those who

But one clear example shows there was inconsistency in Luther's belief in the perspicuity of Scripture and its innate authority for essential Christian doctrine. That example was in the Luther's doctrine and practice of infant baptism. He said,

Since our baptizing has been thus from the beginning of Christianity and **the custom** has been to baptize children, and since no one can prove with **good reasons** that they do not have faith, we should not make changes and build on such weak arguments. For if we are going to change or do away with customs that are **traditional**, it is necessary to prove convincingly that these are contrary to the Word of God. Otherwise (as Christ says), "For he that is not against us is for us" [Mark 9:40]. **We have indeed overthrown monasteries, mass-priests, and clerical celibacy, but only by showing the clear and certain scriptural arguments against them. Had we not done this, we should truly have let them stand as they previously existed.**⁴¹

Luther showed in this context that reason and tradition should not be overthrown unless they support something contrary to Scripture. With such statements, he thus weakened the *sola Scriptura* principle.

BALTHAZAR HUBMAIER

Balthazar Hubmaier⁴² was a contemporary of Luther and just as educated as a Roman Catholic priest. Hubmaier's high view of Scripture is revealed in his personal slogan, which was attached to all of his writings. It is, "Truth is Immortal".⁴³ In his letter to the Swiss reformer, Oecolampadius, Hubmaier directly connected the Holy Scriptures with this favorite slogan when he exhorted him by saying, "However, do such [debating] with bright and clear Scriptures, or you will truly come to shame in the matter, however scholarly you are. For truth is immortal."⁴⁴ For Hubmaier, the Scriptures are the truth of God; they are the word of God. They are inspired, inerrant, infallible, perspicuous, and immortal.⁴⁵

are weak in faith and confute opponents. This is what we earlier called **"the external clarity of Holy Scripture."**

⁴¹ Ibid, Vol. 40, p. 241.

⁴² Some introductory information about Balthazar Hubmaier and almost all of the quotations from Hubmaier's writings are taken from *Balthazar Hubmaier*, H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder trans., eds., from *Classics of the Radical Reformation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989). The abbreviation BH will signify this work in future footnotes.

⁴³ Pipkin and Yoder could not agree on the translation of the German phrase – "*Die Wahrheit ist Untödtlich*." Yoder felt "Truth is Unkillable" was more literal, and though awkward in English expresses "best the nuance of the parallel to the cross and the resurrection of Christ. The point is not that truth is timeless or never dies, but that it rises again, that it cannot be kept down" (BH, p. 42, note). He based his choice mainly on other contemporary slogans like "Truth Conquers" among the Czech Brethren and Menno Simon's "Truth Prevails". Pipkin chose "Truth is Immortal." His choice was based on other 16th-century texts that translated or defined *untödtlich* with the Latin word *immortalis*. (BH, pp. 76-77, note). Both translations come to the same conclusion that truth will survive forever!

⁴⁴ BH, p. 277.

⁴⁵ the "divine Word" or "divine Scripture(s)", BH, pp. 42, 43, 52, 153, 172, 248.

This is more developed throughout his writings.⁴⁶ Often he would argue that his opponents were incorrect about subjects like the mass, infant baptism, infused faith, and purgatory, because these teachings were “without any basis in Scripture.”⁴⁷ For Hubmaier the Scriptures were his final authority in matters of faith and Christian practice. They were to him a “judgment chair,”⁴⁸ “touchstone,”⁴⁹ a “foundation,”⁵⁰ and a “plumbline.”⁵¹ “The church is built on the Word” he said, “and not the Word on the church, Matt. 16:18.”⁵²

In the course of writing many of his treatises, many of which were of an apologetic nature, Hubmaier sprinkled thoughts on the perspicuity of the Scriptures - “. . . illuminating the darker texts of Scripture with the clearer.”⁵³ He constantly referred to his arguments as having been based upon “clear Scriptures” or the “bright and clear Word of God.”⁵⁴ He also rebuked his rivals for arguing against him with “no clear Scripture” or “no clear Word of God.”⁵⁵ Many of Hubmaier’s works were written against the theology of Ulrich Zwingli, especially his view of infant baptism. When fleeing Roman Catholic persecution from Waldshut, Hubmaier sought refuge with Zwingli in Zurich. But Zwingli, who also taught the perspicuity of Scripture had Hubmaier tortured to recant his rejection of a doctrine that was not clearly taught in Scripture. Perhaps the clearest statement by Hubmaier concerning his position on the perspicuity of the Scripture, especially is seen in a public handbill he had printed, which was an invitation to debate the issue of infant baptism.

*From Balthazar Fridberger at Waldshut,
A PUBLIC CHALLENGE
To all Believers in Christ,
Issued on February 2,*

⁴⁶ BH, p. 23.

For all divisive questions and controversies **only Scripture**, canonized, and sanctified by God himself, should and **must be the judge**, no one else: or heaven and earth must fall. . . . Now the judgments of God can only be known out of the divine Word, as Scriptures truly testifies to us. The Word of God judges, John 12:47-49, Deut. 17:8, Exod. 18:13-27; and 28:30.

Therefore Christ points us to the Scriptures: “Search the Scriptures. They give testimony of me, etc.,” and pointed us to Moses and the prophets, whom we should hear: for he does not want to have testimony from men, John 5:39, 46.

This usage was held to by Christ himself and also by Paul and the other apostles. When they spoke against the devil or against evil men, they usually stuck Scripture under their nose as the judge of all controversial talk and thereby overcame them. **For holy Scripture alone is the true light and lantern through which all human argument, darkness, and objections can be recognized.**

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 75, 122, 204, 287, 290, 367, 541.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 277.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 300, 450.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 46, 230.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 24, 52, 343, 452, 531.

⁵² Ibid, p. 182.

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 53, cf. also 105, 119, 322.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 181, 92, cf. also 24, 25, 26, 34, 39, 80, 98, 99, 134, 148, 180, 182, 223, 277, 280, 390, 425, 433, 484.

⁵⁵ Ibid, pp. 162, 258, cf. also 174, 180, 181, 185.

AD MDXXV.
 Whoever wishes to do so, let him prove
 that infants should be baptized,
 and **do it with German, plain, clear, and unambiguous
 Scriptures**
 that deal only with baptism, without any addition.
 Balthazar Fridberger offers
 in his turn to prove
 that the baptism of infants is a work without any basis
 in the divine Word, and this he will do with German,
**plain, clear, and unambiguous Scriptures that deal
 only with baptism, without any addition.**
 Now let a Bible, fifty or one hundred years old,
 as the right, proper, and true arbiter
 be placed between these two positions.
 Let it be opened
 and read aloud with imploring, humble spirit,
 and then let this dispute be decided and once for all
 brought to a conclusion.
 Thus I shall be well content for I want always to give
 God the glory
 and to allow his Word to be the sole judge;
 to him I herewith desire to submit and subject myself
 and all my teachings.
 The Truth is Immortal⁵⁶

WHAT POST-REFORMATION DISCUSSION OF PERSPICUITY IS HELPFUL?

With the help of the printing press and the relative freedom caused by nationalism, reformers like Luther and Hubmaier won for the future a greater opportunity for discussion concerning the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture and its authority. But loyalty to doctrines that are not unambiguously taught in Scripture, like infant baptism, kept the door open in most new denominations of Christianity for their justifying as necessary some new external, ecclesiastical authority to help “judge” what is orthodox to believe and practice.

That authority would not be a pope, but like Roman Catholicism they would have their own ecclesiastical councils, and would make their confessions just their authoritative orthodox

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 80

explanations of what must be believed as taught in Scripture.⁵⁷ In the next century, two voices led that discussion. Those voices belonged to the reformed theologians Francis Turretin and John Owen.

FRANCIS TURRETIN

Francis Turretin's (1623-1687) main theology is found in his multivolume text called, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Turretin answers twenty-one questions under the topic of Holy Scriptures in his Theology. The seventeenth of these questions concerns the perspicuity of Scripture and it gives the clearest formulation of Turretin's definition for it. He asks – "Are the Scriptures so perspicuous in the things necessary to salvation that they can be understood by believers without the external help of oral (*agraphou*) tradition or ecclesiastical authority? We affirm against the papists."⁵⁸ One notices immediately that Turretin's emphasis is on perspicuity as it relates to "things necessary to salvation" and being "understood by believers" without "help." His definition here does not include any objective perspicuity for Scripture that an unbelieving mind may cognitively understand concerning the facts of the gospel,⁵⁹ nor does he discuss the perspicuity of sound doctrines, which are not necessary for salvation, but are necessary for spiritual health and growth.

So Turretin was primarily concerned with proving that the perspicuity of Scripture is limited just to the gospel and just for believers.⁶⁰ And though Turretin does not think any of that tradition can overturn the authority of Scripture, he does believe it can add to Scripture *bona fide* apostolic teaching that must be believed and obeyed. He states it this way – "What all the doctors deliver by unanimous consent according to the word of God, the universal church can and ought to believe."⁶¹ One might see how Turretin has allowed his position on tradition to undermine the doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity, and certainly also of its sufficiency.

⁵⁷ The original Westminster Confession (1646) and the original London Baptist Confession (1689) did preserve a witness to a profession of belief in the perspicuity of Scripture, and the authority of Scripture, as held in the evangelical community for the next three centuries. They also included Scripture quotations or references as footnotes in support of each statement. It would be an interesting exercise to see how objectively clear the wording in each Scripture reference is for its corresponding statement in these Confessions. Such a comparison is made of Chapter 3 of the Westminster confession -

https://www.academia.edu/30599019/Individual_Election_Before_Creation_-_A_Doubtful_Thing

⁵⁸ Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 143.

⁵⁹ Turretin did admit later to what he called "literal and theoretical" knowledge of the Scriptures and said – "There are **many things in the Scripture theoretically perspicuous even to the natural man.**" Ibid., p. 147.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 143. He said –

We unhesitatingly confess that the Scriptures have their *adyta* ("heights") and *bathē* ("depths") which we cannot enter or sound and which God so ordered on purpose to excite the study of believers and increase their diligence; to humble the pride of man and to remove from them the contempt which might arise from too great plainness. Rather **the question [of perspicuity] concerns only things necessary for salvation**, and indeed as to them, only so far as they are necessary to be known and cannot be unknown without criminality.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 166.

JOHN OWEN

Puritan divine John Owen (1616-1683) also discussed in detail the doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity. His main work on Bibliology is found in book six of his *Discourse on the Holy Spirit*. In it Owen appeared more concerned with establishing the illumination of Scripture as a benefit only for believers than to provide evidence from Scripture's instruction concerning its own objective perspicuity.

Owen's treatment of the doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity is found in the second part of book six, entitled – "Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God as Revealed in His Word with Assurance Therein."⁶² He defined the perspicuity of Scripture much like Turretin, in that the illumination of the Holy Spirit is essential for true understanding only for believers, but he extended perspicuity to include more than just the doctrines necessary for salvation.⁶³

Owen did not deny the objective clarity of Scripture. He only limited the benefits of it to the subjective clarity caused in believers by the Holy Spirit following the regeneration of their inner being. Curiously, Owen even once conceded that an unbeliever "may learn, know, and understand the sense, meaning, and truth of the doctrines so proposed and declared unto them, without any especial work of *saving illumination* on their minds."⁶⁴

What is even more curious is that Owen declared that even this understanding of Scripture by unbelievers is caused by the Holy Spirit. He said – "whatever it [the unregenerate mind] attains in the knowledge of truth is to be ascribed unto the guidance of the Spirit of God, although not working in it or upon it by a communication of saving light and grace." It appears that Owen recognized an objective clarity of Scripture that is possible in the unbeliever, though his monergistic view of salvation does not allow it to have any lasting spiritual effect.

Owen divided what he believed was the objective obscurity of some passages of Scripture into two categories. The first (δυσνοητος, *dusnoetos*) is from 2 Peter 3:16 and the

⁶² *The John Owen Collection*, from *The Ages Digital Library Collection* (Rio, WI: Ages Software, 2004), volume 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, book 6, part 2, p. 94-95. Owen said –

The Holy Spirit hath so disposed of the Scripture *that the mind of God in all things concerning our faith and obedience, in the knowledge whereof our illumination doth consist, is clearly revealed therein*. There needs no other argument to prove any thing *not to belong* unto our religion than that it is *not revealed* or appointed in the Scripture; no other to **prove any truth not to be indispensably necessary unto our faith or obedience than that it is not clearly revealed in the Scripture.... Every thing in the Scripture is so plain as that the meanest believer may understand all** that belongs unto his duty or is necessary unto his happiness.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136. He continued this observation, saying,

The propositions of truth in the Scripture; — I mean those which are necessary unto the great ends of **Scripture, — are so plain and evident in themselves, that it is the fault and sin of all men endued with rational abilities if they perceive them not**, and assent not unto them upon the evidence of their truth, or of the mind of God in those places of Scripture wherein they are declared; which is the substance of what we plead concerning the *perspicuity of the Scripture* against the *Papists*.

second (δυσερμηνευτος, *dusermeneutos*) is from Hebrews 5:11.⁶⁵ Owen gave the doctrines of the trinity, the incarnation, the eternal decrees, resurrection and regeneration as examples of “some things hard to be understood.”⁶⁶ From the other category (i.e., “things hard to be interpreted”) he said,

... such are many *allegories, parables, mystical stories, allusions, unfulfilled prophecies and predictions, references* unto the then *present customs, persons, and places, computation of times, genealogies, the signification of some single words seldom or but once used* in the Scripture, the *names of divers birds and beasts* unknown to us.⁶⁷

WAYNE GRUDEM

In the centuries following Turretin and Owen, because of the influence of Enlightenment philosophers and the rise of modernism and the fashioning of the historical-critical method, the doctrines of Scripture’s inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy received greater attention than did the doctrine of Scripture’s perspicuity. But a renewed emphasis, especially in evangelical circles, emerged with the publication of Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* in 1994. Grudem’s definition in his *Theology* for the perspicuity of Scripture is - “The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God’s help and being willing to follow it.”⁶⁸ Or stated another way, after having summarized the Biblical passages that discuss the clarity of Scripture, Grudem said – “We can affirm that the Bible is written in such a way that all things necessary for our salvation and for our Christian life and growth are very clearly set forth in Scripture.”⁶⁹

One notices that Grudem did not limit the perspicuity of Scripture in these definitions to only the gospel, nor did he limit its effect to only those who have already been regenerated. In fact, he said clearly elsewhere, “Scripture is able to be understood by all unbelievers who will read it sincerely seeking salvation, and by all believers who will read it will seeking God’s help in understanding it.”⁷⁰

But in 2009 Grudem refined his definition further adding that understanding of Scripture is “not without ordinary means.”⁷¹ Grudem was borrowing and trying to expand upon the

⁶⁵ Ibid., vol. 4, chapter 6, p. 96. Of these two categories Owen said –

The Holy Spirit hath so disposed the Scripture, that notwithstanding that *perspicuity* which is in the whole with respect unto its proper end, yet are there in sundry parts or passages of it, — (1.) Τίνα δυσνοητα, some things “hard to be understood;” and (2.) Τίνα δυσερμηνευτα, some things “hard to be uttered or interpreted.” The former are the things themselves, which are so in their *own nature*; the latter are so from the *manner* of their declaration.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 96-97.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 98-99.

⁶⁸ Grudem, p. 108.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Grudem, *Theology*, p. 108.

⁷¹ Wayne Grudem, “The Perspicuity of Scripture,” Tyndale Fellowship Conference: The John Wenham Lecture, July 8, 2009, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/34-3/the-perspicuity-of-scripture> He said –

phrase “ordinary means” as found in the Westminster Confession’s statement on Scripture’s perspicuity (WCF, 1.7). He suggested six such “means” that need to be considered to aid in clarifying Scripture – 1) a translation of the Bible in one’s own language, 2) teachers of the Word, 3) commentaries, 4) wisdom contained in the history of interpretation, 5) fellowship with others, and 6) modern tools such as concordances, lexicons, grammars, etc.⁷² Grudem called these “ordinary means” a “need.” And whereas a translation of Scripture into one’s language is certainly a need, it may have been more appropriate to suggest the other “ordinary means” are only helpful towards greater clarity, but not necessary in understanding what the Scripture teaches.⁷³

Grudem tied the perspicuity of Scripture only generally to the authority of Scripture. Of the authority of Scripture he said – “all the words in Scripture are God’s Words. Consequently, to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God himself.”⁷⁴ For Grudem, the Scripture’s meaning and authority is therefore without mediation to any who wish to know and do God’s will.

MARK THOMPSON

Following the neglect of emphasis for centuries and the reintroduction of it in Grudem’s popular theology, the doctrine of Scripture’s perspicuity received even more thorough treatment in journal articles and eventually, more fully, in books dedicated entirely to this

I understand the clarity (perspicuity) of Scripture as follows:

Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood

but (1) not all at once

and (2) not without effort

and (3) not without ordinary means

and (4) not without the reader’s willingness to obey it

and (5) not without the help of the Holy Spirit

and (6) not without human misunderstanding

and (7) never completely.

⁷² Ibid. p. 11-13.

⁷³ Ibid. This is more consistent with Grudem’s definition of perspicuity, (i.e., that basic understanding can be arrived at by any individual using only a basic education and a desire to learn from and to obey God). Grudem offers the following analogy from nature that concurs with this idea.

A useful analogy, then, might be to picture the clarity of Scripture as something of a journey to a distant mountain that we see clearly from afar, but we will see more detail, and understand more of what we see, as we journey toward the mountain over many months and years. We can see it from the beginning of our Christian lives, and we truly see and understand something about it, but a lifetime of seeking deeper understanding will be repaid with a lifetime of growth in knowledge and wisdom. We might even imagine various signs on the mountain. Some, like “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16.31), are written in *huge font* that can be seen from a great distance. Other signs appear shortly after the journey has begun, and teach us to trust God and obey him daily. Yet other signs appear in small font, not visible at first, and when we come close enough to read them they announce topics such as “predestination” and “millennium” and “the future of Israel” and “preaching to the spirits in prison” and “the relationship between God and evil.” p. 9-10.

⁷⁴ Grudem, *Theology*, p. 81-82.

subject.⁷⁵ Mark D. Thompson's *A Clear and Present Word* was published by InterVarsity in 2006 and provided a work that is more Biblically oriented to systematic theology. His definition of the perspicuity of Scripture was - "The clarity of Scripture is that quality of the Biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures its meaning is accessible to all who come to it in faith."⁷⁶

It was difficult to find a succinct personal expression of Thompson's view on the limitations to the perspicuity of Scripture, but as a scholar of Luther's writings, he was in agreement with Luther's view that the objective clarity of Scripture is limited to the subjective influence of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁷ Thompson appeared to be promoting the reformed theological perspective of necessary regeneration before true perspicuity of Scripture can be experienced or appreciated.

Thompson struggled with recognizing how perspicuity of Scripture affects the application of the authority of Scripture. He did not wish to see "the clarity of Scripture . . . transformed into the right of private judgment: 'The churches have no right to say that I am wrong.'"⁷⁸ Though he also said "the role of the churches consists not in *determining* the meaning of Scripture, but in facilitating the recognition and embrace of that meaning."⁷⁹ However, he itemized "the rule of faith, the creeds, the exegetical tradition and God's gift of pastors and teachers" as "rich resources" of the church that "interprets the Word by confessing and exhibiting its [antecedent] clarity."⁸⁰ Thompson needed to address the fact that those "resources" of the church contain much that is not supported by objectively clear Scriptures, but are made from theological extrapolations and inferences from Scriptures.

GREG ALLISON

The best modern work on the doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity has yet to be published. Gregg Robert Allison produced a doctoral dissertation entitled - "The Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture: A Reformulation on the Basis of Biblical Teaching." Allison gave a comprehensive definition of his understanding of Scripture's perspicuity. He said -

⁷⁵ For a more thorough list of articles and books on perspicuity see the BIBLIOGRAPHY below.

⁷⁶ Thompson, p. 169-170.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 169. He said -

Luther's explanation of the twofold clarity of Scripture is once again helpful here. The words make sense as they stand in their context. They do have an external clarity. Yet because of who we are as readers, understanding at the deepest level of acknowledgment and appropriation, a recognition that we are in fact addressed by these words and must respond in repentance and faith, is also a work of the Spirit. It is not separable in the end from the text of Scripture and so, with Luther, we might properly speak of the internal clarity of Scripture. Yet it is always a sovereign work of the Spirit of God. The word borne to the human heart by the Spirit generates faith in God and its corollaries, repentance and obedience

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 168.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Perspicuity is a property of Scripture as a whole and of each portion of Scripture whereby it is comprehensible to all believers who possess the normal acquired ability to understand oral communication and/or written discourse, regardless of their gender, age, education, language, or cultural background. However, the level of people's comprehension of perspicuous Scripture is appropriate to and usually varies proportionately with various factors, including, but not limited to, spiritual maturity. In addition, the doctrine of perspicuity is always affirmed in the context of a believing community, a context which assumes the assistance of others in attaining a more precise understanding of Scripture, and perspicuity requires a dependence on the Holy Spirit for Scripture to be grasped and calls for a responsive obedience to what is understood. Moreover, perspicuity includes the comprehensibility of the way of salvation to unbelievers who are aided by the Holy Spirit, and it does not exclude some type of cognition of Scripture in general by unbelievers.⁸¹

Allison's view therefore of perspicuity included objective aspects that can be understood universally, and also that unbelievers, "aided" by the Holy Spirit, can also understand the gospel. But there was for him primarily a subjective perspicuity that requires prior regeneration, (i.e., only "comprehensible" to all believers with normal education). It would have been helpful if Allison would have developed further what he meant by the "cognition of Scripture" that is available to unbelievers.

Allison presented arguments for the perspicuity of Scripture found in the OT in Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 29:29; 30:11-14; 31:9-13; Nehemiah 8; Psalm 19:7-11; 119:105, 130; and Isaiah 8:19-22. From the NT he analyzed lessons concerning the perspicuity of Scripture as taught in Matthew 24:15; Acts 17:10-12; Romans 4:22-25; 6:19a; 15:4; 1 Corinthians 2:6-3:3; 10:1-11; Colossians 3:16; 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 1 Peter 1:22-2:3; and 2 Peter 1:19. He also discussed John 5:37-47; Acts 8:26-40; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:6; and 2 Peter 3:14-16 as NT passages concerning the obscurity of Scripture.⁸²

So for Allison, all Scripture is understandable, perspicacious, but only too believers. This in effect precludes any universal objectivity since the subjective influence of the Holy Spirit's illumination is needed to make "a person able to truly grasp Scripture."⁸³ He also followed in agreement with the reformers when he said that "perspicuity is affirmed in the context of a

⁸¹ Gregg R. Allison, "The Protestant Doctrine of The Perspicuity of Scripture: A Reformulation on the Basis of Biblical Teaching," a dissertation submitted at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, 1995, available from UMI dissertation services (Ann Arbor, MI: Bell & Howell), p. 516-517.

⁸² Allison expounded more Scriptures, more thoroughly, than all other theologians of modern times who have tackled this important doctrine. The main oversight in this reviewer's estimation was his not including 2 Corinthians 1:12-14 in his evaluation of Scripture's support for its own perspicuity nor 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 concerning Scripture's own obscurity.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 566.

believing community in which believers in general and officially-sanctioned teachers in particular assist the community in attaining a more precise understanding of Scripture.”⁸⁴ This concession opens the door to ecclesiastical authority deciding for believers what is “clear” to believe and obey from Scriptures.⁸⁵

CONCLUSION

Greater freedom and preservation of theological debate resulted from the Reformation and from its institution of evangelical theology on a national scale, also utilizing the printing press to promote the reformers’ understandings of Scripture. Francis Turretin and John Owen championed the theology of Scripture’s perspicuity against the continuing influence of Roman Catholicism and its elevation of its own magisterium above Scripture. Turretin and Owen, however, tended to be short-sighted to how much they were now promoting a new magisterium of theologians established for their “camp” of Christianity. They did this when they promoted the authority of confessions that were developed by that new magisterium. This authority undermined the practical application of Scripture’s authority, which can only have its basis in its own perspicuity of things necessary for salvation and for spiritual growth. The theological wording of confessions, and doctrinal statements, perhaps unwittingly, often suggest to the layperson that God’s Word does not make necessary matters plain enough in its own words.

It was no wonder that the doctrine of Scripture’s perspicuity did not find much refinement in the centuries following the Reformation. It was implicitly held to during the modernist controversies of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. But the doctrines of Scripture’s inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy received much more legitimate attention during that time. It appears that the relativism of the post-modern era, which has begun in past half century, has especially encouraged a revitalization of the doctrine of Scripture’s perspicuity, especially concerning its objective clarity.

Modern theologians like Grudem, Thompson, and Allison have wisely reopened the discussion of what perspicuity means and how it applies to believing and obeying the Scripture. Unfortunately, it seems more criticism of the limitations placed on this doctrine by the reformers and reformed theology should enter the public discussion, as well as more analysis of primary passages that teach the Scripture’s own perspicuity. There is also needed a firmer

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 567.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 532-533. Allison only briefly and generally tackled the effect perspicuity may have on the application of Scripture’s authority. For believers, he said,
... the intelligibility of divine revelation is not only a quality of that communication itself, but perspicuity also calls for receptivity on the part of those who understand the divine message. The principle can be articulated that the comprehension of perspicuous [sic] Scripture entails a willing disposition on the part of the reader/hearer to appropriate and obey its message.

understanding whether a true objective clarity of Scripture exists and can be scientifically verified. Finally, there is needed a firmer understanding how the objective clarity of Scripture brings with it an unmediated obligation to an unregenerate mind concerning the gospel, and an unmediated obligation for sound doctrine to a believer's mind.

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Thompson, Mark D. *A Clear and Present Word*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2006. - Mark Thompson is head of the department of theology at Moore College, Newtown, Australia. Thompson provided more expositional information from Scripture itself to show that clarity is part of the divine intention in much of Scripture. He also provides a helpful bibliography for this topic.