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THE PERSPICUITY OF SCRIPTURE

THE DOCTRINE of the perspicuity of Scripture implies at least three things:

1. Scripture is clear enough for the simplest person to live by. Those who come to it sincerely will find the way of salvation, and will be brought to know the Father through the Son by the working of the Holy Spirit. In it they will find clear guidance for Christian living. This has been proved wherever the Bible has gone throughout the world, and it has brought comfort, strength and understanding to the humblest reader.

2. Scripture is deep enough to form an inexhaustible mine for readers of the highest intellectual capacity. Commentaries upon it have been produced in a steady stream, and its teachings have been examined, expounded, and re-examined all down the ages. Until recently it has been assumed that, although the books of the Bible were written over centuries of time, yet the underlying unity is such that all of its teachings can be brought together in such a way as to make a harmonious body of divinity. It may not always carry its harmony on the surface, but there is a key that will unlock all its statements.

3. The perspicuity of Scripture does not lie in the fact that it resembles a cleverly-written logical treatise, but in the fact that it is inspired by God, who is truth and harmony, and who intends all Scripture to be a revelation of Himself to man. There is an important sense in which the full teachings of Scripture are not clear to the person who approaches them without the illumination of the Holy Spirit (e.g. the teaching about the natural man in 1 Cor. ii). The Church and the individual reader are dependent upon the Holy Spirit for the right perception of what Scripture means.

It is helpful to see an analogy in God's other two revelations. The natural order is sufficiently simple for the ordinary person to live sensibly within it. There are laws of living that anyone can discover for himself. Yet the natural order is so complex that its understanding still defies the greatest minds. We are continually discovering fresh truths in it, and increasing our sense of wonder at God's handiwork. In a somewhat similar way we find that the Person of Jesus Christ is simple enough for the child to know Him and to love Him, yet the books that have been written about Him and the sermons that have been preached about Him have still failed to plumb the mystery of His Being. In both instances it is rightly assumed that the underlying truths can become clear to the honest investigator, even though further mysteries lie beyond.

How far does the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture square with the facts? One obvious challenge is the wide difference of interpretation given by the various groups in Christendom. First we may consider the fundamental difference between the so-called *Catholic* and the *Protestant* Churches. So far as their doctrines are drawn from Scripture, there is a very large measure of agreement. This agreement is seen in the common acceptance of the 'Nicene' creed and the Chalcedonian Definition. The story of the creeds and early confessions shows that the Fathers were concerned to discover how the teachings of Scripture could best be stated in precise doctrinal terms, just as the scientist tries to express the events of the natural order in laws and formulae. Scripture proved to be sufficiently perspicuous for statements to be made that have commended themselves to the Christian Church as a whole down to the present day.

The main differences between Catholic and Protestant have come through the attitude to tradition. Traditions are inevitable in any religious or social structure, and may be good, bad, or neutral. If one gives as much weight to tradition as to the original Scripture, the time will probably come when one has to choose between traditional interpretations and what was originally held. Scripture is then either abandoned as the ultimate guide, or it is regarded as insufficiently perspicuous in itself and consequently as needing to be read in the light of the tradition. The current guardians of the tradition must then be appealed to as the proper interpreters of Scripture. 'The Church to teach, the Bible to prove' is then taken as the norm, and 'the Church' in this context means 'the priests'.

The Bible itself carries a warning about this in the attitude that Jesus Christ Himself took up towards tradition. He accepted the general traditions of His day (e.g. the pattern of synagogue worship), but demanded the right to test all traditions by the original Scripture (e.g. the Sabbath day). The

Reformation turned on this very point, and the Reformers examined all the current doctrines and practices in the light of the Bible. The way of salvation loomed large in their thinking, and they accepted the Bible's own verdict of itself that the Holy Scriptures 'are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. iii. 15). Once again, as with the early creeds and confessions, the teachings of Scripture proved sufficiently clear for there to be substantial agreement among the Protestants as to the teaching of justification by faith. The Roman Church, on the other hand, was not prepared to step out of the network of traditions which taught a different way of obtaining salvation, though both sides agreed that salvation was possible only through the work of Christ upon the cross.

Among those who grounded their faith upon the Bible, however, there were, and are, considerable differences. We may conveniently distinguish between those Protestants who accept the teachings of the creeds and early definitions (whether or not they recite them in their worship), because they believe that they are true to Scripture, and those who belong to the sects and heresies that reject such truths as the Deity of Jesus Christ. Some of these (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians) hold that Scripture is the fully inspired Word of God, but that it does not teach these orthodox doctrines. Others (e.g. Christian Science and Mormonism) produce a further book by which Scripture is to be interpreted in some sense other than the normal Christian one. Others again (e.g. Swedenborgianism and some forms of Spiritualism) draw upon certain parts of Scripture, but ignore or reject other parts. The third group has little bearing on the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, unless it can be demonstrated that there are such hopelessly irreconcilable elements in the teachings of the Bible that our faith must be content to pick out some and ignore others.

The other two groups must be taken more seriously, though they start with the scales of sanctified common sense heavily weighted against them. If one of them is correct, one must conclude that God has allowed some 1900 years to pass with virtually the whole Church in a state of error over the knowledge of the Godhead, and only now has He made it plain to a small group of Christians. With the example of the Reformation before us, after centuries of darkness, we cannot say that this is impossible, but at least the errors of Rome grew up gradually, while the doctrine of the Deity of Christ was held from very early times, even if we could grant the contention of Jehovah's Witnesses that it is not taught in Scripture.

This doctrine of the Deity of Jesus Christ, and consequently the doctrine of the Trinity, provides a good illustration of the perspicuity of Scripture. It is possible to take a few texts and to build a doctrine upon them. Thus, 'My Father is greater than I' (Jn. xiv. 28), 'The firstborn of every creature' (Col. i. 15), and 'The beginning of the creation of God' (Rev. iii. 14), may suggest that Christ is the first of all created beings, and consequently not fully God. If we set over against these such texts as, 'The Word was God' (Jn. i. 1), 'My Lord and my God' (Jn. xx. 28), and 'Being in the form of God' (Phil. ii. 6), we see at once that the solution is not so simple. It then becomes a matter of searching the Scriptures so as to build up the total picture of Christ, and of seeing how the one set of texts may best be interpreted in the light of the other. It becomes clear that the first set can be interpreted very reasonably if the Deity of Christ is accepted, whereas the second set are very hard to interpret if Christ is taken to be a created being. One barrier to interpretation is erected if we start with the fixed idea that the unity of the Godhead means a bare mathematical unity, and that divine Sonship inevitably means that the Father existed before the Son. Scripture then cannot be clear to us, since we have tried to fit it into an arbitrary pattern of thinking. In practice it will be found that such patterns of thinking rank very prominently in the heresies, and one gets the impression that Scripture must be made to conform to the pattern. To give a further example, Christian Science starts with a radical dualism between spirit and matter, so that God cannot have created matter; from this flows all the Christian Science theory.

Pattern thinking does not begin and end with the heresies, and it has an important bearing upon the divisions within orthodox Protestantism. Pattern thinking in itself is highly desirable, and many of the personal 'heresies' come because the reader interprets his texts in isolation. The text gives him an idea, and he may pick up a considerable number of such ideas, correct

and incorrect, without ever welding them into a coherent system. On the other hand it is all too easy to pick up a pattern first, and that pattern becomes so dominant that we can never read the Scriptures without making them subservient to the pattern.

Some of our Protestant divisions concern the manner of church organization and government. Here the pattern may not be one of conditioned thinking — though this may come as a result of our upbringing — so much as of temperament. We all have tendencies towards authoritarianism, democracy, community government, or freedom, and different denominations commonly stress one or other of these things. Actually in the New Testament very little is laid down about precise organization in the Church and the Churches, and we can all find patterns that appeal to us. What would appear to be wrong is for one group to seize on one pattern as so essential that all who refuse to accept it must be regarded as inadequate Christians. The Reformers on the whole behaved reasonably about this, and while the Anglicans retained episcopacy, they did not regard the continental Reformers as having an invalid ministry when they adopted a non-episcopal form. This is surely a non-doctrinal matter, where Scripture is clear that there is to be proper order in the Church, with ministers responsible under God, but not tying us to one outward form of organization only.

Pattern thinking also enters into doctrine. Here we are on tricky ground, and I want to avoid saying either that doctrines must continue to divide us for ever, or that it does not greatly matter what we believe. We ought, however, to scrutinize our pattern of thinking from time to time, considering how we came to hold it in the first place, and how far we have seriously weighed up other interpretations. Is not the following often typical? Soon after our conversion we are much impressed by a mature Christian, who both lends us books and who talks to us about spiritual things. Our inner mind argues that he is a man of experience and a sound Bible student, such as one day we hope to become ourselves; we therefore imbibe both his general theological pattern and his prejudices towards differing points of view. We find a difficulty in the Bible, and we turn to him for his solution. So in a short time we are staunch Calvinists, Arminians, pre- or post-millennialists, entire sanctificationists, Pentecostalist, or advocates of conditional immortality. Now obviously these are issues on which we must all hold some opinion, but, where earnest Christians differ, we ought not to maintain our opinion in such a way as to suggest that there is nothing at all to be said on the other side.

What then becomes of the perspicuity of Scripture? Again it is a matter of balancing statement alongside of statement, realizing that the obscurity for us sometimes arises from the fact that creatures of time are trying to expound eternity in terms of the time with which we are familiar. Important though they are, these points of contention need not affect our salvation, nor need they seriously affect our Christian living. The manner and scope of election is hard to understand, but this does not affect the believer's justification through Christ alone. While the stress of the New Testament is upon the believer's eternal security in Christ, there are the two or three warning verses which must be taken to heart by any who seem to have once had a saving experience of Christ, and who now seem to be living away from Him. Finite minds find it hard to bring the two sides together, but practical Christianity would soon be in difficulties without both of them.

Space will not allow a discussion of all the points that divide us; but conditional immortality does not alter the practical way of entering into Christ and His salvation; the millennium, if it is to come, will come as a fact of history, and our belief or disbelief in it will not affect it in the slightest; the acceptance or rejection of the Pentecostalist interpretation depends, not entirely upon the Scriptures themselves, but upon whether we believe that the gifts in the early Church were intended to persist down the ages. Admittedly infant baptism continues to be a point of division among Bible believers; here the difficulty arises because there is no clear example in the New Testament of the baptism of the child of Christian parents, whether as an infant or on attaining an age at which he is capable of making a profession, and our decision as to the status of such children must be based upon general principles drawn from the Scriptures: here again pattern thinking probably influences our judgment.

A variant of pattern thinking is any strong acceptance of some current

attitude of mind. For example, the perspicuity of Scripture might seem to break down over the supposed inadequacy of the Old Testament view of the after-life. I have heard people trying to apologize for the gloomy idea of Sheol. But this is because they start with the assumption that the state of the departed has always been the same as it is today, whereas, if Scripture is taken as a whole, it is clear that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ wrought a radical change in the believer's experience of death. Again, it may well be that some of the moral difficulties that we find over the severity of God are due to the change in the parent-child relationship which has created an entirely new attitude of mind. This question of climate and attitude demands a book in itself; what is obvious to one generation is far from obvious to another.

We close with the matter of commentaries. It might be objected that the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture leaves no room for commentaries, since Scripture is its own interpreter, and every Christian possesses the Holy Spirit. St. John told his readers, 'Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things' (1 Jn. ii, 20), yet he himself at the time was writing a letter to instruct them. What then is the place of a commentary? In the first instance it is intended to give the plain meaning of each word and sentence, so that the less instructed reader can know what the original writer was intending to say. Moreover the commentary puts the sentence in its setting, showing its place in the argument, so that the reader is not tempted to read it in isolation and draw out some meaning that is not intended. Thus the commentary makes the treasures of scholarship available for all.

After this the commentator may elaborate on the verse, and in particular he will draw out parallels from the rest of the Bible. Thus he makes his wider reading available for the simpler reader whose knowledge of the Bible is more limited. Next the commentator may proceed to preach from the text. He and the preacher both declare that the Holy Spirit has shown them such and such truths from the verse, but he is at pains to make it clear that these truths can be matched by the truths of Scripture as a whole. A commentary that scintillates with new ideas must always be read with caution, since the Holy Spirit is likely to be consistent in guiding the members of the Church to understand what is in the Bible. There is such a thing as the mind of the Church.

At the same time there can be no such thing as one official Church commentary to end all commentaries. Just as God chose different penmen to set out different aspects of His revelation, so He uses commentators and preachers with different backgrounds, and different patterns of thinking, to perceive emphases that others may miss. Certainly it is true that each generation has to produce its own commentaries to draw out the teachings of Scripture in ways that are relevant to its own days. With the spread of literacy throughout the world we shall look forward to commentaries by Indians, Africans, Chinese, and other Christians, which will both resemble and differ from those to which we are accustomed. They will not read new ideas into Scripture, but their background will enable them to perceive truths that we have hitherto missed.

This article has perhaps made things sound a little too easy, but its purpose has been to suggest a constructive approach that may enable us to see some of the reasons for differences that ought not in theory to exist if the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture is true. Scripture is clear enough to live by, but, as befits that which gives the knowledge of the infinite God, it contains depths and heights which need all man's God-given capacities to penetrate; and even the best of us find our understanding coloured by personal and ecclesiastical prejudices.

Note: Those who are interested in what I have called *pattern thinking* and its effect upon our perception of the world and all that is in it, will find much that is helpful in Owen Barfield's *Saving the Appearances* (Faber, 1957. 21s.).

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