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 know how 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 the early Christian church, clear guidance was given, and this has been present 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, the meaning of the writing 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. It is the fullest kind of which the full teachings of Scripture are not clear to the person who approaches them without the help of the Holy Spirit for the right perception of what Scripture means.

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 understanding as we study God's word. 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 one case we are justified in saying that the underlying truths can become clear to the honest investigator, even though further mysteries lie beyond.

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. As far as concerns the original 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 determined to ensure the full teachings of Scripture would be interpreted 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 commanded themselves to the Christian Church as a whole down to the present day.

The main differences between Catholic and Protestant Church have come through the attitude to tradition. Traditions are inevitable in any religious or social group, and may be good, but, on the other hand, they may be bad, and may be given weight to tradition as to the original Scripture, the time will probably come when one has to choose between traditional interpretations and what was taught in Scripture. This dilemma is either abandoned as the ultimate possibility, or it is regarded as insufficiently perspicuous in itself and consequentially 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. "If the text teach, the Bible to prove" is thus brought to the norm, and the "Church" in this context means the "priests".

The Bible itself carries a warning about this in the attitude that Jesus was speaking up towards tradition. He accepted the general of the people as 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 strong 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 order, and these divisions are not one of the patterns that may be brought to bear on the complete principle that they are drawn from the Scriptures: here again pattern thinking may not be wrong. What 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 the other of these things. Actually in the New Testament 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 one group to seize on one pattern as so essential that all who refuse its acceptance must be regarded as inadequate Christians. The pattern 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 matter of freedom, where Scripture is clear and we can choose our own. Now, there is a proper order in the Church, with ministers responsible under God, but not tying us to one outward form of organization only.