

The Perspicuity of Scripture

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Introduction:

I feel honored to be able to give this lecture named after John Wenham. I only met John Wenham once, here in Cambridge, at Tyndale House. My impression was that he was a genuinely humble man who had no idea why I, as a young New Testament scholar, would be excited to meet him. He also seemed to a man who had little awareness of the significant contributions he had made for the advancement of God's kingdom through his work for Tyndale House, his work for Tyndale Fellowship, and his published writings. In fact, during the six years that I taught New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, I used John Wenham's excellent book *The Elements of New Testament Greek*² as the primary textbook every time I taught beginning Greek.³

I was invited to present this lecture on "the perspicuity of Scripture." But I do not find the term "perspicuity" to be particularly perspicuous today; therefore, I will at times depart from the wording of the assigned topic and speak of the doctrine of the *clarity* of Scripture⁴ – which I think means close to the same thing. (Yet a third term that could be used to describe this doctrine is the *understandability* of Scripture, as will be evident from the material that follows.)

In preparing for this lecture, I was somewhat surprised to find how pervasive the influence of this doctrine has been in my own life. It might be helpful for me to begin with some autobiographical material related to this doctrine before I attempt to explain it in more detail.

(1) *Childhood*: The clarity of Scripture was implicit in my assumption, as a young boy of about 7 or 8 years, that I could begin to read the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible with some understanding of its message. I was at that age hopelessly unacquainted with

¹ This article was first given as The John Wenham Lecture at a meeting of the Tyndale Fellowship on July 8, 2009, at Lee Hall, Wolfson College, Cambridge, England. I am grateful to Paul Woodbridge and the other leaders of the Tyndale Fellowship for their invitation to deliver this lecture.

² John Wenham, *The Elements of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

³ I would also like to add that though I did not know John Wenham, I am thankful for my friendship with his son Gordon Wenham, who has served as chairman of the Tyndale Fellowship for the last three years. Our friendship has lasted now for 41 years, beginning in 1968 when we were both students at Harvard and continuing through our joint membership on the Translation Oversight Committee of the *English Standard Version* from 1999 to the present day.

⁴ By "Scripture" I mean the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments that are received as canonical by Protestants. The reasons for accepting these books in the canon, and for considering them to be both human words and the words of God, are explained in my *Systematic Theology*, chapters 3 – 5. Throughout this essay I also assume an agreement with the Tyndale Fellowship doctrinal basis, which affirms, "The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour."

postmodern theories of indeterminate meanings, and I simply sounded out the hard words and plowed forward, no doubt with some nourishment to my soul. I simply *assumed* the Bible could be understood.

(2) *Profession of faith*: The clarity of Scripture was also implicit when, at age 12, before being baptized, I publicly confessed that I was a sinner who had trusted in Christ for salvation, in accordance with:

Rom 3:23: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God⁵

and Rom 5:8: but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

and Rom. 6:23: For the wages of sin is death, but the *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I simply *assumed* that these Gospel verses could be understood, and that I, at age 12, had understood them! But if the Bible is not clear enough to be understood, then how can we even be sure we know what the Gospel message *is*, or that we are proclaiming it correctly? Isn't a belief in the clarity of Scripture implicit in every proclamation of the Gospel?

Or shall we forever be required to say, "You ask what you must do to be saved? Well, we aren't sure yet, but some scholars think the Bible *might* say, at least in *some parts* (which might of course be contradicted by other parts), that Christ died for people's sins and people should place their faith in him – whatever you think faith to be, of course. But there are certainly other views on how to be saved."

(3) *Early teaching*: After I had submitted my PhD dissertation here at Cambridge and left Tyndale House, a conviction of the clarity of Scripture led me to think that I could actually use the Bible as the basis for teaching theology to undergraduate students at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and later to graduate students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and then at Phoenix Seminary. I would *reason* and *argue* with students from Scripture, trying to persuade them that the Bible *actually taught* certain doctrines and *contradicted* others – just as Paul in Thessalonica went into the synagogue "as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he *reasoned* with them from the Scriptures" (Acts 17:2). But such reasoning from Scripture assumed that there was a meaning that could be understood, and that other proposed meanings were incorrect.

(4) *Writing about theology*: While I was teaching theology, for a few years I used as the primary text Louis Berkhof's book *Systematic Theology*⁶ – a remarkably erudite and valuable book, wonderfully useful for all who can read untranslated Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, German, and of course Dutch, as well as dozens of technical theological terms that are *presumably* part of the English language – but in actuality these terms are known only to those in

⁵ All quotations from the Bible are taken from the *English Standard Version* (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939).

the academic guild. Students found Berkhof difficult, and I had to give them vocabulary lists with definitions for each day's assigned reading.

Then I reflected on this situation: Neither Jesus nor Paul nor even the writer to the Hebrews felt compelled to make their teaching of doctrine *so inaccessible* to ordinary Christians, and I wondered if it might be possible to imitate the *clarity of Scripture* rather than the opacity of Berkhof in writing about theology. The result was that I wrote a book called *Systematic Theology*⁷ with an attempt to combine responsible understanding and exegesis of Scripture with an explanation of its doctrines that did not assume prior technical training in academic theology.

What surprises me is that every year I hear from people who tell me, "It was the first book I read after I became a Christian!" I suppose some academics would be discouraged if they wrote a 1290-page book and then heard such a comment – why did I give so many years to my education if even non-academics can understand me? I'm not discouraged by this, however, but thankful to God. The clarity of Scripture tells me that its doctrines can be taught in a way that ordinary people are able to understand.

In addition to that, the clarity of Scripture was the foundation for my book *Systematic Theology* in a more profound way than simply wanting to write clearly. The clarity of Scripture convinced me that I could write such a book *at all*.

Some evangelical scholars might object (and some did!) that no one should assume that he can just discover and prove points of Christian doctrine by referring to various passages of Scripture as I did in that book – what about all the alternative interpretations of all those verses found in all the commentaries? What about the thousands of pages on every one of those doctrines that were written by philosophers and theologians throughout the 2000-year history of the church? How can you think you can use Scripture (someone might say) to support any doctrine until you have done original research in all of that material, in all the primary scholarly languages?

After pondering this objection, I concluded that to do such original research thoroughly for all the topics in theology would take several lifetimes. And yet I did not believe that God would require several lifetimes of work just to learn or to teach what he wanted us to believe! So I went forward with the training that I had at age 37 and just started to write – not perfectly, and no doubt with many shortcomings, but for the most part reflecting the mainstream evangelical (and largely Reformed) position that seemed to me (from seminary training, from doctoral work, and from several more years of reading and teaching) to be most faithful to Scripture as a whole. I wrote the book because I believed it was *possible* for Christians today to know what Scripture taught about the great doctrines of the faith, and that God wanted his people to be able to learn what it taught in clear and understandable English words.

(5) *Technical academic articles*: A persuasion about the value of clarity meant that even when writing more technical articles – such as three detailed articles in academic journals on the meaning of one word in Eph. 5:23 (Greek *kephalē*, "head"), totaling 133 pages and months of

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

research – I tried to write the articles in such a way that an interested and motivated lay person could at least read and follow the argument.⁸ I was writing to the academic guild but extending courtesy to the non-specialists who might be listening in the back row.

In short, the doctrine of the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture has deeply affected my entire life.

Now, how should we understand this doctrine? The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is easily misunderstood and, I think, commonly misunderstood. In what follows, this lecture gives me opportunity to give a more precise explanation of this doctrine than I did twenty-four years ago when I wrote that chapter in my *Systematic Theology*.⁹

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.

We begin with the main affirmation:

I. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood.

A. Old Testament:

Several Old Testament passages affirm an expectation that the words of Scripture are able to be understood. For example,

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. *7 You shall teach them diligently to your children*, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (Deuteronomy 6:6-7)

⁸ See Wayne Grudem, "The Meaning of "Head" (*Kephalē*) in 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 5:23," in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, 145–202. That chapter is a reprint with only slight modifications, and the addition of interaction with Anthony Thiselton's commentary, to my article, "The Meaning of *kephalē* ("head"): An Analysis of New Evidence, Real and Alleged," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44/1 (March, 2001), 25–65.

My two earlier studies on the meaning of *kephalē* were "The Meaning of *kephalē* ("Head"): A Response to Recent Studies," *Trinity Journal* 11NS (Spring, 1990), 3–72 [reprinted in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 425–68] and "Does *kephalē* ("head") Mean "Source" or "Authority Over" in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples," Appendix in *The Role Relationship of Men and Women*, rev. ed., George W. Knight III (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 49–80 [also printed in *Trinity Journal* 6 NS (Spring 1985) 38–59].

⁹ See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapter 3.

But surely talking of God's words "when you walk by the way" was not limited to only one verse about marriage, or relationships with neighbors, or worship of God, for children naturally seek not partial discussions but the "bottom line," the final result of all that the words of God say about a topic. They seek teaching that they can follow that very day. They seek direct answers for what to believe and how to live. They seek, in simple form, systematic theology and "whole Bible" ethical teaching. Thus, the command to teach children assumes an ability to summarize and make plain, at some level, "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) regarding many different topics.

Other passages in the Old Testament also assume that God's words are able to be understood by his people:

"For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 14 But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, *making wise the simple*; (Psalm 19:7).

The idea here seems to be that God's testimonies make *even simple people* to be wise, and if they make wise the simple, then surely they make everyone else wise as well. A similar idea is found in:

The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. (Psalm 119:130)

Elsewhere in the same Psalm, the metaphor of a lamp conveys the idea of imparting understanding – in this case, understanding how to live in the ordinary events on the "path" of life:

Your word is a *lamp* to my feet and a *light* to my path. (Psalm 119:105).

The apostle Peter expressed a similar view of the Old Testament writings:

19 And we have something more sure, *the prophetic word*, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a *lamp* shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, (2 Peter 1:19)

B. New Testament

There is a similar emphasis in the New Testament.¹⁰ Jesus himself, in his teachings, his conversations, and his disputes, never responds to any questions with a hint of blaming the Old

¹⁰ The material in this section on the New Testament is taken, with some modifications, from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 106-107.

Testament Scriptures for being unclear. Even while speaking to first century people who were removed from David by about 1,000 years and from Abraham by about 2,000 years, Jesus still *assumes* that such people are able to read and to understand rightly the Old Testament Scriptures.

In a day when it is common for people to tell us how hard it is to interpret Scripture rightly, we would do well to remember that not once in the gospels do we ever hear Jesus saying anything like this: "I sympathize with your frustration — the Scriptures relevant to this topic contain unusually complex hermeneutical difficulties."

Instead, whether he is speaking to scholars or untrained common people, Jesus' responses always assume that *the blame for misunderstanding* any teaching of Scripture is not to be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but *on those who misunderstand or fail to accept what is written*. Again and again he answers questions with statements like these:

"Have you not read what David did ..." (Matt. 12:3), or
"have you not read in the Law" (Matt. 12:5), or
"have you not read" (Matt. 19:4), or
"Have you never read in the scriptures . . ." (Matt. 21:42),
"have you not read what was said to you by God" (Matt. 22:31), or,
"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice'" (Matt. 9.13), or,
"Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (John 3.10),
or even,
"You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matt. 22:29).

On the road to Emmaus he rebuked two disciples,

"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25).

The blame for failing to understand is always on the reader, never on the Scriptures themselves.

Similarly, most of the New Testament epistles are written not to church leaders but to entire congregations. Paul writes,

"To the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2),
"To the churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2),
"To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (Phil. 1:1).

Paul assumes that his hearers will understand what he writes, and he encourages the sharing of his letters with other churches: "And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16).

The exhortations to read Scripture *publicly* also affirm an expectation that ordinary believers in ordinary congregations could understand the Scriptures:

“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13; cf. John 20:30-31; 2 Cor. 1:13; Eph. 3:4; 1 Tim. 4:13; Jas. 1:1, 22-25; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:2; 2 Pet. 1:19; 1 Jn. 5:13).¹¹

There are even sections that assume that *children* are in the audience, listening to Paul’s letters as they are read, and understanding at least part of what is written, for Paul writes,

“*Children*, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." (Ephesians 6:1-3)

Whenever the New Testament authors quote the Old Testament (about 300 times), they assume that they have understood the Old Testament rightly and that their readers will realize that they are understanding it rightly – or at least that there is a right interpretation that the NT authors can appeal to. And this is true not only for individual verses, but also for collections of verses that they compile to prove a certain theme, such as the universal sinfulness of all mankind (in Romans 3:9-20), the majesty and deity of Christ (in Hebrews 1), or the nature of faith (in Hebrews 11).

Should we define the clarity of Scripture merely to say that Scripture was able to be understood *by its original readers* but that does not necessarily mean that we are able to understand it today?¹² No, I am not willing to add such a qualification, because Jesus repeatedly held people responsible for understanding the Old Testament writings, though many of which were written more than 1000 years in the past, and the New Testament writers similarly expected their readers to know and to be able to understand the Old Testament rightly. Therefore I think that the perspicuity or clarity of Scripture requires us to believe that it is still able to be understood rightly by readers today.

The appropriate conclusion from these passages is that Scripture repeatedly affirms that it is *able* to be understood – not only certain verses or statements, but the meaning of the whole of Scripture on many topics is able to be understood by God’s people. These affirmations are not limited to understanding the basic way of salvation, or understanding only major themes, or understanding certain topics or certain parts.¹³ These are affirmations about the nature of

¹¹ The section adapted from Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, ends here (see previous footnote).

¹² Some Tyndale Fellowship participants suggested this qualification to me after I delivered this lecture.

¹³ The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms the clarity of Scripture with respect to those things “which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation” (WCF 1.7). The inclusion of “observed” makes me think that “salvation” might be intended in a broader sense (“the entire experience of the blessings of salvation throughout our lives”) rather than a narrow sense (“initial saving faith”), but I am not sure about this. In any case, I do not see in the Scripture passages just mentioned any warrant for restricting the clarity of Scripture to certain topics or certain types of passages.

Scripture in any part,¹⁴ apparently grounded in a deep assumption that the Scriptures are communication from a God who is able to communicate clearly to his people.

And such a quality of Scripture seems necessary if God is going to hold us morally accountable for obeying his Word. If he has given us commands that are confusing, or that most people cannot understand, then we might wonder how he can rightly hold us accountable for obeying something we cannot understand.

C. Qualifications:

But there are some necessary qualifications, or we will certainly misunderstand this doctrine as it has been understood by thoughtful writers throughout the history of the church. (Qualifications like these are not new, but have been emphasized in responsible treatments of this doctrine at least since the time of the Reformation, as demonstrated clearly by Mark Thompson's 2006 book, *A Clear and Present Word*.¹⁵)

These qualifications remind us that Scripture does not conform to whatever ideas of "clarity" we might bring to the text. Rather, we need to give careful attention to the text of Scripture and allow it to define in what sense we should understand its clarity.

1. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but (1) not all at once

This first qualification reminds us that understanding Scripture is a *process*.

Commands to meditate on God's law assume that further study will lead to further understanding:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall *meditate* on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Joshua 1:8)

but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and *on his law he meditates day and night*. (Psalm 1:2; also other verses on meditation on God's precepts, statutes: Ps 119:15, 23, 48, 78)

The frequent prayers for understanding in Psalm 119 also indicate that fuller understanding comes with further study:

Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end. (Psalm 119:33) (and many other verses in Ps 119)

¹⁴ But see the discussion below under Qualification (3) about the need for translation into the reader's own language, and the recognition that there are still today a few words that we are not sure how to translate.

¹⁵ Mark D. Thompson *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Nottingham: Apollos, and Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

Even the apostles only *gradually* came to a fuller understanding of the application of OT ceremonial laws to Gentile believers, for the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was the culmination of a process of seeking consensus in understanding this issue. And once the leaders gathered in Jerusalem, resolution took some time:

And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. (Acts 15:7)

Then Barnabas and Paul spoke, then James spoke, then they wrote a letter:

it has seemed good to us, *having come to one accord*, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, (Acts 15:25)

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: (Acts 15:28)

Paul summarizes this process of gaining fuller understanding in writing to the Corinthians:

For we write you nothing but what you can read and understand; *I hope you will understand fully*, (2 Cor. 1:13, RSV).

And deeper understanding is given to those who are more mature in their faith:

Yet *among the mature* we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (1 Corinthians 2:6-7)

But *solid food is for the mature*, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

Analogy: the journey to a distant mountain: 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.”

And even when we can read those topics on the signs, we find that a partial explanation is in yet smaller print, and a fuller explanation is in tiny print. And then at the end of that tiny print we find statements that say:

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" (Romans 9:20)

and

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. (Deuteronomy 29:29)

and

"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? 3 Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. 4 "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. (Job 38:2-4).

And then we say with Job,

"Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. 5 I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further." (Job 40:4-5)

Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood, *but not all at once*: growth in understanding is a lifelong process. *Clarity is a property of Scripture*, not a property of its readers, who vary widely in their understanding.¹⁶

2. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but (2) not without effort

The same verses above on meditation affirm that *effort* is involved, just as “Ezra had set his heart to *study* the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” (Ezra 7:10). Ezra presumably already knew the Law of the Lord, but he studied in order to understand it more fully.

And the clarity of Scripture does not mean that it is all *easy* to understand! Some parts are more difficult than others, as even Peter acknowledges:

¹⁶ I am grateful to Gregg Allison for first emphasizing to me how the focus of this doctrine must be on the nature of Scripture, not the misunderstandings of its various readers. See Gregg Allison, “The Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture: A Reformulation on the Basis of Biblical Teaching” (Ph.D. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, 1995).

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. *There are some things in them that are hard to understand*, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Peter does not say there are things impossible to understand, but hard to understand.

3. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but (3) not without ordinary means

The Westminster Confession of Faith says that “in a due use of the ordinary means” even “the unlearned” may “attain unto a sufficient understanding” of those things in Scripture “which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation” (WCF 1.7).

What are such “ordinary means”? I am going to suggest several, perhaps a longer list than would commonly come to mind:

(1) The use of a *translation of the Bible in one’s own language*¹⁷ (for people cannot understand a text if they do not know the language in which the text is written; cf. 1 Cor. 14:10-11, 16).

The need for a translation brings up one specific difficulty: There are some places in Scripture where we still are not sure what a certain Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek word means. One example is *selah* in the Psalms (it occurs 71 times in Psalms and three times in Habakkuk).¹⁸ Most modern translations just print it as a transliterated word “Selah” and add a footnote saying that the meaning is uncertain, but it probably is a musical or liturgical term.¹⁹ Does this kind of problem modify or correct the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture?

I certainly am not claiming that the meaning of a word is “clear” when we don’t know what the word means! Therefore we might say, with greater precision, “Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood, but not without ordinary means, *including translation into the reader’s own language*,” and that qualification implies, in the specific details where we have a yet-unknown word, that we *probably* do not know the meaning. Yet I say “probably” because context is a great help, and context makes it likely that the word indicated some kind of pause in reading or singing – we have a general sense of the word from its placement, as well as from cognate terms. And we still know that the surrounding verses contain praises, or prayers, or words of lament, and *selah* does not substantially change those meanings. To take another example, we are uncertain of the identity of some of the precious stones listed in Exodus 28:17-20, but we know many of them and we know that the uncertain words refer to other precious stones.

¹⁷ I am grateful for a thoughtful e-mail from David Instone-Brewer that prompted me to add translation to this list of means of interpretation.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Daniel Hill for bringing up the difficulty of unknown words such as *selah*, and for discussing it with me at some length.

¹⁹ Most translations indicate that it probably is some kind of musical or liturgical direction. The lexicons are uncertain whether it means “pause” or “interlude” or “lift up” (that is, lift up the volume or pitch of singing), or something else.

Therefore I would say that Scripture is able to be understood *everywhere where we are able to translate it accurately*; moreover, that the yet-unknown words are relatively few in comparison to the whole scope of Scripture, and that even where the meaning of a *word* is unknown, the sense of the *passage* as a whole is usually quite understandable.

(2) Listening to *teachers* of the Word, for God has given the gift of teaching to the church (1 Cor. 12:28).²⁰

(3) Reading of *commentaries* where available, for these are merely the written form of what is taught by teachers in the church.²¹

(4) Some awareness of the wisdom contained in the *history of interpretation* of the church (even if this only comes not firsthand but through reading commentaries that have reflect some knowledge of that tradition).

(5) Seeking understanding in *fellowship with others*, as in small group Bible studies (or at Tyndale Fellowship conferences!).²²

(6) The use of modern *tools* such as concordances, Hebrew and Greek lexicons, grammars, and sources of historical background information, that help modern readers understand more precisely the sense of the original language and the historical context in which a passage was written.²³

²⁰ I am grateful to David Reimer and Gordon Wenham for helping me to realize that this category of “teachers” may be quite broad, including not only the officially recognized pastors and teachers in a church, but also fathers and mothers who impart a biblical world view to children, and more mature believers who serve as spiritual “fathers” and “mothers” to new Christian.

²¹ Points (3), (4), and (6) in this list all give support to the need for advanced academic work of the type done at places like the Tyndale House Library here in Cambridge, and for the published writings that frequently result from the research done at Tyndale House. Therefore it seems to me that a clear benefit for the work of the kingdom of God comes out of any support that believers give to Tyndale House, for such giving contributes in an unusually effective way to a better understanding of the Bible by the church around the world.

²² I could add that this is one reason why I have been an active member of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) in the United States, which has a similar purpose to the Tyndale Fellowship. I encourage evangelical scholars to participate in the ETS meetings and to read papers, for which there is always valuable and sometimes intense interaction!

²³ Gregg Allison draws attention to a process of explaining the meaning of foreign words that is found in Scripture itself (these verses come from a detailed teaching outline on perspicuity which was sent to me by Gregg Allison):

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:23)

Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." (Mark 5:41)

Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, (Acts 4:36)

There is also some explanation of possibly unfamiliar customs:

Historical background information can certainly *enrich* our understanding of individual passages of Scripture, making it more precise and more vivid. But I am unwilling to affirm that background information can ever be properly used to nullify or overturn something the text actually says. In addition, I am reluctant to affirm that additional historical background information is ever necessary for getting a proper sense of a text.

On the other hand, information about the meanings of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words in the Bible does have to be obtained from the vast linguistic resources found in extra-biblical literature, resources that I consider God's good gift to the church for the purpose of enabling us to understand the Bible more accurately.

So what is the difference? I think (but I am not certain) that it is possible to maintain a distinction between (a) *lexicographical resources* in ancient literature and inscriptions that I think to be *necessary* for understanding the words of Scripture and (b) resources that provide *historical background information* (such as archaeological evidence and historical evidence from ancient texts) that I think to be *helpful* for improving our understanding but never necessary for gaining a correct understanding of the sense of a text. The difference (if it can be maintained) is the difference between what is needed for *translation* and what is useful for *fuller understanding*.²⁴ (For example, a translation will tell me that Ezra journeyed from Babylon to Jerusalem (see Ezra 7:9), and background information will tell me that it was a journey of about 900 miles (1,448 km.), and will tell me what the terrain was like. This does not change my understanding of the passage (it still means that Ezra traveled to Jerusalem). But it does give me a more vivid sense of the journey.

To conclude this qualification of Scripture's clarity: The need for these six "ordinary means" in understanding Scripture should not surprise us. God speaks to us in community, and the communities of God's people have various people with various gifts. Use of these means is, in the providence of God, a way we learn to depend on one another.²⁵

4. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but (4) not without the reader's willingness to obey it

A *willingness to obey* should also be considered necessary to the right understanding of Scripture:

But be *doers* of the word, and *not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres,

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. 8 So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself," he drew off his sandal. (Ruth 4:7-8)

²⁴ I think this distinction can be maintained even if there are a few examples that might not fall neatly into either category.

²⁵ For a thorough discussion of the various means used in interpretation see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991). For an extensive analysis of modern (especially postmodern!) theories of meaning see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:22-25)

And Psalm 119 connects a prayer for understanding with a desire to obey what is understood:

“Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart” (Psalm 119:34).

By contrast, Jesus spoke of some of his Jewish opponents’ unwillingness to receive what he was teaching:

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. (John 8:43).²⁶

Paul implies that the moral and spiritual immaturity of the Corinthian church prevented him from imparting deeper wisdom (“solid food” and not “milk” to them):

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² *I fed you with milk, not solid food*, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? (1Cor. 3:1-3).

The practical implication of this qualification is that Christians who begin to practice willful, repeated sin (and even – or especially – pastors and scholars who begin to practice willful, repeated sin!) will likely soon begin to lose sound judgment in interpretation and will become less and less able to understand Scripture rightly.

5. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but (5) not without the help of the Holy Spirit

In Psalm 119, the frequent prayers for understanding imply a need for God’s help:

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Psalm 119:18)

Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works. (Psalm 119:27)

Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. (Psalm 119:34)

Your hands have made and fashioned me; *give me understanding* that I may learn your commandments. (Psalm 119:73)

²⁶ The words “bear to hear” translate the Greek verb *akouō*, “hear,” in the sense of “hear and receive,” “hear and respond appropriately.” The NET says, “it is because you cannot accept my teaching.”

The NT expresses a similar perspective on the need for divine help in understanding:

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 *Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,* (Luke 24:44-45)

The *natural person* does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are *spiritually discerned*. (1 Corinthians 2:14)

But *their minds were hardened*. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read *a veil lies over their hearts*. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Corinthians 3:14-16)

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. 4 In their case *the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers*, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

But why do we affirm that it is specifically a work of the Holy Spirit to help us in understanding? Probably because of the emphasis on the Holy Spirit as a teacher:

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:26)

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. (1 Corinthians 2:12)

6. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but (6) not without human misunderstanding

Perspicuity is *a property of Scripture*, not a property of its readers. Perspicuity affirms that Scripture is *able* to be understood rightly, not that it *will always* be understood rightly.

Every believer in this age retains some measure of sin, which distorts our understanding. Moreover, our understanding is partial because we are finite. For both of these reasons, we are liable to some misunderstanding.

The disciples failed to understand some of Jesus' teachings:

"Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men." 45 But *they did not understand this saying*, and it was concealed from

them, so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying. (Luke 9:44-45)

So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" 14 And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, 15 "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" 16 *His disciples did not understand these things at first*, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. (John 12:13-16)

Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for *as yet they did not understand the Scripture*, that he must rise from the dead. (John 20:8-9)

In addition, there will always be in the church some who *willfully misunderstand* and distort what Scripture says:

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, *which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction*, as they do the other Scriptures. (2 Peter 3:16 ; cf. 2 Pet 3.3-6)

The clarity of Scripture guarantees, then, that it is *capable* of being understood rightly, not that all believers will understand it rightly. The clarity of Scripture is a doctrine about its *understandability*, not about how various people actually understand it.

In fact, much of the work of scholars who belong to the Tyndale Fellowship indirectly bears witness to a deep confidence in Scripture's ultimate understandability. We write articles and commentaries even about those passages that seem most puzzling, and this activity indicates some expectation that the passages can be understood. Why would we write long articles about preaching to the spirits in prison in 1 Peter 3:18-20, for example, unless we thought (as I did)²⁷ that our articles would persuade readers that the passage *can* be understood rightly?

7. Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood but (7) never completely

If all of God's people are always to be like the "blessed man" of Ps. 1, and "meditate" on God's law day and night, then this implies that we will *always* be able to learn more from it. The other encouragements to God's people to meditate on Scripture (see section C.1 above) similarly imply this.

There is an *initial* level of understanding available to first readers of the Bible and available to some extent to children, and there are *deeper* levels of understanding that come with further reading and growth in Christian maturity.²⁸

²⁷ See Wayne Grudem, "Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature," *Trinity Journal* 7:2 (Fall 1986) 3-31.

²⁸ Grant Osborne recognizes that there are levels of understanding Scripture, as implied even in the title of his book, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*. He writes, "the average person is again justified in asking whether biblical understanding

But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

A real-life example of how there is always more to be learned from Scripture happened to me during the year I spent here at Tyndale House (1985-1986) writing a commentary on 1 Peter.²⁹ There are only 105 verses in 1 Peter and someone might think that a year would be more than enough time to understand it fully. But at the end of the year, when I completed the commentary, I realized that there was still much more that I could learn from 1 Peter if I only had more time. Another example happened last year when I was editing the *ESV Study Bible* and came to the notes on Ezekiel (written by David Reimer, also a member of the Tyndale Fellowship). Somewhere in the middle of these notes it struck me that never in my lifetime will I come to understand as much as David Reimer understands about Ezekiel – and that is only book of the Bible.

Why is there always more that we can learn from Scripture? One reason is because it is the product of the infinite wisdom of God. Another reason is because understanding Scripture rightly is not merely a matter of understanding the individual sentences and paragraphs, but it is also a matter of understanding how *each verse* of Scripture relates to every other verse of Scripture, and how *each combination of several verses* relates to each combination of several other verses or teachings, and how all of these relate to every situation of life, for all of history.

As David says of God's knowledge of his ways, so we might say of comprehensive knowledge of his Word:

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. (Psalm 139:6)

Isaiah writes:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

We might say, then, that *we do understand Scripture* because it is able to be understood, and *we are always seeking to understand Scripture more fully*, because it is always able to be understood more fully. Both are implications of its clarity.

But do these seven qualifications to clarity constitute the “death of a thousand qualifications,” making the whole concept essentially meaningless? Certainly not, for these are sensible qualifications appropriate to understanding an intricate and complex book. They are far

is increasingly being reserved for the academic elite. I would argue that it is not. First, there are many levels of understanding . . . each level has its own validity and its own process. Furthermore, those who wish to learn the hermeneutical principles that pertain to these various levels may do so. They are not restricted to any “elite” but are available to all who have the interest and energy to learn them. Basic hermeneutics can and should be taught at the level of the local church” (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, p. 10).

²⁹ Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

different from saying (a) that Scripture it is internally contradictory, so no clear message can be understood or taught; or (b) that Scripture is in the final analysis baffling, like the sayings of the Delphic Oracle, or simply nonsense, like the writings of a lunatic that make no clear sense at all.

II. Why did God give us Scripture like this?

To review: Scripture affirms that it is able to be understood

but (1) not all at once

and (2) not without effort

and (3) not without 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.

A. Why is Scripture clear?

The theological reason for affirming the clarity of Scripture concerns the nature of God. He is a God who created human language, who cares for his people, and who communicates clearly with us.

As Mark Thompson says,

While the doctrine always remained the clarity of *Scripture* . . . it is richly theological in the sense that it speaks about God and his activity amongst us. Even if we were to move forward into the seventeenth century . . . a commitment to the relevance of God's *presence*, his sovereign *power* and his rich *benevolence* remains³⁰

B. Then why do we need these qualifications?

But then why does further understanding require time, effort, means, and dependence on the help of the Holy Spirit? Why did he not give us something simpler, something where our understanding would be instantaneous and automatic?

Perhaps for several reasons:

1. *The complexity of the subject matter*: God communicated to human beings in Scripture with the purpose of guiding the entire belief system and the lifelong conduct of billions of different people in hundreds of cultures throughout centuries of history. Communication sufficient for this task must necessarily be quite extensive and intricate. An infinite God is telling us about himself and his purposes in all creation! The subject matter is vast.

³⁰ Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, p. 157, emphasis added.

2. *The value of relationship*: God delights to teach us in relationship with himself. The prayers for understanding that are found in Scripture (see section C.5 above) indicate an awareness that Scripture is rightly understood *only in personal relationship with God*, only in a context of *prayer* for his presence and his help in right understanding.
3. *The value of a lifelong process*: God causes us to delight in the *process* of growing in likeness to him. Growth in understanding Scripture is merely part of the larger process of growth in sanctification, and God in his wisdom has ordained that sanctification is a process, a lifelong journey.

God seems to delight in process, for he delights in gradually disclosing more of his glory over time:

He took delight in creating the world not in one day but in six.

He took delight in promising that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent, and then in preparing the way for thousands of years, so that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,” (Galatians 4:4).

He has taken delight in building and purifying his church for the past two thousand years.

And he takes delight when we continually increase of the knowledge of himself and his ways through his Word:

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and *increasing in the knowledge of God*. (Colossians 1:9-10)

The process of understanding more of Scripture, and understanding more of God, is one that will never end in this life. I expect that it will never end even in the age to come. We are finite and we can rejoice in the unending and delightful process of learning more about our infinite Creator.

III. Objections – considered briefly

It is not the purpose of this lecture to deal at length with objections to this doctrine which come from outside the evangelical world, objections which I and many others have answered extensively in other writings. But I think it appropriate to mention briefly three major categories of objections.

A. Theological liberalism

In classic Protestant liberal theology, the Bible is not thought to be the words of God as well as man, but a merely a collection of human witnesses to the work of God in people’s lives. J. I. Packer writes that, in most liberal theological thinking, one finds “A view of the Bible as a

fallible human record of religious thought and experience rather than a divine revelation of truth and reality.”³¹

According to this view, it is only natural to expect to find that Scripture contains *numerous conflicting meanings*, because it was written by *numerous human authors* who lived in widely differing Hebrew, Greek, and Roman cultures, and who had widely differing ideas of God. While this viewpoint may affirm that specific individual writings are relatively clear, it would not affirm clarity as a characteristic of Scripture as a whole, or as a result of any divine authorship by a God who communicates to us in the words of Scripture. (I realize that this viewpoint constitutes the dominant intellectual atmosphere in the universities in which many members of the Tyndale Fellowship live their professional lives, even though it is not their own personal viewpoint.)

Response: This viewpoint is based on a fundamental difference in how we understand the nature of Scripture. I have addressed the question of the simultaneous human and divine authorship of Scripture at some length in other writings,³² but I cannot address it in detail here except to say that such differing views of the nature of Scripture will understandably lead to differing views of the clarity of Scripture. Therefore a confidence that the message of Scripture can actually be known with regard to many doctrines can often indicate someone’s confidence in the divine authorship of Scripture as well. Belief in the clarity of Scripture is a telltale indicator of a prior belief in divine authorship of Scripture.

B. Postmodern hermeneutics

According to much postmodern hermeneutics, there is no absolute truth, nor is there any single meaning in a text – meaning depends on the assumptions and purposes that an interpreter brings to a text. Therefore *claims* to know what Scripture means on any topic are just disguised attempts to exert power over others. Mark Thompson notes that postmodernism has developed the suspicion stated in the nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), “that all claims to know what is true are in reality covert attempts to manipulate people.”³³

Thompson gives a much more detailed explanation of this position than I am able to provide,³⁴ but by way of brief response, I agree with Thompson that such a denial that the meaning of Scripture can be known is ultimately an attack on the character of God – his goodness, his power, and his ability to communicate clearly to his people. It is inconsistent with the assumption of the understandability of Scripture that is found in Deuteronomy’s instructions to parents, in the Psalmist’s exhortations to meditate daily on Scripture, in Jesus’ repeated expectations that his hearers should know and understand Scripture, and in the willingness of Paul and Peter to address entire congregations with the expectation of being rightly understood.

³¹ J.I. Packer, “Liberalism and Conservatism in Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright (Leicester and Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), p. 385.

³² See “Scripture’s Self-Attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Scripture and Truth*, edited by D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 19-59. See also Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapters 3 – 5.

³³ Mark Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word*, p. 33.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-47.

Postmodern insistence on indeterminate meaning stands in sharp contrast to the views the biblical authors themselves urge upon us at page after page.

In addition, Scriptural authors frequently base an argument on the idea that a text means one thing and not another thing:

For example:

We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. 10 How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was *not* after, but before he was circumcised. (Romans 4:9-10)

That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." 23 But the words "it was counted to him" were *not* written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, (Romans 4:22-24)

Now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. 6 It has been testified somewhere, "What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? (Hebrews 2:5-6)

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. (Hebrews 4:8)

By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (Hebrews 11:3)

C. Roman Catholic teaching

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that the correct interpretation of Scripture must come from the teaching officers of the church:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. It's authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that *the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.*³⁵

But neither the teachings of Jesus nor the New Testament epistles give any hint that believing readers need an authoritative interpreter of Scripture such as the Bishop of Rome. Not even in the first century did the apostles suggest that ordinary believers needed an authoritative interpreter in order to understand Scripture rightly. The Scripture remains clear enough that it is able to be understood, now as in all previous ages, by ordinary believers who will take the needed time and effort, and employ ordinary means, and rely on the Holy Spirit's help.

³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), p. 27 (section 85), emphasis added.

IV. Implications of the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture

The implications of this doctrine are numerous, and immensely valuable:

A. The meaning of Scripture can be known

The clarity of Scripture implies, first, that various texts of Scripture, and the Scripture as a whole, have a meaning, and that meaning can be known.

1. Therefore the clarity of Scripture assures us that we can proclaim the Gospel message with confidence, for we can know what it says and what it means.
2. Therefore the clarity of Scripture reminds us that we as Christians should all be reading Scripture daily, for our whole lives.
3. Therefore the clarity of Scripture encourages us that we can teach *biblical doctrine* to our churches. We need not limit ourselves, for example, to teaching “Pauline theology” or “OT Theology” (both of which are valuable in their own right), but we should be able to teach “whole Bible theology,” and so should every pastor in every church.
4. Therefore the clarity of Scripture encourages us that we can teach *biblical ethics* to our churches – not just “Pauline ethics” or “Mosaic ethics” or “Old Testament ethics” (all of which are valuable in their own right) but “whole Bible ethics,” with clear application to ordinary people’s lives today.

These two points (#3 and #4) show why the *clarity* of Scripture is absolutely essential to any effectual authority of Scripture in people’s lives. Without the clarity of Scripture someone could say, “I believe fully in the absolute divine authority of Scripture – but I have no idea what it requires me to believe or how it requires me to live.” In this way, if Scripture has no clarity, its authority is effectively nullified in real life.

5. At this point, I am going to make an appeal to those with advanced training in Old Testament or New Testament studies: Consider using some of your research and writing to help the church learn what the *whole Bible* teaches about some of the important issues of the day, especially the ethical issues. I am afraid that there is a temptation to speak only to the wider academic community that does not share a belief that the whole of Scripture speaks clearly to doctrinal or ethical topics, and therefore never to publish anything that claims to explain what the entire Bible teaches the church today about some topic or another.

I wonder, in fact, if it is sometimes the case that *the more people know* about how to interpret the Bible with academic precision, *the less willing they are* to explain to the church

what the whole Bible says? Who then is supposed to do this? Only the pastors, with less training than the professional bible scholars? Or only the lay people, with less training than the pastors? Is that really what God intended for us? If the teaching of Scripture is able to be understood, not only in its parts but also in the whole, then shouldn't those with the most training be giving the church examples of how to understand the whole?

If we as evangelical scholars do not do this, I'm afraid that the clarity of Scripture – and much of its message – may be covered up and hidden in our generation, not by a priesthood that keeps the Bible in a Latin language that nobody else can read, but by a new scholarly “priesthood” that by its actions implies that nobody today is sufficiently well trained to teach the church what the whole Bible says about anything. The loss to the church would be immense.

B. Translations should be encouraged

The second implication of the clarity of Scripture is that the church should be constantly giving people the Bible in their own language (that is, in translation).

In contrast to the Qur'an, which Islam teaches cannot be properly translated, the Bible itself contains the justification for its own translation, because the New Testament authors frequently quote directly from the Septuagint, a Greek *translation* of the OT, and use it as the word of God. By this process they justify the work of translation of Scripture into other languages.

And so the conviction that people should be able to have a *translated* Bible in their own language is based in large measure on this very doctrine, the clarity of Scripture. If Scripture is *able to be understood* by ordinary believers (not perfectly, but quite well), and if Scripture is *able to be translated* and gives warrant for its own translation, then the church should eagerly translate Scripture into the languages that people speak and understand today.

This conviction has actually changed history:

A conviction about the clarity of Scripture led Wycliffe and Tyndale and others to risk their lives in order to translate the Bible into English.

A conviction about the clarity of Scripture led Martin Luther to risk his life and spend nearly a year in hiding in order to translate the New Testament into German, and later the Old Testament as well.

A conviction about the clarity of Scripture has led thousands of Wycliffe Bible translators, and many others, to devote their entire lives to the translation of Scripture into thousands of other languages.

But the need to translate does *not* imply that translations of the Bible should be rendered in the simplest street language immediately understandable to 12-year-olds, or even immediately understandable to non-Christian adults. This is because the Bible itself as written to its original audiences was not written in the simplest language possible (think of the difficult Greek of 2

Corinthians, for example, or Hebrews, or Acts, or 2 Peter), and for the most part was not written primarily to unbelievers but to believing communities of God's people.

The most faithful translation into contemporary language, therefore, should be a translation that, for its *primary readership*, aims at adult believers, which was the primary audience for most of the New Testament when it was originally written. In today's terms, a Bible translation should aim primarily at adult Christian readers as its target audience.

I appreciate the desire behind "dynamic equivalence" translations – a desire to make Scripture more clear to readers. My objection is that too often such translations simplify a passage so much that details of meaning that could be rendered into English are simply left out. Such a process ultimately undermines readers' confidence in their ability to understand Scripture, because Sunday after Sunday their pastors have to correct the text with additional details of meaning that are not found in their dynamic equivalence translations. To take one example, 1 Kings 1:10 in the NLT says, "So David *died* and was buried in the city of David." But then the pastor explains, "The Hebrew text actually says, 'Then David *slept with his fathers* and was buried in the city of David,' which is a rich image that hints at future resurrection and reunion with ancestors who had died." Or 2 Cor. 5:7 in the NIV says, "We *live* by faith, not by sight," but the pastor explains, "The Greek text actually says, 'We *walk* by faith, not by sight,' where walking is a metaphor that conveys the ideas of life as a journey toward a goal, life as something in which we make regular progress."

Soon the listeners are bound to object, "If you believe the Bible is clear, why not let me see what it actually says? I can certainly understand "sleeping" as a metaphor for dying and "walking" as a metaphor for life. If Scripture is able to be understood – in all its richness – then why not let me see as much of its richness as is possible in the English language?"

C. Bible reading should be encouraged

The third implication of the clarity of Scripture is that churches should strongly encourage personal Bible reading by every believer, and should encourage regular small group Bible studies.

In addition, in every nation the church should be in the forefront of advocating universal literacy. In fact, in northern Europe, one of the great consequences of the Reformation was a great emphasis on universal literacy. Both boys and girls were taught to read, because parents wanted their children to be able to read the Bible and to teach it to their children. The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, where it is believed, leads directly to universal literacy in a nation.

Sadly, Roman Catholic Southern Europe did not hold to this doctrine or follow this pattern of training children to read. The authoritative interpretation of Scripture was given to the faithful by the priests, so lay people were not encouraged to read Scripture for themselves, lest they misunderstand it.

Such contrasting beliefs regarding Scripture led to widespread differences in the general literacy of a population, so that the rate of illiteracy in England in 1900 was only 3%, but in Italy

it was still 48%, in Spain 56%, and in Portugal an astounding 78%.³⁶ (However, it should be added that more recent Roman Catholic teaching has encouraged widespread reading of Scripture by lay people.)

D. Preaching and teaching in the church should be a process of appealing to people's ability to understand the text

The fourth implication of the clarity of Scripture is that Bible teaching should be a process of repeatedly pointing to the words of the text (or highlighting the words on PowerPoint!) for which an explanation or application is being made – rather than giving the impression that a good sermon or lecture mostly consists of gems of wisdom that only highly trained scholars can discover.

Where does the right attitude come from? The attitude of pastors toward their congregations in preaching is often an imitation of the attitude they learned from their instructors in Bible college or seminary. If a lecturer conveys an attitude that says, “My goal is to show you how impossible the task of interpretation is for all but the greatest minds (such as my own),” and then burdens students with an impossible list of exegetical tasks that will require a month to complete for any verse, it will inculcate in most students a seminary disease called “hermeneutical paralysis,” a sense that they can never be sure what Scripture says – the opposite of the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture. And it will inculcate in the elite few top students an imitation of this haughty attitude that will be passed down to entire churches.

But if a lecturer conveys an attitude that says, “My goal is to improve your skill in interpreting Scripture, something you as an adult Christian already do quite well,” and then if the lecturer explains the immense set of exegetical tools available when they are needed (and gives opportunity to put them to use), then there is an appropriate deference given to the clarity of Scripture and the fact that God intended it to communicate well to ordinary believers.

E. Ordinary Christians vs. “the experts”

As one final point of application, I would encourage ordinary Christians to be suspicious of “experts” in some field who attempt to lead you away from what seems to be the plain meaning of the text of Scripture. For example, I confess that one reason I never found the “cessationist” argument regarding miraculous spiritual gifts very persuasive was that it was just so hard to derive from the sense of Scripture that seems so evident when people read it without the background of the debate over spiritual gifts in mind. Do we really think that every example of a miracle in Acts, and every mention of miraculous gifts in the epistles, are put there to show us what the church today is *not* supposed to be? If that were God’s intention, he surely did not make it easy to discover! And so it is with many other doctrinal and ethical matters: If there is

³⁶ David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 250 (citing Gabriel Tortella, “Patterns of Economic Retardation and recovery in Southwestern Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Economic History Review* 47:1 (Feb., 1994), p.11).

something that God thinks it important for us to believe or obey, then surely he would not make it nearly impossible for all but the most advanced experts to find in his Word!³⁷

V. Conclusion

The clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture is no minor doctrine.

It provides the basis for giving us the Bible in our own language.

It provides the basis for thinking we can read the Bible and understand it.

It provides the basis for thinking that we even have a Gospel message to proclaim.

It provides the basis for thinking that we can know what God wants us to believe, and how he wants us to live.

It provides the basis for thinking that detailed study of Scripture, and even extensive academic study of Scripture, has great value, because it will eventually yield even fuller understanding of a Bible that is an infinite storehouse of wisdom and knowledge.

It assures us that our infinite Creator, whom we seek to know and to worship, has loved us enough to speak to us in words that we can understand, and understand not only with our minds but with our hearts. Through these words of God, we know and follow him. And thus we experience in our lives what Jesus tells us will happen: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

³⁷ I realize that at this point some may respond that clarity on such matters is not in the text but in the eye of the beholder!