

The Doctrine of the Word of God: Clarity

Recall the five characteristics of Scripture:

1. Authority
2. Inerrancy
3. Clarity
4. Necessity
5. Sufficiency

Perhaps the best place to start is the Westminster Confession's understanding of the clarity of Scripture:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due sense of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

This is a carefully nuanced statement, with important qualifications.

- It is directed against the attempts in the Roman Catholic church of the time to keep the laity from studying Scripture on their own.
 - The Roman church feared that if laymen were to interpret Scripture for themselves, they would come up with unorthodox, even bizarre, interpretations of it.

But Scripture itself says that God's written Word is for everybody (not just scholars). For example:

- In Deut. 30:11-14, Moses tells the congregation of Israelites about to enter into the promise land that the Law God has given them to live out in the land is "doable."

- “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. 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?’ 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?’ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.”
- In Deut. 6:7, Moses tells the people of Israel that God’s Law can be taught to and understood by their children.
- In Matthew 4:4, Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, says, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every* word that comes from the mouth of God.”
- Psa. 19:7 – “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.”
 - Here, the “simple” (פְּתִי, *peti*) person is not someone who lacks intellectual ability (as we often use the word in English), but one who lacks sound judgment, who is prone to making mistakes, and who is easily led astray.¹
 - ➔ The Psalmist is saying that God’s Word is so understandable, so clear, that even this kind of person is made wise by it.
 - ➔ This should be a great encouragement to all believers: no Christian should think himself or herself too foolish to read Scripture and understand it sufficiently to be made wise by it.
- Psa. 119:130 – “The unfolding of Your words give light; it imparts understanding to the simple.”

It is also important to remember that most of the NT letters are not written to church leaders but to entire congregations (comprised mostly of illiterate and unlearned members).

¹ The WTM lexicon defines the word as “young, naïve person, easily deceived.” The NET notes tell us that this refers to the morally naïve person – that is, one who is still young and still in the process of learning right from wrong and distinguishing wisdom from folly.

- The authors assume that their hearers will understand what they are writing.
 - So much so that in places like Col. 4:16 Paul encourages the sharing of these letters with other churches in other places.

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 such passages.

However, the confession's statement does not encourage autonomous or lawless Bible study.

- The doctrine of Scripture's clarity does not make every layman an expert in Scripture!
- All Christians need to watch their step in studying the Bible.
 - Though the Bible is clear regarding the things that are necessary (i.e. who God is, who man is, how one can be saved, etc.), we must remember that not every part of Scripture is equally clear to everybody.
 - ➔ 2 Pet. 3:15 reminds us that there are indeed difficult portions of Scripture to understand.
 - ➔ 2 Tim. 2:7 reminds us that some parts of Scripture need to be further pondered and meditated upon before clarity is granted by the Lord.
 - The confession says that those who would study Scripture should be humble enough to seek help.
 - ➔ Though there is a place for individualistic Bible study, we must remember that in most places in the Scriptures, Bible study is a corporate affair.
- Though Scriptures are clear, there is definitely a place for having Bible teachers.
 - C.S. Lewis: "The next best thing to being wise oneself is to live in a circle of those who are."

- The teaching role of the priests and Levites in the OT
 - ➔ E.g. Lev. 10:10-11; Deut. 33:10; 2 Chr. 15:3; 17:9; 35:3; Ezra 7:10; Neh. 8:7-9; Mal. 2:7.
- Eph. 4:7-16
- Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 3:2 (elders must be able to teach); James 3:1; Heb. 13:7
- Cf. the constant reminder of Solomon for those who are unwise to follow and learn from those who are wiser than them (e.g. Prov. 13:20, etc.)

However, what is fundamentally necessary to making Scripture clear is not an abundance of teachers or time in personal Bible study (as important as they are), **but the Holy Spirit's illuminating ministry.**

- The ability to understand Scripture rightly is more a moral and spiritual ability than an intellectual one.
 - For e.g., Paul says, "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 Cor. 2:14; cf. Luke 24:16, 31-32).
- Thus, although the Bible is written clearly, it will not be understood rightly by those who are unwilling to receive its teachings (e.g. Mark 4:21-25, 34).
 - This characterized the general response to and reception of Jesus' ministry.
 - ➔ E.g. Mark 4:10-12
 - Frame: The clarity of the word, therefore, is selective. However, this 'selectivity' has further dimensions, for even disciples of Jesus do not find the Scriptures entirely clear. For example, a six-year-old child may believe in Jesus, but have a very rudimentary understanding of Scripture. That, too, is under God's sovereign control. It is God's decision generally to communicate with us through Scripture more and more

clearly as we grow in spiritual maturity. This is why the confession says that not everything in Scripture is equally clear to every Christian.²

- I would hasten to note that it is possible even for believers to be stunted in their understanding of Scripture due to hardness of heart and/or unrepentant sin.
 - Mark 6:52; 8:17; cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-4; Heb. 5:11-14

If Scripture is so Clear, why are there so many disagreements and denominations?

Again, we need to clarify that the clarity of Scripture refers to the essentials of the Christian faith.

- Secondary matters like eschatology, baptism, spiritual gifts, etc. do not belong to this category.

Moreover, even as regenerated, redeemed people, we need to remember Paul's words that we still only "know in part", and only when Christ returns will we "see" as we ought to see (1 Cor. 13:9-12).

- "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (v.12).

Simply put, as fallible sinners, it is possible to make mistakes *in our interpretation* of Scripture.

- The importance of "**hermeneutics**"
 - Fee's book "How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth"
 - Wretched's "Herman Who?"

Grudem's words are worth quoting:

In no case are we free to say that the teaching of the Bible on any subject is incapable of being understood correctly. In no case should we think that persistent disagreements on some subject through the

² John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2013), 609.

history of the church mean that we will be unable to come to a correct conclusion on that subject ourselves. This truth should give great encouragement to all Christians to read their Bibles daily and with great eagerness. We should never assume, for example, that only those who know Greek and Hebrew, or only pastors or Bible scholars, are able to understand the Bible rightly.

Finally, even though we must admit that there have been many doctrinal disagreements in the history of the church, we must not forget that there has been an amazing amount of doctrinal agreement on the most central teachings of Scripture throughout the history of the church.³

It was the clarity of Scripture that emboldened such reformers as William Tyndale (1494-1536) to labor arduously to get the Word of God into the hands of the 'common folk.' On one occasion when in dispute with a 'learned' Catholic, he replied, "If God spare my life before many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more Scripture than thou dost."

That's confidence in the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture. This confidence would ultimately cost Tyndale his life. He died by strangulation, and his corpse was burned in the city square. And yet, through his relentless efforts, Tyndale translated most of the Bible into the common English of the day, and the Bible, in the hands of 'commoners', literally changed the world and prepared her for the great reformation that was soon to follow, which not surprisingly, was predicated upon "Sola Scriptura."

³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 109-10.