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THE PERSPICUITY OF SCRIPTURE

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The perspicuity or clarity of Scripture in its relation to almost all areas of systematic theology is affected by postmodern hermeneutics that fail to respect the authority of Scripture. The doctrine raises a number of questions difficult to answer in a brief span, but two very basic issues are the meaning of the doctrine of perspicuity and the long-range historical context in which the doctrine has arisen. The basic doctrine means that the Bible can be understood by people through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit and that people need to search the Scripture and judge for themselves what it means. Scripture itself attests its own perspicuity, but not to the point that it cannot be misunderstood or is in every point equally simple and clear. The doctrine does not rule out the need for interpretation, explanation, and exposition of the Bible by qualified leaders. The doctrine does mean that Scripture is clear enough for the simplest person, deep enough for highly qualified readers, clear in its essential matters, obscure in some places to people because of their sinfulness, understandable through ordinary means, understandable by an unsaved person on an external level, understandable in its significance by a saved person through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and available to every believer whose faith must rest on the Scriptures. Historically, debates about perspicuity have related to Marcion's attack on the OT, the fathers' denial of OT perspicuity, covenant theology's subordination of the OT to the NT, and the medieval church's attack on biblical perspicuity. The Reformers, the Protestant scholastics, and the German pietists supported the doctrine which is of primary importance for the practice of contemporary Christians.

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It is not difficult to define perspicuity even though, as some wag remarked, the term is not very perspicuous anymore. The perspicuity of Scripture means simply "the Bible is a plain book."[1] But the study of the perspicuity, or clarity, of Scripture is complicated by at least three matters.

In the first place, almost all of the doctrines of the theological encyclopedia are intertwined with the doctrine of perspicuity. In the doctrine of God, for example,

[1]Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d) 1:183.

is God incomprehensible, as most evangelical theologies teach? And if so, how does He accommodate Himself to mankind in order to make Himself and His revelation clear? Concerning the doctrine of man, how does man's creation in the likeness of God relate to the clarity of Scripture? In the doctrine of sin, how did man's fall into sin and his subsequent condition of depravity keep him from understanding clearly God's communication to him in the holy writ? As to pneumatology, how does the Holy Spirit's illumination make Scripture clear?[2] Or in the doctrine of the Bible, what is the relationship of translation theory to Scripture's clarity?

Second, the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture is complicated by the vociferous antagonism of the postmodern critics of biblical authority. This antagonism is especially noticeable in the field of postmodern hermeneutics. A defender of the clarity of Scripture, James Patrick Callahan, writes, "There is a sincere distrust of perspicuity, and a praise of obscurity, afoot in modern [i.e., contemporary] hermeneutics. . . . Perspicuity is quickly and easily missed as nothing more than an illusion, a fideistic commitment to a religious fallacy. . . ."[3] Standing on the philosophical shoulders of Immanuel Kant, these postmodern philosophers insist that clarity of meaning is only to be found in the reader, not in the text itself.[4]

In the third place, saying that "the Bible is a plain book" raises a number of practical questions. Callahan asks,

> In what way is Scripture clear? In its language, its translation, its every word, its expression of the authors' intent, its reference to historical matters, its narration of its story? And what makes one text so easily understood and others so obscure? Isn't all writing intended to be clear, and all communication meant to be understood? And if so, what is special, if anything, about the Bible's clarity? And another important question follows: To whom is Scripture clear? To Christians only, to the critically educated, to church authorities like pastors or bishops, or to anyone at all?[5]

All of these questions cannot be answered in a brief essay. Therefore, this study has a twofold purpose. First the meaning of the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture will be investigated; and second, some key debates over perspicuity will be identified in their historical context.

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[2]The illumination by the Holy Spirit is a major part of the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture. This article, however, is focused on other basic biblical and historical issues.

[3]James Patrick Callahan, "*Claritas Scripturae*: The Role of Perspicuity in Protestant Hermeneutics," *JETS* 39/3 (September 1996):362.

[4]But Kevin Vanhoozer is correct: "Precisely because they have authors, texts don't mean just anything. The author's will acts as a control on interpretation. Thanks to an author's willing this rather than that, we can say that there is a definite meaning in texts prior to reading and interpretation. As God's will structures the universe, so the author's will structures the universe of discourse" (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998] 47). See further, Robert Thomas' article in this issue.

[5]James Patrick Callahan, *The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2001) 11. Callahan has done the most work on perspicuity in recent years, and his article and book have been of considerable help in the preparation of the first part of this article.

THE MEANING OF THE PERSPICUITY OF SCRIPTURE

Definition of Perspicuity

What does the assertion, "the Bible is a plain book," mean? In further explanation, Hodge writes, "Protestants hold that the Bible, being addressed to the people, is sufficiently perspicuous to be understood by them, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; and that they are entitled and bound to search the Scripture, and to judge for themselves what is its true meaning."[6] His son and successor at Princeton Seminary affirmed, "[T]he Scriptures are in such a sense *perspicuous* that all that is necessary for man to know, in order to his salvation or for his practical guidance in duty, may be learned therefrom, and that they are designed for the personal use and are adapted to the instruction of the unlearned as well as the learned."[7] Even more clearly, Callahan explains,

> Scripture can be and is read with profit, with appreciation and with transformative results. It is open and transparent to earnest readers; it is intelligible and comprehensible to attentive readers. Scripture itself is coherent and obvious. It is direct and unambiguous as written; what is written is sufficient. Scripture's concern or focal point is readily presented as the redemptive story of God. It displays a progressively more specific identification of that story, culminating in the gospel of Jesus Christ. All this is to say: Scripture is clear about what it is about.[8]

Biblical Support of Perspicuity

The doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture pervades the Bible, as the following chart displays:

Biblical Teaching about the Perspicuity of Scripture

Scripture Is Clear Because:	Scriptural Reference
Scripture is light.	"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105). "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 . . ." (2 Pet 1:19a).

[6]Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:183.

[7]A. A. Hodge, *A Commentary on the Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1926) 63.

[8]Callahan, *Clarity of Scripture* 9.

Scripture is profitable.	"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).
Scripture explains salvation.	". . . the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15b).
Scripture is addressed to common people, not religious experts.	"Hear, O Israel" (Deut 6:4). "The common people heard Him [Jesus] gladly" (Mark 12:37, NKJV). "to the saints who are in Ephesus" (Eph 1:1). "with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:2).
Parents can teach Scripture to their children.	"And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 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" (Deut 6:6-7).
Even a child can understand Scripture's message.	"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings. . . " (2 Tim 3:14-15a).
Scripture tests the accuracy of religious ideas.	"Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

What Perspicuity Does Not Mean

In spite of what Scripture teaches about itself, it is still possible to misunderstand this doctrine, of course. So, what does this doctrine not mean, and what does it mean? First, perspicuity does not mean that all of Scripture is equally clear as to its precise meaning. The Second London Confession of Faith of the Baptists (1677, 1688), reflecting the Westminster Confession at this point, begins its

statement on perspicuity: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all . . . ."[9] The great church father, Chrysostom, compared Scripture to a river: "In one part there are whirlpools; and not in another," he wrote. And he concludes, "Why then art thou bent on drowning thyself in the depths?"[10]

Second, the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture does not mean that the teaching of Scripture is everywhere equally simple. There is a difference between clarity and simplicity. Scripture is clear, not mystical or hidden. But it often takes work to understand what the biblical authors meant in a certain passage. Commenting on Paul's writings, the apostle Peter admits, "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 Pet 3:16).

Third, perspicuity does not mean that interpretation, explanation, and exposition by a Bible teacher are never necessary. The New Testament speaks of the gift of teaching and the office of pastor-teacher. In Acts 8, Philip heard the Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah the prophet and asked him, "'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him" (Acts 8:30-31). Our Lord also explained Scripture to his disciples. After His resurrection, for example, He met some of His disciples on the Emmaus road. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

Those heroes in church history who emphasized the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture never implied that the teaching ministry is unnecessary. The Reformers, for example, like Calvin and Luther, "wrote numerous exegetical and expository commentaries on the text, and discussed issues concerning the problem of biblical interpretation."[11] One of the qualifications of a pastor, in fact, is that he be "able to teach" the Scriptures (1 Tim 3:2). Even the change from one culture to another, and one language to another, mandates teachers. Bernard Ramm writes,

> Words and sentences occur in the context of a culture. Their meaning depends in a large part to these contexts in which they occur and without that context it is either difficult or impossible to know the meaning of the words or sentences. It is therefore no great thing nor something out of the ordinary that we should have words, concepts, and sentences that puzzle us in Holy Scripture.[12]

Thus, perspicuity does not mean that interpretation, explanation, and exposition by a Bible teacher are never necessary. The Bible teaches that they are.

Fourth, the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture does not mean that even

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[9]Second London Confession of Faith (1677, 1688), 1,7, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. by William L. Lumpkin (Philadelphia: Judson, 1959) 251.

[10]John Chrysostom, "Homilies on Timothy", in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. by Philip Schaff, 1st series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 13:507.

[11]Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 179.

[12]Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 99.

essential biblical doctrines are everywhere stated with equal clarity. Correct understanding may involve comparing one passage with another passage. The great church father, Augustine, wrote,

> Thus the Holy Spirit has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude. Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere.[13]

What Perspicuity Does Mean

So what does the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scriptures mean? First it means that **Scripture is clear enough for the simplest person to live by**. Scripture says, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple" (Ps 119:130). Wayne Grudem comments, "Here the 'simple' person (Heb. *peti*) is not merely one who lacks intellectual ability, but one who lacks sound judgment, who is prone to making mistakes, and who is easily led astray. God's Word is so understandable, so clear, that even this kind of person is made wise by it."[14] Robert Reymond explains,

> For example, one does not need to be 'learned,' when reading the Gospels or hearing them read or proclaimed, to discover that they intend to teach that Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, performed mighty miracles, died on the cross 'as a ransom for many,' and rose from the dead on the third day after death. These things are plain, lying on the very face of the Gospels.[15]

On the other hand, perspicuity also means that **Scripture is deep enough for readers of the highest intellectual ability**. Augustine, one of the great minds of the ancient world admitted that certain passages of Scripture seem to be covered with "a most dense mist," which he believed "was provided by God to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless."[16]

Third, perspicuity means that **Scripture is clear in its essential matters**. Scripture, "in any faithful translation, is sufficiently perspicuous (clear) to show us our sinfulness, the basic facts of the gospel, what we must do if we are to be part of the family of God, and how to live."[17] The late R. V. Clearwaters, president of Central Baptist Seminary in Minneapolis, when confronted by the old argument that "Scripture is obscure and has many different interpretations," would read Rom 3:23 to that person: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." "Now," he

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[13]Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. by D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958) 38.

[14]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 106.

[15]Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 88.

[16]Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 37.

[17]Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy,* ed. by Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 128.

would say, "you give me your interpretation of that verse, and I'll give you mine." His point was, of course, that it is almost impossible to misinterpret "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God"? This verse and all other essential matters in Scripture are clear.

Fourth, the perspicuity of Scripture means that **the obscurity that a reader of the Bible may find in some parts of Scripture is the fault of finite and sinful mankind**. Grudem explains,

> 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 see how your problem arose—the Scriptures are not very clear on that subject." Instead, whether he is speaking to scholars or untrained common people, his 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, "Have you not read . . ." (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:14; 22:31), "Have you never read in the scriptures . . ." (Matt. 21:42), or even, "You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Matt. 22:29; cf. Matt. 9:13; 12:7; 15:3; 21:13; John 3:10; et al.).[18]

The blame must not be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but upon finite and sinful man.

Fifth, perspicuity means that **interpreters of Scripture must use ordinary means**. The writing of Scripture, though completed under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit, was accomplished by ordinary men using normal means of grammar and syntax. So, "if an interpreter properly follows what has been called 'the laws of language,' or 'the rights of language,' he can know what the Scriptures specifically mean."[19]

Sixth, the perspicuity of Scripture means that **even an unsaved person can understand the plain teachings of Scripture on an external level**. Some might think of 1 Cor 2:14 that says that the things of the Spirit are foolish to the man without the Spirit, and he cannot understand them. But the point is not that an unsaved person cannot understand what the Scripture is saying or teaching. The point is that he cannot have a spiritual understanding. At best, Scripture is insignificant to him; at worst, it is incredible.

In other words, there are two levels of knowing and understanding. At the first level, it is possible to see and hear with the senses—one could even say, to see or hear with the mind—while on the other hand not seeing or hearing with the Spirit of God (Matt 13:13-15). Joseph Bayly recounts an interesting story:

> I remember studying under C. T. Craig, New Testament scholar and Revised Standard Version translator at Union Seminary the summer of 1942. The course was "The Pauline Interpretation of the Gospel." For the first few weeks Dr. Craig could not have been more clear in his understanding of the Pauline teaching if he had been teaching at Dallas

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[18]Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 106.

[19]Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 98.

> or Wheaton. Then, at a critical point in the course, he said, "Up to this time we've been studying what Paul actually said. Now we shall proceed to reinterpret his writings in the light of the twentieth century." From then on he cut down what he had previously built. St. Paul was "a child of his times"; culture changes necessitated a drastic revision of his ideas.[20]

So, Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 2:14 does not mean that unsaved people cannot understand any part of the Bible. Unsaved man, as a matter of fact, "will be judged for rejecting that which Scripture itself declares should be abundantly clear to them, because they refuse to receive it."[21] Reymond writes,

> One does not need to be instructed by a preacher to learn that he must believe on Jesus in order to be saved from the penalty his sins deserve. (This includes the unbeliever, who is certainly capable of following an argument.) All one needs to do in order to discover these things, to put it plainly, is to sit down in a fairly comfortable chair, open the Gospels, and with a good reading lamp, read the Gospels like he would read any other book.[22]

Seventh, perspicuity means that **the Holy Spirit must illumine the mind of the reader or hearer of Scripture if he is to understand the significance of Scripture**. This is the correct meaning of 1 Cor 2:14.

Finally, the perspicuity of Scripture means that **in accordance with the priesthood of the believer, every Christian has the right and is bound to read and interpret it for himself, so that his "faith may rest on the testimony of the Scriptures, and not on that of the Church.**"[23] There are no church officers, class of officers, or Bible expositors to whose interpretation of the Scriptures the people are required to submit as a final authority.

To summarize,

> 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 due use of ordinary means, may attain to a sufficient understanding of them.[24]

HISTORICAL DEBATES OVER THE PERSPICUITY OF SCRIPTURE

Having surveyed the basic features of the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture, the question to be pursued is, How has this doctrine been treated in church history? Perspicuity became a major issue in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras. Before then, however, the church wrestled with the clarity of the Old

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[20]Joseph Bayly, "Out of My Mind," *Eternity* (November 1982):59.

[21]Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics" 123.

[22]Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology* 88.

[23]Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 183.

[24]Second London Confession of Faith, 1,7.

Testament, and eventually even the clarity of the New Testament.

The Attack on the Perspicuity of Scripture

One of the first issues to confront the church as it came out of the apostolic era dealt with the clarity of the Old Testament. The fathers asked and answered such questions as, Should the Old Testament be totally replaced by the New Testament? Should the church even keep the Old Testament in its canon?

Marcion's Attack on the Old Testament

At least one well-known theologian, Marcion by name, denied that the Old Testament (and some of the New Testament books) deserved the dignity of being included in the Christian canon of inspired books. Marcion did not deny that the Old Testament deserved to be read or that it had any teachings for Christians. But to Marcion, new wine must not be poured into old bottles, and the Old Testament was an old bottle.

In response, the church fathers wrote passionate treatises against Marcion. Tertullian, for example, wrote five books against Marcion. Irenaeus, in his *Adversus Haereses*, Book Four, responded to some of the doctrines of the Marcionites. Justin Martyr, Cyprian, and other fathers took every opportunity to condemn Marcionism. According to one specialist, "No other single man had called forth such a volume of anxious apologetic from the Church. For Marcion was a real danger."[25]

The Fathers' Denial of the Perspicuity of the Old Testament

Though the church fathers defended the canonicity of the Old Testament, they in effect denied its clarity in a couple of ways. First, they denied perspicuity by employing the allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. Augustine, for example, learned the allegorical method from Ambrose. He writes, "This [the defensibility of the Catholic faith] was especially clear after I had heard one or two parts of the Old Testament explained allegorically—whereas before this, when I had interpreted them literally, they had 'killed' me spiritually."[26]

James Preus, a scholar of the early and medieval hermeneutical developments, says that Augustine believed that

> . . . whenever the interpreter encounters a passage which does not literally teach faith or love, his task is to interpret it figuratively: he must raise it to the level of the edifying. For the passage that in its literal meaning does not edify must (according to Augustine's understanding of the divine intention) be a *figura* of something that does edify—a *signum* of something spiritual or theological *res* whose true meaning must be revealed . . . as *doctrina*, *lex*, or *promissio*.[27]

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[25]E. C. Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London: SPCK, 1948) ix.

[26]Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999) 96-97.

[27]James Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969) 13. Preus' book is based on his Harvard dissertation. His translations from Latin and analyses of the medieval theologians inform this section of the essay.

Thus, the clear sense of Scripture has two levels of value for Augustine: one level is edifying, and one is not. And that which is not edifying should be allegorized. The Old Testament, in its literal meaning, almost in total, falls under the unedifying classification. The only exceptions to the unedifying classification are the Old Testament law and the direct prophecies about Jesus Christ.

But there is something more significant happening in the fathers' understanding of the Old Testament. Not only did they believe in allegorizing much of the Old Testament, they also subordinated the Old Testament to the New Testament. After all, the key for allegorical interpretation was the New Testament. In other words, the interpreter of the Old Testament believed that he should read the Old Testament through the paradigm of the New Testament. The Old Testament in itself was not perspicuous for faith and practice. As the church moved into the Middle Ages, the theologians (now Roman Catholic) taught "that the OT, spiritually understood, is the same as the NT; or even the NT is the true literal sense of the OT."[28]

Covenant Theology's Subordination of the Old to the New

When the Reformation came, the Reformers reawakened to the value of the history and ethics of the Old Testament, to be sure. They studied it more and developed their idea of the theological covenant out of Old Testament theology. There was also a renewal of the commitment to literal interpretation and an awareness of the dangers of allegorical interpretation. However, one hermeneutical principle from medieval attitudes toward the clarity of Scripture remained: the subordination of the Old Testament to the New Testament.

This principle continues to this day to be the method of doing theology in covenant theology. Covenant theologian, Hans K. LaRondelle, for example, argues that the Old Testament Scriptures can only be interpreted accurately by studying the New Testament. Historic Christianity, he says, has always tried to understand the Old by the New.

> The Christian interpreter of the Old Testament is once and for all obliged to read the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of the New Testament as a whole, because the Old is interpreted authoritatively, under divine inspiration, in the New Testament as God's continuous history of salvation. Historic Christianity has always confessed that the New Testament is the goal and fulfillment of the Old.[29]

Of course the "historic Christianity" that he is referring to in this case is the medieval method of interpretation.

For covenant theology, doing theology proceeds as follows:[30]

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[28]Ibid., 16.

[29]Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1983) 19.

[30]See the helpful study by Mike Stallard, "Literal Hermeneutics, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism" (unpublished paper, Pre-Trib Research Center, 1995) 13-16.

1. The formulation of a biblical theology from the New Testament;
2. The formulation of a biblical theology from the Old Testament;
3. The production of a systematic theology by harmonizing points 1 and 2.

But there are serious weaknesses in this system of interpretation. By reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament, covenant theologians may in effect minimize the historical-grammatical interpretation of great sections of the Old Testament and produce allegorizers of the Old Testament. Covenant theologians in effect "undo, or replace the results that would have been obtained in performing a true biblical theology of the OT."[31] The Old Testament is almost an afterthought in this procedure. The New Testament is used like the "presidential power of veto"[32] over legitimate exegetical results in Old Testament passages. So, there is no true Old Testament biblical theology that serves to form the production of systematic theology. The systematic theology is "one-legged."[33]

The proper approach for doing theology would progress as follows:

1. The formulation of a biblical theology from the Old Testament;
2. The formulation of a biblical theology from the New Testament;
3. The production of a systematic theology by harmonizing all biblical imputs to theology.

And why is this best? For at least three reasons. First, because this is the nature of progressive revelation. In progressive revelation, revelation builds upon previous revelation. Second, because this process enables the interpreter to read the Old Testament with a grammatical-historical hermeneutic. And third, because in this procedure, there is really no priority of one testament over another except in a chronological order of progressive revelation. In the end, it is superior to be able to insist that an Old Testament text must not be stripped of its original meaning in its context, found through historical-grammatical interpretation and biblical theology. Both the New Testament and the Old Testament should be treated as perspicuous.

The Medieval Church's Attack on the Perspicuity of the Entire Bible

The situation in the Middle Ages had yet one more turn. In the on-going development of the Roman Church's doctrine of the interpretation of Scripture, Thomas Aquinas argued that clarity of meaning of a passage of Scripture can only be constituted by later interpretation. All historical material is subject to further interpretation because "things passing through their course signify something else. . . ."[34]

This means, as already has been pointed out, that the New Testament reinterprets the Old Testament. But what about the New Testament? What clarifies

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[31]Ibid., 15.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales,* VII q. 6 a 3 corp, in *Opera Omnia* IX, 546f., translated and quoted in Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* 56.

it? Since there is no "third testament," "the obvious answer is . . . his [Christ's] mystical body, the Church, endowed with the Spirit."[35]

Later Roman Church theologians such as Jean Gerson (d. 1429) went so far as to argue that the authority to judge and declare what the literal sense of Scripture rests in the church alone. Instead of the literal sense being the plain sense, or grammar of the Bible as it expressed the intention of the author, the literal sense "has become the private property of the Spirit endowed Church."[36] Instead of a grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture, Gerson and other medieval theologians argued for an ecclesial-literal understanding. So, "in the last analysis, the Bible itself has no theologically authoritative literal meaning. The possibility of argument from Scripture against the *magisterium* is . . . programmatically and theoretically eliminated."[37] Since the right to say what Scripture means has been given by God to the Roman Church, the problem of the perspicuity of Scripture is solved. Scripture means what the church says that it means.

The Roman Catholic Church officially defended this view at the Council of Trent during the Counter-Reformation:

> In order to restrain petulant spirits [the Council] decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall,—in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine,—wrestle the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church,—whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures,—hath held and doth hold. . . .[38]

To complete the story, Rome in the Counter-Reformation and since has not said that the Bible is completely obscure and inaccessible, written in some secret code. A clear understanding of Scripture is possible, but only through the mediation of the church. The issue ultimately is not so much obscurity of Scripture as much as it is authority over the interpretation of Scripture. And this leads to the response of the Reformers to the position of the Roman Church.

The Protestants' Proclamation of the Perspicuity of Scripture

One of the major principles of the Protestant Reformation was the priesthood of the believer. Thus the believer is his own priest before God and has the right to interpret Scripture for himself. The corollary principle was that Scripture was clear and every Christian could understand it. Callahan writes,

> Yet, while Protestants did not invent the notion, Protestantism certainly linked its own identity with a reinvented version of Scripture's clarity, making the claim to Scripture's 'plain meaning,' a logically necessary article of the Protestant faith. . . . This has its

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[35]Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* 57.

[36]Ibid., 79.

[37]Ibid., 81.

[38]Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent (fourth session, April 8, 1546), in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed.by Philip Schaff (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d., reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 2:83.

origins in Zwingli and Luther, and is particularly evident in the Protestant scholastic tradition.[39]

The Reformers' Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture

All of the major Reformers spoke and wrote about the clarity of Scripture. Zwingli, in September 1522, published "Of the Clarity and Certainty or Power of the Word of God." John Calvin argued that the church must not withhold the Bible from Christians because withholding would rob them of necessary armor in the struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil.[40]

The debate between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants over perspicuity climaxed, however, in the interchange between the Roman Catholic humanist, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, and Martin Luther in their respective works, *The Freedom of the Will* and *The Bondage of the Will*.[41] In his work, Luther laid down several principles that more or less outline the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture for the Reformers. The following chart summarizes Luther's doctrine of perspicuity.

Martin Luther's Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture

The Principle	Luther's Statement in *Bondage of the Will*
1. Nothing in Scripture is obscure.	". . . in opposition to you I say with respect to the whole Scripture, I will not have any part of it called obscure. What we have cited from Peter holds good here, that the Word of God is for us 'a lamp shining in a dark place" (II Peter 1:19). But if part of this lamp does not shine, it will be a part of the dark place rather than of the lamp itself" (163).
2. Anything that seems to be obscure is so because of the ignorance of man, not the obscurity of Scripture.	"It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness of indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth" (111).

[39]Callahan, *Clarity of Scripture* 128.

[40]John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. by T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 221.

[41]Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. by E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 17 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969).

3. Some texts are obscure because the reader does not understand key words and grammar.	"I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject matter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture" (110).
4. Satan also tries to blind human eyes to the meaning of Scripture.	"It is due to the malice of Satan, who sits enthroned in our weakness, resisting the Word of God. If Satan were not at work, the whole world of men would be converted by a single word of God once heard, and there would be no need of more" (167).
5. If a Scriptural topic seems to be obscure in one place, it will be clear in other places.	"If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another . . ." (111).
6. There are two kinds of clarity in Scripture.	"To put it briefly, there are two kinds of clarity in Scripture, just as there are also two kinds of obscurity: one external and pertaining to the ministry of the Word, the other located in the understanding of the heart" (112).
7. External clarity extends to the whole world, not just Christians.	"If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything there is in Scripture has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light, and published in all the world (112).
8. Internal obscurity comes from depravity.	"All men have a darkened heart, so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and truly understand nothing of it" (112).
9. The Holy Spirit brings about internal clarity.	"If you speak of the internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God" (112).

10. One of the worst results of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Scripture is that it has kept people from reading and studying the Bible.	"Yet with such a phantasmagoria [bizarre illusion] Satan has frightened men away from reading the Sacred Writ, and has made Holy Scripture contemptible . . ." (110).
11. Another result of Roman Catholic doctrine is that it has sometimes set wicked men above Scripture.	"Nothing more pernicious could be said than this, for it has led ungodly men to set themselves above the Scriptures and to fabricate whatever they pleased, until the Scriptures have been completely trampled down and we have been believing and teaching nothing but dreams of madmen" (159).

Protestant Scholastics' Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture

In the years following the deaths of the firs-generation Reformers, Lutheran and Reformed scholastics had the opportunity to state with some precision of words the various doctrinal emphases of the Reformation.[42] The battle over the perspicuity of Scripture between Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars remained intense during these years. Possibly the best illustration of the scholastics' statement of the perspicuity of Scripture is found in the work of Reformed scholastic, Francis Turretin (d. 1687). Turretin highlights the perspicuity of Scripture in a chapter in his book, *The Doctrine of Scripture*.

In this chapter, Turretin makes twenty-two points about Scripture's clarity, most of which simply develop the Reformers' teaching. In point two, for example, Turretin writes, "No one denies that Scripture is obscure to unbelievers and unregenerate people, to whom the gospel is its own concealment, as Paul says (II Cor. 4). . . . [But] is it so obscure that a believing person cannot comprehend it for salvation without the authority and decision of the church? This we deny."[43] In point six, Turretin writes,

> It is not a question of perspicuity that excludes necessary means for interpretation, such as the inner light of the Spirit, the attention of the mind, the voice and ministry of the church, lectures and commentaries, prayers and vigils. We acknowledge such means are not only useful but also normally are necessary, but we want to deny any obscurity that keeps the common people from reading Scripture, as if it were harmful or dangerous, or that leads to a falling back on traditions when one should have taken a stand on Scripture alone.[44]

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[42]See further, Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), for a complete study of the Lutheran scholastics.

[43]Francis Turretin, *The Doctrine of Scripture,* ed. and trans. by John W. Beardslee III (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 185.

[44]Ibid., 187-88.

Point fifteen reads, "It is one thing for there to be in Scripture difficult passages . . . whose difficulties can be mastered, but another for there to be insuperable . . . difficulties, which cannot be understood no matter how painstakingly they are investigated."[45]

German Pietists' Emphasis on the Perspicuity of Scripture

Contemporary with, and sometimes in conflict with, the scholastics were the Pietists.[46] The Pietists were reformers within the Reformed and Lutheran Churches in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who believed that the scholastics had overemphasized the fine points of Protestant theology and underemphasized the necessity of the new birth and practical Christian living.[47] Practical Christian living included the study of the Bible, and this meant an emphasis on the perspicuity of Scripture.

One of the most important of the Lutheran Pietists was Philipp Jakob Spener (d. 1705). In his famous *Pia Desideria*, for example, Spener wrote,

> Indeed, it was by a special trick of the cursed devil that things were brought to such a pass in the papacy that all these spiritual functions were assigned solely to the clergy (to whom alone the name "spiritual," which is in actual fact common to all Christians, was therefore arrogantly allotted) and the rest of the Christians were excluded from them, as if it were not proper for laymen diligently to study in the Word of the Lord. . . . This presumptuous monopoly of the clergy, alongside the aforementioned prohibition of Bible reading, is one of the principal means by which papal Rome established its power over poor Christians and still preserves it wherever it has opportunity. . . . Every Christian is bound not only to offer himself and what he has, his prayer, thanksgiving, good works, alms, and so forth, but also industriously to study in the Word of the Lord, with the grace that is given him to teach others, especially those under his own roof.[48]

In a message, "The Necessary and Useful Reading of the Holy Scriptures," Spener refers to Gregory the Great's metaphor:

> Scripture is water in which a lamb can touch bottom and walk on it but an elephant must swim. This we can understand in the following sense: A simple person can discover his need in it and come to it even though he can only wade; on the other hand, the person who has greater understanding will meet with so many difficulties in the text that he must swim through them with great struggle, that is, he must turn all his powers toward

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[45]Ibid., 191.

[46]The best book-length studies of Pietism in English are still the three works by F. Ernest Stoeffler. See F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: Brill, 1971); Stoeffler, *German Pietism During the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1973); and Stoeffler, ed., *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

A helpful compendium of Pietist writings is in print: Peter C. Erb, ed., *Pietists, Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

[47]Pietist Lutheran groups who honor Scripture and believe in the necessity of the new birth still exist today—the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, for example.

[48]Philipp Jakob Spener, "Pia Desideria," in Erb, ed., *Pietists: Selected Writings* 35.

overcoming those difficulties.[49]

The doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture pervades the Pietists' writings, so much so that a major work on the Pietist doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture would, in fact, be helpful.

CONCLUSION

The practical lessons from the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture are many. The first is surely thankfulness to the God of grace who clearly reveals in a book how to have one's sins forgiven, how to have eternal life, and how to live a life pleasing to Him. This doctrine is also one of the important teachings of Scripture for which Jude instructed Christians to "earnestly contend for the faith" (Jude 3). Clarity of Scripture is denied by every false theology, usually putting a priesthood, a cult's founder, an inner light, a critical methodology, or a postmodern hermeneutic, between the Scriptures and the Christian.

Finally, pastors may need to be reminded never to give the impression to their people that they cannot understand the Bible without their sermons. On the contrary, pastors must help their people to learn to love to read and study God's Word. The Bible is a precious book, able to make people wise unto salvation, profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness—and it is clear.

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[49]Philipp Jakob Spener, "The Necessary and Useful Reading of the Holy Scriptures," in Erb, ed., *Pietists: Selected Writings* 72. See also in the same volume Spener's, "The Spiritual Priesthood" 50-64; and "The Necessary and Useful Reading of the Holy Scriptures" 71-75.