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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbet-01.php

MAKING CLEAR THE DOCTRINE OF THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

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In this paper I aim to make clear what the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is and why it is important for the church today. The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is an important one for Protestants. It is through this doctrine that the lay person may be encouraged to read and interpret Scripture directly. The interpretation of Scripture is not limited to the province of church leadership or scholars alone, but to all who have the Holy Spirit. It is because of this doctrine that all Christians can be encouraged to read Scripture on their own, in Bible study groups, and in their own language.

However, the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is ironically obscure. Based on the common definition of clear being ‘easy to understand’, one may ask: How can Scripture be clear and yet a multiplicity of interpretations abound? How can Scripture be clear and there be a need for further clarification of Scripture? How is this current paper important? Based on the existence of and need for these things, it appears that Scripture is not clear. At the heart of these questions is the idea that clarity of Scripture means that the correct interpretation is *easily* apparent to the hearer or reader. However, this is not what the doctrine means.

To display what the clarity of Scripture means and so address these questions, I will examine portions of the history of the debate and parts of Scripture itself. This will lead to examining how differing interpretations of Scripture occur and demonstrate how the doctrine encourages lay Christians to read and interpret Scripture. I will end with a proposal for how the clarity of Scripture may be taught.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF CLARITY

In order to begin thinking about the doctrine it is useful to have a working definition in mind. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) of 1646 provides a good starting point for an elaboration of the doctrine.

VII. 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 use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.¹

The WCF asserts that what is necessary for salvation is clear enough (in at least one place) that any person may understand given the ordinary means. The *ordinary means* is a term that will require further elaboration. For now, it will suffice to say that it may include such things as translation of Scripture, preaching, and studying Scripture.

HISTORY OF THE DEBATE

Although the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture came to prominence with the reformation, ‘it was not... an innovation of the Reformation’.² The church fathers were talking about the clarity of Scripture long before. Irenaeus, in writing against the Gnostic heresies, taught Scripture could be unambiguously understood by all.³ Augustine also talked about the clarity of Scripture, saying that all matters concerning faith and manner of life are plain in Scripture.⁴

As time passed, Scripture began to be seen as more obscure. Jean Gerson during the years 1414-18 argued that the authority to judge the literal sense of Scripture was held by the church alone.⁵ This belief in the role of the Roman Catholic Church as sole interpreter of Scripture was clearly formulated, following the debates of Erasmus and Luther, in the Council of Trent’s 1546 *Decree Concerning the Edition, and the Use, of the Sacred Books*. In it the Roman Catholic Church declared against the Protestants that the ‘mother Church’ had the sole right to ‘judge the true

¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.7.

² Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 117.

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Company, 1885), i, 315–567 (p. 398) (= Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.27.2).

⁴ Aurelius Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, in *St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. by Philip Schaff, trans. by J. F. Shaw, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1 (Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Company, 1887), ii, 522–97 (p. 539) (= *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.9.14).

⁵ Mark S. Burrows, *Jean Gerson and De Consolatione Theologiae (1418): The Consolation of a Biblical and Reforming Theology for a Disordered Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2010), pp. 229–40.

sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures'.⁶ Due to the prominence of the reformation debates between (particularly) Erasmus and Luther it is helpful to examine them in order to better understand the doctrine.

Erasmus and Luther

In 1524 Erasmus wrote his work *The Freedom of the Will* (*De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collation*) to combat the ideas of Luther and his followers. Luther replied a year later in his work *The Bondage of the Will* (*De servo arbitrio*). These works epitomise the debate over the clarity of Scripture.

In *The Freedom of the Will* Erasmus argued for the obscurity of at least some parts of Scripture.⁷ If Scripture is clear, why do we need people to interpret it? Erasmus argued that because of Scripture's obscurity, the Holy Spirit was given to the ordained for the interpretation of Scripture.⁸ Furthermore, when working from the premise that all could interpret, he asks how a matter (in this case free choice) can be resolved when there are people of all sorts holding to both sides of the debate. He suggests that when we take away the ruling of the church in these matters there is no way to be sure about a matter; everything becomes subjective argument.⁹

To some degree this comment about subjectivity is true. However, arguments must be made from Scripture as a unified canon, and this limits what can be argued. In the WCF we can see that the doctrine does not mean that everything is clear in itself, or equally clear to all. Luther states: 'I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse.'¹⁰ However, Luther goes on to qualify that this is not because of Scripture itself. In fact, later on Luther states 'I will not have any part of it called obscure.'¹¹

⁶ The Council of Trent, 'The Canons and Dogmatic Decrees of the Council of Trent. A.D. 1563', in *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The Greek and Latin Creeds, with Translations*, ed. by Philip Schaff, trans. by J. Waterworth, 3 vols (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), ii, 77–206 (p. 83).

⁷ Desiderius Erasmus, *On the Freedom of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, trans. by E. Gordon Rupp (The Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), pp. 35–97 (pp. 38–39).

⁸ Erasmus, *Freedom of the Will*, p. 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Career of the Reformer III*, ed. & trans. by Philip S. Watson, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), xxxiii, 3–295 (p. 25).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

According to Luther, one reason for interpretative struggles is our difficulty with vocabulary and grammar.¹² In addition, Luther argues that much remains obscure for many people due to their blindness, or not taking the trouble to look.¹³ With reference to Erasmus' argument that some things are impossible to understand,¹⁴ Luther argues that this is not a matter for the clarity of Scripture. Although some matters such as the Trinity and humanity of Christ are not explained clearly in Scripture, the fact is that these things are true is clear in Scripture. Luther writes 'But *how* these things can be, Scripture does not say (as you imagine), nor is it necessary to know.'¹⁵ Luther argues that Erasmus has confused theological matters affirmed in Scripture with the explanation of how these matters can exist. So according to Luther language, spiritual blindness, and lack of effort are barriers to interpretation.

Luther explains the clarity of Scripture in terms of two forms: internal and external. Internal clarity is that given by the Holy Spirit. A person cannot truly understand Scripture without the Holy Spirit (Ps. 14:1).¹⁶ Contrary to Erasmus, Luther says that because all Christians have the Holy Spirit they can through the Spirit interpret the Scriptures so as to judge 'the dogmas and opinions of all men'.¹⁷

Externally, Luther says the entirety of Scripture is clear: 'everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light, and published to all the world'.¹⁸ But what does Luther mean by external clarity? External clarity is that belonging to public ministry and the primary concern of leaders and preachers. It entails judging dogmas for the whole church according to Scripture itself.¹⁹ However, contrary to the Roman Catholic Church, the authority of such judgement comes from Scripture alone, tradition and church hierarchy. Therefore, Luther is saying that Scripture is clear to all through the proclamation of Scripture, as those proclaiming Scripture listen to the Holy Spirit within who gives internal clarity. In arguing for the two sources of clarity Luther holds in tension both private judgement and the judgement of the church. The place for resolving issues is 'in the presence of the Church [and] at the bar of Scripture'.²⁰

¹² Ibid., p. 25.

¹³ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁴ Erasmus, *Freedom of the Will*, pp. 38–39.

¹⁵ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, p. 28.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

²⁰ Ibid.

Whitaker and Turretin

From this examination of the clarity of Scripture in Luther's thought it may appear that there is no space for differing abilities to understand Scripture. However, the WCF says 'All things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.'²¹ Luther argues that Scripture is clear in its entirety, but that mediating factors (such as obscure grammar) can render parts unclear to us. In contrast, it appears that the WCF, limits absolute clarity to matters of salvation. This also seems to be the case in Whitaker (1548-95) and Turretin (1623-87).²² However, Whitaker affirms Luther's belief that Scripture is clear in its entirety, but that parts of Scripture are unclear due to secondary reasons (such as grammar).²³ Turretin argues that there are degrees of clarity in Scripture,²⁴ but that what is necessary for salvation is clear enough that it can be understood without the help of external tradition.²⁵ There seem to be two issues going on here: the clarity of Scripture, mediated by the Spirit, making it understandable; and the ability of a person to understand Scripture. The presence of these two factors can explain how Whitaker can both affirm Luther and then say

Meanwhile, we concede that there are many obscure places, and that the scriptures need explication; and that, on this account, God's ministers are to be listened to when they expound the word of God, and the men best skilled in scripture are to be consulted.²⁶

Luther argues that Scripture is clear through the Spirit. The only obscurity is caused by the reader through: not taking the trouble to look; grammatical difficulties; or attempting to understand *how* something such as the Trinity can be when Scripture is silent on the issue. It appears that Whitaker, Turretin, and the WCF are dealing with the interaction between the ability of individuals to understand Scripture and the clarity of Scripture mediated through the Spirit when they assert that the essentials of salvation and faith are so clear they may be understood by the

²¹ *Westminster Confession*, 1.7.

²² Francis Turretin, *The Doctrine of Scripture: Locus 2 of Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, trans. by John W. Beardslee III (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 186; William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture, against the Papists, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, trans. by William Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), p. 364 <<https://archive.org/details/disputationonhol00whituoft>> [accessed 5 May 2015].

²³ Whitaker, *Disputation*, pp. 359–64.

²⁴ Turretin, *Institutio*, p. 187.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

²⁶ Whitaker, *Disputation*, p. 364.

learned and unlearned alike. Conversely, when they say that Scripture is not equally clear to all they are solely addressing the ability of individuals to understand Scripture.²⁷ This attention to the individual abilities of different people is an important part of the doctrine. In addition to this attention to ability Turretin also points to the need for effort. This could perhaps be seen to elaborate on Luther's 'taking the trouble to look'.

Although the Scriptures are to be searched (John 5:39), it does not follow that they are obscure everywhere [...] (1) We do not say that it is understandable to everyone, but only to the mind of one who is ready to learn and earnest in study [...] All things become obscure very easily to those who read halfheartedly and carelessly. (2) We do not deny that there are in Scripture its secrets, which can be found out only by great effort and through investigation, but this does not prevent there being many other matters, and especially those necessary for salvation, which are easily seen by the eyes of the faithful.²⁸

The work of these scholars is helpful, but the examination of Scripture is more important. Luther and many others since have found reason to believe in Scripture's clarity through the testimony of Scripture, which attests it is the bar against which doctrine must be judged.

SCRIPTURE IS CLEAR

Scripture makes it abundantly clear that it is useful and can be understood. This is seen in both Testaments. I will first highlight some passages on clarity in the OT, then in the NT, and then move on to passages that qualify what clarity means.

The Old Testament is Clear

One of the most famous parts of the OT is the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9). In this passage it speaks of the commandments of the Torah as though they can be learnt and understood. They are simple enough that they can be learnt by children (Deut. 6:7). Furthermore, Deuteronomy 30:11-14 explicitly states that the Law passed on to Israel was not too difficult and could be understood. Similarly, in Psalm 19:7 David makes the claim that 'The testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, making the simple wise.' The word simple (פְּתִי *peti*) refers to a person who is easy to lead astray, and

²⁷ Turretin, *Institutio*, pp. 186–87; Whitaker, *Disputation*, p. 364; Westminster Confession, 1.7.

²⁸ Turretin, *Institutio*, p. 192.

are prone to mistakes, believing whatever they are told.²⁹ So we see that David's claim here is that God's laws are such that they can even make wise those who are easy to lead astray.

In Psalm 119, God's words are said to give light both to the simple (Ps. 119:130), and to one's path (Ps. 119:105). This metaphor of light is used to convey the idea of giving understanding.³⁰ Furthermore, the prophets constantly speak to all the people, expecting all to listen and understand the message from God.³¹ Therefore, we can see that the concept of the clarity of Scripture is found in the OT. In a similar way, we can see the NT affirming the clarity of Scripture.

The New Testament is Clear

Just as the prophets prophesied to all people expecting that all could understand, Jesus spoke to the Jews and the NT leaders wrote to whole churches with the assumption that all the people could understand.³² The public reading of Scripture is also said to be beneficial (1 Tim. 4:13), and all Scripture is said to be useful for equipping every believer to serve God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). In addition, the Berean Jews were called more εὐγενεστεροί (*eugenesteroi*, noble-minded) than the Thessalonian Jews, because they examined Scripture to determine if what Paul said to them was true (Acts 17:11). It is assumed here that individuals can judge the truth of Paul's words based on Scripture alone. Another parallel to the OT understanding of clarity is seen in an exhortation to children (Eph. 6:1-3). Scripture is not too obscure for children. Furthermore, the clarity of Scripture extends to matters other than salvation. 'All Scripture is God-breathed useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NIV 2011). Despite these affirmations of

²⁹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: Coded with Strong's Concordance Numbers*, ed. by E. Brown (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), sec. פָּתִי; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), p. 106.

³⁰ Wayne Grudem, 'The Perspicuity of Scripture', *Themelios*, 34.3 (2009), 288–308 (p. 292).

³¹ The prophesied inability to understand in Isa. 6:9, Matt. 13:14-15, and Rom. 11:8 can be explained in terms of Luther's category of blindness and not taking the effort to understand. Isa. 1:10f; 5:3f; 9:1; 40:1f; Jer. 2:4; 4:1; 10:1; Ezek. 3:1. See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, trans. by John Vriend, 4 vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), I, 477.

³² Matt. 9:13; 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:42; 22:29, 31; Luke 24:25; John 3:10; 1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:2; Phil. 1:1. Letters were also expected to be understood and useful for teaching in other churches (Col. 4:16).

clarity there are a number of qualifications within Scripture itself that must be addressed. These may be thought of in terms of the second issue: the ability of each person to understand Scripture.

Qualifications

Scripture is clear, but cannot be understood instantly. Scripture emphasises that a process is involved in understanding Scripture. The commands to meditate on God's law point to a process leading to greater understanding (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2). Furthermore, in Acts 15 there is an example of the early church requiring time and debate to come to an understanding of what God wanted. A process towards full understanding is made explicit in 2 Corinthians 1:13-14.

From the call to meditate on Scripture we can say that Scripture takes effort to understand. A good example of this can be found in Ezra the scribe who carefully studied the law (Ezra 7:10). Another is found in 2 Peter 3:15-16 where Peter affirms that some concepts conveyed in Scripture are hard to understand (but does not say it is impossible).³³

Given the need to keep working on understanding Scripture more, it is apparent that we will not come to a full understanding in this life.³⁴ This does not mean that parts of Scripture are unable to be understood, rather that we are limited in the amount we can come to understand in our lifetimes. Turretin explains it in terms of 1 Corinthians 13:12 'Now I know in part; then I shall know fully' (NIV) saying that we have imperfect knowledge in this life and will not fully know until the next.³⁵

In addition to there being a process of understanding, Scripture is said to be understood through 'due use of the ordinary means'.³⁶ The 'ordinary means' contains a number of factors:

1. Scripture must be in a language that people can understand (cf. 1 Cor. 14:10-11, 16). This is what Luther meant when he said that one reason for obscurity was 'ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar'.³⁷

³³ Grudem, 'The Perspicuity of Scripture', p. 295; Larry Dean Pettegrew, 'The Perspicuity of Scripture', *Master's Seminary Journal*, 15.2 (2004), 209-25 (p. 213).

³⁴ Grudem applies Ps. 139:6 and Isa. 55:8-9 here. However, these do not adequately address the issue because they talk directly about God and not his word given to us. Grudem, 'The Perspicuity of Scripture', pp. 300-01.

³⁵ Turretin, *Institutio*, pp. 191-92.

³⁶ *Westminster Confession*, 1.7.

³⁷ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, p. 25.

2. Scripture is understood through people who teach or explain it. God has given teachers to the church as a gift (1 Cor. 12:28).³⁸ Scripture at times affirms the need for such a guide (Luke 24:27; Acts 8:30-31).
3. Scripture is understood in fellowship with other Christians and may involve debate. This may be seen in the councils of the early church (e.g. Acts 15).

A natural extension to points 2 and 3 above is that teachers and councils may not necessarily be those that happen in our current time. The writings and traditions of teachers and councils of the past can also be considered as part of an ongoing debate about the interpretation of Scripture. The list of ordinary means may not be limited to these.³⁹

Scripture is understood only when the reader is willing to obey it. Being unwilling to obey Scripture can lead to a failure to understand it (John 8:43). In exegesis of John 5:37-47, Brian Wagner argues this passage affirms a conditional clarity for the unbeliever. Scripture is clear if they are willing to search it and are open to what it teaches.⁴⁰ Similarly, when someone is knowingly practising sin they are less able to understand (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

Scripture is understood with the help of the Holy Spirit. In Psalm 119 the psalmist frequently petitions God for the ability to understand.⁴¹ Similarly, the NT reveals the need of God's help to understand, and this ability is affirmed for the layperson.⁴² These passages do not specifically say that we need the Holy Spirit to understand. However, the Holy Spirit is presented as our teacher in the NT (John 14:26; 1 Cor. 2:12) and this is why we say today that the help of the Holy Spirit is needed.⁴³ Given this point treats the original audiences of the OT and NT in the same way, it may conflict with doctrines of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit acted differently prior to Jesus. In Ezekiel 36:27 and Joel 2:28-32 it says that in the future the Spirit will be given to every believer. Jesus promised to send the

³⁸ This includes reading commentaries (a written form of teaching) and the church's history of interpretation (historical teaching). Grudem, 'The Perspicuity of Scripture', pp. 296-97.

³⁹ Grudem, 'The Perspicuity of Scripture', pp. 296-98.

⁴⁰ Brian H. Wagner, "'The Father's Clear Testimony'" (John 5:37-47): Christ's Teaching of the Conditional Perspicuity of Scripture', *Journal of Dispensational Theology*, 15.45 (2011), 27-46 (pp. 40-41).

⁴¹ Ps. 119:18, 27, 34, 73.

⁴² Luke 24:44-45; 1 Cor. 2:14-15; 2 Cor. 3:14-16; 4:3-4; 1 John 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:9. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, 478.

⁴³ Grudem, 'The Perspicuity of Scripture', p. 299.

Spirit (John 15:26-27) and that is what occurred at Pentecost (Acts 1:5; 2:1-4).⁴⁴ The role of the Spirit in aiding understanding of Scripture is not mentioned in the OT.⁴⁵ However, although the fullness of the Spirit was not dwelling in all believers,⁴⁶ the Spirit still had a role in helping those who sought help to understand (Ps. 119).

In summary Scripture is clear, but humans have limited and varying capacities to understand Scripture. Scripture is to be understood through use of the ordinary means. The reader must be willing to obey it, and must have the help of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ With respect to the issue of many interpretations, the following (and last) qualification on the clarity of Scripture is important. So we will move on to examining how Scripture can be misinterpreted.

HOW CAN SCRIPTURE BE MISINTERPRETED?

Scripture is clear, but humans can still misinterpret Scripture. Luther suggests that people misinterpret Scripture solely because of the work of Satan.⁴⁸ However, given he previously mentioned grammar and other matters, this statement seems to be saying that beyond a failure of the ordinary means, Scripture is solely misinterpreted due to Satan's influence. Luther supports this with passages that talk about the blinding of unbelievers.⁴⁹

Berkouwer suggests this view is inadequate, but fails to describe factors beyond those of the ordinary means.⁵⁰ The blinding only describes how those without the Holy Spirit can misinterpret Scripture. We must be able to also talk about those who have the Spirit. One reason is that

⁴⁴ Cf. John 20:22.

⁴⁵ As a result, systematic theologies do not tend to mention this when discussing the work of the Spirit in OT times. This may be an oversight that needs correcting. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd edn (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), pp. 789–93; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 636–37.

⁴⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pp. 792–93.

⁴⁷ Scripture can obviously be understood to some degree by anyone. However, it is the Holy Spirit that ensures clarity. Turretin suggests a difference between the literal and theoretical meaning and the spiritual and practical meaning. The spiritual and practical he suggests is restricted to those who have faith. Turretin, *Institutio*, p. 193.

⁴⁸ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, pp. 99–100.

⁴⁹ 2 Cor. 3:15; 4:3f. Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, p. 27.

⁵⁰ G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. by Jack Bartlett Rogers (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975), pp. 268–69.

we must be willing to *obey* Scripture. People can intentionally distort the meaning of difficult passages of Scripture (2 Pet. 3:3-6, 16).

In addition, due to an inability to *fully* understand Scripture in this life, each interpreter may stress different parts of the Bible to different degrees. Because of limits to our knowledge, this could lead to an over-emphasis on one or more facets, skewing the whole theological system. This in turn can lead to misinterpreting Scripture, a misinterpretation that could be said to derive from the limitation of the human intellect rather than a wilful attempt to deceive or the blinding of Satan. However, it is also possible that people may come up with different interpretations that are both correct and compatible, just as there are four gospels that all teach truth and are compatible (cf. Heb. 4:12).⁵¹

So we see that a system that rightly allows individual interpretation can lead to many interpretations. As Berkhof has said, the Roman Catholic Church was right in one respect: belief in the clarity of Scripture leads to a less unified interpretation of Scripture.⁵²

In summary, the main reasons why people with the Spirit can arrive at multiple interpretations are: misinterpretation due to unwillingness to obey Scripture; being unable to fully understand Scripture; and bringing different facets of Scripture to the fore, thus having a different emphasis of interpretation.

CONFUSION OVER CLARITY

There has been some confusion over the doctrine of clarity. We saw that Luther emphasised the absolute clarity of Scripture. The WCF (and others) emphasised the absolute clarity of what is necessary for salvation, but also made mention of human limitations. Two modern definitions by Thompson and Grudem (respectively) also appear to emphasise different things:

⁵¹ Some dispute the compatibility of the gospels, but others have shown the weakness of their arguments. For example see Paul Barnett, *Gospel Truth: Answering New Atheist Attacks on the Gospels* (Nottingham: IVP, 2012), pp. 83–108.

⁵² However, it could be argued that the Roman Catholic Church only provides a front of unified interpretation (in the form of ‘official doctrine’) as there is much variation between their theologians. Louis Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1932), p. 167.

The clarity of Scripture is that quality of the biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures meaning is accessible to all who come to it in faith.⁵³

The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it.⁵⁴

Timothy Ward notes that Thompson's definition is helpful in that it keeps the focus on God's 'dynamic presence' acting through Scripture.⁵⁵ Grudem's definition (the latter) is helpful as it comes out of a thorough examination of biblical theology. However, as Ward points out, they both differ from the classic definitions exemplified by the WCF.⁵⁶ Ward argues the problem is that both Thompson and Grudem's definition focus too much on the individual and private reading. He argues rather that the doctrine means that we can 'base our saving knowledge of him [God] and of ourselves, and our beliefs and our actions, on the content of Scripture alone'.⁵⁷ However, Ward's definition neglects mention of the need for use of the ordinary means. Thus all three modern definitions are less satisfactory than that of the WCF. The first two deal with only a part of the doctrine (that Scripture is clear), but leave the issue of the limitations of human intellect unmentioned. Ward's definition takes into account limitation by speaking of what is made clear through Scripture to all Christians, but neglects mention of the ordinary means. Ward also appears to inadequately address the reformation claim that Scripture is clear in its entirety. In response to this confusion I propose we talk of a dual doctrine in order to better teach the clarity of Scripture.

Proposal: A Dual Doctrine of the Clarity of Scripture and the Limitations of Human Intellect and Spiritual Blinding

A dual doctrine of the clarity of Scripture and the limitation of human intellect openly and clearly acknowledges both facets to the traditional doctrine of clarity. The first part of the doctrine (that of the clarity of Scripture) would affirm wholeheartedly that Scripture is clear in all its parts. The reason that Scripture is guaranteed to be understandable is

⁵³ Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, 21 (Nottingham: Apollos, 2006), pp. 169–70.

⁵⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 108.

⁵⁵ Ward, *Words of Life*, p. 127.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125; *Westminster Confession*, 1.7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

that as God's communicative act, he makes it understandable through the action of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁸

This is not without qualification. The qualification comes in the form of the second part of the dual doctrine: The limitations of human intellect and spiritual blinding. This second part would affirm all the qualifications stated above.

Despite the limitations of the human intellect, the doctrine would affirm that God in his grace guarantees that with the help of the Holy Spirit, and through one form of the message or another (ordinary means) all can understand what is necessary for salvation. Furthermore, because all Scripture is clear (with the Holy Spirit and through use of the ordinary means) all Christians can be encouraged to delve into all Scripture in order to learn more than they currently know in accordance with their abilities and in community with the church.

Conversely, although all Scripture is clear, misinterpretations can exist due to our natural limitations. As a result, all must approach the interpretation of Scripture in prayerful humility, acknowledging that at any point we may be wrong and another may be right. This goes for all Christians, those at the highest levels of the Christian academy as well as the lay person with no formal education. We also need to take care in attending to the ordinary means. The ordinary means includes but is not limited to: either understanding the original language or using a suitable translation; listening to the voices of teachers past and present; and interpreting within the Christian community. We must remember that human effort is required and interpretation may be hard work at times. The need for attention to past teachers means that tradition, church councils, and creeds, while not holding supreme authority of interpretation in themselves must be given due consideration in our own attempts to understand Scripture. A failure to attend to tradition may easily result in misinterpretations due to the world-view from which we approach Scripture.

Thus the dual doctrine of the clarity of Scripture and the limitation of human intellect affirms that the entirety of Scripture can be understood, but also that fallen humans are unable to grasp all of Scripture.⁵⁹ An appeal to such limitation is not a satisfactory excuse for a lack of effort

⁵⁸ Thompson, *Clear and Present*, pp. 169–70.

⁵⁹ What the incarnate Christ was able to understand has been debated (cf. Luke 2:52; John 16:12–15). However, there is not space here to engage in that debate. What is more important for the current question concerns primarily the knowledge of the risen Christ which is made known to believers through the Spirit (John 16:12–15). This transmission of knowledge about Scripture ensures that all Scripture can be understood. See also the *Westminster Confession*, 8.8.

to understand because, as Whitaker says, a fundamental principle of the doctrine is that 'the scriptures are sufficiently clear' that they may be read 'by the people and the unlearned with some fruit and utility'.⁶⁰

Now we may see that the questions posed at the start have been answered. How can Scripture be clear and yet a multiplicity of interpretations abound? How can Scripture be clear and there be a need for further clarification of Scripture? How is this current paper important? All of these are answered in through the second facet of the doctrine — the limitation of the human intellect. It is because of the limitation of the human intellect that such a use of the ordinary means is required. Conversely, it is because of the first facet of the doctrine that all Christians should be encouraged to examine the Scriptures.

⁶⁰ I reworded the centre of the translation 'to admit of their being read' into modern English. Whitaker, *Disputation*, p. 364.