

CLEAR OR OBSCURE?

REFORMATION DOCTRINE AND THE
CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

It is no exaggeration to say that the sixteenth-century Reformation was, at bottom, a hermeneutical revolution. Luther's meeting with Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg in 1518 developed into a discussion of *Unigenitus* (a papal bull published in 1343), which asserted the notion of a treasury of merits. In response Luther wrote a statement in which he refused "to discard so many important clear proofs of Scripture on account of a single ambiguous and obscure decretal of a Pope who is a mere human being." Not surprisingly, Cajetan objected that *someone* has to interpret the Bible and that the Pope is supreme in this area. Interpretation, however, had been a crucial element in Luther's "individual struggle for spiritual existence." He therefore unambiguously denied the Pope's supreme authority and proceeded to make his hermeneutical concerns a key element in the religious conflict that followed.¹

The connection between this chapter and the previous one is very close. The main contribution of the Protestant Reformers to biblical hermeneutics is their insistence on *the plain*

¹A. Skevington Wood, *Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (London, Tyndale, 1960), pp. 5-6.

meaning of Scripture. Their concern, however, focused specifically on the need to rescue the Bible from the allegorical method. We see this element strikingly expressed in many of Luther's remarks: "The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural sense."² He can refer to allegories as dirt and scum that lead to idle speculations; indeed, for Luther, all heresies arise from neglecting the simple words of Scripture.³

As we have already noted, the contrast between the Reformers and the medieval scholastics should not be exaggerated. Not only had medieval scholarship made notable advances in historical and grammatical exegesis; it is also true that the Reformers' disapproval of allegory was not always consistent. Still, it is quite accurate to describe the Reformers as opponents of the allegorical method.

My concern in this chapter, however, is to identify their reason for that opposition. Up to the time of the Reformation, the Bible was perceived by most people as a fundamentally obscure book. The common folk could not be expected to understand it, and so they were discouraged from reading it.⁴ Indeed the Bible was not even available in a language they could understand. They were almost completely dependent on the authoritative interpretation of the church.

But suppose the Bible is not to be allegorized. Suppose each passage has, not several meanings, but one, simple, literal meaning. In that case, all Christians may be encouraged to read

²*Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Holman, 1930) 3:350.

³Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (New York: Dutton, 1886), pp. 327-28.

⁴This statement is an overgeneralization and has been disputed, esp. by H. Rost, *Die Bibel im Mittelalter. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Bibliographie der Bibel* (Angsburg: Kommissions-Verlag M. Seitz, 1939). Moreover, Smalley points out that the revival of popular preaching in the twelfth century led to the use of allegory for the specific purpose of instructing the laity (*Study of the Bible*, p. 244). It can hardly be denied, however, that the authorities discouraged private Bible reading and that the problem became worse by the eve of the Reformation.

the Bible. The Scriptures should be translated into the common tongue. Each believer has a right to private interpretation. Luther in particular was very insistent on these points, and he expended tremendous energy on his most enduring work, the translation of the Bible into German.

The very fact that a *translation* was needed, however, raises certain problems for the view that the Scriptures are easily accessible to common Christians. If a Christian is unable to read the Bible in its original languages, then he or she is dependent on knowledgeable individuals to analyze the biblical text, understand its meaning, and express it clearly in the language of the reader. For this reason and others, many Christians feel that the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture has become more and more difficult to defend.

In the first place, the tremendous advances in specialized knowledge during the past century are sufficient to intimidate even the brash among us. We could point to numerous interpretations of Scripture that have been proved wrong by recent advances. Does not that fact raise serious questions about the measure of certainty we can claim to have for our present opinions? What is true more generally seems also to be true of the interpretation of Scripture: the more we know, the more conscious we are of our ignorance.

In the second place, to say that the Scriptures are clear seems to fly in the face of the realities of contemporary church life. As pointed out in chapter 1, even those who share significant areas of doctrinal agreement find themselves at odds in the interpretation of important biblical passages—passages dealing with baptism and the Lord's Supper, passages that address the question of violence, and passages that have relevance for serious ethical problems such as war, capital punishment, and abortion. If those who are wholeheartedly devoted to the authority of Scripture cannot agree on such questions, has the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture become meaningless?

In the third place, there appears to be a new sensitivity to the significance of corporate authority in the church. The Reformers' emphasis on the right of private interpretation was

often balanced by a recognition that no Christian is an island but is part of the body of Christ. Modern Evangelicalism, however, afraid of the abuse of church authority and influenced by a strong sense of individualism, has not always appreciated the need for Christians to submit their understanding of Scripture to the judgment of the established church.

Yet things seem to be changing. One detects a strong sense of humility among a growing number of believers. Without succumbing to the opposite danger of compromising their convictions, many Christians show a genuine desire to submit to the wisdom and counsel of their elders in the faith. Though this development is a wholesome one, does it not challenge our conviction that the meaning of the Scriptures is plain and readily accessible to the common reader?

ERASMUS VERSUS LUTHER

These questions are all serious, but they are not really new. Without minimizing the distinctive pressures that characterize modern Christianity, we need to appreciate how much help we can receive from Christians in earlier ages. Already in the fourth century, for example, John Chrysostom had recognized the need for both affirming and qualifying this notion of the clarity of Scripture: in his words, *panta ta anankaia dela*, "all the things that are necessary are plain."⁵ Even Origen, though not so explicitly, was making the same point when he argued that virtually all Christians understand what he believed to be one of the most fundamental doctrines: the spiritual significance of the law.⁶

A qualification of this sort may seem to leave the door open for abuse: could not someone define *necessary* and *fundamental* in such a way that vast portions of the Bible remain inaccessible to believers? Indeed one could, but we need to remember that such abuses are possible whenever we seek to be

⁵See Farrar, *History*, p. 329n. (I have not been able to verify Farrar's vague reference.)

⁶Origen, *On Last Principles* 2. 7. 2, p. 117.

careful and responsible in our formulation of doctrine. Any attempt we make to avoid simplistic answers by clarifying and qualifying our statements runs the risk of being misunderstood and misapplied. It is important to note, however, that the Reformers themselves—tempted though they must have been to overstate their position in the face of controversy—defined their doctrine of biblical clarity, or perspicuity, by focusing on the foundational truths of Scripture.

Particularly instructive in this regard is Luther, since no one was more forceful in affirming that the meaning of the Bible is plain and accessible to all. Perhaps the most revealing discussion is found in his famous essay *On the Bondage of the Will*, in which he responded to a series of criticisms Erasmus had made some time earlier.⁷ Erasmus, in the preface to his work *On the Freedom of the Will*, had objected to Luther's statements on human freedom because this subject, he felt, was a very obscure one:

For there are some secret places in the Holy Scriptures into which God has not wished us to penetrate more deeply and, if we try to do so, then the deeper we go, the darker and darker it becomes, by which means we are led to acknowledge the unsearchable majesty of the divine wisdom, and the weakness of the human mind.⁸

Echoing Chrysostom's remark about the things that are "necessary," Erasmus argues that just a few things are "needful to know" about the doctrine of free choice and that it is irreverent to "rush into those things which are hidden, not to say superfluous." Then follows an important statement that could be interpreted as an affirmation of the clarity of Scripture on those matters that are truly significant:

There are some things which God has willed that we should contemplate, as we venerate himself, in mystic silence; and, moreover, there are many passages in the sacred volumes about which many commentators have made guesses, but no one has

⁷See E. G. Rupp et al., eds., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Library of Christian Classics 17; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969).

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 38.

finally cleared up their obscurity: as the distinction between the divine persons, the conjunction of the divine and human nature in Christ, the unforgivable sin; yet there are other things which God has willed to be *most plainly evident*, and such are the precepts for the good life. This is the Word of God, which is not to be sought in the highest heaven, nor in distant lands overseas, but it is close at hand, in our mouth and in our heart. These truths must be learned by all, but the rest are more properly committed to God, and it is more religious to worship them, being unknown, than to discuss them, being insoluble.⁹

Finally, he argues that certain topics, even if they can be understood, should not be discussed in the presence of the "untutored multitude," who might find them offensive and damaging.

As we might expect, Luther contests Erasmus's claim in the strongest of terms:

But that in Scripture there are some things abstruse, and everything is not plain—this is an idea put about by the ungodly Sophists, with whose lips you also speak here, Erasmus; but they have never produced, nor can they produce, a single article to prove this mad notion of theirs. Yet with such a phantasmagoria Satan has frightened men away from reading the Sacred Writ, and has made Holy Scripture contemptible, in order to enable the plagues he has bred from philosophy to prevail in the Church.¹⁰

More important for our present purposes, however, is Luther's recognition that there *are* indeed certain kinds of obscurities in Scripture that require (as his words certainly imply) scholarly research:

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 the subject matter of Scripture.

Luther defines "subject matter" as "the supreme mystery brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been

⁹Ibid., pp. 39–40, my emphasis.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 110.

made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally." Having thus defined the focus of his concern, Luther goes on:

The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms. Truly it is stupid and impious, when we know that the subject matter of Scripture has all been placed in the clearest light, to call it obscure on account of a few obscure words. If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another; and it is one and the same theme, published quite openly to the whole world, which in the Scriptures is sometimes expressed in plain words, and sometimes *lies as yet hidden* in obscure words.¹¹

His conviction that difficult passages are made clear by others (a point that will occupy us again shortly) echoes Augustine's teaching:

Accordingly the Holy Spirit has, with admirable wisdom and care for our welfare, so arranged the Holy Scriptures as by the plainer passages to satisfy our hunger, and by the more obscure to stimulate our appetite. For almost nothing is dug out of those obscure passages which may not be found set forth in the plainest language elsewhere.¹²

One could argue that Erasmus and Luther were not really at odds on the question of the clarity of Scripture: they both affirmed such a doctrine with regard to its essential message. They did differ, however, on how one defines that message; moreover, the tone and basic thrust in Erasmus's essay naturally lead one to distrust the ability of the common believer to

¹¹Ibid., pp. 110–11 (my emphasis). Cf. Origen's remark: "If some time, as you read the Scripture, you stumble over a thought, good in reality yet a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence, lay the blame on yourself. For you must not give up the hope that this stone of stumbling and this rock of offence do possess meaning" (from Homily 39 on Jeremiah, quoted in Tolinton, *Selections*, pp. 49–50).

¹²Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.6 (NPNF 2:537). On the notion of Scripture as its own best interpreter, see further below (pp. 103–4).

understand the Bible. Luther's most fundamental concerns were diametrically opposed to that tendency.¹³

THE NEED FOR QUALIFICATIONS

We must remember, however, that Luther did not for a moment deny the limitations of the interpreter's knowledge. For one thing, Christians differ in their level of maturity; indeed, extensive ministry in the church is almost a prerequisite for correct interpretation:

No-one can understand the Bucolics of Virgil who has not been a herdsman for five years; nor his Georgics unless he has labored for five years in the fields. In order to understand aright the epistles of Cicero a man must have been full twenty years in the public service of a great state. No one need fancy he has tasted Holy Scripture who has not ruled the churches for a hundred years with prophets, like Elijah and Elisha, with John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles.¹⁴

More to the point, the clarity of Scripture does not at all preclude the need for specialists who seek to bridge the gap that separates us from the languages and cultures of the biblical writers. Luther himself was a man of broad erudition and of fine philological skills. He could argue that "to expound Scripture, to interpret it rightly and to fight against those people who quote wrongly . . . cannot be done without knowledge of the languages."¹⁵ The energies he expended on his translation of

¹³These comments are too simple; I have ignored other complicating factors in the debate that are not directly relevant to our purpose. It should also be noticed that, if Erasmus and Luther did indeed differ in their identification of the essential message of Scripture, that factor itself could be used as an objection against the clarity of Scripture: if the Bible is so clear, why could not Luther and Erasmus agree on its fundamental subject matter? Luther's likely response to this question may be inferred from the subsequent discussion.

¹⁴Wood, *Luther's Principles*, p. 16. This quotation comes from a note written by Luther two days before his death; cf. P. Stublmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik* (GNT Ergänzungsreihe 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), p. 98.

¹⁵Wood, *Luther's Principles*, p. 29. Wood notes Luther's attention to detail: on one occasion Luther and two of his helpers spent four days translating three lines in the Book of Job (*ibid.*).

the Bible are the clearest testimonial to his conviction that the common folk did, in an important sense, depend on the expertise of scholars.

In any case, it would be a misunderstanding of the Reformers to interpret their emphasis on the perspicuity of Scripture in such a way as to make biblical scholarship unnecessary or unimportant. Developments in the various relevant disciplines during the last century or two heighten our sense of dependence on the careful work of scholars, yet at the same time such developments ought to increase our confidence that the Bible is not a locked mystery box but an accessible book that continues to open up its truths to those willing to search them out.

The essence of the Protestant position is captured well by the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). The first chapter of that document contains a full statement regarding the character of Scripture, and paragraph 7 addresses directly the doctrine of perspicuity:

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.

Here the confession achieves a remarkable balance in its formulation. The emphasis falls heavily on the clarity of the biblical message, but the framers have been careful to qualify the doctrine in several ways: (1) *not every part of Scripture is equally clear*; (2) *the matters in view are those that are necessary for salvation*; (3) *readers of the Bible must be willing to make use of "ordinary means"—personal study, fellowship with other believers, attention to the preaching of the Word*; and (4) *the interpreter's understanding will not be complete but will certainly be "sufficient" for the purpose stated*.

One should notice, incidentally, the phrase "nor alike clear unto all." This qualification reminds us of the relative obscurity to be found in the minds of individual readers, a topic

that occupies a prominent place in Luther's work. Luther was well aware that to acknowledge incidental obscurities in the text of Scripture did not fully address the problem raised by Erasmus. Accordingly, Luther goes on to deal with an additional factor.

It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth. [Here he quotes 2 Cor. 3:15 and 4:3-4.] . . . Let miserable men, therefore, stop imputing with blasphemous perversity the darkness and obscurity of their hearts to the wholly clear Scriptures of God.

As he comes to the end of this discussion, Luther summarizes his doctrine by pointing out that there are two kinds of clarity and two kinds of obscurity:

one external and pertaining to the ministry of the Word, the other located in the understanding of the heart. 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. . . . For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it. If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything there is in the Scriptures has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light, and published to all the world.¹⁶

HUMAN DARKNESS AND THE SPIRIT'S LIGHT

Luther's emphasis on the darkness of the human heart is nothing new, of course. We saw how significant this principle was in the medieval development of allegorical interpretation. It may be useful, moreover, to remind ourselves of Origen's conception that part of the divine aim was to conceal truth. We should not be too quick to condemn Origen, since he could

¹⁶Rupp, *Luther and Erasmus*, pp. 111-12; cf. Ralph A. Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983), pp. 53-63.

have easily appealed to several important passages of Scripture in support of his view.

For example, even if we allow for some degree of literary hyperbole in Isaiah 6:9-10, we cannot do justice to that passage unless we recognize that at least one aspect of Isaiah's mission was to darken the hearts of many Israelites.

Go and tell this people:
 "Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
 be ever seeing, but never perceiving."
 Make the heart of this people calloused;
 make their ears dull
 and close their eyes.
 Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
 hear with their ears,
 understand with their hearts,
 and turn and be healed.

This passage clearly speaks of divine retribution against those who have set themselves against the God of Israel. The point is developed from a different angle in 8:14-15, where the Lord describes himself, not only as a "sanctuary" (to believers), but also as

a stone that causes men to stumble
 and a rock that makes them fall.
 And for the people of Jerusalem he will be
 a trap and a snare.
 Many of them will stumble;
 they will fall and be broken,
 they will be snared and captured.

These portions of Scripture became very important to the apostles as they sought to understand Israel's rejection of the gospel message. Jesus himself had appealed to Isaiah 6 in connection with his practice of speaking in parables. The relevant passage is Mark 4:10-12, one that itself has become quite a stone of stumbling to modern scholars, who think it is absurd to take Jesus' words in their apparent meaning. After all, parables are intended to illustrate and clarify a message! Why

would our Lord say anything that was actually designed to keep people from understanding?¹⁷

In truth, however, Jesus' message had the same two-edged function as Isaiah's ministry: a blessing to believers and a curse to God's enemies. The elderly Simeon, as he held the baby Jesus in his arms, declared that Jesus was "destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34). The apostle Paul described his message as a fragrance of life, the aroma of Christ for salvation, but he acknowledged that, to those who are perishing, it is "the smell of death" (2 Cor. 2:14-16). Not surprisingly, both Paul and Peter quote Isaiah 8:14 as they deal with the difficult problem of seeing many reject the message of the gospel (Rom. 9:32-33; 1 Peter 2:4-8; it should be noted that both of these passages have a very strong predestinarian motif).¹⁸

It was unfortunate that Origen should make the factor of God's concealing truth so basic in his hermeneutical system, but we dare not forget the principle altogether. Even those who have responded in faith to the divine message continue to be sinners. The corruption of sin will always affect our understanding of Scripture to a greater or lesser extent; part of our responsibility, therefore, is to learn to depend more and more on the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

We need to be careful, of course, not to use this blessing to justify our prejudices and laziness. The guidance of the Spirit does not preclude our making use of "the ordinary means" that the Westminster Confession refers to. Moreover, we need to appreciate that the passages that stress the role of the Spirit in interpreting God's message (one thinks primarily of 1 Cor. 2:6-14) do not focus on difficult exegetical details but precisely on those matters that are needful for salvation. Quite properly, therefore, the Westminster Confession reminds us: "Neverthe-

¹⁷According to C. E. D. Moule, it would be "perversely literalistic" to suggest "that parables are used *in order to exclude*" (*The Birth of the New Testament*, 3d rev. ed. [New York: Harper & Row, 1982], pp. 116-17).

¹⁸On the use of "stone" passages in the New Testament, see esp. Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London: S.C.M., 1961), pp. 169-86.

less, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary *for the saving understanding* of such things as are revealed in the Word" (1. 6; my emphasis).

This factor helps us to deal with a troublesome matter: does it make sense to use commentaries written by unbelieving scholars? Why should we depend on the judgment of those whose hearts have not been enlightened by the ministry of the Spirit? The usual answer is that many of the issues modern commentators deal with do not directly affect Christian doctrine. Such a response, by itself, is not wholly satisfactory, yet there is enough truth in it to serve our present purposes. Even a heart deeply antagonistic to the gospel does not lead a scholar to identify a noun as a verb. Learning on the expertise of scholars who have specialized interests should be regarded as one more instance of using "ordinary means" in the study of Scripture.

This perspective can help us make sense of a frequently cited verse that is both reassuring and puzzling: "As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you" (1 John 2:27). Some Christians tend to absolutize this statement and to resist the notion that scholarly work is helpful and important. They forget, of course, that they cannot even read the Bible without depending on the scholarly work that has made Bible translations possible. *Someone* had to learn Greek and Hebrew; *someone* had to study ancient culture; *someone* had to develop expertise in transferring the message of the original to clear, forceful English—all of which had to happen before modern American believers could claim that they need no one to teach them about the Bible!

THE ROLE OF SCHOLARSHIP

We do indeed need help not at all because the Scriptures are inherently obscure but because we are far removed from the biblical writers in time and culture. Even a document written carefully in clearly formulated English, such as the Declaration of Independence, can appear obscure two hundred years later. The very opening phrase, "When in the course of human

events. . . ." will be partially lost to a modern reader who does not realize that the word *course* carried some strong philosophical nuances in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ What shall we say, then, about a document written not two hundred but two thousand years ago? not in English but in very different languages? not in America but in the Mediterranean world?

The history of biblical interpretation during the past century or two—whatever objectionable features it has had—must be understood primarily as an attempt to bridge this massive linguistic and cultural gap between us and the original text. The development of highly specialized critical tools may appear to create a wall between the simple believer and the Bible, but in effect it facilitates bringing the two together. Not all scholars, of course, view their work in this way—and many who do often fail to meet such a goal. Furthermore, modern critical approaches should not be viewed naïvely as completely neutral with respect to the question of faith.²⁰ A believing scholar must bring any hermeneutical approach (even those developed by evangelical scholars!) under the searching light of Scripture itself.

In spite of such qualifications, we can state unequivocally that modern biblical scholarship has helped to open up the meaning of innumerable passages of Scripture, sometimes in very dramatic ways. The discovery and analysis of the Egyptian papyri, for example, has increased our understanding of New Testament Greek almost beyond reckoning. The development

¹⁹Gary Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), p. 93 and chap. 8.

²⁰Cf. Troeltsch's views mentioned above in chap. 2. The most significant contribution to this fundamental question is the controversial thesis of the "twofold division of science," propounded by Abraham Kuyper (*Encyclopaedia*, pp. 150–82). Though in many respects believing and unbelieving science have the same character, argued Kuyper, they move in different directions because of their different starting points (p. 155). Cornelius Van Til has insisted on the same point in many of his writings; see *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), pp. 21–22 and *passim*. For an attempt to develop the implications of this thesis, see Gary North, ed., *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective* (Vallejo, Calif.: Ross House, 1976).

of Old Testament form criticism, though it has spun many questionable and radical theories, has made it possible for us to uncover the significance of various kinds of literary genres within the Hebrew Bible.²¹ And so on and on.

We dare not confuse, therefore, the peculiar and often harmful proposals of radical scholars with the actual advances of biblical scholarship as a whole. Someone committed to the authority of Scripture and convinced that those proposals must be rejected can still recognize the enormous contribution of modern scholarship to the understanding of the Bible.²²

If we think that nowadays we face more exegetical problems than earlier generations did, the reason is precisely that we know more about the Bible and therefore have a greater awareness of our ignorance. Two hundred years ago, Bible readers only thought that they understood many passages that now we have doubts about. Paradoxically, our *subjective sense* of the clarity of Scripture seems diminished at the same time that we have *greater objective evidence* regarding the clear meaning of the Bible. To recognize this fact is to remind ourselves that we cannot confuse what Luther called the external and internal aspects of the doctrine of scriptural perspicuity. We dare not attribute to Scripture the limitations of our minds and hearts.

Even more to the point, however, is our need to appreciate that all of the advances in modern scholarship—and all of the new questions raised by it—do not affect the basic outlines of Christian theology. Many individual scholars, of course, reject the great doctrines of the Reformation on the basis of modern philosophical commitments.²³ But changes in

²¹In addition to the well-known research of A. Deissmann, J. H. Moulton, and others at the beginning of the century, see the recent work by G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (North Ryde, N.S.W.: Macquarie University, 1981–). See also Tremper Longman III, "Form Criticism, Recent Developments in Genre Theory, and the Evangelical," *WTJ* 47 (1985): 46–67.

²²It is ironic that wrong-headed and obnoxious theories very often sensitize responsible scholars to valid questions that would otherwise not have occurred to them. See my article "The Place of Historical Reconstruction in New Testament Criticism," pp. 122–33.

²³In particular, many scholars have adopted a thoroughgoing naturalism. Useful surveys documenting the development of biblical scholarship during the

our understanding of individual passages of Scripture do not require or even suggest that we alter the essence of the Christian message.

Referring again to the Westminster Confession of Faith, perhaps the most comprehensive theological statement arising from the Reformation, we may ask: Is there any chapter in that document that needs revision because we now conclude that, say, the Song of Solomon was written, not as an allegory, but as a description of human love? Is there even a paragraph that must now be excised because of advances in textual criticism or philology? The answer is a definitive and unequivocal no.

Neither this document nor any other theological confession is perfect; we must recognize that Christians have grown in their understanding of Scripture and may indeed wish to revise certain aspects of any doctrinal statement. But all of the increased knowledge and sophistication of the modern era does not suggest for a moment that previous generations of Christians misunderstood the gospel message.

THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD

The reason for such stability in the face of dramatic advancement is that the great teachings of Scripture are not dependent on the interpretation of any particular verse in isolation from others. Though Christians sometimes rely heavily on certain proof texts, the church has come to understand the divine message by developing sensitivity to the *consistent* teaching of the Bible as a whole.

The believer is thus not at all a slave to scholarly pronouncements. Believers may express puzzlement and even distress upon hearing a new interpretation of some favorite text, but they will usually adjust to it if they can eventually see how it fits their understanding of Scripture as a whole. What they will not tolerate—and rightly so—is an interpretation that obvi-

past two centuries are the essays by W. Neil and A. Richardson in *CHB* 3:238-338. For greater detail on the development of British views on Scripture, see the highly regarded work by H. G. Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

ously conflicts with the consistent tenor of the biblical teaching. In the most fundamental sense, believers need no one to teach them (1 John 2:27), and the most imposing scholarship will not intimidate them.

A most interesting sidelight to this discussion is the fact that even Origen justified his hermeneutical program along lines similar to those we have been considering. At one point, after acknowledging the validity of the literal meaning, he argued that we have the need and responsibility, not merely to grasp the sense of any given passage, but to assimilate the *entire* meaning of Scripture.²⁴ Origen did not expand on this idea, and perhaps we should not make too much of it, but he apparently maintained a strong sense of the importance of contextual interpretation. Because of the unity of the Bible, the whole of Scripture constitutes the context to any one passage, and Christians who are spiritually mature may be expected to draw all the threads together. We make a serious mistake if we do not see this process as an essential aspect of allegorical interpretation. And what was true of Origen was certainly true of the Fathers in general:

They knew what was their aim in handling scripture. It was not to produce an entirely consistent system of doctrine which would somehow fit in every little detail of the Bible, nor was it to set up a biblical literalism which would treat the Bible as one treats a railway timetable. It was to discover, and to preach and teach, the burden, the purport, the drift, the central message of the Bible.²⁵

²⁴Origen, *On First Principles* 4. 3. 5, pp. 296-97. Wiles asked, from a somewhat different perspective, what criteria controlled a method as flexible as that of allegory: "An important part of the answer to that question is Origen's conviction that scripture must always be consistent with itself, that the real meaning of every passage will be part of the truth of the one Christian faith" ("Origen," pp. 479-80).

²⁵Hanson, "Biblical Exegesis," p. 452. On the same issue, see Michael Andrew Fahey, *Cyprian and the Bible: A Study in Third-Century Exegesis* (BGRH 9; Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1973), p. 473. The great Charles Spurgeon, in spite of his questionable use of certain texts as the basis for his sermons, was kept from distorting the biblical message through his impressive familiarity with the overall teaching of Scripture.

A corresponding principle vigorously formulated at the time of the Reformation is that Scripture is its best interpreter. We earlier noticed that Luther appealed to this notion in response to the charge that there are obscurities in the Bible ("If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another"). As early as the second century, Irenaeus articulated this principle when he argued against certain gnostic views:

For no question can be solved by means of another which itself waits solution; nor, in the opinion of those possessed of sense, can an ambiguity be explained by means of another ambiguity, or enigmas by means of another greater enigma, but things of such character receive their solution from those which are manifest, and consistent, and clear.²⁶

Oddly, Farrar objects to the idea that "Scripture interprets itself, a rule which exegetically considered has no meaning."²⁷ Quite the opposite, this rule is the most fundamental hermeneutical principle when dealing with any piece of literature; it is, in effect, the principle of contextual interpretation. Anyone who views God as the author of Scripture can hardly afford to ignore it.

CHURCH AND TRADITION

One final problem requires our attention in this chapter—the question that we raised earlier concerning submissiveness to the teaching of the church. How does the clarity of Scripture relate to this question? Should we depend on the church to teach us about the Scripture?

For that matter, what is the role of tradition? The

²⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2. 10. 1 (ANF 1:370); cf. de Margerie, *Introduction* 1:70, who also refers to 2. 10. 2 and 3. 27. 1 and to Salvator Herrera, *Saint Irénée de Lyon exégète* (Paris: A. Savieta, 1920), pp. 120ff. Origen also held to this principle; see Hanson, *Allegory*, p. 180.

²⁷Farrar, *History*, p. 332, n. 1. He does observe, however, that the watchword *analogia fidei* is a wise one insofar as it forbids us "to isolate and distort any one passage into authoritative contradiction to the whole tenor of Scripture" (p. 333). Cf. the positive treatment in Bohlmann, *Principles*, chap. 6.

Protestant Reformation is usually characterized as a massive break with tradition. There is a very important element of truth in that characterization, but here again a crucial caveat is necessary. The Reformers opposed the authority of tradition and of the church, but *only insofar as this authority usurped the authority of Scripture*. They never rejected the value of the church's exegetical tradition when it was used in submission to the Scriptures.

Luther could not have been the exegete he was without the help of the church's tradition. The tradition gave him a footing on which he could and did move and shift, but which he never lost. But this was so because he believed that under this footing was the foundation of the Scriptures themselves, which he, as an expositor of the Scriptures and also as a son of the church, was to receive gratefully. . . . Luther knew the difference between gratitude and idolatry in the reception of the church's heritage. In this sense he advanced the audacious claim that by his exposition of the Scriptures he was a most loyal defender of the tradition, and that the idolatrous traditionalism of his opponents could mean the eventual destruction both of Scripture and of tradition.²⁸

Consider in this regard John Calvin's development. Calvin had no peer in the sixteenth century as an expositor of Scripture, but he was under no illusion that he could somehow skip a millennium and a half of exegetical tradition and approach the Bible free from the influence of the past. The first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* appeared in 1536, when Calvin was only in his twenties. Enlarged editions appeared in 1539 and 1541 and more significant alterations beginning in 1543, but the work did not reach its final form until 1559. During these two decades Calvin was immersed in biblical exposition and preaching. "As his understanding of the Bible broadened and deepened, so the subject matter of the Bible demanded ever new understanding in its interrelations

²⁸Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings* (companion vol. to *Luther's Works*; St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 88.

within itself, in its relations with secular philosophy, in its interpretation by previous commentators."²⁷

This last point is most important, for Calvin also spent considerable time studying the major theologians of the church. Indeed, beginning with the 1543 edition, there were "vastly increased" references to the Fathers, including Augustine, Ambrose, Cyprian, Theodoret, and others.²⁸ Calvin's position was well thought out:

Insofar as possible, we should hold to the work of earlier exegetes. The Reformer saw himself as bound by and indebted to the exegetical tradition of the church, above all the early church, especially Augustine. He was unwilling to give up the consensus of interpretation.²⁹

It is clear, then, that the Reformation marked a break with the *abuse* of tradition but not with the tradition itself. This fact tells us a great deal about the Reformers' sense of corporate identity with the Christian church as a whole. It would not have occurred to them to interpret the Scripture as autonomous individuals. On the contrary, they were most forceful in their interpretations when they were convinced that they were giving expression to the truth *given to the church*.

Unfortunately, some would have us believe that the genius of the Reformation was a breaking loose from authority in general and that post-Enlightenment biblical critics, in their radical abandonment of church guidance and scriptural authority, were really giving more consistent expression to the fundamental principle of the Reformation.³⁰ Disturbing too is the fact that even conservative scholars in our day sometimes give much higher priority to individualism than to corporate responsibility. The idea of pursuing truth "wherever it may lead

²⁷F. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 132, my emphasis.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁹Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," p. 11. Note also Peter Suhlman, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), pp. 34-35.

³⁰Froelich's thesis clearly implies this view; note Harvey, *Historian and Believer*, pp. 3-9.

us" becomes a pious but misconceived motto, for truth rarely if ever manifests itself in isolation.

No doubt there are cases when a scholar hits on an idea whose time has not come, and the fact that the church is not immediately convinced of its validity is no reason to abandon it altogether. On the other hand, new theories and strange interpretations have been suggested by the thousands, most of them never to be propounded again. The humble believer who, innocent of historical and critical methods, cannot see how these interpretations fit in with the church's understanding of the truth may thereby show greater perception of the meaning of Scripture. In a paradoxical way, the clarity of Scripture thus proves triumphant over the misguided attempts of human wisdom, and Jesus' prayer finds a new application: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure" (Matt. 11:25-26).

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