

Scripture alone but interpreted by tradition?

David R. Bickel
Ottawa, Ontario

February 10, 2008; typo corrected May 3, 2008

Introduction

Roman Catholic theologians have traditionally attributed doctrinal differences among Protestants to Scripture's lack of clarity, claiming that doctrinal unity cannot be achieved without an authoritative interpreter of Scripture. Denying that such an interpreter exists in an ecclesiastical hierarchy, Lutherans have maintained that although many passages of Scripture are unclear in themselves, they are often clarified by [the rule of faith, the set of perfectly clear statements in Scripture, which teach all truly catholic doctrine](#); this is what the term *perspicuity of Scripture* means. Rather than placing interpretive authority in human traditions or, at the opposite extreme, ignoring or despising the writings of earlier Christians, Luther[†] and his followers rejoiced in the extent to which those writings agreed with the clear words of Scripture. Without explicitly denying the perspicuity of Scripture, Keith Mathison, in his *Shape of Sola Scriptura*, advocated a middle course in which the writings of early but post-apostolic Christians have a real authority alongside and yet subordinate to that of the Scriptures. His arguments have influenced not only his fellow Calvinists, but even [some Lutherans](#), in spite of [the stand of Luther, the Augsburg Confession, and the Formula of Concord](#).^{††}

Fundamentalism/Evangelicalism

Mathison's most convincing argument against seeing Scripture so clear as to require no clarification from church history is that such an attitude leads to most of the denominations seen today. [\(However, just as much doctrinal disunity may be observed among Christians who rely on extra-biblical interpreters.\)](#) Mathison is not alone: many Protestants as well as Catholics smile at the fundamentalist claim to simply believe passages of the Bible, saying we need to interpret them (as if they all were dreams of Pharaoh or parables) by seeing what a consensus of credible scholars or a consensus of church fathers say (as if they wrote more clearly than the prophets and apostles). Consulting pastors, scholars, and church fathers does have value to the extent that they point us back to the words of Scripture, but not for the purpose of adding clarity to Scripture and certainly not to serve as the standard by which ordinary Christians can judge whether or not they are being taught the truth.

The real problem with Evangelicalism is not that it seeks to simply believe the clear passages

[†] Luther's study did not uncover some hidden meaning of Scripture. Rather, his study taught him to see that the church authorities contradict each other and, especially in his day, the Pauline gospel, which he regarded as clear enough to determine when the Fathers departed from it.

^{††} Every document of the Book of Concord exemplifies achieving unity of confession in response to heresy by simply submitting to clear passages of Scripture rather than to the powerful and ever-present temptations of human reasoning and traditions.

of Scripture, but that it does so inconsistently. For example, Dispensationalism in effect refuses to believe Christ's statements that there will be no marriage in the age of resurrection and that all the prophets speak of him. It then proceeds to build an elaborate eschatological system on the interpretation of less clear passages. Unfortunately, premillennial fundamentalism is not alone in this kind of approach to the sacred writings. The problem is particularly evident not only in all Protestant denial that the body and blood of Christ are truly present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, but also in all Catholic denial of the bondage of the fallen human will.

Bondage of the Will

In *Bondage of the Will*, Luther teaches that the doctrinally foundational passages of Scripture really are clear enough to simply believe with absolute certainty, without any need of human interpretation in the sense of clarification. That is, orthodox doctrine is based on the clear texts of Scripture, not on theologians' clever clarifications of Scripture. Luther struck at the root of the uncertainty of Erasmus concerning election: the latter scholar saw Scripture as unclear, with some passages favoring election and others favoring free will. Luther found that some passages in Scripture were clear enough to refute the synergism of Erasmus. In [a section on Scripture's perspicuity](#), Luther noted that "heretics" such as Reformed Protestants, Arians, and [synergists](#) tend to read figures of speech into Scripture instead of believing the doctrine it teaches.^{†††} He thus observed that disagreements on gospel doctrine came not from any lack of clear Scriptures, but from inattention to those Scriptures.

Luther's understanding of the perspicuity of Scripture is thus very different from the idea that each individual may interpret the Bible according to his or her preferences and that we must tolerate the resulting differences in the church. Rather, we must believe what Scripture says clearly and refrain from substituting our own opinions for those passages that remain unclear.

Then why are teachers needed?

The assumption behind the question is that since Scripture is not clear, Christ appointed teachers to clarify it for us. If that were why we needed teachers, we would still have to choose which teachers to believe, and how to choose a method of doing so (other than the method of comparing their teachings to clear texts of Scripture) is certainly less clear than Scripture itself. The apostles, on the other hand, said we need no teachers in that sense (1 John 2:18-24), but that even simple laymen are to determine whether their teachers agree with the gospel (Galatians 1) and with the words of Christ (1 Timothy 6). [Luther concurred:](#)

We should well consider this passage, for Christ our Lord here commands and gives all Christians the power to be judges of all doctrine, and he gives them power to judge what is right and what is not right. It is now well on a thousand years that this passage has been perverted by false Christians, so that we have had no power to judge, but had to accept what the Pope and the councils determined, without any judgment of our own.

^{†††} In the context, he was replying to Erasmus's evasion of clear texts on election by interpreting them figuratively. Luther pointed out that Erasmus interpreted those passages in the same way as the Arians and the Reformed interpreted other passages. In effect, Luther was saying that if Erasmus were consistent in his approach to Scripture, he might as well deny not only election, but also the Trinity and the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist.

This is not to say that a Christian unfamiliar with Scripture should recklessly use it to judge. Rather, we must take the time to learn the Scriptures since only they make us wise unto salvation.^{†††}

Until all believers come to unity of faith, pastors and teachers are needed to proclaim God's clear word to us and to exhort us to believe that word rather than the interpretations of men. For without pastors and teachers to constantly point us back to the Scriptures alone, in our sinful nature, we will turn from them to the trickery men, blown about by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:11-14). For example, it is hard to imagine the leaders of the Lutheran Reformation carrying out their work apart from their teaching office and their special training in the Scriptures. In writing his catechisms, Luther went through great effort to proclaim the clear word of God to the common people. In the Large Catechism, he teaches infant baptism in a way that ordinary people can grasp and recommends that its defense against the Anabaptists be left to the scholars. Luther communicated on a much higher level when addressing Erasmus, Zwingli, and other peers.

In summary, the vocation of the teacher is not to clarify God's word, as if men can speak more clearly than God, but to present God's clear word, exhorting them to believe and obey it. The pastor holds the office of the keys as instituted by Christ, an office that would only be useless to those who need no forgiveness. At the same time, Scripture must be clear enough for ordinary, believing sinners to avoid false teachers, as Jesus and the apostles taught (e.g., Rom. 16). The Holy Spirit is needed, not to clarify Scripture, but to bring us sinners to heed its words rather than human interpretations of those words. Even a fallible translation can be accurate enough that God's word is present to pronounce the forgiveness of sins and call the dead to life.

Congregational and pastoral responsibilities

It is sometimes objected that congregations will not always be able to understand difficult passages. Lutherans do not claim that any congregation has the ability to correctly interpret every passage of Scripture or even to notice every subtle nuance of the clear passages; we do not even claim pastors have those powers. (Although pastors should tend to understand more than their congregations,^{††††} they were not given the keys of the kingdom to teach their opinions about uncertain matters, no matter how intellectually stimulating, but to preach Christ crucified.) Lutherans do claim that congregations must ensure that their pastors preach the good news and administer the sacraments according to the clear passages of Scripture rather than contrary to them. If, at the present time, a congregation has insufficient knowledge of Scripture to do so due to laziness or other sin,

^{†††} Related to the view that Scripture requires outside authoritative interpreters is the teaching that one cannot understand any passage of it until he or she has become familiar with the entire Bible. Very few of the first-century Christians could even read through the Old Testament, and yet they were to believe the clear gospel and reject all who taught a gospel different than the one they had first heard (Galatians 1; 1 John) from the officers commissioned to bind and loose, to forgive and retain sins (John 20:21-23).

^{††††} Paul's telling Timothy to study to show himself approved should never be understood in opposition to Paul's telling congregations to judge teachers by their agreement with the gospel. In fact, they should support each other: pastors teach their sheep the clear word of God, the sheep continue to heed and support faithful pastors, some sheep are called to become pastors to receive training from existing ones, etc. The Galatians could better resist the Judaizers after receiving Paul's letter, but they really should never have been bewitched in the first place. After all, he called the church (the true body of Christ), not any pastor, bishop, or council, the pillar and foundation of truth.

it must repent and familiarize itself with the Scriptures until it can carry out its responsibilities. Of course, sinless perfection is not required before a congregation can judge between orthodoxy and heterodoxy; otherwise, all the biblical injunctions that it so judge would be purely theoretical.

Pastors, in turn, have the responsibility to train their congregations in the Scriptures to mark and avoid false teachers, not by whether they agree with the pastors' words, but by whether they agree with Christ's words. For [Lutherans do not believe the anathema of Galatians 1 was only to be applied in the days of the apostles](#). Christ has not left his church, but speaks now as clearly as ever, and if not through the Scriptures, then through which church asserting apostolic succession? Jesus and the apostles assumed the Old Testament remained clear even long after the prophets had perished. Modern biblical criticism would disagree, even to the point of saying the apostles wrongly interpreted the Scriptures, but why should that influence the church? Regarding the gospel, not just doctrines of secondary importance, the papacy says we should interpret Scripture one way, the Eastern Orthodox Church another way, a Reformed seminary another way, a fundamentalist sect another way, some scholars with a new perspective another way, etc. What option would laymen have if there were no clear passages of Scripture that distinguish true teaching from false teaching? In that case, they would then be left either to interpret the Bible as seems right in their own eyes, to submit to the largest church body, or otherwise to obey the commands and traditions of men.

The electronic version of this document, available from [DawningRealm.org](#), has hyperlinks to related online resources. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

[Leave a comment](#)