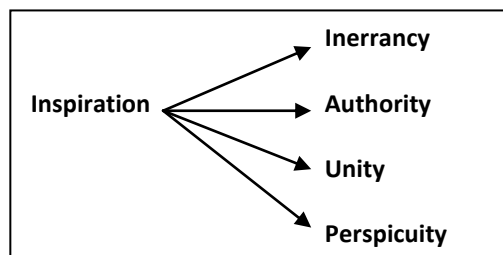


The clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture

Introduction

- the story so far...

God has spoken. He has spoken in the Bible – the Scriptures are the very words of God, breathed out by Him. He has spoken in the Bible perfectly and authoritatively – he speaks truthfully, and he rules his people through his Word. But...



- How can I understand the Bible? (it's hard... people disagree...)

How can I rightly understand the Bible? If the Bible is where God speaks in order to save and to build up his people then it follows that understanding the Bible *really* matters.

But the Bible is a hard book. And people disagree about what it means. We hear people say things like, "Isn't it just a matter of interpretation?"

And we live in a world where postmodern thought has left its mark – "there are many different truths... I have my truth and you have your truth... there is no fixed meaning in any text."

What we going to see in this session is that God has done everything necessary for us to hear his voice clearly. We're going to think firstly about the *perspicuity or clarity of Scripture*. God has fixed his truth in the text of his word. It's possible to uncover it. It's certainly not good enough to think that we can get any old interpretation out of a Bible passage. Then we're going to think about God's role and ours in uncovering the truths and treasures of God's word.

1. God speaks directly through the Bible to every Christian: Scripture is perspicuous

- Understanding perspicuity

What do we mean by perspicuity? Here are some definitions and explanations – both what it does mean and what it doesn't mean.

The word "perspicuous" is related to the (more familiar) word "Perspex." Both words have the sense of being "clear." Perspicuity simply means "clarity."

It *doesn't* mean that all Scripture is easy to understand. It *doesn't* mean that the Spirit of God is not necessary to understand and to believe the Bible.

It means, rather, that God rules his people directly through his Word. He does not rule his people via a class of special interpreters or scholars or priests. The Bible is clear enough that *all of his people* can read, understand and respond rightly. It is shallow enough for a child to paddle in, and it is deep enough for an

elephant to swim in. It is for all of God's people – be they young Christians or mature, be they infants or scholars.

The perspicuity of Scripture is one of the chief implications of Pentecost.

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^{ESV} Acts 2:16-18, But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

This is an amazing promise! It doesn't mean that all Christians will actually see visions and have dreams from God – that wouldn't fit with the sufficiency of the Bible for life and godliness (see our later session on the sufficiency of Scripture). It's actually saying something bigger than that. Back in the Old Testament the only people who had revelation from God were the prophets; they were God's special spokesmen to whom were given visions, dreams and words from God.

The apostle Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, explains that in the "last days" (that's the Bible's own phrase for the period between Jesus' ascension and return – i.e. that's *now*) the Lord will give his Spirit to *all his people* – be they young, old, men, women, servants, or whoever. And as a result all will have access to God and to his Words in a way enjoyed in Old Testament times only by a privileged few.

If we're ever tempted to doubt the perspicuity of Scripture we should remember what God is like: he wants to address us directly through his word, and through it he wants to transform us. He has made us as creatures in his image so that we can communicate with him. As we'll see in a moment he gives us his Spirit to help us. As a result, His word is understandable.

- **Applying the doctrine of perspicuity**

Why does the doctrine of perspicuity matter? And what are its implications?

Our *unbelieving culture* doesn't believe in a clear and over-arching truth. It believes in lots of different, competing, but (in theory) equally valid truths.

Even more significantly we need to be aware that *in the wider church* many doubt that God has spoken clearly through the Bible. Some would affirm that affirm that the Bible is clear on certain matters. But they would add that the Bible is unclear in many other areas (as evidence they would adduce the fact of disagreement within the church). As a result, it is said that we must discern the will of God without or apart from the Bible.

Recent discussions in our denomination about gender roles in church and family have proceeded on this basis. Current discussions about human sexuality are entirely predicated upon this assumption (that the Bible is fundamentally unclear). Put bluntly, "un-clarity" is often cited in argument as a power play – it removes Scripture from the argument and allows other authorities (human reason, the institution of the church, human experience) to determine doctrine and morality.

On principle we must insist that God speaks clearly through the Bible. Of course there are difficulties in interpretation. But when there is a problem we must start from the position that the problem is within us (either individually, or corporately). It means we need to pray harder and work harder at understanding God's word. We believe, as a matter of principle, that God has communicated to us in the Bible – about how he wants the roles of men and women to be worked out in family and church, and about human sexuality.

It isn't wrong to find the Bible hard. But even when we're struggling to understand it try to remember that God *wants* to speak to you, and we *can* understand his Word. He's done everything to make that possible.

And his work in revelation doesn't just stop in giving us a clear word. He doesn't sit back and leave us on our own to work out what to believe and how to live (a kind of deist god). As ever, he is intimately involved in our lives and he is intimately involved in the process of understanding, believing and obeying Scripture.

2. The Holy Spirit reveals the truth to God's people

- **The Spirit's work of illumination**

What's the biggest problem that a person faces when they pick up the Bible? It's this: that all people naturally reject the Bible because they naturally reject God. No one has ever rejected the Bible because of intellectual arguments. No one has ever rejected the Bible because of the circularity of our reasoning. They may think they do, but respectfully we have to say that they don't.

Remember where we began in our studies in the doctrine of Scripture; all human beings are small and sinful. Here's how Jesus puts it:

^{ESV} John 3:19, And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

However, the work of God's Spirit can turn around this situation. He enables God's people to receive the Word:

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 2:14, The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Without the Holy Spirit no one can understand the Bible, no one can understand the things of God. They may be vicars, theology lecturers, highly intelligent and impressive. But without Spirit they cannot truly understand the Bible.

Whereas a five year old child who trusts in Jesus and who therefore is indwelt by the Spirit *can* have a true knowledge of God's word.

For, the same Spirit who wrote the Bible is needed to work *in us* that we might believe the Bible. Here it's important to distinguish the term "inspiration" from the term "illumination": the Spirit *inspired* the prophets and apostles so that they spoke the words of God. He does not inspire us; rather, he *illuminates* the text of the Bible to us – he lights it up so that we receive it as it really is, as the Word of God.

This illumination isn't something that happens once at the start of a person's Christian life. Every Christian every day needs the God the Spirit to illuminate, give understanding, and convince us that the Bible is to be received as God's Word.

Did you notice in Acts 2 that it's only when the Spirit is poured out on God's people that they experience revelation from God. Or listen to Jesus' words:

^{ESV} Luke 10:21-23, In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²² All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." ²³ Then turning to the disciples he said privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!"

Don't miss what Jesus is saying here. God hides the truth from some people. Those from whom in particular he chooses to hide his truth are those who in the world's eyes are wise and learned. God is opposed to

human beings trying to find him on their own. Instead, he chooses to reveal himself to “little children” (v21); that is, to humble disciples (v23) – those who humbly and dependently rely on God for knowledge of him. And both to hide and reveal in this way is God the Father’s “gracious will” or “pleasure.”

What implications follow from this?

Firstly, humility. Without God’s help we cannot know him at all. If we’ve ever truly understood any truth about God, then it’s because the Spirit has taught us.

Secondly, expectancy. When you open the Bible do you expect God both to address you and to help you understand?

It’s not a small thing to listen to the Bible – either in personal reading, group Biblestudy, or public proclamation. Where God’s word is properly taught, there God’s voice is heard. Where God’s word is properly taught, there the Holy Spirit is at work.

Imagine you’re listening to the reading and preaching of God’s Word in church one Sunday. What’s going on? Outwardly, you might see some people listening attentively (and others perhaps not!). But what’s going on spiritually? What’s going on beneath the surface?

God the Holy Spirit is wielding his sword, for the Scriptures are the sword of the Spirit. One person is receiving the word humbly, they’re being saved. Another is being strengthened in their trust in Jesus. But for another person it is as if a blindfold has been put over their eyes – truth has been concealed from them, they’re kept out of eternal life and are being prepared for judgement. It is a truly awesome thought.

Thirdly, prayer. It follows that if we need God’s help, then we must ask for it. Before personal devotions, biblestudies and in public church meetings we are to pray. What should we ask? Here’s one of the Bible’s own prayers:

^{ESV} Ps 119:18, Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.

Fourthly, we are to work hard at listening to God’s word. Thus far we’ve learned that Scripture is clear and that the Spirit enables us to understand his Word. We might conclude, then, that we are passive as we encounter God in Scripture. Do we just need to pray, read a Bible passage and then we’ll get zapped by God with the particular message of that passage? No! We are called to be passive or lazy. We are to be eager and hard working listeners to God’s Word.

That’s our concluding point...

3. God’s people are to work hard at listening to the Bible: prayerful meditation and study

- **What does God do? What do we do? How does it fit together?**

Here we’re thinking about God’s role and our role in the process of reading, studying, believing and obeying the Bible. Listen to these Bible texts encourage us in prayerful meditation upon God’s Word:

^{ESV} 2 Timothy 2:7, Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

^{ESV} Proverbs 2:1, My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, ² making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; ³ yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, ⁴ if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, ⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

Both these texts make the same point. They describe for us the dynamic of faithful Biblestudy which is also the dynamic of a faithful walk with the Lord. It has three dimensions which we can distinguish but never separate:

- (i) we give ourselves wholeheartedly to the word of the Lord (“think over,” “receive... treasure up my commandments”), *and*
- (ii) we pray for help (“call out for insight”), *and as we do that*
- (iii) the Lord will give us knowledge of him in his word (“give you understanding,” “from his mouth come knowledge and understanding”)

- **Biblical meditation**

“Meditation” is the key Bible word which describes our role in this process – (i) above. Whereas Eastern and new age meditation is forbidden to the Christian (for its advocates foolishly believe that they encounter the divine through emptying their minds), Biblical meditation is commanded of us repeatedly:

^{ESV} Joshua 1:8, This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

^{ESV} Psalm 1:2, but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

^{ESV} Psalm 119:15, I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways.

^{ESV} Psalm 119:48, I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.

^{ESV} Psalm 119:97, Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.

^{ESV} Romans 8:5, For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

^{ESV} Colossians 3:2, Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

The Hebrews word “meditation” is connected to the word for “muttering”! It means filling one’s mind with Scripture and then preaching that Scripture to ourselves (literally talking to oneself with God’s truth).

Here’s how the Puritan pastor Stephen Charnock encourages us in Biblical meditation – here, specifically, meditation upon the sovereignty of God: “Meditate on this power of God, and press it often upon your minds. We conclude many things of God that we do not practically suck the comfort of, for want of deep thoughts of it and frequent inspection into it. We believe God to be true, yet distrust him; we acknowledge him powerful, yet fear the motion of every straw. Many truths, though assented to in our understandings, are kept under hatches by corrupt affections, and have not their due influence, because they are not brought forth into the open air of our souls by meditation... A strong God, and a weak faith in omnipotence, do not suit well together” (Stephen Charnock, *Existence and attributes of God*, pp102-103).

So we must ask: Is Biblical meditation part of your personal study of and devotion to the Lord in his Word?

Postscript...

In practice we may feel like we are still left with an important question. “How do I study the Bible faithfully and responsibly? I have a clear conviction about the clarity of the Bible. I know that the same Spirit who inspired Scripture dwells within me and will give me a life-transforming understanding both as I pray and study. But how do I study God’s word faithfully and responsibly?”

For that we must await a later session!