

The Scriptures As Our Rule

Some Properties of the Scriptures,
with a particular look at their
perspicuity

The Properties of God's Rule

- It is a **perspicuous** or “clear” rule. Not all things in Scripture are equally plain either in themselves or to all men, 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 ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Perspicuity

- Some portions of Scripture, it must be admitted are somewhat obscure and difficult to interpret, but in such things as are necessary to salvation the Scriptures are very clear. In this respect, it has been said that the Scriptures are of such a depth that a lamb may wade in them, but an elephant may also swim in them.
- Though some of the difficult doctrines of the faith that are necessary to salvation are so high that we can never fully comprehend them, yet the way of Scripture's teaching them is very clear.

Perspicuity

- While it may be that something necessary to salvation is obscurely spoken of in one place, yet in some other place we will find that doctrine clearly taught.
- By the “unlearned” we do not mean the unconverted, for we have already learned that the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit is necessary for a right understanding of the Scriptures. Rather, we mean simply that the unlearned Christian may use the appointed means (preaching, reading, hearing, memorizing, etc) and come to a sufficient understanding of the Scriptures to live a godly and productive life to the Lord.

Perspicuity Proved

- The Scripture teaches its own perspicuity in this sense. It is called a *lamp* and a *light*, Ps. 119:105. Its very entrance *gives light*, Ps. 119:130. Thus Prov. 6:23. The Apostle Peter also calls Holy Scriptures a *light* (2 Pet. 1:19) and particularly the word of prophecy, or the prophetic word, which of all the Scripture seems often to be most dark. Yet he calls it a light shining in a dark place, showing that where it shines, though the place be dark, yet the Word dispels the darkness.

Perspicuity Proved

- God has given his Word in such a way that its commands are not far from the understanding; the lowliest believer has no reason to complain of the difficulty of it in things necessary to salvation. Thus Dt. 30:11ff., “For this command which I command thee this day, is not hidden from thee, etc.” And it continues, “But the Word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.”

Perspicuity Proved

- If all things necessary to salvation must be understood by all Christians, then the Scriptures must be clear even to the lowliest believer. But the former is true. 1 Cor. 2:15, “He that is spiritual judgeth all things” and 1 John 2:20, 27, “Ye have an unction from the holy One, and ye know all things. The anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you; but the same anointing teacheth you of all things.”
- Consider to whom John was writing; not only to learned men and great theologians, but to all believers, even to “little children.” This is because “if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.”

Perspicuity Proved

- Of unbelievers, Paul said that the things necessary to salvation were hidden from them, because the god of this world has blinded their eyes (2 Cor. 4:4). As for others, God himself has taught them (2 Cor. 4:6, cf. John 6:45).
- God promised to write his law on his people's hearts, and that he must himself teach them to know him (Jer. 31:33, 34). Therefore Scripture must be perspicuous in things that are necessary for knowing God, for that which is written on our hearts cannot be other than clear to us and that which God actually teaches us can no longer be obscure to us.

Perspicuity Proved

- If the Scriptures are not so clear in themselves so that they require the church or its magistracy to teach us it right interpretation, then our faith must ultimately be resolved in the testimony of men; but that cannot be, for human testimony is not infallible or authoritative in itself and cannot therefore give divine faith or infallible persuasion.
- Finally, the perspicuity of Scripture is obvious if we consider its author who is the Father of lights, and the purpose for which he gave the Scriptures, that they should be a rule of faith and life. Shall he who made the tongue not speak clearly?

Inferences

- The opinions of the church fathers, decrees of councils, acts of assemblies, covenants, and minister's sermons, are not the rule of faith to us; nor can any of them bind us but as they are agreeable to and an expression of the Word of God, by which all of them must be judged and tried (Isaiah 8:20).

Inferences

- Translations of the Scriptures into the common language of the people is a necessity wherever the gospel comes. How could the unlearned otherwise know them?
- This should also give us a just abhorrence of the superstition of those who believe every act should be judged by natural conscience alone without reference to the written Word of God.
- We should also abhor every ceremony added by the wit and wisdom of men. Such ceremonies imply the imperfection and insufficiency of Scripture. No holy days but the Lord's Day, no sacraments but baptism and the Lord's Supper, no offices in the church but those instituted by Christ and the apostles. We must not worship God in whorish garments, but in the white linen of his institutions.

Inferences

- Finally, there is an implied exhortation to study the Holy Scriptures. Read them in your families, and read them in secret. Cry out to the Holy Spirit who dictated them, to cause you to understand them. Do not kiss the cover and lay your Bible on a shelf, as too many so-called Protestants do in this day, for their dust will be a witness against you in the great judgment. Prize the Bible above all other books, as you prize the Author himself. Remember that it shows you the way of salvation, as a lamp and a light.

What Is The Bible About?

2 Tim. 1:13, “Hold fast the form of
sound words”

The Text, 2 Tim. 1:13

- “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.”

The Text

- Here is the character of Scripture doctrine, namely that it consists of “sound words.” Such doctrine is sound in itself plus it has the ability by the Holy Spirit to heal our souls from the sickness of sin.
- The sum of Scripture doctrine is faith and love in Christ Jesus, i.e. what man is to believe and what man is to do (1 John 5:3; John 14:15). It is in Christ Jesus because all our faith in God and obedience toward God is offered through him.

The Text

- Note that there is a duty to “hold fast” the form of sound words:
 - To have a pattern of doctrine in our minds
 - To hold it fast, meaning to cleave to it, keep hold of it, without flinching from it, whatever dangers or difficulties may attend the doing so.
- Thus, “The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.”

The Text

- As to the matter of Scripture doctrine:
 - Some things in Scripture are less principal than others; by which we mean that they serve as illustrations or examples. We may learn many things from Scripture in this way such as ancient customs, the nature of some plants and animals, husbandry, and such like. But these are primarily for examples of how we should trust and obey God. Though these matters are not “principal,” yet they are to be believed and practiced by God’s people.

The Text

- On the other hand,
 - The Scripture teaches some things as “principal” matters. These can be subsumed under two heads: faith and obedience. Whatever concerns the salvation of our souls in both the Old and New Testament, may be reduced to one of these two heads. It is either an article of faith or a point of obedience. If it is neither, then it is an illustration or example from which we should learn faith and obedience.

The Text

- From the text, we shall consider this outline:
 - The nature of faith and obedience, and the connection between the two.
 - The manner of Scripture's teaching
 - The sense of Scripture
 - Demonstrate how the Spirit of God speaking in Scripture is the supreme Judge of all controversies in religion (i.e. in matters of faith and obedience)

The Nature of Faith & Obedience

- *First*, as to faith.
 - Divine faith is believing what God has revealed *because God has said it.*
 - This divine faith is the work of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:8)
 - Faith believes what has been revealed under four basic heads:
 - What (Who) God is
 - The Persons in the Godhead
 - The decrees of God relating to all that comes to pass
 - The execution of God's decrees in creation and providence

What Is The Bible About?

The Nature of Faith & Obedience

The Nature of Faith & Obedience

- Three Inferences:
 - There can be no right knowledge of God acquired in an ordinary way apart from the Scriptures (Matthew 22:29; Ephesians 2:12).
 - Where Scriptures are not known there can be no saving faith (Romans 10:14, 15, 17).
 - There is nothing that we are bound to believe as a part of the Christian faith but what the Bible teaches, whoever they may be who claim otherwise (Isaiah 8:20; Matthew 23:10).

The Nature of Faith & Obedience

- *Secondly*, as to obedience
 - It is that duty which God requires of man. It is that duty and obedience which is **owed** to God. It is the will and law of God, respecting God's universal supremacy and sovereign authority over man; and which he should render to him out of love and gratitude. Thus Ps. 19:11, "By them is thy servant warned."

The Nature Of Faith & Obedience

- Three Inferences:
 - There can be no sufficient knowledge of our duty apart from Scriptures.
 - There can be no right obedience yielded to God apart from Scriptures.
 - There is no point of duty or obedience that we are called to but what Scripture teaches. The law of God is exceeding broad and reaches to the whole duty of man, inner and outer.

The Nature Of Faith & Obedience

- *Third*, as to the connection between them:
 - Faith and obedience are joined together because there is no true faith but what is followed with obedience by the believer, and no obedience is acceptable to God except that which flows from faith in his Son. Thus “faith is the lodestone of obedience, and obedience is the touchstone of faith.”

The Nature Of Faith & Obedience

- Three Inferences:
 - Faith is the foundation of all acceptable works and works cannot be the foundation of faith (Titus 3:8). Faith is in order to obedience.
 - Just as faith without works is dead, so also are works without faith; for without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6) and whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Faith is the first principal of all holy and acceptable obedience.
 - Those who inculcate moral duties without beginning with the necessity of regeneration and faith in Christ are foolish builders.

What Is The Bible About?

The Manner of the Bible's
Teaching

The Manner of the Scripture's Teaching

- The Scriptures teach some things explicitly and other things they teach implicitly by good and necessary inference, such as the doctrine of the holy Trinity.
- The Scriptures teach externally only. The Spirit teaches internally. Externally the Scriptures teach what we are to believe and what duty God requires, but the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Scriptures, for the several reasons we have learned previously.

What Is The Bible About?

The Sense of Scripture

The Sense of Scripture

- The sense is one and not manifold. There may be parts that subordinate to one another as types and shadows or of prophecies that are fulfilled more than one time.
 - Some things have a *simple sense* only
 - Some things have a *figurative sense* only
 - When something has a simple sense and also prefigures something else, it is a “*type*” or “*shadow*” of that which is to come.

The Sense of Scripture

- Typology is not intended to become fanciful:
 - Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness as a type of Christ. Thus John 3:14-15
 - There is but a single sense that is shared by the “type” and the “antitype.”
 - Thus, sometimes the type is figurative and the antitype literal; sometimes the type is literal and the antitype figurative; and sometimes both type and antitype are either literal or figurative.

The Sense of Scripture

- Where there is a question about the true sense of Scripture, it must be found out by searching other places that speak more clearly, the Scripture itself being the *infallible* rule of interpreting Scripture.

The Sense of Scripture

- Analogy of Scripture is a rule because:
 - The Holy Spirit gave this as a rule in 2 Peter 1:20-21. No Scripture is of our own private interpretation (exposition). As it came, so must it be expounded, but it came not by the will of man. Therefore we cannot and must not rest upon the opinion of men. We must look to the dictates of the Holy Spirit in other places that may be clearer.

The Sense of Scripture

- There are several approved examples of this in Scripture itself; comparing one Scripture with another to find out the meaning of the Holy Ghost, as
 - Acts 15:15, “And to this agree the words of the prophet...”
 - Acts 17:11, the Bereans commended for the practice
 - Matthew 4:6, Christ compared Satan’s quotation with a clearer Scripture to prove the devil wrong. Thus in v. 7 Christ shows the true meaning is that God will protect us when we do not tempt him.

The Sense of Scripture

- Analogy of Scripture is the great, chief, and infallible rule of interpretation. Other things may also be of some help:
 - Knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, when the English (vernacular) is ambiguous
 - Context, considering the scope and design of the Holy Spirit (a text without a context is a pretext)
 - Distinguishing proper and improper words, i.e. figurative language must be taken figuratively
 - Consulting the commentaries of godly and trusted men
 - Reading history and other background material
 - Take heed to the analogy of faith: one Scripture cannot contradict another.

The Sense of Scripture

- Thus, especially in personal study:
 - Go to God for his Spirit to teach you
 - Take heed of an earthly, carnal, and fleshly mind. When the heart is carnal it cannot understand the things of the Spirit of God.
 - Endeavor to be exercised to godliness. Scripture is not for speculation, but for true faith and true living.
 - Which means, *finally*, that you learn to practice what is revealed to you in Scripture.

What Is The Bible About?

The Spirit of God speaking in Scripture is the supreme Judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined.

Scripture The Supreme Judge

- All decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and we are to rest in the sentence of Scripture.
- Men are prone to error, but Scripture is perfect. Yet men sometimes substitute their own judgment in matters of religion:
 - “Enthusiasts” (charismatic and the like)
 - “Traditionalists”
 - “Rationalists”
 - “Scripturalists” (i.e. true Evangelicals)

Enthusiasts

- Enthusiasts set up a private spirit, or what they may call “the Spirit,” as the judge of controversies. But whatever these may pretend, the Scripture is our only rule. For,
 - Whatever revelation or light men may pretend to, God binds them and us to the written word (Isa. 8:20).
 - Such are cursed who teach an other gospel, much more one that is contrary to the received gospel (Gal. 1:8-9).
 - We must “try the spirits” (1 John 4:1), but this implies that we have a rule by which private spirits must be tried. That rule is the Supreme Judge.
 - If private spirits teach according to the Scripture, then their teaching is unnecessary. If they teach in addition to the Scripture, then their teaching makes Scripture imperfect, which doctrine we have already refuted.

Traditionalists

- Not those who do things in a “traditional way,” but who hold that there the church is a visible and infallible judge able to determine doctrine with finality. We deny, because:
 - The Scripture makes no mention of such a judge in those places where officers are mentioned (as 1 Cor. 12:28; 6:2ff; Rom. 12:7).
 - Our faith must not be built on the testimony of men, but of the apostles and prophets in the writings of Scripture alone (Eph. 2:20; 2 Cor. 1:24).
 - The preached word should be examined by the written word (2 Cor. 1:24; Acts 17:11).
 - By what standard should we judge the doctrine that the church is the final arbiter of true doctrine? If by the church, then the Scripture is imperfect, but if by the Scripture, then the claim is false on the surface of it.

Rationalists

- This is not Christian rationalism, which makes use of good and necessary consequence from Scripture, but a rationalism that regards human reason as the final judge as to whether a Scripture doctrine is true. Thus for a rationalist, such Scripture doctrines as the incarnation and the Holy Trinity must be rejected because they are not “reasonable.” We answer:
 - Reason in an unregenerate man is blind with respect to the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14).
 - Human reason is not infallible, which is demonstrated by the fact that we can err even in matters of mathematics and logic.
 - Scripture requires that our imaginations be cast down and our reason brought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).
 - If reason were the supreme judge, then our faith would be simply self-confidence and not faith in Christ.

Scripturalists

- Scripturalists (Evangelicals) maintain that the supreme judge of all doctrinal controversy is the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture. This is proved:
 - The Scriptures themselves, as Deuteronomy 5:32; 17:11; Isaiah 8:20; Luke 16:29; John 5:39.
 - The practice of the Lord and his Apostles was to appeal to Scripture, not the rabbis or any other authority, as Matthew 4; 22:31-32; John chs. 5 and 10; Luke 24:44; etc.
 - Three advantages of appealing to the Spirit speaking in Scripture:
 - He is infallible, so we know his sentence will be true
 - He is sovereign, so there can be no appeal from his sentence
 - He is no respecter of persons, and is therefore not subject to any party spirit.

Inferences

- People then should diligently read and study the holy scriptures, in order to know what to believe and what to do.
 - If the Bible contains everything we must know about God and our duty, then we should seek diligently in its pages.
 - If we would prevent others from teaching us false doctrine or persuading us to wrong practices, the best defense is to know our true doctrine and duty.

Inferences

- It is a great danger to our souls and those of our families to believe or practice what is not found in Scripture
 - Thus the Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, and others make prey of those who do not regularly study the Scripture.
 - Thus all who set up some standard other than Scripture, including church councils, Book of Mormon, writings of Ellen G. White or Mary Baker Eddy.
- Consider how worthy of reproof are those who make little conscience of reading the Scriptures privately or in families. Some pay little attention to what they read, considering only the progress they have made in the Scriptures and not how much progress the Scriptures have made in them.

Inferences

- Thus religion, if it is the right sort, will be a practical matter. The right sort means that we will not maintain our practices from a blind obedience or as a mere bodily exercise.
- All right obedience originates from a right heart, i.e. from the principle of faith in the heart. True faith will be productive of good works. Let us then show our faith by our works.