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Luther and Lutheran Orthodoxy: *Claritas and Perspicuitas Scripturae*

Roland F. Ziegler

I. Introduction

Lutheran Orthodoxy is not imaginable without Luther, but it is not simply a continuation of Luther.¹ Lutheran Orthodoxy takes up the insights of the Lutheran Reformation and develops a form in which these insights can be taught and transmitted in its own context. In this paper I want to look at one insight of Luther and how it was taken up, defended, and also modified by Lutheran Orthodoxy. The clarity of Scripture is important for Luther's theology not only in his controversies with Rome, but also with the Sacramentarians. The clarity of Scripture is decisive for his approach to theology and church reform. In Lutheran Orthodoxy, the main controversy was with Rome. The perspicuity of Scripture is at the heart of how theology without the magisterium is possible. In this paper, I will first look at Luther's understanding of the clarity of Scripture, then at the objections to it by the Jesuit theologian Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621). I will discuss the answer to Bellarmine by selected Lutheran theologians and conclude with a short meditation on the contemporary dogmatic relevance of the clarity of Scripture.

II. Luther on the Clarity of Scripture

The Clarity of Scripture in the Early Debates with Rome

In 1520, Luther wrote a detailed response and defence of the articles that were condemned by the bull "*Exsurge Domine*." In the introduction to the "Assertion of

¹ Like all periodization in history, the exact delineation of the age of Lutheran orthodoxy is not possible. Robert Preus (*The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism, vol. 1: A Study in Theological Prolegomena* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970], 44) sets the beginning at 1580 and the end "in the early 18th century." Johannes Wallman ("Orthodoxie. II. Christentum. 2. Historisch a) Lutherische Orthodoxie" in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th ed., vol. 6 [Tübingen: Mohr, 2003], col. 696-702) sets the parameters between 1555 and 1780. Especially in the late 17th and during the 18th century there was an overlap between Lutheran Orthodoxy, pietism, and the enlightenment. During this later period, Lutheran Orthodoxy lost its theological and cultural dominance in Lutheran territories.

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all condemned articles condemned by the latest Bull of Leo X,” Luther discussed the question of whether he interprets the Bible subjectively in opposition to the “objective” interpretation of the church.² But what is the supposed objectivity that his opponents touted? It is to follow the church fathers in their understanding of the Bible while affirming the impossibility of understanding Scripture on its own. Luther rejects making the opinions of the church fathers normative for the understanding of Scripture. If the church fathers are to be normative for understanding that which cannot be understood by itself, then it follows that one will need an interpreter to interpret the interpretation! For how can one be sure that he has properly understood the church father’s interpretation of the Scriptures? At a certain point, the reader has to be able to understand a text. Otherwise, the meaning of that text will remain forever elusive and one is forced to move from one interpretation to another. Relying on interpretations as method is unworkable. To put it differently, in order for one to understand a text, either the text itself or the interpreters have to be clear or understandable. So, where does clarity begin and darkness end? Why should one assert the clarity of church fathers over the clarity of Scripture?

Luther uses the church fathers themselves to argue that Scripture is clear. For, when arguing a point, the church fathers supported their theses with Scripture. Thus Scripture is to be the judge on all points of doctrine. Luther writes, “But Scripture can only be judge in controversies if it is through itself (not through the interpretation of church fathers or the magisterium) most certain, most accessible [without any difficulty], most understandable, its own interpreter, evaluating everything of everything, judging and enlightening.”³ He continues by asserting that in Ps 119:130 (“The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple”) the Spirit teaches that understanding comes through the words of Scripture.⁴ Thus, if one wants to understand Scripture, one has to begin with Scripture.

² This writing (Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65 vols. [Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993], vol. 7, pages 94–151 [hereafter WA]) is not included in the American Edition of Luther’s works. A German version, “Grund und Ursach aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers, so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammt sind” (WA 7: [299] 308–457), is in English as “Defense and Explanation of All the Articles” (1521): vol. 32, pp. 3–99, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AF.

³ “Oporet enim scriptura iudice hic sententiam ferre, quod fieri non potest, nisi scripturac dederimus principem locum in omnibus quae tribuuntur patribus, hoc est, ut sit ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans . . .” (WA 7:97.20–24).

⁴ WA 7:97.26–27. “Von der Klarheit der Heiligen Schrift: Untersuchungen und Erörterungen über Luthers Lehre von der Schrift in ‘De Servo Arbitrio’,” in *Gesammelte und Nachgelassene*

Scripture is thus first principle (*primum principium*). Luther finds the *principium* in Psalm 119:160: “Thy word is true from the beginning; and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth forever.”⁵ Yet the Bible is an unusual *principium*. Usually at that time—that is, in the Aristotelian understanding—the “first principle” in knowledge is that “from which a thing is first knowable . . . for example the hypotheses in demonstrations.”⁶ First principles are evident statements that neither need to be founded on anything else nor can be founded on anything else—otherwise, they would obviously not be first. For Aristotle, the first principle is that non-hypothetical which must be known by all men, for “a principle which one has to *understand* anything is not an hypothesis; and that which one must know if he is to know anything must be in his possession for every occasion.”⁷

If Scripture is to be the first principle, it must be understandable and clear, and it must enable understanding for everything else—at least in theology. This approach differs therefore from common philosophical approaches. Whereas an empiricist puts sensory perception as first principle; a rationalist, reason; and a theologian, neither—Scripture itself imparts its content to man. This might seem strange to us moderns who start with man and with epistemological questions, but it makes sense if one has a realistic understanding of knowledge (i.e., that knowledge comes about when the things of this world form our mind). The alternative to Scripture would be either the things of this world (the parallel to empiricism, so to speak), or the realm of forms in which the mind participates. For Luther, though, neither sensory experience nor innate ideas can serve as the foundation of theology, but solely the word of God. Thus Scripture is the *principium*, and as *principium* it is therefore clear. As the Swedish theologian Bengt Hägglund wrote, Scripture as principle is evident (i.e., plain or clear to the understanding) in the sense of being trustworthy, so that its authority is a given to the believer through the working of the Holy Spirit, and in the sense of meaning, so that “the proper understanding of the statement can be gained by Scripture itself.”⁸

Werke, Band II, Studien zur Theologie Luthers und des Luthertums (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1981), 238–243.

⁵ The Vulgate translates: “*Principium verborum tuorum veritas et in aeternum omnia iudicia justitiae tuae.*” Robert Weber, Roger Gryson, and Bonifatius Fischer, eds., *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, Editionem quintam emendatam retractatam (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), at Ps. 118:160.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Δ, 1 (1013a 15). Translation from: Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, tr. Hippocrates George Apostle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ, 3 (1005b 10–20).

⁸ Bengt Hägglund, “Evidentia sacrae scripturae. Bemerkungen zum ‘Schriftprinzip’ bei Luther,” in *Vierhundertfünfzig Jahre lutherische Reformation: Festschrift für Franz Lau zum 60. Geburtstag* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1967), 117.

A year later, Luther addressed the question of the clarity of Scripture again in his book against Latomus. Here he uses the language of the clarity of Scripture:

There is one teacher, even Christ, and the fathers are to be tested by the judgment of the divine Scriptures so that it may be known who has clarified and who has obscured them. Thus Paul orders us to “test everything; hold fast to what is good” [I Thess 5:21]. In I Cor 14[:29] he says, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.” He commands that all be tested and that there be no exceptions—neither Augustine, nor Origen, nor any man, not even the Antichrist, the pope. But doesn’t obscure Scripture require explanation? Set aside the obscure and cling to the clear. Further, who has proved that the fathers are not obscure? Are we once again going to have your, “it seems,” and their, “they say”? What did the fathers do except seek and present the clear and open testimonies of Scripture? Miserable Christians, whose words and faith still depend on the interpretations of men and who expect clarification from them! This is frivolous and ungodly. The Scriptures are common to all, and are clear enough in respect to what is necessary for salvation, and are also obscure enough for inquiring minds. Let everyone search for his portion in the most abundant and universal Word of God, and let us reject the word of man, or else read it with discrimination. This is enough regarding this matter, and much more than enough.⁹

The Bondage of the Will

Luther actually uses the term “clarity of Scripture” in his answer to Erasmus. Erasmus had maintained that the Scriptures are intentionally dark. To understand the argumentation, we need to be aware of the original connotations of “clear” and “obscure.” Both have to do with light, but in English such words unfortunately only work with the connotations of “dark” or “obscure.” The opposite of “clear” is not really “dark,” it is “clouded, murky, muddy,” etc. The Latin *claritas* has the connotation of brightness. This is important not because etymology determines a word’s definition (the etymological fallacy of meaning), but because Erasmus himself uses the metaphor of light. The Scripture, he says, is in some places like the Corycian cave, “which begins by attracting and drawing the visitor to itself by its pleasing aspect, and then as one goes deeper, a certain horror and majesty of the divine presence that inhabits the place makes one draw back.”¹⁰ That is how the Scriptures are, he says: they are dark because of the majesty of God, their purpose is

⁹ Martin Luther, “Against Latomus” (1521), AE 32:217.

¹⁰ Gordon E. Rupp and Philip S. Watson trans., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, c. 1969), 38.

not to speak clearly (at least in places), but to give us an experience of the awe-inspiring nature of God—an experience of the *mysterium tremendum et facinosum*.¹¹

Luther first distinguishes between God and Scripture. In God there are many hidden things, but not in Scripture. “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.”¹² Luther admits that there are many texts in Scripture that are “obscure and abstruse,” not because of their content, but rather because of “our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar.”¹³ For the content of Scripture is free and open to all, the “supreme mystery brought to light, namely that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally.”¹⁴ Thus, the reason why some people do not understand the Scriptures is their “blindness and indolence.”¹⁵ “Let miserable men, therefore, stop imputing with blasphemous perversity the darkness and obscurity of their own hearts to the wholly clear Scriptures of God.”¹⁶

Luther then distinguishes between two kinds of clarity: external and internal. The external clarity of Scripture pertains to the ministry of the word, internal pertains to the understanding of the heart. Regarding the internal clarity, this is only possible with the Holy Spirit. The internal clarity pertains to apprehending and truly understanding the Scriptures, which can be amiss even if one can “recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it.”¹⁷ This internal clarity implies faith in God. The external clarity, though, means that “nothing is left obscure or ambiguous.”¹⁸

Luther discusses the subject another time in *On the Bondage of the Will*, this time in the context of evaluating a theological opinion. If the church and the church fathers cannot serve as final arbiters in a theological dispute, what can?¹⁹ Luther’s answer is that everything has to be judged by a twofold judgment. The first is an internal judgment, by which the Spirit enables a person to judge matters concerning his own person, which Luther identifies with the internal clarity of Scripture. The other is external, where “we judge the spirits and dogmas of all men, not only for ourselves, but also for others and for their salvation.”²⁰ Since to judge doctrine is

¹¹ Cf. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

¹² *Luther and Erasmus*, 110; WA 18:606–609.

¹³ *Luther and Erasmus*, 110.

¹⁴ *Luther and Erasmus*, 110.

¹⁵ *Luther and Erasmus*, 111.

¹⁶ *Luther and Erasmus*, 111.

¹⁷ *Luther and Erasmus*, 112.

¹⁸ *Luther and Erasmus*, 112.

¹⁹ To the following, cf. *Luther and Erasmus*, 158–169 (WA 18:652–661).

²⁰ *Luther and Erasmus*, 159.

especially a duty of the office, this clarity is connected with the office. The Scriptures are to judge opinions, and that they can do this is proved by Deuteronomy 17:8–20; Psalm 19:9; 119:130; Isaiah 8:20.

The connection with the office does not mean, however, that the Scriptures are only clear for the ordained. Rather, the Scriptures can be preached and can serve to evaluate doctrine because they are clear. If they were unclear, not only preaching as exposition of Scripture would be impossible, but of course the appeal to the Scripture in theological controversy would be meaningless.

Luther finds it unacceptable that Erasmus will of course not say that everything in the Scriptures is dark—after all, his point is: let us stick to that which is clear, that which pertains to leading a Christian life, and leave the rest, which is dark. For Luther, the Scripture as a lamp shining in a dark place (2 Pet. 1:19) is a description of the entire Bible, not only parts of it.²¹

This does not mean for Luther that everybody will see the truth of Scripture. Blindness in men prevents them from seeing the truth of Scripture. Luther is content to make his case in such a way that the mouth of the adversaries “is so far stopped that they have nothing to say in reply and, although they say a great deal, yet in the judgment of common sense they say nothing.”²²

Clarity of Scripture in the Controversy on the Lord's Supper

The great debate on the Lord's Supper among those who were opposed to Rome and committed to Scripture alone can be seen as a test case for the clarity of Scripture. For it raises the plausible empirical argument: if the Scriptures are clear, why is there disagreement on its meaning? Luther was not immune to the arguments of the sacramentarians, as he confessed himself.²³ What moved him to stay with the confession that the true body and blood of Christ are orally eaten in the Lord's Supper? It was not some kind of traditionalism—if anyone, it was Melanchthon who was a traditionalist, and who fell because of his traditionalism, once he realized that the patristic argument for the Lutheran position was not as good as he thought it to be.²⁴ Neither was it the commitment to a certain form of Christology, as, for

²¹ *Luther and Erasmus*, 163.

²² *Luther and Erasmus*, 163–164.

²³ Cf. Luther's remark in “Ein Brief an die Christen zu Straßburg wider den Schwärmgeist” (1524), WA 15:394.12–28.

²⁴ Gottfried Hoffmann, *Kirchenväterzitate in der Abendmahlskontroverse zwischen Oekolampad, Zwingli, Luther und Melanchthon: Legitimationsstrategien in der innerreformatischen Auseinandersetzung um das Herrenmahl*, 2nd ed., Oberurseler Hefte, Ergänzungsbände 7 (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2011), 232–235.

example, Karl Barth suggested. Rather, it was the words of Scripture themselves that forced him to confess.²⁵

In the introduction of *That These Words of Christ, "This Is My Body," etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics*, Luther gives a narrative of the history of Christianity. It is the narrative of the devil attacking the church. In the beginning, "when God's Word was preached by the apostles purely and clearly, and no human commandments but simply the holy Scriptures were set forth, it seemed as if there would never be any trouble, since holy Scripture was the empress among Christians."²⁶ But then the devil attacked and produced "many sects, heresies, and factions among Christians." Since every group claimed Scripture, Scripture lost "its worth," and even was regarded as a "heretics' book." Scripture became suspicious and truth had to be found somewhere else. What was the solution? Councils! To keep unity, councils and their decrees seemed to be the solution, and concomitant with that, it seemed that the Scriptures were not sufficient, that one needed fathers and councils to understand the Scriptures, and that there were authoritative extra-biblical traditions. "When the devil saw this he jeered and thought: now I have won! Scripture lies prostrate, the fortress is destroyed, the weapons are beaten down. In their place they now weave walls of straw and make weapons of hay, i.e. they intend now to array themselves against me with man-made laws."²⁷ The only way to stop arguing about the meaning of Scripture, according to Luther, is to push Scripture to the side. Thus, when Scripture is read, there will be argument in the church. This, for Luther, is not because of the ambiguous nature of Scripture or the limitations of human communication, where the meaning of a text is partly determined by the reader or even created by the reader—as it is now fashionable to say among the hermeneutically sophisticated—but because of the work of the devil. It is the work of the devil to drive the church away from an engagement with Scripture and instead busy itself with human words. In his time, Luther sees first the renewed interest and engagement with Scripture and the corresponding activity of the devil in creating factions. "In short, the devil is too clever and too mighty for us. He resists and

²⁵ Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets" (1525), WA 18:174.10–15: "Denn der text erzwingts mi gewallt, das die sünde geschehe am essen und trincken, weyl er spricht 'Wer unwirdig isset und trincket' und spricht doch, das die selbige sünd geschehe am leyb und blut des HERRN, das laut gewalltiglich, das er ym essen und trincken den leyb und blut Christi habe beleydigt und ubel mit yhm umgangen" (cf. AE 40:183). Idem, WA 18,207,17: "Der spruch war zu helle und zu mechtig und wuste nichts dazu zu sagen" (cf. AE 40:217). See also Bernhard Rothemann, *Die Klarheit der Schrift*, Teil I, Martin Luther: Die wiederentdeckten Grundlagen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 101: "Der zwingende, unaufgebbare Grund für Luthers Abendmahlslehre ist darum wirklich nichts anderes als der Bibeltext."

²⁶ Luther, "This is My Body" (1527), AE 37:13.

²⁷ Luther, "This is My Body" (1527), AE 37:14.

hinders us at every point. When we wish to deal with Scripture, he stirs up so much dissension and quarrelling over it that we lose our interest in it and become reluctant to trust it.”²⁸

Lest we think that Luther places the devil in too high regard, we have to keep in mind that Luther sees in the dissension among Christians also the wrath of God. For the devil is the instrument of God, and God “gives the devil free rein to produce crude, clumsy errors and thick darkness to punish our shameful ingratitude for having treated the holy gospel as so wretchedly despicable and worthless”²⁹ Luther is not worried, though. He thinks that this new error will not last long. His confidence comes from trust in the word of God. This doctrine “does not attack obscure and uncertain Scripture, but clear, plain Scripture, as we shall hear.”³⁰ Luther is aware, though, that there is a limit to what can be done with arguments from Scripture. He thinks that the main proponents of the sacramentarian doctrine are beyond help. They are under the judgment of God, and their hearts have been hardened. Thus, he writes for the confused—those who are not yet under the judgment of God. The analogy is Christ, who did not convert the high priests, but their disciples.³¹

From this we see that clarity does not mean for Luther that everybody will see what Scripture has to say. The devil blinds people, and God in his judgment hardens them in their inability to see the clear word of God. Of course, we also have heard this above in the discussion of the *Bondage of the Will*.

Since Luther debates the meaning of the words of institution, we should not be surprised that there is no discussion on the clarity of Scripture as a whole, but rather a discussion on the clarity of the words of institution. That these words are clear is emphatically and repeatedly asserted by Luther. The opposition of Karlstadt, Zwingli, and Oecolampadius did not destroy this conviction. A few examples:

The sum and substance of all this is that we have on our side the clear, distinct Scripture which reads, “Take, eat; this is my body,” and we are not under obligation nor will we be pressed to cite Scripture beyond this text—though we could do so abundantly.³²

Reasonable and conscientious men see clearly here that it is a shame to spread such drivel among the people, and it does not deserve an answer. Nonetheless, the people pounce upon it, cling to it, and treat it as pure Scripture and truth

²⁸ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:17.

²⁹ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:19.

³⁰ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:19.

³¹ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:20.

³² Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:33.

in opposition to these words that are so clear, simple, and lucid, “This is my body.”³³

The holy doctors follow the practice, in expounding the Scriptures, of using lucid and clear passages to clarify the obscure and ambiguous passages. It is also the Holy Spirit’s practice to illumine the darkness with light. But our fanatics proceed the other way around: they tear out of a text an obscure, ambiguous word which pleases their fancy, ignore the context, and then run around trying to use it to make a lucid, clear text obscure and ambiguous, and then claim that it is the pure truth. This is the method of the devil, who is a lord of darkness and tries with darkness to extinguish the light.³⁴

Not that the Scriptures are obscure; but their imagination is blind and lazy, so that it cannot view the clear words correctly, just as a lazy man does not open his eyes to see the real light but takes a glimmer to be the light.³⁵

Luther is not weakened in his conviction through the ongoing dissent. In *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* of 1528, Luther asserts the clarity of the Words of Institution in strong words:

We know, however, that these words, “This is my body,” etc. are clear and lucid. Whether a Christian or a heathen, a Jew or a Turk hears them, he must acknowledge that they speak of the body of Christ which is in the bread. How otherwise could the heathen and the Jews mock us, saying that the Christians eat their God, if they did not understand this text clearly and distinctly? When the believer grasps and the unbeliever despises that which is said, however, this is due not to the obscurity or clarity of the words, but to the hearts that hear it.³⁶

III. The Roman Counterattack: Robert Bellarmine

Robert Bellarmine (4 October 1542—17 September 1621), Jesuit and one of the foremost theologians of the Counter-Reformation, wrote a collection of polemical treatises called “Disputations” in which he engaged the arguments of the reformers and gave a rebuttal. Bellarmine was viewed as important enough that for the next

³³ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:74.

³⁴ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:112.

³⁵ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:113.

³⁶ Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” (1528), AE 37:272.

hundred years Lutherans engaged him in their discussion of the perspicuity of Scripture.³⁷

In this section, I will use a selection of Lutheran authors: Leonhard Hutter and his *Loci theologici* of 1619 as a representative of early orthodoxy; Johannes Hülsemann, whose *Observations on Bellarmine's "On the Word of God"* was first published in 1641 and republished as an appendix to his *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae* in 1679, thus demonstrating its continued significance; and three disputations on the topic: one by Hutter from 1606; the second by Johann Adam Osiander, professor in Tübingen, for the doctoral disputation of Heinrich Schütz from Stockholm, Sweden, of 1677; and last one by Gottfried Hoffmann, professor in Tübingen, of 1722, at the end of the age of Orthodoxy.³⁸

The Orthodox Lutherans define the perspicuity of Scripture as a perspicuity of that which is necessary for the salvation of the Christian, for those who have received the firstfruits of the Spirit. Thus, Hutter defines perspicuity in this way: "The canonical Holy Scripture, in matters concerning faith and our salvation, is always perspicuous and clear, so that it can be understood by a pious and believing man, even without the testimony of the church."³⁹ The Lutherans will therefore readily admit that there are dark passages in Scripture, but they reject to speak of the Scripture simply as dark. Like Luther, the imagery of the word of God that enlightens plays a central role for this doctrine.⁴⁰

³⁷ The edition used is: Robert Bellarmine, *Disputationum Roberti Bellarmini Politiani S.J. S.R.E. Cardinalis De Controversiis Christianae Fidei Adversus Hujus Temporis Haereticos Tomus Primus* (Neapoli: apud Josephum Giuliano, 1856).

³⁸ Leonhard Hutter, *Loci communes theologici* (Wittebergae: typis Johannis Matthaehi, 1619). Johannes Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae* (Lipsiae: sumptibus Michaelis Ruswormii, 1679). Hülsemann's *Animadversiones in R. Bellarmini Tom I. Controv. Lib. I. De Verbo Dei*, included in this volume, have a separate page count. Leonhard Hutter, *Disputatio Theologica V. De Perspicuitate Scripturae* (Wittebergae: typis Cratonianis per Johann. Gorman., 1606). Johann Adam Osiander, *Dissertatio de attributis quibusdam S. Scripturae* (Tübingae: typis Johann-Henrici Reisi, 1677). Gottfried Hoffmann, *Dissertatio theologica quâ praecipui pontificorum errores circa doctrinam de Scriptura sacra ὡς ἐν Συνόψει ob oculos sistuntur, strictimque refutantur DEO clemente adjuvante, praeside Godofredo Hofmanno* (Tübingae: literis Josephi Sigmundi, 1722).

³⁹ Hutter, *Loci*, 44. Similar Hoffmann, 22; Osiander, 7.

⁴⁰ Hutter, *Loci*, 44. Psalm 119 plays an important role as exegetical foundation. Hutter quotes Ps 119:34 (*Da mihi intellectum et scrutabor legem tuam*), 119:18 (*revela oculos meos, et considerabo mirabilia de lege tua*), and 119:135 (*Faciem tuam illumine super servum tuum, et doce me justificationes tuas*). Hutter takes these quotes as proof that those who have received the firstfruits of the Spirit can meditate and learn from the Scripture the statutes of God and do not have to suspend judgment on what the Scriptures say until they are told by council or pope. In his disputation on the perspicuity of Scripture, Hutter starts with John 5:39, which he—like many classical exegetes—understands as an imperative. This verse directs everybody to read and meditate on the Scriptures (Hutter, *Disputatio*, fol. A2r).

Bellarmino's thesis is this: that the Scriptures are not clear (*aperta*) in themselves, and that they do not suffice to end controversies on the faith without explanation.⁴¹

1. If the Lutheran thesis were true, why are there so many controversies?⁴² And just so that we are clear, Bellarmine is willing to go with this argument to the bitter end. Yes, there are and have been controversies concerning the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and all the articles of the faith. This then proves for Bellarmine that the Scriptures are not clear, not even on those articles.⁴³

Hutter wants to make several distinctions in regard to the question about why there is no end to discussions.⁴⁴ If the Scriptures speak to the issue, then all discussions are over in the sense that they are decided by Scripture. If by "over" one means that there are no more people who want to discuss such issues, then this will not do. For such an approach does not take into account the arrogance of wanton characters who will not be satisfied with anything and who would rather accept Plato's analogy of the sun whose light at noon bestows the ability to see the intelligible than admit that what Scripture says is clear even apart from human understanding. Controversies are not due to the darkness of Scripture, but to the sin of man, and to the fact that God blinds man in his judgment.

2. Bellarmine also criticizes Johannes Brenz, who mentions the linguistic difficulties in the Bible, but who also states that the sense of Scripture is still clear.⁴⁵ But this, according to Bellarmine, is patently false, as is shown by Psalm 119:18 ("Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law"). Thus, the Scriptures themselves teach that they are unclear—a nice move by Bellarmine using the same Psalm adduced by Luther in *The Bondage of the Will*.⁴⁶

This illumination, according to Hülsemann, is not to understand what the text says, (i.e., the true apprehension of the *sensus literalis*), but rather it refers to the inner illumination (i.e., faith)—the same kind of illumination of which Paul speaks

⁴¹ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 96. Bellarmine starts with quoting Luther from the *Assertio* referred to above and also refers to the Luther's statements in *The Bondage of the Will*, though without explicitly referring to them.

⁴² Bellarmine mentions the two answers Luther gives: first, because the Scriptures can be dark in one place, but teach what is said there clearly in others; second, though the scriptures are clear in themselves, they are dark to the arrogant and unbelievers because of their blindness and crooked mind (*pravus affectus*).

⁴³ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 100.

⁴⁴ Hutter, *Loci*, 46–47.

⁴⁵ This is from Brenz's answer to Pedro de Soto in his *Apology of the Confessio Virtembergica*. On this debate, see Matthias A. Deuschle, *Brenz als Kontroverstheologe: Die Apologie der Confessio Virtembergica und die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Johannes Brenz und Pedro de Soto* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

⁴⁶ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 96. He quotes Ps 119:19, 34, 135.

in Ephesians 1:8.⁴⁷ Osiander makes the observation that the prayer for the Holy Spirit is not because of the darkness of Scripture, but because of the human frailty and the inborn blindness of the human mind. That it cannot be because of the darkness of Scripture is shown when shortly thereafter David calls the word of God a lamp and a light (Ps 119:105).⁴⁸

3. Bellarmine argues that since Christ explains the Scriptures to the disciples, even though they knew Hebrew and were neither arrogant nor unbelievers, this shows that the Scriptures cannot be understood by themselves (Luke 24). Additionally, Bellarmine quotes Acts 8, the story of Stephen and the Ethiopian eunuch.⁴⁹

Hülsemann states that the examples of Christ explaining the Scripture in Luke 24 and Stephen in Acts 8 do not speak against the clarity of Scripture now, when we discuss whether Christians can know what is necessary for salvation.⁵⁰

Regarding Luke 24, Osiander offers another way to defend the perspicuity of Scripture. He points out that Christ scolds the disciples as foolish and slow of heart, thus blaming them for their lack of understanding, and not the Scriptures for being unclear.⁵¹

4. Bellarmine uses 2 Peter 3:16 to argue for the obscurity of Scripture and the need for interpretation: “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”

Hutter first states that he does not deny that the Scripture needs to be interpreted.⁵² He also does not want to defend the thesis that the Scripture is clear in such a way that it can be understood by anybody immediately. But the question is whether or not the entire Scripture is unclear, and *that* is not asserted in this passage. The conclusion from the particular to the general is not logically valid. Additionally, Peter does not say absolutely that some things are difficult to understand, but rather to those who are unlearned and unstable and thus who purposely distort the meaning. And finally, according to Hutter, and especially Hülsemann,

⁴⁷ Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae*, 64. Cf. Osiander, *Dissertatio*, 10.

⁴⁸ Osiander, *Dissertatio*, 10–11. Here he also says that the prayer is for the spiritual understanding.

⁴⁹ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 97, then also brings a long catena of quotes from the church fathers to prove his point. Since this would lead too far, I will omit it here and also, in the answers of the Lutherans, the discussion on the question of what the church fathers taught on the clarity of Scripture. I leave it to my colleagues who specialize in patristics to discuss the question of what the church fathers taught concerning the intelligibility of the Scriptures.

⁵⁰ Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae*, 64.

⁵¹ Osiander, *Dissertatio*, 11. Similarly, the problem of the eunuch was not the darkness of the text, but the blindness of his intellect and his ignorance.

⁵² Hutter, *Loci*, 46.

the reference is not to the letters themselves, but to the topic of the letters, namely the last things. They, the subject matter, are hard to understand.⁵³

5. After giving proof from the church fathers, Bellarmine argues from reason.⁵⁴ In the Scripture one has to distinguish between the content and the way of speaking. The content of Scripture is very dark (*obscurissima*), for neither the Trinity, nor the incarnation, nor the heavenly sacraments, nor the nature of the angels, nor the work of God in the mind of man, nor eternal election and reprobation can be investigated without great effort and work and the danger of gravest error. Bellarmine then draws an analogy with metaphysics: since metaphysics is more difficult and dark than other disciplines concerned with rational knowledge, how then could the Scriptures not be even darker, which deal with things far above the ken of metaphysics? Also, since large parts of Scripture contains prophecies concerning the future, this, too, is a dark subject matter.

Against this, Hülsemann states that, of course, the things of Scripture are far beyond the powers of natural reason. But the point of Scripture is that God communicates through the means of language those things that we cannot know by nature, but that we learn through this medium of Scripture.⁵⁵

6. Concerning the way of speaking, Bellarmine also sees innumerable difficulties. There are passages that seem to contradict each other. There are ambiguous statements, like John 8:58. There are incomplete sentences, like Romans 5:12. There are other linguistic difficulties, like sentences that are not in logical order, Hebraisms, and figurative language. Thus, on a linguistic level the Scriptures are dark.

⁵³ Hoffmann (*Dissertatio*, 22) seems to agree with the exegesis of the Catholic side, that there are certain things dark in Paul's letters. This is not a problem for him, since he already has admitted that there are some things obscure in the Bible. Salmer (probably Alfonso [Alphonsus] Salmerón [8 September 1515–13 February 1585], a Spanish Jesuit) had argued that an accessible Bible would breed contempt. This is rejected by Hoffmann as ridiculous, for then also the Apostles's Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer—which are considered clear from the Roman Catholic position—should be mysteriously dark and unintelligible. (Cf. Also Hoffmann, 22.) Osiander (*Dissertatio*, 12) makes the same point.

⁵⁴ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 97–98.

⁵⁵ Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae*, 66. But are not the subjects of the Bible so mysterious and deep that the Bible itself is mysterious and not readily intelligible? Hutter (*Loci*, 47) will again agree that there are dark things in Scripture (e.g., prophecy), and that the person who is not enlightened by the Spirit will find the Scriptures dark. But to conclude from such things that the Scriptures are dark is to commit the fallacy of the accident. Regarding prophecy, we cannot understand it without the spirit of prophecy. But once prophecies are fulfilled, like Is 7:14, they are easily understood. Regarding the linguistic difficulties that the Jesuits adduce, most of them can be resolved by looking at the overall usage of words, considering the context and diligent study of the biblical languages. Tropes and types do not make the Scriptures dark, but instead serve to illustrate the content wonderfully.

This is rejected by Hülsemann. First, the examples that Bellarmine adduces can be resolved rather easily. Secondly, though there might be linguistic difficulties in some places, those dogmas that are necessary for salvation are expressed in such a way that anybody who does not close his mind can understand them. The Roman side, according to Hülsemann, agrees that there are clear passages concerning ethics. And regarding the dogmas of faith, Romans 10:8 is adduced: “the word is not far from you.”⁵⁶

7. The reformers, according to Bellarmine, are guilty of self-contradiction. For if Scripture is as clear as they claim, why then do they write commentaries?⁵⁷

According to Hutter, the task of professors and pastors is not to make sense of a dark Scripture, but to draw conclusions from the “first principle” (Scripture) and transmit them, and to give expositions and applications of the Scripture. Hutter also sees a use for the witness of the church and an *a posteriori* argument for the authority of Scripture, even though these are not the reason one believes Scripture.⁵⁸

8. Bellarmine states that Psalm 19:8; 119:105; and Prov 6:23 also do not refer to the entire Scriptures, but to the law. Or, the words of God are said to be a light, not because they are easily understandable, but because, once understood, they illuminate the mind.

Hutter addresses Bellarmine’s argument that the entirety of Scripture is not meant in these references. Hutter rejects the first argument with the observation that *torah* in the Hebrew does not mean the law in the narrow sense, but the entire teaching of Scripture, both law and gospel. Regarding the second point, that the metaphors of light refer to the illumination of the person through the text, Hutter holds no objections. However, he does reject the idea that there can be an illumination of the person without an understanding of the text.⁵⁹

Continuity and Discontinuity with Luther

The Orthodox Lutheran theologians continued Luther’s emphasis on the clarity of Scripture against the concept that a churchly magisterium has the final say over the meaning of an intrinsically unclear Scripture. But there are also some differences. First, there is a terminological change: the preferred term becomes perspicuity, not clarity. But because the orthodox theologians also believe in the

⁵⁶ Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae*, 66, 68.

⁵⁷ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 95. The quote is somewhat garbled from Luther, “On the Councils and the Church” (1539), AE 41:19–20.

⁵⁸ Hutter, *Loci*, 45.

⁵⁹ Hutter, *Loci*, 44–45. Ps 119:105 speaks of the law as a light. Jesus’ statements in John 16:25 and 17:7, and 2 Tim 3:15 and 2 Pt 1:19 are taken as confirmation of the perspicuity of Scripture.

Scriptures as a light, this terminological shift should not be seen as wholesale categorical shift which makes the Bible into a transparent, passive object. Nevertheless, there is definitely a shift in the way the orthodox fathers talked about the clear and dark passages in Scripture. Luther most of the time refuses to talk about dark passages in Scripture, because he thinks strictly from the Scriptures as a communicative act of God which thus makes these ontological statements of clarity a property of Scripture. Any darkness is in the reader, not in Scripture.

The orthodox dogmaticians, though, combine, it seems to me, two perspectives. Deductively, they affirm the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture. But inductively, from the perspective of the reader, they affirm that some passages are clear and understandable to every Christian, whereas other passages are more difficult to understand. Their doctrine of perspicuity includes both aspects: what the Scriptures are in themselves, and how the Christian experiences reading the Scriptures.

IV. Conclusion: The Systematic Relevance of the Topic

The difficulty of defining clarity / perspicuity

Traditionally, clarity or perspicuity of Scripture is discussed as a property of Scripture. But clarity and perspicuity are not simply accidents in Scripture, rather they describe a relation between Scripture and reader. Something is clear for somebody. At the least, a linguistic communication is clear for a person who speaks the language. If a Uighur talks to me in as clear a way as is possible, it will be utter darkness for me since I do not speak Uighur. Any discussion of clarity must therefore include the reader in some sense, at the minimum level there must be a commonality of language that enables communication.

But as the Anglican John Webster rightfully stresses, clarity of Scripture cannot be transferred to the clarity in readers or the reading communities.⁶⁰ Clarity has to be part, in Webster's words, of the "ontology of Scripture".⁶¹ What he means by that is that there has to be place to talk about the clarity of Scripture in Scripture itself, though he, as a good Barthian, is wary of ascribing properties to Scripture that only belong to God, which would be deifying Scripture in his view.⁶²

⁶⁰ John Webster, "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture" in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 365.

⁶¹ Webster, "Biblical Theology," 354.

⁶² Webster, "Biblical Theology," 365.

Clarity as a theological statement

Because we use “clear” about writing all the time, it is tempting to use it in the context of Scripture in the exact same way. But as the biblical texts used in this discussion show, “clear” when used of the Bible has the connotation of luminosity. Scripture is a light to enlighten—in both aspects of enlightenment: it creates an understanding of what it states, and it illumines in that it gives faith. That is why clarity and efficacy belong together. The efficacy of Scripture happens not past or beyond the reading and understanding of the text—otherwise we might as well recite the Bible in an unknown language, or even better, carry Bibles around as holy talismans whose vibes will clean our aura. The clarity of Scripture has to do with the work God does through these texts. To put it differently, the proper understanding of clarity refuses to separate clarity from efficacy. Thus, the Scriptures are not only information, but an instrument through which the Holy Spirit, using the words and texts of it, enlightens with his gifts, sanctifies, and keeps the Christian in the true faith.

Webster stresses that as God is light, so his word is light. Luther would probably be more careful, since he distinguishes between God and Scripture quite carefully. Scripture also affirms that God dwells in darkness (1 Kgs 8:12), and that there are many things concerning God hidden to us. But God in his revelation certainly is light, and thus revelation as light and the luminous Scriptures belong together, just as the enlightening work of the Spirit.

So, the clarity of Scripture is a *theological statement*, it is a *confession*, not simply an empirical observation. The clarity of Scripture is a statement derived from Scripture just as much as the statement that the Scripture is the word of God. Both cannot be empirically verified—this is much more obvious in the case of the word of God, for how *would* one empirically verify it, short of a theophany? Just because clarity of Scripture sounds more like an empirical statement, it does not mean that it is an empirical statement.⁶³

But does this not make the term “clarity” rather empty, a word that means in theological parlance something completely different than in everyday speech, and thus negate Luther’s contention that the natural meaning of words is to be preferred? Not quite, but the semantics of “clarity of Scripture” has to be established on its own and not by some extra-theological standard of clarity. But not even in everyday

⁶³ Webster, “Biblical Theology,” 357: “To talk of *claritas scripturae* is to acknowledge that by virtue of the action of God, Holy Scripture *is* clear.” Nevertheless, this does raise the question of whether the scriptures are clear only *in actu* or also *in se*. Webster seems to oscillate somewhat in this. There his Barthianism is a problem.

language do we say that something is unclear simply because not everybody understands it. If there is obscurity in the act of reading, we know it can be the fault of the reader or the fault of the author. Or, to quote Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: “Wenn ein Buch und ein Kopf zusammenstoßen und es klingt hohl, ist das allemal im Buch?” [“If a book and a head collide, and it makes a hollow sound, is that always in the book?”]⁶⁴

Thus, we do not attribute it to God when men falsely understand the Scriptures, nor do we entertain the blasphemous thought that God is unable to communicate clearly and enlighten man. Rather, we see in sinful man the cause of a wrong understanding, just as we do not attribute the unbelief of man to God, but to man.

Practical consequences

We have seen above in the writing of Hutter that clarity of Scripture and interpretation do not exclude each other, nor does it mean that teaching and preaching is superfluous. But clarity of Scripture does have consequences for teaching and preaching, of course. It means that the presupposition of exegesis is that the text can be understood by Christians, that all exegesis is not a clarification of the dark text, but an unfolding, a paraphrase of the text. Exegesis should not be seen as constructive, nor as creative. The readers do not construct the meaning of the text, they follow the word, and they paraphrase what the word says.⁶⁵

Clarity and Ecclesiology

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was an obvious anti-establishment tendency, so to speak, regarding the clarity of Scripture. The polemical thrust was against a theology that maintained the practical preeminence of tradition and magisterium in regard to Scripture.⁶⁶ Thus, since the living tradition and teaching office in the church in the form of the papacy had become an enemy of the gospel, the doctrine took an anti-traditional and anti-papal character, and later an individualistic one. It is anti-traditional in that sense that the clarity of Scripture and its hermeneutical sufficiency go together: the Christian does not depend on an ecclesial authority to understand in Scripture what is essential for faith

⁶⁴ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, vol. 1, Sudelbücher I, 6th ed. (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1998), p. 291, Aph. D 399.

⁶⁵ Webster, “Biblical Theology,” 381. Cf. what Francis Pieper has to say about doctrine as repetition in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 57.

⁶⁶ I say practical, because of course any decent Roman theologian would have readily admitted that the Scriptures are supreme, or at least on par with the apostolic tradition.

and morals. The magisterium or tradition as the best guide on questions of philological or archeological matters is not something anybody has seriously proposed anyway.

But of course there can be good tradition and a good teaching office as well. For Luther, the preaching office presupposes the clarity of Scripture. Only a clear Bible can be preached. A dark Bible in the sense of Erasmus has to be venerated, or maybe it leads to introduction of the sacrament of silence in worship, as proposed by the German theologian Rudolf Otto.⁶⁷ But good tradition is a light because it receives the light, just as the teaching office shines if it says what Scripture says. Tradition is at best the moon that receives its light from the sun. Since both what is transmitted in the church and teachers in the church can go awry, it is necessary to evaluate them. Such an evaluation is the task of all Christians. No Christian should swear absolute loyalty to any church, congregation, or teacher in the church. No teacher or church tradition is inerrant and infallible. Only Scripture is inerrant and infallible. So in our reading of Luther and the Lutheran fathers (and the fathers of the early church and the medieval church!), we honor them where they are bearers of the divine word, and teachers of this word, but they are not a *conditio sine qua non* for the understanding of the text.

Let me conclude with a word from an Australian Anglican, Mark Thompson, who says in his monograph on the clarity of Scripture: "In short, a confession of the clarity of Scripture is an aspect of faith in a generous God who is willing and able to make himself and his purposes known. God has something to say and he is very good at saying it."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 210–214.

⁶⁸ Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 21 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 170.