

## Is the doctrine of "claritas scripturae" still relevant today?

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The question raised by the title assigned to this essay is of enormous importance, for both a general and a particular reason. The general reason is perennially pressing: one can talk endlessly about the centrality of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, the truthfulness of Scripture, and so forth, but none of this has more than theoretical interest unless some form of responsible doctrine of *claritas scripturae* - what the English-speaking world often refers to as the perspicuity of Scripture - can be sustained. The particular reason why the titular question is pressing is that current doubts are in large measure generated by postmodern epistemology, and that is something the magisterial reformers neither combated nor foresaw.

I propose to give the briefest thumbnail sketch of the doctrine of *claritas scripturae* in Western thought, pausing especially with Luther and Calvin, before turning to the relatively few contemporary discussions of the doctrine, along with a description and an assessment of the relevance of postmodernism to the question. I shall then sketch in the beginnings of a confessional response, with some tentative suggestions regarding the shape that *claritas scripturae* might take today.

### I. Historical Summary

#### 1. Scripture Summary

Here a detailed treatment would multiply the length of this essay many times. Yet it is important to remind ourselves that the issue of clarity is raised by Scripture itself.<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 29:29 presupposes that what God has revealed is both intelligible and accessible; the next chapter insists on the perspicuity of the Deuteronomic covenant (Deut.30:11-14). Paul can affirm the perspicuity of  $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta$  faith (Rom.10:6-10); elsewhere he insists that he does not write anything but what his readers can read and understand (2 Cor.1:13). Certainly the repeated calls to hear or read or obey what is written presupposes that what is written is intelligible (e.g. Deut.4:1-2; cf. 6:4-9; 31:9-13; Ps.19:7-11; Rom.

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<sup>1</sup> On this point, Greg Allison, "The Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture: A Reformulation on the Basis of Biblical Teaching," Ph.D. dissertation, Deerfield 1995, esp. chaps.5-7, is useful.

4:22-25; 15:4; 1 Cor.10:1-11; Col.3:16; 1 Tim.4:13; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; 1 Pet.1:22-2:3). Passages that deploy the metaphor of a light or lamp to refer to Scripture (e.g. Ps.119:105,130; 2 Pet.1:19 - which suggests that clarity and certainty are tied together) assume that Scripture is understandable. There are plenty of examples where Scripture is understood (e.g. Acts 17:10-12; 2 Tim.3:14-17). Where there is lack of understanding (תבונה) in Israel, the problem is not so much the intrinsic incomprehensibility of Scripture as the refusal to abide by it. Idol makers, for example, know (ידע) nothing, they understand (ביר) nothing, for the noetic effects of sin cripple their understanding (Isa.44:18): the problem is not with the material itself. Even when Jesus or some other person portrayed in Scripture consciously chooses to present something in a veiled way (e.g. the parables, Mark 4:10-12), there are moral reasons for the restraint, as the quotation from Isa.6 makes clear. When the Ethiopian eunuch asks how he can understand the passage he is reading unless someone explains it to him (Acts 8:31), it is a confession of personal inadequacy to be remedied by someone with better grasp of Scripture's content, not an assertion of the essential obscurity of the subject matter. If according to Paul the Spirit must work to take away the profound incapacity of the "natural man" (1 Cor.2:14), at root that incapacity is moral, and betrays the human condition without diminishing Scripture. When 2 Peter 3:16 acknowledges that some things in Paul's letters are "hard to understand" (δυσνόητα), at least we are not told that they are beyond understanding (ἀνόητα).

## 2. From the Fathers to the Magisterial Reformation

The reason for pausing here for a while is that it is still necessary to counter the suggestion that *claritas scripturae* was a novel concept introduced by Luther and other Reformers in their polemical attempts to detach the authority of Scripture from the Roman Magisterium. Quite apart from what Scripture says about itself in this regard, Mark Thompson has shown that the Fathers widely appealed to the intelligibility of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> True, there were conditions to this perspicuity. When Justin Martyr insists to Trypho that unconverted Jews do not understand their own Scriptures, their lack of comprehension springs from their failure to grasp Scripture's Christological focus, and this is at heart a moral failure rather than an intellectual one.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in the early church's struggles against

Gnosticism, the charge that the heretics misunderstood and distorted Scripture is repeatedly ascribed to deceit, moral perversity, willful blindness, rather than to intrinsic difficulty within the Scriptures themselves.<sup>4</sup> *Claritas scripturae* as a property of Scripture itself is either presupposed or enthusiastically defended.

But the seeds of change were already being sown, owing to at least two factors. (1) Many of the perceived difficulties in Scripture were resolved by appealing to allegory. Not least was this the case with the urgent task of interpreting the Old Testament in a Christian fashion. Justification was found in such passages as 2 Cor.3:6 and Gal.4:21-31 (though arguably those passages were not well served in such appeals). Doubtless Clement of Alexandria and his successor Origen in the Catechetical School spurred on these developments, until Origen could speak frankly of the obscurity (ἀσαφεία) of some Scriptural passages that are impossible (ἀδυνατός) and meaningless (ἄλογος) when interpreted according to the literal sense (τὸ ῥητόν).<sup>5</sup> Even the modified Alexandrianism of Augustine, whose influence over the later church is undisputed, did not entirely escape the problem. While justifying a theory of multiple senses of Scripture, Augustine insists that figurative interpretations of a passage must not say anything other than what is plainly taught elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>6</sup> That solves much of the problem for the perspicuity of Scripture as a whole, though it may sanction innumerable instances of obscurity in discrete passages. But Augustine saw this as a God-given advantage. If a passage is "obscure," i.e. if its literal meaning is nonsense, this is a God-given invitation to probe more deeply into what God has disclosed. This provision simultaneously keeps us humble and challenges our epistemic corruptions, the fruit of the fall.<sup>7</sup> (2) It was early argued that the church, and not the Jews nor the gnostic heretics, constitutes the true preserver and interpreter of holy Scripture.<sup>8</sup> So much should Scripture be denied to outsiders that on occasion the Fathers could argue that in seeking to persuade heretics one should not appeal to the Scriptures that heretics, after all, reject or badly interpret, but to the analogy of faith (*regula fidei*), i.e. the body of apostolic traditions preserved and taught by the church, in particular by the orthodox episcopate. This does not mean that any of the Fathers put the authority of the episcopacy above the Scriptures. When Augustine insists he

"Virtually every major Christian writer of the first five centuries either composed a treatise in opposition to Judaism or made this issue a dominant theme in a treatise devoted to some other."

4 E.g. Irenaeus, *Contra Haer.* i.3.6; i.8.1 [PG 7.477.521]; Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* iv.19.6 [CCSL 1.592]; *De pud.* xvi.24 [CCSL 2.1314-15].

5 *De princ.* iv [PG 11.341].

6 *De util. cred.* iii.5 [CSEL 25.7-8].

7 E.g. Augustine, *De doct.* ii.6 [CCSL 32.36]; *Conf.* xi.2 [CCSL 37.195].

8 E.g. Irenaeus, *Contra Haer.* iv.33.8; v.20.2 [PG 7.1077.1177-78]; Tertullian, *De praes. haer.* vii.9; xv.3-4 [CCSL 1.193,199].

2 See Mark S. Thompson, "The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture" (D.Phil. dissertation, Oxford, forthcoming). I am grateful to Mr Thompson for showing me his stimulating work before it is completed, and I am indebted to him at several points in this subsection.

3 *Dial.* 29 [PG 6.537]. Justin is not alone in this charge: cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Chicago 1971, 15:

would not have believed the gospel if the authority of the catholic church had not roused him to action,<sup>9</sup> he does not mean that Scripture was weak, variable, lacking in authority, or unclear. After all, elsewhere Augustine insists that even universal councils err and may be refuted or corrected by later councils; Scripture alone is qualitatively above contradiction and correction.<sup>10</sup> He means, rather, that the church is the guardian and preserver of Scripture, and that in his case it was Ambrose, representing the church, who brought the Scriptures to life for him.<sup>11</sup>

But what were tendencies and nuanced positions in the patristic period tended to harden in the Middle Ages into stances that in some circles at least increasingly denied much substantive meaning to *claritas scripturae*.<sup>12</sup> The commitment to multiple levels of meaning became systematic, and as the full apparatus of patristic and medieval scholarship was applied, and vernacular Latin was gradually dissipated, the accessibility and thus the perspicuity of Scripture faded a little farther into the distance. Such a summary is desperately simplistic, of course, as there were remarkable exceptions: Hugh of St Victor, for instance, argued that the search for allegory was actually preventing a proper understanding of Scripture.<sup>13</sup> Doubtless there were differences of opinion on the place of the hierarchy in articulating the tradition, and the role of its authority in relation to the authority of Scripture, but the diversity of those differences of opinion cannot mask the shift, in comparison with the patristic period, that placed the centre of discussion farther away from the authority and perspicuity of Scripture than it had once been.<sup>14</sup> Further, if the earlier Middle Ages were dominated by the Platonic-Augustinian tradition, which tended to emphasize the darkness of the human mind, the later Middle Ages rediscovered the Aristotelian tradition, paving the way for the Reformation's reaffirmation of *claritas scripturae*.

9 Contra Ep. Man.i.5 [PL 42.176].

10 De bapt.ii.3 [CSEL 51.178].

11 Conf.vi.4 [CCSL 27.77].

12 On this period, see especially Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Oxford<sup>3</sup> 1983; Gillian R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1984; idem, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Road to Reformation*, Cambridge 1985.

13 In *Salomonis Ecclesiastes*, praef [PL 175.114-115]; I am indebted to Mark Thompson, *Relation*, op.cit., for this reference.

14 In particular, Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, Cambridge 1963, esp. pp.370-375, argues that the tradition was considered faithful because the fathers and doctors of the church were regarded as faithful interpreters of the Bible. By contrast, the majority view argues that in practice canon law invested ecclesiastical tradition with the same authority as the Bible. See, for example, the critique of Oberman in Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, Oxford 1987, 140-158. McGrath argues (p.151) that Luther's *sola scriptura* was not formally innovative (it was commonplace in the medieval period) but was substantively innovative, since the formal principle had been emasculated in practice.

### 3. The Magisterial Reformation

Here the wealth of studies available could easily swamp this essay and turn it aside from its proper interest. One must therefore resist any treatment of Zwingli, whose views on the perspicuity of Scripture were rather distinctive and fluid, and of such Anabaptist greats as Balthasar Hubmeier. It is enough to remember that the essays and books of the last few decades, devoted to a study of the views of Luther and Calvin on this subject, invariably concur, however nuanced the articulation, on the importance of *claritas scripturae* for these fountainheads of the Protestant Reformation.

Treatments in this generation of Luther's views on the perspicuity of Scripture emphasize the important contribution this doctrine made not only to the reformer's exegesis but, no less importantly, to his willingness and ability to confront the teachings and practices of the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic Church.<sup>15</sup> "There is not on earth a book more lucidly written than the Holy Scripture. Compared with all other books, it is as the sun compared with all other lights."<sup>16</sup> There are numerous treatments of his dispute with Erasmus on this subject, especially Luther's *De servo arbitrio*.<sup>17</sup> "Those who deny that the Scriptures are quite clear and plain," writes Luther, "leave us nothing but darkness ... In opposition to you [Erasmus], I say with respect to the whole Scripture, I will not have any part of it called obscure."<sup>18</sup> Recently Mark Thompson, in the dissertation to which I have made reference, has been studying *claritas scripturae* in Luther's eucharistic writings. Here Luther found himself embroiled not only in controversy with Rome, but with other reformers. Various nuances are easily discernible. For example, Luther recognizes that promises given early in the history of redemption were in fact relatively

15 See, inter alia, Friedrich Beisser, *Claritas Scripturae bei Martin Luther*, Göttingen 1966; Ernst-W. Kohls, "Luthers Aussagen über die Mitte, Klarheit und Selbstständigkeit der Heiligen Schrift," *Luj* 41 (1973), 46-75. More broadly, on the Catholic/Protestant controversy in this respect, see the sources in Wilbirgis Klaiber, *Katholische Kontroverstheologie und Reformen des 16. Jahrhunderts: Ein Werkverzeichnis*, Münster 1978; Louis Desgraves, *Repertoire des ouvrages de controverse entre Catholiques et Protestants en France (1598-1685)*, 2 vols, Geneva 1984.

16 Comm. on Ps.37; cited in A. Skevington Wood, *Luther's Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, London 1960, esp. pp.17-21.

17 E.g. Rudolph Hermann, *Von der Klarheit der heiligen Schrift: Untersuchungen und Erörterungen über Luthers Lehre von der Schrift De Servo arbitrio*, Berlin 1958; E. Wolff, "Über 'Klarheit der Heiligen Schrift nach Luthers 'De servo arbitrio'," *ThLZ* 92 (1967), 721-730; C. Augustin, "Hyperaspistes I: La doctrine d'rasme et de Luther sur la 'Claritas Scripturae'", in: *Colloquia Erasmi Turonensis*, ed. J.-C. Margolin, Toronto 1972, 737-738; Otto Kuss, "Über die Klarheit der Schrift: Historische und hermeneutische Überlegungen zu der Kontroverse des Erasmus und des Luther über den freien oder verklärten Willen", first appeared in: *ThGl* 60 (1970), 273-321; reprinted in *Schriftauslegung: Beiträge zur Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments und im Neuen Testament*, ed. Josef Ernst, München 1972, 89-149.

18 LW 33.94.

obscure, but God in his grace did not permit such obscurity to continue: the promises were enlarged, clarified, elucidated, fulfilled. Scholars have also long recognized that Luther repeatedly turns to what he judges to be the clearest elements in the gospel, and views them as the non-negotiables that exercise certain hermeneutical control. For instance, Runia is right to comment, "No one can understand [Luther's] hermeneutics properly unless he sees that this hermeneutics [sic] is determined by the dialectical bipolarity of law and gospel."<sup>19</sup> Again, Luther's *theologia crucis* warmly influences his reading of Scripture (as his theology is shaped by Scripture) and becomes a kind of *hermeneutica crucis*.<sup>20</sup> It is also commonly observed that under the influence of Luther, in high German Lutheran orthodoxy the primacy of the "literal" meaning prevailed.<sup>21</sup> Nor would it be fair to assert that Luther advocated so direct an appeal to a perspicuous Scripture that he felt all knowledge of earlier exegesis was either vacuous or a waste of time. Far from it: he constantly appealed to the Fathers. Luther "attacked an authoritarian and self-serving appeal to tradition as a means of forcing scripture to speak with a certain voice. But he did not seek to substitute individual opinion for tradition in a way akin to the mood of post-Enlightenment rationalism."<sup>22</sup>

Treatments of Calvin tend to focus a little less on *claritas scripturae per se*, and a little more on the structure and practice of his exegesis and commentary writing. Yet here too the perspicuity of Scripture is repeatedly either assumed or defended, and correlated with other elements in Calvin's thought. It is true to say that in some respects Calvin was a disciple of Luther on these matters<sup>23</sup> - and indeed the Genevan reformer also diligently studied the interpretive methods of Melancthon, Bucer, Zwingli, Oecolampadius and others.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, he was a superior systematician and constantly attempted to correlate the diverse elements he found in the Christian faith.

For instance, Calvin recognizes that all of God's self-disclosure in the Bible necessarily involves some element of divine accommodation. For the transcendent God to disclose himself in the time- and culture-bound limitations of his image-bearers unavoidably drives us toward some view of

19 Klaas Runia, "The Hermeneutics of the Reformers", *Calvin Theological Journal* 19 (1984), 127.

20 See Patricia Maxwell Hayden-Roy, "Hermeneutica gloriae vs hermeneutica crucis: Sebastian Franck and Martin Luther on the Clarity of Scripture," *ARG* 81 (1990), 50-68.

21 E.g. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik*, Göttingen 1979, 109-11.

22 Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, London 1992, 182.

23 So, rightly, Stuhlmacher, *Verstehen*, op.cit., 98; Runia, "Hermeneutics," op.cit., 141-142.

24 For a brief summary of the evidence, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, "Calvins exegetische Prinzipien," *ZKG* 79 (1968), 329-341; *ET Interp.* 31 (1977), 8-18.

accommodation.<sup>25</sup> But such a view of accommodation is germane to *claritas scripturae*, for it reflects the divine determination to communicate in such a way as to be understood. God does not disclose himself in esoterica that human beings cannot understand apart from some mediating interpreter. Further, Calvin is constantly concerned with the effectiveness of Scripture. Demosthenes and Cicero may move and enchant, but the Bible, Calvin insists, "will so affect you, so pierce your heart, so work its way into your very marrow, that in comparison of the impression so produced, that of orator and philosopher will almost disappear, making it manifest that there is a truth divine."<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, Calvin explicitly embraces clarity and brevity.<sup>27</sup> Certainly he is prepared to use the entire panoply of knowledge and tools in his efforts at interpreting Scripture: he writes, "If we believe that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we shall neither reject nor despise the truth itself, wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to insult the Spirit of God; for the gifts of the Spirit cannot be undervalued without offering contempt and reproach to the Spirit himself."<sup>28</sup> Yet nevertheless he repeatedly argues for *brevitas et facilitas* as priorities in commentary writing, over against anything that is too complicated or difficult to understand, for in the latter case the plain meaning of Scripture is obscured<sup>29</sup> - which argument, of course, presupposes *claritas scripturae*. Indeed, Torrance and Parker<sup>30</sup> rightly point out that Calvin is influenced by Cicero in regarding perspicuity as a rhetorical concept: the interpreter of Scripture allows the text to become perspicuous, in the sense that careful and honest interpretation permits the intentions of the author to flow from the text like living speech. That is why Calvin is even more suspicious of allegorical interpretations than is Luther. Calvin also manages to overturn, hermeneutically, not a few of the structures of medieval epistemology. As Torrance sums up: "We do not think ideas as such nor propositions that intervene between our cognising and the realities we cognise. We think things and realities and employ ideas and propositions in our thought and speech about them. Thus by claiming that we do have intuitive knowledge of God Calvin laid the axe to the root of the whole conception of

25 See especially Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity", *Interp.* 31 (1977), 19-38 - though note the warnings of John D. Woodbridge, "The Impact of the 'Enlightenment' on Scripture," in: *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, Grand Rapids 1986, esp. p.265, to the effect that more recent discussions that appeal to Calvin's view of accommodation often go well beyond anything Calvin himself would have acknowledged.

26 *Inst.*I.viii.i.

27 *CR* 38.403

28 *Inst.*II.ii.xv.

29 See especially Richard C. Gamble, "Brevitas et facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," *WThJ* 47 (1985), 1- 17. More broadly, see T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Grand Rapids 1971.

30 T. H. L. Parker, op.cit., 51; T. F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, Edinburgh 1988, 111.

theology as the systematic correlation of representative ideas, i.e. as the science of abstractive theology. We do not operate in knowledge of God with 'ideas in the middle', so to speak, communicated and creditive ideas that come between us and the divine Reality and from which we infer knowledge of God or deduce truths about him. While the Word of God does certainly involve the communication of truths and statements, in and through these God speaks to us directly and confronts us with the majesty and dignity of his Truth.<sup>31</sup> That is why Calvin can write, "First, then, we ought to believe that Christ cannot be properly known in any other way than from the Scriptures; and if it be so, it follows that we ought to read the Scriptures with the express design of finding Christ in them."<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Calvin's understanding of the testimony of the Spirit is intimately bound up with the Spirit's operation through the Word.<sup>33</sup> The Spirit's task is not to make clear what is intrinsically obscure, but to bring home what we because of our sinful natures intrinsically reject. *Claritas scripturae*, far from being diminished, is thereby defended.

## II. The Contemporary Challenge

But is *claritas scripturae* still defensible?

The reason I have taken so much space to summarize the dominant emphases of the doctrine as it was formulated during the Reformation is that the question posed by the title of this essay cannot responsibly be addressed unless we agree on the shape of that doctrine in its best known and most mature form, as well as on the degree to which contemporary culture has so changed the questions that on first appearance the answers must also change rather dramatically. It is to the latter that I now briefly turn.

As I have recently described and documented at some length the nature and rise of postmodernism,<sup>34</sup> I may be brief here and refer readers to that publication. Although "postmodernism" is now being applied to many areas of Western culture, at heart it pertains to epistemology. The rise of the Enlightenment, connected as it is with Cartesian thought, assured most Western intellectuals during the last three and a half centuries that objective truth could be discovered by unfettered human reason, that the best approach to doing so was bound up with foundationalism and rigorous method, that such truth was a-historical and a-cultural, and that despite enormous difficulties and acknowledged differences of opinion, the discovery and articulation of such trans-cultural truth was the

summum bonum of all rational and scientific enterprise. Over the centuries, cracks developed in this structure, but in large measure the structure held in most circles of Western higher education until a couple of decades ago. Gradually the Western world became more empirically pluralistic, lost many of its moorings in the foundational cultural presuppositions of Judaeo-Christian faith, became more secularistic (which permits lots of scope for religion so long as it is privatized and of little influence in the public discourse), and, in this century, increasingly committed itself to philosophical naturalism.

But now there has come about a shift in epistemology. In Germany this developed from the late 1930s to the 1960s, when the new hermeneutic became instrumental in moving the locus of meaning from the author to the text to the reader, and the model that describes the interpretive process became a hermeneutical circle. In France, inferences drawn from the fledgling discipline of linguistics developed by Ferdinand de Saussure came to be labeled deconstruction, with its various shadings (Derrida, Foucault, de Man, Lyotard) and its profound suspicion of "totalization." In America, these developments developed into "radical hermeneutics" and were not only applied to central problems in theology but often shifted from the individual interpreter to the autonomy of the interpretive community.

The net effect of these developments is profound. In law, history, literature, theology, the philosophy of science, and much else beside, many of the leading younger scholars (and some not quite so young) are profoundly committed to the view that there is no such thing as public, objective, cultural-transcending truth. All interpretations are necessarily constrained by the individual and/or the interpretive community to which he or she belongs. Texts are "open"; they do not convey one truth, but many truths, polyvalent meanings; the only heresy is the view that there is such a thing as heresy. Moreover, these developments, though not universal (history is always messy), have now reached through the media into the public marketplace. Millions who have never heard any form of the word "postmodern" are nevertheless postmodern in their epistemological approaches, because of the influences of the media. Many a scientist and technician, epistemologically still modernist in their own disciplines, are postmodernist in just about every other domain.

What we must see is the revolutionary nature, epistemologically speaking, of these proposals. By and large, children of the Enlightenment, i.e. epistemological modernists, found little reason to challenge *claritas scripturae*. So great was their confidence in reason, so deep their commitment to public and universal truth, that it was easier to doubt Scripture's authority, inspiration, truthfulness, effectiveness, and power than it was to doubt its essential perspicuity. Reason could always find out what it truly meant. But that

31 T. F. Torrance, *op. cit.* 93.

32 *Comm. on John 5:39.*

33 For a convenient summary, see Klaas Runia, *art. cit.*, 145-146.

34 D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, Grand Rapids 1996.

perspective is rapidly changing. If texts have no univocal meaning, still less their author's meaning, it is far from clear what *claritas scripturae* might mean. In the epistemological universe of Luther and Calvin (and of the Middle Ages too, for that matter), the God of the Bible knows everything, and has revealed some things. Human beings come to know some small part of what God truly and exhaustively knows through the revelation that he has given. The question at issue is whether that revelation is "clear" or needs some special illumination or Magisterium to comprehend it and make it known. In the epistemological universe of modernism, God may or may not exist, but so confident is the scholar of reason and intellectual effort and so assured is the view that there is public truth to pursue, that there is little sense in doubting *claritas scripturae*. But in the epistemological world of postmodernism, where reason is a culturally constrained phenomenon, where interpreters are culture-bound, where texts are polyvalent, where claims to universal interpretations are viewed as intrinsically manipulative and therefore evil, where language is perceived to be not something we use ("logocentrism") but something into which we are born, it is far from clear that *claritas scripturae* is even a coherent concept, let alone a defensible one.

That is why there is no recent writing, of which I am aware, that simultaneously defends *claritas scripturae* quite specifically while showing itself to be aware of the onset of postmodernism. Pannenberg, sitting on the fence between the two worlds, self-consciously modifies Luther by seeking to ground *claritas scripturae* not in Scripture, which he thinks to be an assignment that is now impossible, but in the events behind the texts and in the traditions mediating the biblical events rather than in the texts themselves.<sup>35</sup> A thoroughgoing postmodernist would find little difficulty rejecting this new locus for *claritas scripturae*; a conservative response simply retreats to Luther.<sup>36</sup> More recently, conservative scholars have begun to perceive the danger, yet have advocated highly questionable "solutions." Sandin, for example, holds that "some recent approaches to Biblical hermeneutics (as inspired by the writings of Dilthey, Heidegger, Bultmann and Gadamer) are in fundamental conflict with the historic Protestant principles of *sola scriptura* and *claritas scripturae*," and argues for "interpretation without preunderstanding"<sup>37</sup> - as if that were possible. Again, Burrows asks, "How are we to undertake the task of biblical exegesis in a world which defines itself as 'postmodern,' an age in which exegesis of all sorts seems besieged with conflicting voices, and one in which, to recall the

35 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Philadelphia 1970, 1-14.

36 So U. Duchrow, "Die Klarheit der Schrift und die Vernunft," *KuD* 15 (1969), 1-17.

37 Robert T. Sandin, "The Clarity of Scripture," in: *The Living and Active Word of God*. Festschrift for Samuel J. Schultz; ed. Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood, Winona Lake 1983, 236.252.

thrust of George Steiner's penetrating cultural analysis, the modes of 'hermeneutic encounter' have been reduced to barren 'archaeologies'?"<sup>38</sup> Still more recently, an entire dissertation devoted to the subject of the perspicuity of Scripture manages fairly sophisticated discussion of the issues within a biblicist heritage (along with the assumption of Enlightenment epistemology), without ever engaging the vast postmodernist literature that calls the entire enterprise into question.<sup>39</sup>

### III. A Preliminary Response

What follows is not much more than a pump-priming exercise. The epistemological issues I have discussed at some length in *Gagging*, to which reference has already been made. The specific points below that deal with *claritas scripturae* merely sketch the kind of issues that would have to be taken on board and greatly expanded if a thoroughgoing articulation of the doctrine were to be attempted in our postmodern world.

1. One must begin by acknowledging that there is considerable truth in postmodern epistemology (if speaking of "truth" in this context is not an oxymoron!). It will aid no one if, alarmed by the sheer relativism that the most consistent forms of postmodernism open up, we retreat into modernism as if it were a sanctuary for the gospel. We may applaud modernism's passion for truth, while doubting that its confidence in the neutrality, power, and supremacy of reason, and its reliance on appropriate methods, were unmitigated blessings. Similarly, we may applaud postmodernism's recognition that we inevitably interpret texts (and everything else) out of a framework, that there is no escape from pre-understanding, while doubting its insistence that no knowledge of objective truth is possible. Even some correlative insights from postmodernism, such as the importance of the interpretive community, should be recognized for their value, even if they are pushed too hard. The New Testament certainly emphasizes the role of the local church as an "interpretive community" that helps to establish new converts in the faith: this is something to be cherished and utilized. Yet again, postmodern critics go too far: the models advanced by, say, Stanley Fish, give the impression that recognizing the importance of interpretive communities and our legitimate dependencies on them obviates any question of culture-transcending truth, and locates meaning only in the

38 Mark Burrows, "John Gerson on the 'Traditional Sense' of Scripture as an Argument for an Ecclesial Hermeneutic," in: *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective*. Festschrift for Karlfried Froehlich; ed. Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem, Grand Rapids 1991, 171. The reference is to George Steiner, *Real Presences*, Chicago 1989, 230-231.

39 Greg Allison, "The Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture," op. cit., 1995.

community or in the individual belonging to a community. But in offering a telling critique of this stance, it is important not to reject its genuine insights.

2. One of the most common devices in the postmodernist's arsenal is the absolute antithesis: either we may know something absolutely and exhaustively, or our vaunted knowledge is necessarily relative and personal. Once that antithesis is established, it is so terribly easy to demonstrate that we do not and cannot have absolute and exhaustive knowledge about anything - after all, we are not God, and omniscience is an incommunicable attribute of God - that the alternative pole of the antithesis must be true. But in fact, the antithesis is false. It is easy enough to demonstrate the wide range of things we may know truly without knowing them exhaustively. When we speak of "certainty" or "confident know-ledge," we are not claiming what can properly belong only to omniscience.<sup>40</sup> The falsity of the antithesis underlying so much of post-modernist theory must constantly be exposed.

3. Various useful models have been developed to conceive how understanding of a text, however partial, is achieved: e.g. distancing (*Horizontsentfremdung*) and the fusion of two horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), in which the aim is not perfect and exhaustive language but such a competent "fusion" that an excellent transfer of information from one horizon to the next is possible; the hermeneutical spiral - differing from the hermeneutical circle in this respect, that the radius is becoming smaller and smaller as one approaches the absolute, rather than remaining constant; and the asymptotic approach. This latter approach, developed by Karl Popper with respect to the philosophy of science, has been adapted to discuss more broadly-based epistemological issues. An asymptote is a curved line that approaches ever more closely the straight line of an axis but never touches it. So also human knowledge may approach, in some area, the absolute knowledge of God, but we will never touch the axis, for then we would be omniscient - in short, we would be God. There is inadequate space to flesh out these models here. But they must constantly be set over against the reductionism intrinsic in much postmodernist thought.

4. The bearing of these initial points on *claritas scripturae* should be obvious. *Claritas scripturae* is possible, not because it claims that any Scripture or all of Scripture is so perfectly perspicuous that all readers may understand absolutely everything about the text. The kinds of caveats the Reformers themselves introduced need to be repeated and restated, while we add to them the strong

insistence that what is being claimed is not an exhaustive knowledge of what a text means, but a true knowledge (however partial) of what it means.

5. Modernist epistemology, springing from the foundationalism of Descartes, attempted to provide a secure basis of human knowing without reference to an absolute. The God-centred epistemology of the Middle Ages and of the Reformation era was displaced with a finite "I": "I think, therefore I am (*Cogito, ergo sum.*)" It was only a matter of time before the limitations of this "I" became apparent: different "I"s think different things, and eventually the subject-object tension, so pervasive a problem in Western epistemology, generated postmodern epistemology. But this latest turn of the epistemological wheel is profoundly challenged if there is a transcendent and omniscient God, a talking God, who chooses to disclose himself in words and linguistic structures that his image-bearers can understand, i.e. can understand truly even if not exhaustively.

What is at issue is a worldview clash of fundamental importance. If you buy into a postmodern worldview, then even if there is an omniscient talking God, you cannot possibly know it in any objective sense. But the talking God of the Bible not only communicates, but establishes a quite different metanarrative. A metanarrative is nothing more than a narrative that establishes the meaning of all other narratives. Postmodernism loves narratives, precisely because they are texts that tend to be more "open" than, say, discourse; but it hates metanarratives with a passion, seeing in them oppressive claims of totalization that manipulate people and control the open-endedness of the post modern world. But the God of the Bible so discloses himself that he provides us with a metanarrative: the movement from creation, through fall, Abrahamic covenant, giving of the law, rise of the kingdom, exile, etc., climaxing in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and ultimately in the parousia and the onset of the new heaven and the new earth. This metanarrative is given in words; it explains and controls the interpretation of other narratives. To claim this is "totalization" and therefore to be rejected as oppressive exploitation is a useful category only if the metanarrative is untrue; if in fact it is true, to accuse it of totalization is nothing other than the resurfacing of human hubris, the shaking of one's puny fist in the face of God, the apex of sinful rebellion.

In short, we are dealing with a world-view clash of cosmic proportions. If Christianity simply plays by the rules of postmodernists, it loses; biblically faithful Christianity must establish an alternative worldview, which overlaps

<sup>40</sup> Even after the parousia this gap will never be closed, for to close it would mean we have become God. 1 Cor. 13:10-12 does not promise that we shall know exhaustively and absolutely with the knowledge of omniscience, but that we shall then know in an unmediated way, "face to face."

with both the postmodern world and with the modern world at various points, but is separate from both, critiques both, and succumbs to neither.<sup>41</sup>

Again, the implications for *claritas scripturae* are striking. At issue is not whether this doctrine is defensible within a worldview that makes it indefensible, but whether it can be reestablished within a worldview of biblical theology that thoughtfully confronts and challenges an age that is departing from the Judaeo-Christian heritage with increasing speed. In other words, *claritas scripturae* is certainly still defensible, but only if set within a biblical-theological view of God and the Bible's metanarrative, deployed in a contrastive matter with the philosophical postmodernism on offer. Otherwise, it would have to be redefined into unacceptable subjectivism.<sup>42</sup>

6. Even this introductory sketch immediately raises numerous other issues with respect to *claritas scripturae*. I can do no more than list four of them. First, the Christian worldview I have lightly sketched presupposes coherence in the Christian revelation, because there is finally one God behind it. It has often been pointed out that the Reformation emphasis on *claritas scripturae*, with its insistence that some parts of Scripture are clearer than others and can usefully be used as a help and a guide in the less clear parts, depends on the *analogia fidei* - and the *analogia fidei* itself depends utterly on the coherence of Scripture.<sup>43</sup> Thus the credibility of the doctrine of *claritas scripturae* continues to depend on critical biblical-theological and historical-critical work of a confessional sort, for the coherence of Scripture, even apart from postmodern interpretations of it, is no longer widely espoused in academic circles. Secondly, the wrestling with the role of the Holy Spirit in coming to understand what Scripture says, important to both Luther and Calvin (especially the latter), demands careful rearticulation today. This must now include thoughtful examination of the Spirit's role in conversion where conversion entails a massive shift in worldview - as when, for instance, a devout Hindu becomes a Christian, and abandons one worldview for another. For in our rapidly changing Western world, Christian conversion increasingly entails a similarly massive change in worldview, and worldviews decisively shape how we understand

41 In the same way, Brian Ingrassia, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, Cambridge 1995, is entirely right to argue that much of modernism's and postmodernism's critique of God has not been against the God of the Bible within the framework of a genuine and responsible biblical theological worldview, but against the God of what he calls "ontotheology", the theology that was vaguely the illegitimate offspring of Christian theology but was in fact decisively shaped by philosophical underpinnings that rejected that worldview.

42 E.g. a postmodernist might redefine *claritas scripturae* in terms of the "clarity" of Scripture for the meaning the individual or interpretive community "finds" there, while strongly denying that there is any culture-transcending truth that is "clear" within the text itself.

43 E.g. Henri Blocher, "The 'Analogy of Faith' in the Study of Scripture", *SBET* 5 (1987), 32.

things. Thirdly, the peculiar promises of the new covenant to the effect that those who adhere to it will no longer need mediating teachers (e.g. Jer.31:34; 1 Jn.2:26-27 - which passages surely again raise questions about the relative roles of Scripture and the Spirit in *claritas scripturae*), urgently call for study and reflection in the light of the postmodern challenge.<sup>44</sup> Finally, the Reformation doctrine of accommodation needs rearticulation in a postmodern world. The result will enable us to insist that culture-transcending truth can be known by people locked within particular cultures, but that such truth cannot be communicated in a culture-transcendent way. It must be communicated in and through the channels of culture. Within such a framework, *claritas scripturae* is not only defensible, but honours the God who is above culture and yet who has disclosed himself within the real history of time and space.

However preliminary these reflections on *claritas scripturae* may be, they are respectfully offered to Gerhard Maier on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, with gratitude to God for his concern for the gospel and confessional faithfulness.

44 I have attempted something of the sort in my forthcoming commentary on the Epistles of John in the NIGTC series.