NEW STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY 21

Series editor: D. A. Carson

A clear and present word

THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

Mark D. Thompson

With thanks to God for three wise theological guides: *Alan D. Catchpoole*, Principal, Capernwray Bible College, Australia (1970–1982); *D. Broughton Knox*, Principal, Moore Theological College (1959–1985); *Peter F. Jensen*, Principal, Moore Theological College (1985–2001), Archbishop of Sydney (2001–).

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A CLEAR AND PRESENT WORD

Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: 1. the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); 2. the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and 3. the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

It is a pleasure to include in the Series this volume by Dr Mark Thompson. I suppose one might initially question why his work has been included in a series devoted to biblical theology. His earlier work on Luther was essentially an historical study; the present work, it might be argued, belongs at least as obviously to the domain of systematic theology as to biblical theology. But that is just the point. NSBT is interested in how biblical theology contributes to related disciplines, and while this present work addresses historical and dogmatic questions, on several fronts its fulcrum is responsible biblical theology.

Certainly there are few topics more pertinent in the first decade of the twenty-first century. A strange combination of collective

theological amnesia and an uncritical acquiescence in the least disciplined forms of postmodernism have made many Christians highly suspicious of hearing any sure or clear Word from Scripture. The 'perspicuity of Scripture' (often designated *claritas Scripturae*) has fallen on hard times. Dr Thompson's clearly written and robust articulation of the clarity of Scripture will help many people think about these matters knowledgably, crisply, faithfully, pointedly. The purpose of such an exercise, of course, can never be an end in itself: the purpose is to handle Scripture itself with greater wisdom and confidence. That is why this book deserves the widest circulation.

D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Author's preface

The five chapters of this book were originally the Annual Moore College Lectures, delivered in August 2005. It was an enormous privilege to be invited by the Principal, Dr John Woodhouse, to deliver those lectures. His encouragement during the study leave granted for the purposes of preparation kept the project on track when a myriad of other demands threatened to derail it. I join with many others in thanking God for his gifted and godly leadership of the Moore College community and I am grateful for this opportunity to record my own extensive debt to his faithful ministry of the word of God.

Like many before me, I have found that one of the great benefits of working in a theological college is the opportunity to wrestle in fellowship with faithful and insightful colleagues and highly motivated and gifted students about questions such as the clarity of Scripture. I have greatly benefited from conversations on this topic with Drs Peter Jensen, Robert Doyle, Peter Bolt, Andrew Shead, Mike Ovey and Peter O'Brien. A number of former students at Moore College have also investigated these questions and shared the results of their work. While there are undoubtedly others, I owe a particular debt to Stephen Anderson, Hefin Jones and Orlando Saer. Outside this environment I am glad to acknowledge the philosophical insights of Mr Shane Waugh.

In researching this subject, as previously, I have been much more than adequately equipped by the resources of the Moore College Library. I found that almost everything I needed to explore these questions was already held by the library and in those rare cases where something was not, Mr Kim Robinson ensured that it was ordered or borrowed with unusual speed. I am very grateful to him and the rest of the library staff.

Professor John Webster of the University of Aberdeen has been extraordinarily generous, allowing me to read his own treatment of this topic prior to its publication in his book *Confessing God*. The book appeared as these lectures were being delivered and the extent of my debt to his stimulating treatment of the topic will be obvious.

I hope he will understand where I have continued to walk a somewhat different path.

I have valued the encouragement I have received over many years now from Professor Don Carson. We first spoke about this topic back in 1996 in a little restaurant in Oxford. Years later he was one of those who convinced me to make this the topic of the lectures when he first heard that I had been invited to deliver them. His own model of wide and generous reading, his humble and constant submission to the word of the living God, and his determination to honour God by speaking his truth and confronting error or sheer sloppy academic work have encouraged me and many others. His graciousness and generosity to me personally, not least in accepting this book as a volume in the New Studies in Biblical Theology series, is something for which I continue to give great thanks to our God.

The book is dedicated to three theologians who have all left their mark on my own thinking and that of countless others. Alan Catchpoole was the first to show me how to think theologically. His passion for explaining the teaching of Scripture in a systematic way opened up a new world. Broughton Knox was nearing the end of his long tenure as Principal of Moore College when I began studying there in 1983. His capacity to excite students is now almost legendary in Sydney and elsewhere. He modelled a kind of theological reflection that refuses to be distracted from the words of Scripture, allowing every system and every thought to be challenged by what God has said to us in the Bible. Peter Jensen, who succeeded Broughton Knox in 1985, has been an outstanding mentor both theologically and personally. Though called to a different role amongst God's people in 2001, he has continued to encourage me to think hard, read widely and speak with clarity and boldness.

Yet the one person without whom not a single word that follows could have been produced is my wife Kathryn. She makes life and ministry a joy and is the ever-present reminder of God's wonderful goodness to me. Eternity alongside her is a marvellous prospect.

In the remarkable kindness of God he has equipped his people for life in a fallen world by giving them his Spirit and his word written. If what follows encourages men and women to read the Scriptures with confidence in God's goodness, expecting to be addressed by him in the words he has caused to be written for us, then it will have served its purpose.

Mark D. Thompson
August AD 2005

Abbreviations

ANF	*The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, 10 vols., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1985
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
AV	Authorized Version (of the Bible)
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
CCSL	*Corpus christianorum series latina*, 176 vols., Turnholt: Brepols, 1954–
CD	K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley, trans. G. Thomson, H. Knight et al., 4 vols., Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–74
ChrCent	*Christian Century*
CTJ	*Calvin Theological Journal*
ESV	English Standard Version (of the Bible)
FS	Festschrift
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IJST	*International Journal of Systematic Theology*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
KD	K. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4 vols., Zollikon: Evangelischer, 1932–67
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LW	*Luther's Works*, ed. J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann, 55 vols., St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NPNF, 1st Series	*A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st Series, ed. P. Schaff, 14 vols., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1979

NPNF, 2nd Series	*A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, 14 vols., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1982
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
PG	*Patrologiae, cursus completus, patres ecclesiae, series graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 162 vols., Paris: Migne, 1857–66
PL	*Patrologiae, cursus completus, patres ecclesiae, series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols., Paris: Migne, 1844–64
RTR	*Reformed Theological Review*
SBET	*Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SP	Sacra pagina
ThTo	*Theology Today*
TJ	*Trinity Journal*
WA	*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Schriften*, ed. J. K. F. Knaake, G. Kawerau et al., 66 vols., Weimar: Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–
VE	*Vox evangelica*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.
(Ps. 119:18)

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and con-
trite in spirit and trembles at my word.
(Isa. 66:2b)

If God spare my life ere many years I wyl cause a boye that dryveth
the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost.
(Tyndale 1521)

Christ has not so enlightened us as deliberately to leave some part of
his word obscure while commanding us to give heed to it, for he com-
mands us in vain to give heed if it does not give light.
(Luther 1525: 95)

In the fog of this intellectual life of ours the word of God, which is
clear in itself, always becomes obscure.
(Barth 1938: 716 [*KD* I/2, 803 = *CD* I/2, 716])

No confession concerning Scripture is more disturbing to the church
than the confession of its perspicuity.
(Berkouwer 1966–7: 288)

Behind the argument about the clarity of Scripture is an argument
about whom Scripture belongs to and whether it is a means of
control.
(Goldingay 1994: 345)

We can cloak our own darkness by calling it the obscurity of the text;
we can evade the judgement which Scripture announces by endless
hermeneutical deferral; we can treat Scripture not as the clear Word
of judgement and hope but as a further opportunity for the imagin-
ation to be puzzled, stimulated and set to work . . . That is why the
promise of *claritas scripturae* is inseparable from the prayer: 'Open
my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law' (Ps.
119:18).
(Webster 2005: 67)
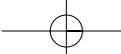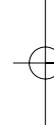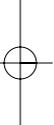
Chapter One

Oh sweet obscurity: The absurdity of claiming clarity today

'Did God really say . . . ?'

By almost any measure a bold and confident use of the Bible is a hallmark of evangelical Christianity. Whether it be the sophisticated sociohistorical analysis of David Bebbington, who ranks 'biblicism' as the third of his four characteristics of evangelical religion,[1] or the simple and direct statement of evangelical leader John Stott, 'It is the contention of evangelicals that they are plain Bible Christians,'[2] explorations of evangelical identity routinely acknowledge the decisive role of the Bible in shaping thought and practice. Billy Graham's insistent appeal to 'the Bible says' is emblematic for many. Convinced that what the Bible says, God says, classic evangelicalism appeals to the Scriptures for an understanding of God and his purposes as well as for the shape of an appropriate response to the words he has spoken.

Underlying such an appeal are a number of assumptions about the origin, nature and form of that collection of ancient narrative, poetry, proverb, law, vision and epistle that is the Christian Bible. What authority (if 'authority' is the right word) can such an anthology legitimately exercise over the thinking and behaviour of men and women two millennia after its completion? What gives these texts a priority over the plethora of other religious texts in the world, even just the ancient world? How does their undoubted variety in genre and historical perspective serve the interests of their message, if, indeed, we can be permitted to speak about 'message' in the singular at all? These are all legitimate questions that have occupied many,

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[1] Bebbington 1989: 2–4, 12–14. Bebbington acknowledges that others such as J. C. Ryle, John R. W. Stott and J. I. Packer all mention the authority of Scripture as the leading principle of evangelical faith (Ryle 1871: 10; Stott 1977: 5–14; Packer 1978: 20).

[2] Stott 1970: 32.

especially in the last fifty years or so.[3] Yet even if there are very good grounds (and there are) for accepting the Christian Scriptures as the authoritative word of the living God, complete with a coherent story or meganarrative that appropriates rather than sublimates the genuine diversity to be found in these texts,[4] there is still another question that nags away at many: Can we really be certain about what it says or what it means?

In many ways this would appear to be the question of the hour. A lack of confidence that we do or even that we can know for sure what the Bible says is apparent in Western Christianity. Theologians, it seems, are more comfortable asking questions than giving answers or seeking to justify them. Ancient apophatic traditions with their appeal to mystery, to God's incomprehensible nature and his inscrutable will, are gaining a new prominence in mainstream denominations.[5] Silence is proposed as a more appropriate response to the reality of God's presence than bold proclamation.[6] Those who persist in an appeal to the clear teaching of Scripture face charges of hermeneutical naivety, entrapment in modernist assumptions, a lack of epistemic humility, or, worst of all, an act of 'communicative violence'.[7] You can't be sure that's what it means; and if you say you are, it is merely a ploy to coerce me to accept your point of view.

Despite a number of sophisticated explorations of the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture in recent decades,[8] this doctrine is either ignored or derided by many. It seems scarcely credible and even absurd given two thousand years of Christian biblical interpretation, let alone contemporary literary theory. What is more, it just doesn't

[3] The literature discussing the doctrine of Scripture more generally is immense. Amongst the most helpful and scholarly treatments of this doctrine and related issues in English are Berkouwer 1966–7, though note it has been extensively abridged by Jack B. Rogers; Vanhoozer 1994b; Gunton 1995; Wolterstorff 1995; Jensen 2002: 145–256; Horton 2002: 123–219; Ward 2002; and Webster 2003a. At a more popular level, the recent volume from N. T. Wright (Wright 2005) raises important questions, even if its argument is open to significant criticism at a number of points.

[4] For the distinction between *meganarratives* and *metanarratives* (the latter the target of Jean-François Lyotard's famous definition of the postmodern condition, Lyotard 1979: 7) see Westphal 2003. For a little more detail of what is involved see Westphal 2001: xi–xvi.

[5] Williams 1991: 5–6. Note John Webster's stinging retort: 'Apophasis does not secure freedom from idolatry, and, indeed, may be itself a form of idolatrous resistance to the human vocation to positive speech and action' (Webster 2003b: 121).

[6] Williams 1994a, 1994b; Muers 2004.

[7] Muers 2004: 215.

[8] E.g. Berkouwer 1966–7: 267–298; Sandin 1983; Callahan 2001; Webster 2005: 33–67.

seem to resonate with the experience of many Christians who strug-
gle to make sense of what is being said at point after point. Should
this doctrine and the rhetoric associated with it ('the plain meaning
of the text') be quietly retired from Christian use? Is it not simply an
uncomfortable reminder of those long-gone days when we took
words at their face value, oblivious to the leaps of logic we made
whenever we read the biblical texts? Berkouwer's forty-year-old
observation appears vindicated in the current climate: 'No confession
concerning Scripture is more disturbing to the church than the con-
fession of its perspicuity.'[9]

There is undoubtedly a contemporary flavour to these objections
to the doctrine of Scripture's clarity. The phenomenon known
mostly as 'postmodernism' has reshaped old questions and gener-
ated new ones. Nevertheless, the debate itself is not new.
Considerable ink has been spilt over the centuries in attempts to
challenge or defend the idea that Scripture, both in form and in sub-
stance, is clear. It is one of the many examples of our arrogance
mixed with ignorance that we at the beginning of the third millen-
nium consider responsible hermeneutics a relatively recent acquisi-
tion. Christian teachers have been exegeting the Scriptures since the
Day of Pentecost, if not before, and questions of interpretation,
indeed of the relative clarity or obscurity of the ancient texts and
their own, were recognized and addressed from the earliest days.[10] So
before we explore a little more fully the particular shape objections
to this doctrine have taken in more recent years, it is worth identify-
ing the reasons why some in earlier times found it difficult to accept
that Scripture is clear.

Traditional objections to the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture

Objections to any suggestion that Scripture is clear and that, as a con-
sequence, a direct appeal to the words of Scripture is enough to settle
controversy, came from various directions. Nevertheless, it may be
helpful to identify five basic protests and deal with more specific
issues under those headings. As those who sought to defend this doc-
trine in the past made plain, none of these objections is unanswer-
able. However, no attempt will be made to rehearse those answers or

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[9] Berkouwer 1966–7: 288.
[10] The most obvious example of such a concern in the New Testament is 2 Pet. 3:14–16.

to construct our own at this point. The objections themselves need to be taken seriously and the weight of the arguments borne in full. As the history of Christian theology more generally makes plain, far too much theologizing has in fact been a response to a caricature rather than engagement with an issue.

1. *The doctrine fails to take account of the transcendent mystery that is the subject of Scripture*. This was one of the chief objections raised against the idea of Scripture's clarity by the great early-modern humanist, Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536). In his exchange with Martin Luther over the status of the human will, Erasmus objected that Luther's confident appeal to the Scriptures ran the risk of blasphemy, or at least of lacking the restraint necessary when speaking about God and his purposes on this side of the Lord's return. While not every passage of Scripture is opaque, it ought not to surprise us if many are, since God and his purposes are greater than the human mind. Does not Scripture itself say so? Erasmus' appeal at this point was to Romans 11:33 and Isaiah 40:13:

> Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
>
> (Rom. 11:33)

> Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel?
>
> (Isa. 40:13)[11]

Paul and Isaiah, Erasmus suggested, tread a 'wiser and more reverent course' than the one to which Luther had committed himself. In fact, Luther's confidence was actually presumption. He had dared to reduce God to a series of doctrinal assertions without realizing that at significant points God's person and will go far beyond our linguistic capacity. Erasmus was protesting that all human language, including the language of Scripture, is stretched to breaking point when it comes to expressing the reality of God and his purposes.[12] From this perspective, insistence upon the clarity of Scripture represents a

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[11] As translator Gordon Rupp points out, Erasmus (or his printer) misquotes Isaiah, replacing *adiuvit* with *audivit,* resulting in 'Who has heard the Spirit of the Lord . . .' (Erasmus 1524a: 38 fn. 11).

[12] This is part of what Rowan Williams describes as 'the sheer difficulty of talking about God' (Williams 2003).

failure at an elementary level: recasting God in the dimensions of his creatures. As Karl Barth would put it, 'The revelation attested in the Bible is the revelation of the God who by nature cannot be unveiled to men.'[13]

2. *The doctrine fails to acknowledge the God-given role of the church as the interpreter of Scripture.* This objection lay close to the heart of the dispute about Scripture's clarity at the time of the Reformation. Luther and those who stood with him reacted to what they saw as a radical inflation of the role of the church as guardian and interpreter of the Scriptures. Indeed, Luther considered that the papal claim to be the authoritative interpreter of Scripture was the second of three walls built to preserve the power of Rome and to stymie all attempts at reformation.[14] However, the idea that the church had an important role in guarding the integrity of the Scriptures and attesting genuine interpretations had a much more benign origin. Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyons, sought to counter the appeal to Scripture by the heretics of his day by insisting that the church, led by bishops as successors of the apostles, is the guarantor of true interpretation:

> True knowledge is the teaching of the Apostles, the ancient con-stitution of the Church for the whole world, and the mark of Christ's body according to the successions of bishops, to whom they committed that Church, which is in every single place. [The Church] carefully and continuously comes to us without pre-tence, [providing] a very full handling of the Scriptures, and a legitimate exposition according to the Scriptures, careful, accepting neither addition nor subtraction, reading without falsification, without danger, and without blasphemy.[15]

It should be evident that Irenaeus considered the Scriptures to be inviolate and that the authority of the church does not extend to adding or subtracting from the biblical text. Yet the reality of hetero-dox appeals to the Old Testament or the writings of the apostles led him to insist upon an interpretative responsibility peculiar to the

[13] Barth 1932: 320 (*KD* I/1, 338 = *CD* I/1, 320). Note, as usual, that this is not all Barth has to say. In the pages that follow he will speak of God's 'permanent freedom to unveil Himself or to veil Himself' (342 = 324).

[14] Luther 1520a: 133–136 (*WA* VI, 411.8 – 412.38 = *LW* XLIV, 133–136).

[15] Irenaeus 189: 508 (*Adversus haereses* IV.xxxiii.8 [*PG* VII, 1077 = *ANF* I, 508]). The passage is notoriously difficult, being preserved partly in Greek and partly in Latin. The translation is my own. Cf. Irenaeus 189: 548 (*Adversus haereses* V.xx.2 [*PG* VII, 1177–1178 = *ANF* I, 548]).

orthodox churches.[16] Only by heeding the interpretative guidance of the true church could the danger of blasphemy be avoided.

This concern is even more obvious in one of the most famous statements about the church's role as guardian and interpreter of the Scriptures, from the *Commonitorium* of Vincent of Lérins written around AD 434:

> Here someone may possibly ask: Since the canon of the Scriptures is complete, and is abundantly sufficient for every purpose, what need is there to add to it the authority of the church's interpretation? The reason is, of course, that by its very depth the Holy Scripture is not received by all in one and the same sense, but its declarations are subject to interpretation, now in one way, now in another, so that, it would appear, we can find almost as many interpretations as there are men. Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, all another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, still another, and finally, Nestorius another. For this reason it is very necessary that, on account of so great intricacies of such varied error, the line used in the exposition of the prophets and apostles be made straight in accordance with the standard of ecclesiastical and catholic interpretation. Likewise in the catholic church itself especial care must be taken that we hold to that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by everyone.[17]

The last line points us in the direction of the famous 'Vincentian Canon', three cardinal virtues that enable an interpreter to identify the church's authorized interpretation: ecumenicity (everywhere), antiquity (always) and consensus (by everyone).[18] But once again the concern is to *preserve* the meaning of Scripture rather than to *constitute* it. The church's role is to be a responsible guardian of this treasure entrusted to her, contending against diverse and idiosyncratic interpretations.

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[16] See the complaints of Irenaeus about the interpretative practices of the heretics: Irenaeus 189: 320, 326 (*Adversus haereses* I.iii.6, I.viii.1 [*PG*, VII, 477, 521 = *ANF* I, 320, 326]). Cf. Tertullian 207: 377 (*Adversus Marcionem* IV.xix.6 [*CCSL* I, 592 = *ANF* III, 377]).

[17] Vincent 434: 132 (*Commonitorium* II.5 (*PL*, L, 640. My translation departs very little from that of C. A. Huertley in *NPNF*, 2nd Series, XI, 132).

[18] Vincent 434: 152 (*Commonitorium* XXVII.70 [*PL*, L, 674; *NPNF*, 2nd Series, XI, 152]).

However, in the centuries that followed, a shift took place that gave the church's interpretative function greater significance. In the wake of the Reformation, the Council of Trent declared in 1546 that the function of 'Holy Mother Church' is to 'pass judgment on the true meaning and interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures'.[19] The teaching of this council has been repeatedly affirmed in the centuries since. In its dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei verbum*, promulgated in 1965, Vatican II drew attention to God's continuing presence and activity in the church: 'God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son.'[20] It then continued:

> But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.
>
> It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.[21]

Until recently it may have been possible to characterize this line of argument as a peculiar conviction of the Roman Catholic Church. However, increasingly Protestant writers have also been willing to admit a much more corporate dimension to Christian interpretative responsibility, one that calls into question traditional appeals to the clarity of Scripture. To be sure, this has somewhat different contours

[19] 'Decretum de editione et usu sacrorum librorum', Council of Trent, Session IV, 8 April 1546.
[20] Vatican II, *Dei verbum*, II.8 available online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei_verbum_en.html.
[21] Vatican II, *Dei verbum*, II.10.

from the classic statements of Catholic doctrine, but lines of conver-
gence are apparent. So Robert Jenson writes:

> The primary hermeneutical principle for the church's reading
> of Scripture is – I want to insist – simply the church's own life
> . . . What God uses to guide our reading of the Bible is first and
> foremost the church's liturgy and devotion and catechesis and
> homiletics, as Scripture has its particular place in them.[22]

Elsewhere he declares, 'The slogan *sola scriptura*, if by that is meant
"apart from creed, teaching office, or authoritative liturgy", is an oxy-
moron.'[23]

Once again those who put forward such an argument against the
clarity of Scripture have often appealed to the Scriptures them-
selves.[24] Do they not teach that the same Spirit who moved the
prophets to speak and to write (2 Pet. 1:21) has been given to
the church to guide her 'into all truth' (John 16:12–15)? Did not the
apostle Peter expound with decisive authority the prophecies of Joel
on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14)? Did not the Jerusalem church
decide, in Acts 15, that Paul's gospel was a right and proper under-
standing of the Scriptures in the light of Jesus' life, death and resur-
rection? Does God not manifest his glory 'in the church' (Eph. 3:21)?
God's involvement with his people did not cease with the production
of the biblical texts. The Bible does not stand alone and the Christian
person's experience of the Bible occurs in a context. Indeed, a case
can be mounted for a certain priority of the church, at least from a
historical perspective, since the community predates the texts
addressed to it. Nevertheless, the most important part of the objec-
tors' argument is their insistence that God continues to be present
amongst his people by his Spirit, guiding and teaching through the
authorized teachers of the church.

3. *The doctrine fails to take seriously the nature of the words of
Scripture*. Whatever else we might say about the Bible, we cannot
deny that these pages are full of words, human words, arranged
according to the conventions of human language. Furthermore, these

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[22] Jenson 1995: 90.

[23] Jenson 1997: 28. See also Franke 2004: 192–193.

[24] E.g. 'To remove the Bible from its organic churchly setting and to attempt to
"exegete" it outside its ecclesial context is itself "uncritical" and "unscientific," since
such a method of reading and interpreting the Scriptures is contrary to the testimony
of the writings themselves, as well as the testimony of the church that produced them'
(Hopko 1995: 116).

words are each used from within a particular historical and social context. The recognition of these simple truths about Scripture lie behind the third classic objection to declarations of Scripture's clarity, which insists that such declarations regularly fail to take this genuine humanity of the biblical text seriously. Not only does the humanity of the text stand in stark contrast to the transcendence of God himself (objection 1 above), human language, especially in its written form, is a notoriously frail and fallible means of communication. We habitually mishear and misread each other, we choose the wrong words and convey our meaning obliquely. Those with malicious intent use words to cloak their intentions rather than make them known. Of course, communication is still possible; most of the time we do succeed in making ourselves, our thoughts, desires and plans known to each other through human words. Yet it *is* difficult. Human language is neither pristine nor ideal. In short, declarations of Scripture's clarity, especially those of a more absolute type, expect more of these words than they are able to deliver.

Some would suggest that such claims for clarity in fact arise from the belief that we need to affirm certain perfections of the biblical text in order to secure its authority in theology and the Christian life more generally. At times when the authority of the Bible seemed threatened, new and inflated claims were made by conservative forces. The usual suspects are the Lutheran and Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century and the 'heirs' of Hodge and Warfield in the twentieth. Karl Barth and others have argued that the rationale for this move is entirely mistaken and insist instead upon 'the vulnerability of the Bible' as a necessary corollary of its genuine humanity.[25] Barth himself warns that 'we must not compromise either directly or indirectly the humanity of its form and the possibility of the offence which can be taken at it':[26]

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[25] Barth 1938: 509 (*KD* I/2, 565 = *CD* I/2, 509). Rachel Muers speaks of God making his word 'vulnerable to mishearing' (Muers 2004: 116, 119).

[26] Barth 1938: 528 (*KD* I/2, 587 = *CD* I/2, 528). This is one feature of Barth's 'distinction yet relatedness' of witness and word, of the Bible and revelation: 'In the Bible we meet with human words written in human speech, and in these words, and therefore by means of them, we hear of the lordship of the triune God . . . If we want to think of the Bible as a real witness of divine revelation, then clearly we have to keep two things constantly before us and give them their due weight: the limitation and the positive element, its distinctiveness from revelation, in so far as it is only a human word about it, and its unity with it, in so far as revelation is the basis, object and content of this word. To avoid this, there is no point in ignoring the writtenness of Holy Writ for the sake of its holiness, its humanity for the sake of its divinity' (Barth 1938: 463 [*KD* I/2, 512 = *CD* I/2, 463]).

This offence is therefore grounded like the overcoming of it in
the mercy of God. For that reason it must not be denied and
for that reason, too, it must not be evaded. For that reason
every time we turn the Word of God into an infallible biblical
word of man or the biblical word of man into an infallible
Word of God we resist that which we ought never to resist, i.e.
the truth of the miracle that here fallible men speak the Word
of God in fallible human words – and we therefore resist the
sovereignty of grace, in which God Himself became man in
Christ, to glorify Himself in His humanity.[27]

Barth's direct target in this paragraph is any insistence upon the infal-
libility or inerrancy of the biblical text. Yet a little further along in
the same volume of the *Church Dogmatics* he makes clear that for
very similar reasons claims for the clarity of Scripture need careful
qualification:

In order to be proclaimed and heard again and again both in
the Church and the world, Holy Scripture requires to be
explained. As the Word of God it needs no explanation, of
course, since as such it is clear in itself. The Holy Ghost knows
very well what He has said to the prophets and apostles and
what through them He wills also to say to us. This clarity
which Scripture has in itself as God's Word, this objective *per-
spicuitas* which it possesses, is subject to no human respon-
sibility or care . . . But this Word in Scripture assumes the form
of a human word. Human words need interpretation because
as such they are ambiguous, not usually, of course, in the
intention of those who speak, but always for those who hear.[28]

It is this line of thinking that leads Gerrit Berkouwer to suggest
that at least some appeals to the clarity of Scripture 'lack respect for
the words of Scripture'.[29] They arbitrarily impose a special linguistic
property upon the text that is not possessed by other human
writing.[30] Indeed, some suggest that their unintended result is a kind

[27] Barth 1938: 529 (*KD* I/2, 588 = *CD* I/2, 529).
[28] Barth 1938: 712 (*KD* I/2, 798–799 = *CD* I/2, 712).
[29] Berkouwer 1966–7: 279. Berkouwer's targets here are 'spiritualism' and the insist-
ence of a simple clarity that renders unnecessary continual detailed exegesis of
Scripture.
[30] Anderson 1967: 67, 70.

of docetism, where the humanity of the biblical text proves to be unimportant or, more seriously, merely apparent.[31] To take the humanity of the text seriously means grappling with the imprecision of human language: there is rarely a mathematical exactness to human words. It also means grappling with the historical location of the biblical texts and the distance that creates between it and all but the original readers.

The genuine humanity of Scripture, including its historical location, is highlighted by the fact that most of its readers down through the ages have encountered it as a translated text. Without the activity of translators, transposing the original words into the vernacular of a myriad of people groups around the globe, the Scriptures would be accessible only to those trained in ancient Hebrew and Greek. Yet this very phenomenon of translation introduces its own problems.[32] At one level, there is the loss, to a greater or lesser extent, of the form of the original text. The most obvious example is Hebrew poetry, particularly the acrostic psalms. 'Translation is always a treason' the Italian proverb insists, and a Chinese author once likened its best products to 'the reverse side of a brocade – all the threads are there, but not the subtlety of colour or design'.[33] However, at another level, given that all translation involves interpretative choices and that alternative translations are often available (especially in languages such as English), an element of uncertainty can easily enter the process of reading the Bible. Even translations at the literal end of the spectrum can tend to close off interpretative options. Which form of the text, then, are we to consider clear? If most of us approach the text only as far as a translation will allow, does it make any sense to talk about the clarity of Scripture?

More than two centuries of historical criticism has raised additional questions about any robust affirmation of Scripture's clarity.[34] Taking the words of Scripture seriously, its practitioners suggest, means acknowledging that very little about this text is simple or straightforward. Opponents of the doctrine at the time of the

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[31] France 1982: 236.
[32] Silva 1987: 79.
[33] Okakura 1906: 19.
[34] De Senarclens spoke of how historical criticism sought 'to rediscover the humanity of the Bible' and to free the Word of God from a 'novel and illegitimate incarnation' in order to 'restore to Jesus Christ his living authority' (de Senarclens 1959: 287). Others speak of how historical criticism was, at its heart, a revolt against the Augustinian worldview, with its supernaturalist perspective and its priority of divine initiative over human action (Harrisville & Sundberg 2002: 5, 26–29).

Reformation had pointed to difficulties in the text such as apparent contradictions, ambiguities, broken syntax and even verses out of place in a narrative.[35] Yet the critical biblical scholarship that emerged in the wake of the Enlightenment went much further. It insisted that we cannot always move directly from the biblical narratives to the historical events to which they refer. Imagination, symbolism and different historiographical conventions make the move more complex than we might first suppose. There is a palpable diversity between – and in some cases within – the texts that complicates the picture further. Appeals to the clarity of Scripture may too easily be attempts to avoid messy historical realities and retreat behind traditional interpretations in defiance of the tremendous advances in specialist knowledge over the past two hundred years. Does a careful, scholarly examination of the text we actually have really lead to the doctrine of Scripture's clarity, or is it something brought to, indeed imposed upon, the Bible by those who refuse to look too closely?

4. *The doctrine fails in practice given the reality of diverse interpretations*. This ancient objection points to the most glaring empirical counter-evidence against the clarity of Scripture. If Scripture is clear, its true and normative meaning accessible and intelligible to all, then why are there so many different and even conflicting interpretations? We have already seen that this reality demanded explanation during the time of Irenaeus and Vincent of Lérins. It was even more of an embarrassment during the time of the Reformation, when the differences were not merely between Catholics and Protestants but between the Protestants themselves. Luther's protracted dispute with Zwingli and others over the words of Jesus at the Last Supper was merely the most notorious example.[36] Some scholars detect a retreat on the part of the Reformers themselves: a movement away from their early hermeneutical optimism forced upon them by the reality of such undeniable differences between equally learned and godly men.[37] It was one thing to write boldly about the clarity of Scripture in 1525; it was quite another to rehearse those same sentiments in 1530. A supposedly clear and compelling word had failed to bring unanimity of opinion.

The Catholic opponents of the Reformers did not hesitate to capitalize on this 'inconsistency'. Roberto Bellarmino used the old

[35] See Whitaker's careful account of this objection by Bellarmino and his point-by-point response (Whitaker 1588: 377–379).

[36] Thompson 1998a.

[37] McGrath 1999: 161. For a different view see Steinmetz 1984: 96–97. For a more detailed treatment of the idea in Luther's thought see Thompson 2004: 198–209.

figure of Scripture as a wax nose (*cereus nasus*), a text malleable in a variety of directions as heretics attempt to cloak their perfidy. In the absence of a judge to decide between them, people would simply concoct their own interpretation as a way of justifying their personal convictions. The so-called 'right of private judgment' (a much later term) was undeniably the path to theological anarchy.[38]

The same arguments have been repeated many times since the sixteenth century. Today a preponderance of biblical commentaries is cited as further evidence that the question of Scripture's meaning remains an open one.[39] Furthermore, some long-held understandings have been shown to be untenable given a better knowledge of the languages of Scripture and careful attention to the context and to biblical theology. Few today would insist with Luther and his contemporaries that the 'man of lawlessness' in 2 Thessalonians 2 or the 'antichrist' of 1 John 2 is the pope.[40] In some cases differences of opinion, such as that between Luther and Zwingli over the words 'this is my body', have hardened into firm theological positions with little prospect of reconciliation. Hard cases make bad law, it is true, but what are we to do with continuing differences over who is the 'I' in Romans 7, or what it means to be baptized for the dead in 1 Corinthians 15, or when and how Jesus preached to the spirits in prison in 1 Peter 3? An honest look at the history of exegesis or simply at the current state of Old Testament or New Testament study, we are told, exposes the folly of any talk about the clarity of Scripture.

5. *The doctrine fails by its own criterion, since Scripture confesses its own obscurity*. This final objection opens up the possibility not only that we could claim more for Scripture than it does for itself, but that we might be claiming what Scripture explicitly denies. Once again the classic presentation of this argument comes from Bellarmino in the sixteenth century who well understood its psychological impact. If his opponents claimed to be obedient to the Scriptures, if their basic stance on authority for Christian thinking and living was truly represented by the principle *sola scriptura*, then to demonstrate that Scripture did not claim what they were claiming for it and in fact acknowledged its own obscurity would be a powerful blow to the entire

[38] Abraham sees other serious theological problems generated by the Reformers' advocacy of the clarity of Scripture and its inevitable compromise by the disputes between them (Abraham 1998: 151–152).

[39] Carnley 2004: 105.

[40] Luther 1535–45: II, 383 (*WA* XLII, 536–537 = *LW* II, 383); Luther 1535: 335 (*WA* XL, 516 = *LW* XXVI, 335); Luther 1527: 252 (*WA* XX, 667–669 = *LW* XXX, 252).

Protestant system. This potential of Bellarmino's argument was rec-
ognized by those who sought to reply to him, such as William Whitaker
in the sixteenth century and François Turretin in the seventeenth.[41]

We will return to Bellarmino's arguments in more detail in the final
chapter. For our present purposes we need only note his appeal to
David's prayer for understanding in Psalm 119, the interpretative
assistance given to the disciples on the Emmaus road and also to the
eunuch on the road to Gaza, and the promise of the Spirit to guide
the disciples into all truth. None of these would be necessary, he
argued, if the meaning of Scripture was clear, accessible and intelli-
gible to all. Furthermore, this same pattern of conscious dependence
upon the interpretative assistance of the church could be discerned in
the writings of the early church Fathers as they sought to explain
Scripture. Those who had proposed and defended the doctrine of the
clarity of Scripture had presented the world with an unbiblical theo-
logical novelty.

It is evident just from this brief sketch that many of the questions
surrounding this doctrine have been raised repeatedly (and answered
repeatedly) over the last two thousand years. Although the debate
was most prominent in the early church and again in the sixteenth
and seventeenth centuries, an argument can be mounted that even the
medieval conversations about the priority of the literal or historical
sense and the legitimacy of allegorical interpretation were largely
variations on this same theme.[42] However, significant new dimensions
have been added to the discussion since the 1970s. These present new
challenges to those who would affirm the clarity of Scripture in the
third millennium.

The contemporary context of this discussion

Since the 1970s we have witnessed a massive shift in intellectual com-
mitments, not least in the fields of philosophy, literary theory and
theology. The challenge of postmodernism, both a protest at and the
progeny of modernism in all its forms, has dramatically changed the
landscape and any affirmation of the clarity of Scripture (inseparable
as it is from questions of the Bible's truth and authority) must take it
into account. Postmodernism cannot be ignored, even if there are

[41] Whittaker 1588: 367–370; Turretin 1679–85: 145–146.
[42] Callahan 2001: 105–126. For more detail on relevant developments in this period
see Smalley 1941; Evans 1984, 1985.

already signs that the ground is beginning to shift again.[43] We will keep returning to an engagement with postmodern perspectives in the chapters that follow. However, in order to help us appreciate the world into which any restatement of the doctrine of Scripture's clarity must venture, we turn now to look briefly at the three aca- demic fields I have mentioned as they bear upon the question.

Postmodern philosophy: Radically questioning epistemological certainty

There is a strongly reactive element to postmodernism, especially in its philosophical mode.[44] It is a repudiation of the central features of what is often called 'the Enlightenment project'. Chief amongst these is what might be termed 'modernist epistemology', a set of convictions about the capacity of human beings to know or apprehend reality and so to speak about truth. Epistemological questions have interested philosophers since at least the time of the protosceptic Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570–475 BC). He recognized that the process of gaining and validating knowledge was not as straightforward as many thought. The same issues kept resurfacing in different forms through the centuries, with important contributions by Zeno of Citium, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas. However, it was René Descartes (1596–1650) who famously raised the profile of epistemology with his search for an indubitable foundation upon which to reconstruct human knowledge in the face of a resurgent scepticism. He finally located that foundation, he believed, in the human ego, the 'I' of his famous 'I think therefore I am'. Here was a reliable starting point: the simple and undeniable fact that when I doubt everything, it is 'I' who doubts. From this foundation, through the application of a rigorous method, we can know the truth about things.[45] Whether through

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[43] Parker 2004. For a strong challenge to postmodernism, especially as it has influ- enced evangelical theology, see the other essays in that volume: Moreland and De Weese 2004; Smith 2004; Caneday 2004; and Wellum 2004.

[44] Cf. David Tracy's assessment, Tracy 1994:16. Paul Lakeland suggests that 'the post- modern elements in our contemporary world are all manifestations in one way or another of a breakdown of what have previously been taken to be "givens", fundamental coor- dinates of experience' (Lakeland 1997: 2). As we have already noted, Jean-François Lyotard famously summed up the postmodern condition as 'an incredulity toward meta- narratives' (Lyotard 1979: 7). Helpful and accessible discussions of postmodernism from the perspective of evangelical Christianity include Carson 1996: 57–137 (simplified and updated in Carson 2005: 87–124); Hicks 1998; and Groothuis 2000.

[45] Strictly speaking, the ego is only one of Descartes's indubitable foundations. Another is the conviction that, because he is perfect, God is no deceiver (Descartes 1641: 37–38).

careful logical argument or scientific measurement, observation and testing, we can proceed from the knowing subject to the truth of reality.

Mathematical precision became the ideal to which all the endeavours of human reason aspired. The ancient concern of philosophy for questions of metaphysics (loosely, the nature of reality) was swamped by the new priority given to questions of how and what we know.[46] This shift of emphasis in philosophy was reinforced by the repudiation of supernatural explanations, given intellectual credibility by the geological studies of James Hutton (1785) and Charles Lyle (1830–3), and Charles Darwin's work on biological evolution (1859, 1871). The result was a remarkable optimism about the accessibility of objective, universally applicable truth. This optimism seemed to be vindicated by the extraordinary achievements in the natural sciences and the development of technology through the application of critical methods of observation and testing.

Of course over the next three and half centuries there were protests. Not everyone was as persuaded as Descartes and his successors that some kind of purchase on objective truth was possible. David Hume embraced a profound scepticism, which prompted Immanuel Kant to explore the valid exercise of human reason as well as its limits. The so-called 'masters of suspicion' raised the possibility that our perception of reality, our convictions about what is true, might be shaped by our own vested interests: economics (Marx), psychosexuality (Freud) or the exercise of personal or corporate power (Nietzsche). There were also sophisticated attempts to correct the preoccupation with objectivity and to insist that there is a critical personal element to all our knowledge (Polanyi).[47] Some abandoned epistemology for linguistic analysis (Wittgenstein) or existentialism (Kierkegaard, Heidegger). More recently, others have pursued an alternative in the internalist epistemology associated with Laurence Bonjour and Roderick Chisholm.[48] Nevertheless, the dominant note

[46] 'The reign of epistemology has ended in European philosophy and theology' (Tracy 1994: 133). Carl Raschke credits Hegel with a critical climactic move here with his 'absorption of the Being into thought' (Raschke 2004: 40–41).

[47] Polanyi's 1951–2 Gifford Lectures explained, 'We must now recognise belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework' (Polanyi 1962: 266).

[48] Here a claim to knowledge is justified by conditions appropriately internal to the knower's perspective rather than some external foundation (Greco 2000: 181). See also Sosa & Bonjour 2003.

was one of optimism about the human capacity to grasp reality and identify objective truths about it.

Postmodernism has amplified the protests of the past and gener-ated a series of fresh challenges to the confident epistemology of modernism. In a world where cultural and religious pluralism are non-negotiable realities, the claim that we are capable of gaining access to universally valid truths, indeed the notion of absolute truth itself, is highly problematic. It smacks of imperialism and bigotry. It would compel you to use the words 'no' and 'wrong' in a world where some argue that these words are themselves violations of the rights of others. Nietzsche's suspicion that all claims to know what is true are in reality covert attempts to manipulate people has been developed in the detailed studies of Michel Foucault.[49] There is always a reason why you want to say this or that is true. The binary thinking of 'true and false' is not only archaic; it is self-interested (and self-interest may be personal or corporate).

Furthermore, our perceptions of reality and declarations of truth are more dependent upon our context than we often realize or admit. Pure objectivity is mythological. Hans-Georg Gadamer, amongst others, argued persuasively that we cannot detach ourselves or our situation from our history. It is important to unmask modernism's 'prejudice against prejudice' and recognize that our foremeanings and presuppositions help to shape the 'event' of understanding.[50]

> Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms – i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates . . . Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only

[49] 'The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society had its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mech-anisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault 1977: 72–73).
[50] Gadamer 1984: 271.

a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. *That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*[51]

Modernist epistemology, according to such thinking, is based on a series of illusions. We cannot, nor should we, escape the contingency of our truth claims. Of course we can still live with a degree of confidence. We can still make sense to each other within our particular 'language game' (Wittgenstein's overused and often misunderstood expression). Yet to make a claim for truth that extends beyond our own sociolinguistic community, beyond the particular story in which we locate ourselves, is either naive or manipulative (and perhaps both). Simply put, 'when people defend their worldview or some system of thought, they are simply defending their own fragile self-identity'.[52]

It is not difficult to see how these developments impact upon any attempt to speak about the clarity of Scripture. This doctrine is suspected of operating totally within the epistemological framework of modernism. It is far too committed to the project of achieving certainty. In particular, it is sometimes argued that a particular form of modernist epistemology, the Common Sense Realism associated with the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, is the real driving force behind the doctrine as it was classically defined.[53] This can be seen in the introduction to one contemporary textbook on hermeneutics:

> In the last century, however, the application of Scottish Common Sense Realism to Scripture has led many to assume that everyone can understand the Bible for themselves, that the surface of the text is sufficient to produce meaning in and of itself. Therefore, the need for hermeneutical principles to bridge the cultural gap was ignored, and individualistic interpretations abounded. For some reason, no one seemed to notice that this led to multiple meanings. The principle of perspicuity was extended to the hermeneutical process as well,

[51] Gadamer 1984: 276–277.
[52] Carson 1996: 31.
[53] Reid's own words help identify the heart of this approach: 'All knowledge, and all science, must be built upon principles that are self-evident; and of such principles, every man who has common sense is a competent judge, when he conceives them distinctly' (Reid 1785: 268).

> leading to misunderstanding in popular interpretation of
> Scripture and a very difficult situation today. Hermeneutics as
> a discipline demands a complex interpretive process in order
> to uncover the original clarity of Scripture.[54]

By binding itself so tightly to modernist epistemology, it is argued,
twentieth-century doctrines of Scripture, and perhaps especially the
doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, doomed itself to the same fate.
There are no unshakeable foundations upon which to build a certain
knowledge of reality. Likewise, interpretation is a complex process
and the clarity of Scripture is something that needs to be uncovered.
A clear and universally accessible Scripture in fact functions for evan-
gelical theology in much the same way as Descartes's indubitable
foundation operates in modernist epistemology more generally.[55]
Many have seen the implication: we are as removed from the meaning
of Scripture as we are from a grasp on reality itself and absolute
truths about it.[56]

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[54] Osborne 1991: 9–10. Common Sense Realism is regularly demonized and associ-
ation with it taken to discredit the way Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield
expounded the doctrine of Scripture (Ahlstrom 1955; Rogers & McKim 1979:
323–351; Vander Stelt 1978: 166–184; Marsden 1980: 110–115; Noll 1994: 84–99;
McGrath 1996: 168–170; Raschke 2004: 120–131). More nuanced than most criticisms
is that of Harriet Harris: 'The Scottish Common Sense philosophy has influenced fun-
damentalist thought, but its influence is neither specific nor comprehensive. It is not
specific because fundamentalist theologians have not engaged with the arguments of
Common Sense philosophers and the philosophy does not lead obviously in a funda-
mentalist direction. It is not comprehensive because many fundamentalist character-
istics – even those which have parallels in Common Sense philosophy – derive from
aspects of the Christian tradition which predate that philosophy . . . Common Sense
philosophy provided a framework within which to produce a conservative biblical
apologetic in a scientific age' (Harris 1998: 13–14). However, outside theological
circles, especially those interacting with classical evangelicalism, there is a growing
appreciation of Reid's philosophical contribution (Cuneo & Woudenberg 2004). The
shallowness of the argument that dismisses Princetonian doctrines of Scripture by
simple appeal to its association with Scottish Common Sense Realism has repeatedly
been exposed in recent years; e.g. Carson 1996: 153–154; Helseth 2004.

[55] Greer 2003: 37–38.

[56] So James K. A. Smith: 'everything is a matter of interpretation, including those
interpretations described as core orthodoxy. We never have the crisp, unadorned voice
of God because it is always heard and read through the lens of our finitude and situ-
ationality. Even when someone purports to deliver to us the unadorned voice of God,
or "what God meant", we always receive only someone's interpretation, which is
wearing the badge of divinity' (Smith 2000: 44). For a critique of what he labels Smith's
'hermeneutical Pelagianism' see Webster 2003a: 100.

Postmodern literary theory: From author to text to reader to interpretative community

There is, as one might expect, considerable overlap between developments in the field of philosophy and those in the field of literary theory and hermeneutics.[57] Similar concerns about the confident claims of modernism to be certain, this time about *the* meaning of a given text, have echoed throughout the massive output of literary critics since the 1960s or 1970s. Schleiermacher's definition of the technical side of interpretation has been a particular target: 'The point of the task is to understand the particular part of a coherent utterance as belonging in the specific sequence of thoughts of the writer.'[58]

The impact of postmodern literary theory on contemporary biblical hermeneutics is so significant that it will be a particular focus of our attention in later chapters. However, it may be worth providing a very brief orientation at this point.[59] With the broadest possible strokes we might say that literary theory has moved away from classical notions that the meaning of texts is determined, either entirely or in large measure, by the author's intention, through a fascination with structural features of the text as the carriers of meaning, to a greater appreciation of the contribution the reader brings to the task of understanding, and finally to an emphasis upon the role played by the interpretative community in shaping the reader's expectations of and stance towards the text. This should not be misunderstood as a lineal development with each perspective neatly building upon and eventually taking over from the one that preceded it. Indeed, many have continued to affirm the importance of traditional elements in the approach to texts, albeit in a modified way, while at the same time registering genuine appreciation of the important insights of other approaches. For our current purposes, though, we might simply highlight four general features of the discussions in this field that impact the work of biblical scholars.

[57] See Richard Rorty's perceptive, though dated, chapter entitled 'From Epistemology to Hermeneutics' (Rorty 1979: 315–356).

[58] Note that Schleiermacher was concerned that this be understood as a linguistic task: the thought-content he had in mind is 'known grammatically via the language' (Schleiermacher 1809–10: 254). See the discussion of how Schleiermacher has been misunderstood in Wolterstorff 2001: 73–75.

[59] Perhaps the best detailed treatment of these developments remains Vanhoozer 1998: 37–195. Note also the brief but stimulating treatment in Wolterstorff 2001: 73–82.

1. *The author does not have all the answers*. Roland Barthes once famously complained that 'The image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered around the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions . . .'[60] Building upon the work of the French poet Stephané Mallarmé, Barthes insisted that the notion of an author was an unnecessary limitation on textual meaning with palpable theological dimensions. If we insist upon an author and focus our interpretative efforts on seeking to establish the author's intention or message we are in effect closing off all other options.[61] Once we feel we have established the author's intention we have *the* authoritative interpretation. The need of the moment, he argued, was the 'anti-theological activity' of refusing to fix meaning in this way. 'To refuse to fix meaning is', he argued, 'in the end to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.'[62]

Barthes, with his suggestion that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' is one of the most aggressive pro-testors at the traditional preoccupation with the author as the one who designates 'the' meaning of the text.[63] Michel Foucault is another, who describes the author as 'the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning'.[64] However, they are part of a larger disquiet (not only amongst postmodern writers it should be said) over the role attrib-uted to the author in establishing the meaning of his or her text. Two problems seem to loom large. First, how are we to establish the inten-tion of the author, especially if it is not explicitly expressed? Second, how are we to overcome the possibility that the text may have turned out quite differently from the way the author intended?[65] Yet there is in fact a third and perhaps most critical danger: does not the very attempt itself reduce the shape of the interpretation either to biog-raphy or to psychological analysis? Is every text really only about its author in the end?

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[60] Barthes 1968: 126. A similar protest had been voiced earlier by advocates of the so-called New Criticism, notably in a previously mentioned article on 'the intentional fallacy' by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946).

[61] 'To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (Barthes 1968: 129).

[62] Barthes 1968: 129.

[63] Barthes 1968: 130.

[64] Foucault 1979: 119.

[65] Wolterstorff 2001: 75–76. In the background of many of these discussions is the famous article by Wimsatt and Beardsley on 'the intentional fallacy' (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946).

Paul Ricœur also spoke of what he called 'the semantic autonomy of the text'. It is important for him that a distinction be made between speaking and writing as modes of communication. Writing is not just a more permanent form of communication than speaking. When speech is transformed into writing very significant changes occur at a number of different levels. In speech the speaker and hearer are in the same 'dialogical situation'. There is the possibility of referring back to the speaker for clarification or explanation. Yet in writing and reading the relation is nowhere near as immediate; in his words, 'the dialogical situation has been exploded'.[66] The critical effect of this is that 'the author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide'. [67]

We will return to Ricœur in a moment. In the meantime it is worth considering the impact of so detaching the text's meaning from the author's communicative intention. Claims to an authoritative inter-pretation are now much more dubious. The door is opened to diverse interpretative possibilities, even conflicting or contradictory readings. There is a new unpredictability to the task of interpretation. This is compounded by the other end of the communicative chain, where a written text is potentially addressed to anyone who knows how to read. As Ricœur put it, 'It is part of the meaning of a text to be open to an indefinite number of readers and, therefore, of interpretations. This opportunity for multiple readings is the dialectical counterpart of the semantic autonomy of the text.'[68]

In such a context is it not simply naive to speak about the 'clarity' of a particular text and to suggest a particular reading commands the assent of all? This leads us to consider a second feature of contem-porary literary theory.

2. *Reading is as socially located as writing*. David Tracy has iden-tified a shift in the language of hermeneutics from a concern for 'his-torical context' to a recognition of 'social location'.[69] The significance

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[66] Ricœur 1976: 29.

[67] 'This dissociation of the verbal meaning of the text and the mental intention of the author gives to the concept of inscription its decisive significance, beyond the mere fixation of previous oral discourse. Inscription becomes synonymous with the seman-tic autonomy of the text, which results from the disconnection of the mental intention of the author from the verbal meaning of the text, of what the author meant and what the text means. The text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it. This concept of semantic autonomy is of tremendous importance for hermeneutics' (Ricœur 1976: 29–30).

[68] Ricœur 1976: 31–32.

[69] Tracy 1994: 135.

of each writer's linguistic community in shaping the texts he or she produces has long been recognized. In biblical studies this has meant extensive debate about the nature and impact of the Johannine community or the Graeco-Roman context of Paul's mission. However, Gadamer and, two decades later, Stanley Fish have emphasized the social location of all reading as well as all writing.

Gadamer's contribution is part of the larger theory of understanding we have already touched upon and was developed in his highly influential *Wahrheit und Methode*. In this book he built upon the work of his teacher Martin Heidegger, arguing that 'understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event' and that we who are trying to understand are 'always situated within traditions'.[70] We do not come to a text with a blank sheet, as if the text did all the work conveying its meaning. We come as those who have a 'horizon', a 'range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point'.[71] The text has its own horizon as well and a significant part of the process of understanding is acknowledging both the distance between them and the need to bring them into relationship of some kind. In his words, 'understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves'.[72]

Stanley Fish developed this notion of the social location of the interpreter in a new direction. Instead of speaking about horizons and traditions, he popularized the notion of 'interpretative communities'.[73]

> What I have been arguing is that meanings come already calculated, not because of norms embedded in the language but because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms. That structure, however, is not abstract and independent but social . . .[74]

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[70] Gadamer 1984: 300, 282. See Heidegger: 'Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us' (1927: 191–192). For an account of the intriguing debate between Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas on the relation of prejudice (that which we bring to the text) and critical reflection, see Ferretter 2003: 109–118.

[71] Gadamer 1984: 302. Gadamer attributes this notion of 'horizon' to Edmund Husserl, though the latter may have been influenced by William James's idea of 'fringes' (245).

[72] Gadamer 1984: 306.

[73] His influential book *Is There a Text in This Class?* is subtitled *The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Fish 1980).

[74] Fish 1980: 318.

Each reader approaches a text with a set of prejudices, interests and values, as well as a set of expectations about this particular text, which are all to various extents shaped by the cultural community in which he or she operates. There may indeed be aspects of a person's approach to the text that are idiosyncratic, yet the most basic parameters of expectation and method are determined by the community. As Fish himself put it:

> What I finally came to see was that the identification of what was real and normative occurred within interpretive communities and what was normative for the members of one community would be seen as strange (if it could be seen at all) by the members of another. In other words, there is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only 'ways of reading' that are extensions of community perspectives.[75]

Meaning is, by and large, conventional. Its contours are shaped by the group to which we belong (there are fairly obvious echoes here of Wittgenstein).[76] Such a perspective on understanding texts has very serious implications for the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture. If meaning is largely or even entirely determined by the reader who resides within an interpretative community, then how can we possibly decide between suggested meanings? Even if we were to propose criteria for such a discussion, these would themselves be open to the charge that they are merely conventional, the product of a particular interpretative community's perspective on the nature of texts in general or of this text in particular. What seems clear to one group may not be so clear to another. Indeed, this is what we should expect: 'there is no single way of reading that is correct or natural'.

3. *The world that matters is the world of the text*. We have already seen how one constraint on interpretation, the communicative intention of the author, has been removed by writers such as Barthes and Ricœur. Yet traditionally language has been understood as a way of signifying something, or referring to reality.[77] This too has been seen by some contemporary theorists as an unnecessary, even arbitrary,

[75] Fish 1980: 15–16.
[76] There is undoubtedly much more to Fish's argument than this brief summary can convey. For the best recent engagements from a Christian perspective see Vanhoozer 1998: 168–174; Ward 2002: 182–185; Ferretter 2003: 130–138.
[77] The basic building blocks of the Western view of signification are to be found in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*, completed about AD 426. See below, p. 116.

restriction on the possibilities of textual meaning. Early in the twen-
tieth century Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the important sources of
the 'structuralist' approach to linguistics and textual analysis, chal-
lenged any necessary connection between words and what is signified
by words. In an important sense, the meaning of words is arbitrary,
determined more by the place of the word in the total language
system to which it belongs.[78] The structural relationship of words
within a text became the important focus of attention for those who
followed de Saussure. However, his challenge to the centrality of
textual reference has been radicalized in more recent work.

Jacques Derrida and his program of 'deconstruction' is most often
cited in this regard. Derrida's own language is famously tortuous. He
is in fact suspicious of simplicity, once famously insisting that 'those
who wish to simplify at all costs and who raise a hue and cry about
obscurity because they do not recognize the unclarity of their good
old *Aufklärung* are in my eyes dangerous dogmatists and tedious
obscurantists'.[79] It is possible, even for powerfully influential think-
ers, to confuse obscurity with profundity and simplicity with super-
ficiality. Derrida calls into question the lingering sense of reference.
He speaks of the 'transcendental signified', by which he means any
proposed external reference of a text, either in terms of its author and
his psychology or the nature of reality itself. If we are to take texts
seriously, he argues, we need to recognize 'the absence of the
transcendental signified'.[80] So devastating is his critique that, as one
commentator notes, when Derrida is finished 'neither language nor
human self-awareness conceals any thread of reference to things as
they are'.[81] What we are left with is 'the infinite play of signification':

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[78] De Saussure 1916: 8–11.

[79] Derrida 1988: 119. One writer critiquing Derrida's literary model was castigated
in a review for his 'unproblematic prose and the clarity of his presentation, which are
the conceptual tools of . . . conservatism' (Zavarzadeh 1982: 333).

[80] 'Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the
center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no
natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an
infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when lan-
guage invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center
or origin, everything became discourse – provided we can agree on this word – that is
to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified
is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcen-
dental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely' (Derrida
1967b: 351, 353–354).

[81] Raschke 1982: 4. Raschke uses these words to describe how 'the movement of
deconstruction has set about to show that the cathedral of modern intellect is but a
mirage in cloud-cuckoo land'.

A CLEAR AND PRESENT WORD

one sign simply referring to another and that to another and so on.[82] Once we recognized this 'absence of the transcendental signified', writing, and indeed meaning itself, takes on a different appearance: 'From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs.'[83]

Derrida's talk of 'the infinite play of signification' has led some to suggest that a commitment to the essential indeterminacy of meaning is a critical element of his deconstructionist program. The play never ends and we cannot prematurely decide upon *the* meaning of a text. Certainly, when signs refer only to each other and 'acquire what sense they have from their contrast with other signs', meaning itself retains very little stability.[84] There is always another sign. In such a climate all talk of the clarity of this text, the Bible, sounds like a nostalgic if not frantic search for certainty and security. Such an interpretative utopia just doesn't exist. It is time to let go.

Once again Paul Ricœur has something to say at this point. Unlike Derrida, he wishes to retain a place for both sense (what is said) and reference (that about which it is said). Descriptive texts in particular do more than just endlessly move from sign to sign. Yet his idea of reference is not just a return to the classical model. Texts such as the Bible present their readers with a possible world, perhaps a number of such worlds, which they are invited to inhabit. There is still a world that matters and to which the text refers, but it is a world generated by the text itself.[85]

4. *We can no longer talk about 'the plain meaning' of a text*. This is the conclusion of much contemporary literary criticism. Against the temptation to be unequivocal and our constitutional tendency towards closure,[86] we are faced with the reality of interpretative difficulty and a variety of possible readings of any text, let alone the Bible. Not many take the extreme position of Derrida and suggest an inescapable and infinite play. Umberto Eco, for example, has insisted that the interpretative possibilities are not in fact limitless. We can in fact identify those interpretations that are contextually illegitimate.[87] Yet he too rejects any suggestion that there is a single plain meaning:

[82] Derrida 1967a: 49.
[83] Derrida 1967a: 50.
[84] Vanhoozer 1998: 62.
[85] Ricœur 1976: 36.
[86] Kermode 1979: 65. See the brief discussion in Callahan 2001: 259–262.
[87] '[M]any modern theories are unable to recognize that symbols are paradigmatically open to infinite meanings but syntagmatically, that is, textually, open only to the indefinite, but by no means infinite, interpretations allowed by the context' (Eco 1990: 21).

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> To recognize this principle [the principle of contextual limita-
> tion] does not mean to support the 'repressive' idea that a text
> has a unique meaning, guaranteed by some interpretive
> authority. It means, on the contrary, that any act of interpret-
> ation is a dialectic between openness and form, initiative on
> the part of the interpreter and contextual pressure.[88]

The process of understanding a text as it has been unfolded since
the 1960s or 1970s is indeed a complex one. To speak of the clarity of
the Scripture in a context informed by that discussion sounds a little
quaint or perhaps reactionary. It raises too many questions and
ignores too much scholarship. Whose plain reading are you talking
about? Aren't you prematurely closing down the conversation? What
is left to justify your privileging of this particular perspective?

Theology in the postmodern setting: A struggle for identity

Theology at the beginning of the twenty-first century has not escaped
either the pressures of pluralism or the challenges to certainty and
confidence that have made such a mark on contemporary philosophy
and literary theory. Ecumenism and interfaith dialogue have become
vital concerns of denominational bodies and are more insistent in
their demands for a review of both the style and content of tradi-
tional theological work. From the other direction it appears as if the
theological academy has rediscovered its ecclesial responsibilities,
with a renewed emphasis on the community of faith as the proper
context for theological reflection.[89] There is also a new tentativeness
discernible in some contemporary theological writing, matched with
(and perhaps arising from) a determination to avoid comparison with
fundamentalism, a term that lost whatever residual value it might
have had on 11 September 2001. Dogmatism is pounced upon wher-
ever it appears.

A feature of theology in both its Protestant and Catholic modes
since the 1970s has been a surge of interest in the doctrine of God,
and more particularly the doctrine of the Trinity. When writing the
preface for the second edition of his *The Promise of Trinitarian
Theology* in 1997, Colin Gunton was led to remark, 'suddenly we are

[88] Eco 1990: 21.
[89] E.g. the collection of essays in honour of Thomas Gillespie entitled *Theology in
the Service of the Church* (Aston 2000).

all trinitarians, or so it would seem'.[90] God is at the centre of theological reflection again, even those forms of it that accent the category of mystery and reappropriate the resources of the apophatic tradition. Of course in certain significant traditions God had never left centre stage, and certain forms of contemporary trinitarian reflection, it must be said, are overly concerned about the utility of the doctrine in a way that betrays a lingering inclination towards anthropocentric thinking. Nevertheless, this fresh appreciation of the fact that the way we think about God shapes the way we think about everything else has energized Christian theology at the turn of the millennium.

Some contemporary theologies have embraced postmodernism, arguing that it provides the tools with which to combat the aggressively secular and sometimes explicitly anti-Christian elements of modernism on the one hand and the rationalism of conservative elements within the Christian community on the other.[91] In a postmodern world, theology and church life need a new face, witness the arrival of post-conservative,[92] post-evangelical[93] and post-liberal[94] theologies, and, to choose just one example, the emerging church movement.[95] In a postmodern world, Christian evangelism and apologetics need not be constrained by modernist notions of proof and evidence. In a postmodern world, reflection means so much more than thinking, and theology means so much more than arguments about biblical texts and their implications. Postmodernism retains its flavour of protest even in the theological sphere, challenging authoritative traditions of exegesis and doctrine, and calling on us not to choose comfort and closure over authentic Christian existence. At its most radical edge, postmodern thinking provides 'a hermeneutic for the death of God'.[96] At its best, as David Tracy observes,

> postmodern theology is an honest if sometimes desperate attempt to let God as God be heard again; disrupting modern historical consciousness, unmasking the pretensions of modern

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[90] Gunton 1997: xv.

[91] Some of the more positive Christian responses to postmodernism include those from John R. Franke, Stanley Grenz, Carl Raschke and Merold Westphal (Grenz & Franke 2001; Raschke 2004; Westphal 2001).

[92] E.g. Grenz 2000; Grenz & Franke 2001.

[93] Tomlinson 1995.

[94] Lindbeck 1984; Liechty 1990; Lindbeck 2002.

[95] Long 2004; McLaren 2004. See the recent response to the emerging church movement in Carson 2005.

[96] Taylor 1984: 6.

rationality, demanding that attention be paid to all those others forgotten and marginalized by the modern project. *Theos* has returned to unsettle the dominance of modern *logos*.[97]

Nevertheless, the influence of postmodernism on Christian theology has not gone unchallenged. A number of serious critiques have been published in recent years. The timely challenge to modernist hubris is applauded while some postmodern analysis is disputed and many of its own positive proposals are revealed to be incoherent and destructive of biblical and creedal Christianity.[98] Nevertheless, movements in theology always seem to lag behind larger intellectual currents, so while postmodernism may be beginning to fade in the academy generally, its challenge to classical Christian theology may well be felt for some time yet.

Once again these developments have had a significant impact on contemporary attempts to explain the Christian doctrine of Scripture in general and the clarity of Scripture in particular. In addition to rehearsing the traditional objections we examined earlier, classical accounts of the doctrine are regularly described today as rationalistic or overstated, even charged with attributing to the biblical text a perfection that is God's alone.[99] Some contemporary writers cast further doubt upon the doctrine by suggesting its natural home is nineteenth- and twentieth-century fundamentalism, replete as that was with debts to its modernist context. The clarity of Scripture is thus caught up in the persistent and somewhat frantic assaults upon the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.[100] Others draw attention to the way the doctrine functions within a particular theological tradition, arising out of a polemical context and reinforcing conservative readings. Here is a powerful instrument to effect theological closure, generating a 'totalising intepretation that brooks no dissent'.[101] Faced with such charges, contemporary accounts to affirm Scripture's clarity sometimes seem tangled, pessimistic and defensive.[102]

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[97] Tracy 1994: 37.
[98] There are many such critiques, but amongst the most helpful are Carson 1996 and the stimulating collection of essays edited by Erickson, Helseth and Taylor (2004).
[99] Webster 2005: 35, 43.
[100] Harris 1998: 288–289.
[101] Cowdell 2004: 123.
[102] Callahan 2001: 48.

A reason to think again

Given these challenges to the doctrine, some very ancient and others the product of contemporary trends in thought and practice, any restatement of the clarity of Scripture might seem doomed to derision. Perhaps this explains the virtual disappearance of the doctrine from recent theological discussion. However, this is an historical anomaly. The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture has a long and honourable pedigree. It is demonstrably more than a construct of the sixteenth-century Reformation or a nineteenth-century alliance with modernist epistemological optimism.[103] Affirmations of Scripture's clarity have stubbornly persisted despite the best efforts of their detractors, and most recently sophisticated theological arguments have been presented for taking those affirmations with the utmost seriousness.[104] There are good reasons to think again about this neglected doctrine.

Perhaps chief amongst them is the impact that the neglect of this doctrine has upon the lives of the people of God. Neglect or dismissal of the clarity of Scripture almost inevitably undermines all talk of the authority of Scripture. How is a text supposed to function authoritatively if its meaning is considered to be inaccessible? The history of the European churches in the centuries just prior to the Reformation would seem to be eloquent testimony to the reality of such a consequence. As one contemporary writer puts it, 'yielding to the word is premised upon its clarity'.[105] The outworking of this principle in a negative direction can be seen in a number of current ethical debates. Few are willing to deny the authority of Scripture in principle, but there is a disturbing reluctance on the part of many to allow Scripture to have the final word, precisely because this conviction concerning its clarity has been lost.

All the objections and qualifications we have examined in this chapter are answerable and in fact have been answered in the long history of this doctrine. It is surprising how little is really new in the contemporary confusion. Classic Christian confidence that the

[103] See, amongst others, Whitaker 1588: 393–401; and Callahan 2001: 50–159. Note Callahan's conclusion that 'the subject of Scripture's clarity and obscurity neither begins nor ends with the Protestant Reformation', even if 'what Protestantism does with perspicuity is somewhat unique in that the subject becomes more prominent in its own right' (159).

[104] I think particularly of recent work by John Webster of the University of Aberdeen. Webster 2003a: 91–101; 2005: 33–67.

[105] Callahan 2001: 268. See also Carson 1997: 97.

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ordinary man or woman (the ploughboy of Erasmus, Tyndale and Luther) can read and understand the Scriptures is well grounded. Yet today the doctrine needs a robust theological exposition rather than a purely historical or literary one. To such an exposition we now turn.