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**The Bible Teaches ...
Through a Glass Darkly**

Christ is the Question
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The Bible Teaches ... through a Glass, Darkly

Whenever I hear someone say, “The Bible clearly teaches...,” I am reminded of an experience I had very early in my days as a candidate for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church. I was only a junior in the university, and I should never have been turned loose on an unsuspecting congregation, but a combination of the Presbytery’s shortage of ordained pastors with the mutual economic convenience of the congregation and myself—they were too poor to pay a real minister and I so broke I took anything I could get—brought me together with a tiny, rural congregation near Northport, Alabama. The Bethel Presbyterian Church. They eventually fired me, in defiance or ignorance of all Presbyterian order, but rather later than I had expected, given our clash of expectations. By that time I had come to love them, and a few of them even came to love me. It was a learning experience for both sides. I’m not sure what they learned, but one of the things I learned was the astonishing array of ways the Bible holds authority among ordinary believers.

One Sunday, as early-comers chattered away before the service began, one of our pillars declared that one of his favorite ’coon dogs had just had puppies. Somebody asked him how much he was going to sell them for. “Oh,” said he, “I can’t do that. It says in the Bible, ‘Thou shalt not take the price of a dog.’” There was silence, as all eyes turned to me, the student, the expert from the University, the preacher. And yet again, I failed them utterly. I said I didn’t know that verse, and I’d have to look it up.

I did look it up. It really is there. In the King James Version of Deuteronomy 23:18, the Bible says, and I quote, “Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the LORD thy God for any vow: for even both these are abomination unto the LORD thy God.” Well, if I had been better of memory or quicker of wit, I could have set the puppy owner’s mind at ease. As far as I know, he hadn’t made any vow requiring to be paid in church, and in any case, if he did sell his puppies, as long as he kept the money out of the collection plate, it would seem the LORD God would not mind. Or I could have seized this as an Educational

Opportunity, to preach about texts in their context. What was the “hire of a whore” doing in the same sentence with “the price of a dog”? Newer translations, of course, make things a little clearer. The Revised English Bible, for example, translates or rather paraphrases, “You must not allow a common prostitute’s fee, or the pay of a male prostitute, to be brought into the house of the LORD your God in fulfilment of any vow.” The new *Jewish Study Bible* keeps to a literal translation but adds a footnote to the same effect. In the event, however, I failed my little congregation at Bethel Presbyterian, and for all I know, they may still have trouble buying and selling coon dogs in that place. Though, knowing their ingenuity in things of this world, I bet they worked out a barter arrangement pretty quickly.

The Trouble with the Literal

All right, I admit the example is a little silly, but it really did happen. And it illustrates some of the problems hidden behind our debates over the “meaning” of scripture. The issue may seem trivial, but the structure of the argument that was implied by my dog owner’s scruples is not different from that mounted by many of those spokesmen who are so stridently and confidently proclaiming God’s easy answer to the complicated problems we are facing in our national life today. “The Bible clearly teaches...”—you fill in the blank. And such arguments are taken seriously—sometimes with deadly seriousness—by many people.

There are several tangled issues here. Let’s see if we can just sort them out. To begin with, there is the problem of what is “literal.” Some of you would immediately accuse my dog owner of being *too literal* in his reading of scripture. At one level that’s surely true. “Literal” at this level means something like the meaning you would arrive at if you had to look up every word in the dictionary and accepted the first definition provided. If you’ve tried to read the user’s guide for a new electronic device produced in, say, Japan or South Korea, you know what that kind of translation looks like. The native speaker doesn’t use language that way. Ordinary language careens happily between ostensive meanings and tropes of all kinds without any loss of the power to communicate. If I had said to my worried dog owner, “It’s raining cats and dogs,” I don’t

imagine for a minute that he would have rushed to the window to see if Persians, Maine Coons, Pekingese, and poodles were descending from the heavens. Within the community of competent speakers of a particular language, we understand that kind of code-shifting without thinking about it. Our everyday speech is crammed with metaphors. And a little common sense helps. As St. Paul said, as he cheerfully abandoned the literal meaning of a text he was quoting from that same book of Deuteronomy, in order to make it say something altogether different, “Is it oxen that God cares about?” (1 Cor 9:9). Equally we might ask, commonsensically, “Is it the price of dogs that God cares about?” But wait a minute. I think the historical critic will likely say, “But in fact the compiler of the laws of Deuteronomy really did think God cared about oxen and their welfare.” And perhaps she will go on to say, “And so ought we to care about the welfare of all living creatures. Including not only oxen but also whales and, for that matter, dogs.” So perhaps there are times when we ought to read “literally” and times when it is deeply misleading to do so. There are at least two problems, then, right here at the beginning: (1) “When is the literal really literal?” and (2) “How do we move from whatever the literal meaning is (or was) to that ‘And so ought we’?”

From “Literal” to “Historical”

Let’s go back to the “literal” meaning of Deut 23:18 (19). How do we know that “dog” here doesn’t mean a quadruped with a wagging tail, but instead is a slang term for a male prostitute such as were active in Canaanite fertility cults? We know that because of historical research into language usage. And that knowledge amounts to our persuasion, or rather the persuasion of the linguistic experts whose opinion we trust, that a native speaker of Hebrew in ancient Israel, hearing the phrase *מְהִיר כָּלָב*, “price of a dog,” side by side with the phrase *אֶתְנֵן זֹנָה*, “fee of a prostitute,” would immediately have understood that “dog,” too, meant a kind of prostitute. Just the same way you and I know that “raining cats and dogs” means a very heavy rain, not that tabbies and beagles are falling from the sky. Making that kind of judgment is what modern biblical scholarship does. On the whole it does it very well. Mind you, the process can be

very complicated, as all the students of ancient near eastern languages here will attest, but the central idea is fairly simple: the plain or literal meaning of a text is what it would have meant in its *historical* setting to a competent native speaker of its *original* language. We'll come back to that notion, which is an important one. But first, let's notice how very modern it is.

For most of Christian history, about eighteen centuries in fact, the "literal sense" meant something quite different. The literal sense of a text was its face value to a reader or hearer who was formed by the Christian experience and the Christian story, by the church's liturgy, its creeds, its catechism, its hymns, its ethos. It was the plain meaning. A text might have other meanings as well, and for theologians and preachers these "spiritual" meanings might be even more important—the allegorical meaning, the moral, and the anagogical. But the plain meaning was there for all—all, that is, who had been socialized properly into the Christian community and its traditions. The literal meaning was an insider's meaning, but for the insider it seemed to reside *in the text itself*. In fact the meaning, like all meaning, lived in the field between the text and the community that used it, between text and audience. Meaning was transactional, but not consciously so. And it *worked* as the literal meaning precisely because the transactions were unconscious. The text meant what the text said.

Beginning early in the eighteenth century, as Hans Frei has pointed out, a change took place in the way texts, and all language, were understood to signify. This change follows the exaltation of the powers of reason by the Enlightenment and the glorification of objective observation by the new empirical sciences. The result, says Frei, is a radical *simplification* of meaning. "Concepts like 'fact,' 'probability,' and 'verification,'" he says, "turned all language into a mirror of reality or a perceptual report of our knowledge of what is extramental." Real meaning becomes *ostensive* meaning, that is, a text *means* by *referring* to something outside itself: something in the "real" world, a thing, a fact, an event. Frei, of course, particularly laments the effect that this narrowing of meaning had upon the way in which we read *narrative*; indeed he speaks of the "Eclipse of Biblical Narrative." Now the question whether a story is "true" or not turns into the question whether the events the story narrates really happened that way. If we cannot believe that a great

fish really swallowed Jonah and spit him out again unharmed, then there is no truth in the story. And whether we can believe the fish part of the story is a question to be settled by reason and by observation. Has anyone ever in fact seen a fish that could swallow a man whole? Is it rational to suppose that, if such a fish existed and if such a man were swallowed, said man would survive three days and three nights of confinement in the fish's stomach? In a rational universe, is it *moral* to suppose that the Creator would suspend all normal laws of biology and physics just to teach Jonah and the Ninevites a lesson? The change of focus affects equally the modernists and their opponents. The modernist looks at scripture and announces, with Sportin' Life of *Porgy and Bess*, "The things that you're liable / To read in the Bible / They ain't necessarily so. And the fundamentalist responds, "Oh, yes they is!" This new epistemology creates a new kind of literalism, and you're either for it or against it, but both sides are playing more or less the same language game.

The way in which the new temper of the Enlightenment most directly affected biblical interpretation was through the rise of modern historiography. The ideals of rationality, universality, neutrality of perspective, and objective verification—ideals which reigned in the new physical sciences—naturally became the goals of scientific history as well. Because so much of the Bible contains accounts of things that are said to have happened in the past, biblical scholars had to become historians. The most fundamental of exegetical sciences, the study of language, becomes a historical discipline, for language changes over time, and what a word meant in Plato's time is not necessarily the same as what it meant in the common language of Rome's eastern provinces four or five centuries later. The literal sense of the text becomes the historical sense. When the literal sense has become the historical sense, literalism has become fundamentalism, the only alternative seems to be a knowing skepticism, and in the process what was the plain sense of the text has often been lost from view.

The Triumph of the Expert and the Self-Defeat of the Doctrine of Scripture's Clarity

The triumph of modern historicism is at the same time the triumph of the expert. When the plain

sense of the text becomes the historical meaning, then two degrees of separation impose themselves between people like my naive dog owner at Bethel Presbyterian and the text they are trying to live by. First, they have to live in a *now* which is separated by a far greater distance than they imagine from *then*. What the text *meant* is not necessarily, and indeed very often not, what it *means*. Second, because the ordinary readers lack the skills of the historical philologist and the historian of ancient society, they are separated from that expertise which has now become necessary to know the historical meaning of the text.

There is a very sad irony in this double separation. My dog owner had undoubtedly been taught, since he was a good Presbyterian, that every person ought to read the Bible for him- or herself and to try to live by its plain meaning. The conviction that scripture is clear in itself has played a fundamental role in the development of those traditions that are rooted in the Protestant Reformation. The doctrine of the *claritas scripturae* was one of Luther's strongest weapons against the papacy and the whole hierarchy of the church arrayed against him. For if scripture seemed obscure in itself—and many an innocent reader has thought it did—then it must be kept out of the hands of the naive reader. For that reader, the truths of scripture must be distilled and filtered by those who were anchored in the safe tradition of the church's interpretation and who were authorized and legitimated by the church to teach that filtered truth. But if the essential truths of scripture were clear in themselves, then any reader might say with Luther, "I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God." Insistence on *sola scriptura* as the rule for faith and life required, then, that one also embrace the doctrine of scripture's clarity. So when Erasmus pointed out that there were rather a lot of things in scripture that were less than transparent, Luther denounced him vehemently not only for his sophistic skepticism but for a position that supported the papacy. If there were things hard to understand in scripture (as Luther surely knew there were), then the fault did not lie in scripture. It lay rather in our own sin. Calvin, of course, agreed. All our powers of knowing have been corrupted by sin, so that we cannot know aright without the spirit's help.

The doctrine had its dangers, however, as the Reformers quickly saw. Both Luther and Calvin were quite impatient with those unruly prophets who sprang up around them, claiming to find by the spirit all kinds of novelties in scripture and producing all kinds of disorder by their preaching. Evidently the clarity of scripture was a bit tricky and depended a lot on who was doing the looking. As recent scholarly investigations of the doctrine of *claritas* have pointed out, it was a polemical doctrine from the outset, and the context determined its application.

This tension between the plain sense of scripture as defined by the common sense of the tradition, on the one hand, and, on the other, the untrammelled freedom of the individual interpreter, guided only by what the Spirit seemed to be saying in his or her heart, determined the future of interpretation down to our own day. This tension was magnified and altered by developments in the academy, on one side, and in popular culture, on the other.

The academic side of the story is one of the steady professionalization of biblical interpretation. On the face of it, there's nothing wrong with that. The Reformers were scholars. Luther is reported to have said, "They can excommunicate me, but they can't take away my doctorate." The mainstream heirs of the Reformation have always encouraged scholarship. They were instrumental in the founding of many of the great universities in this country, Emory among them. From the doctrines of *sola scriptura* and *claritas scripturae* follow directly the immense and successful labors at translation of the Bible into ordinary languages that have gone on for five centuries. The Reformers thought the main cause of the Bible's obscurity was sin, but they also knew that even the purest saint could not understand what מְהִירָ כְּלָב meant if she didn't know Hebrew.

However, as I said earlier, the peculiar form of academic professionalism that we know today drew deeply upon the emerging ideals of the Enlightenment and of modern science. For biblical scholarship, that meant, as we have seen, the redefinition of the enterprise as a division of scientific history-writing. And there followed the necessary methodological skepticism without which no historian can do her job effectively. The hermeneutics of suspicion is the air we breathe. And there also followed a passionate devotion to the past as past, the determination to let the past

speak for itself, be it ever so different from what we think it ought to have been or done or said. Now when that happens, when history is devoted to learning “how it really was,” to the extent that this is possible, the historian will almost inevitably be at odds with any ongoing practice of using the story of the past for present goods. The more we succeed as historians, the more aware we are of the differences between past and present, and that abyss between then and now yawns before every would-be believer.

Moreover, professionalization, in the university as in our society in general, has meant specialization. When the University of Berlin was organized in 1810, it was intended to become a model of efficient application of Enlightenment principles in the modern world. And so it was. It was also a model of the best of Prussian bureaucracy. The organization of learning into distinct faculties or disciplines has become the standard by which we all live. “Divide and conquer” worked well for Caesar, and it works well for some kinds of learning. It also works well for the establishment of bureaucratic fiefdoms, as we all know very well indeed. Specialization enhances concentration and control. It makes possible sustained, intense effort on closely defined tasks. But it often separates us from just those people to whom we ought to be listening, and who might need to listen to us.

On the other side of the great divide, in popular culture, we have seen developments that also inhibited the free interchange between professional scholarship and lives of Christian laypeople. First, the radical individualism and subjectivism that has been characteristic of the modern western world, whose influence on the academic ways of knowing we have already talked about, has also been deeply imbedded in the popular ethos—perhaps more in North America than anywhere else on earth. So, as the evangelical scholar James Callahan has pointed out, “In nineteenth-century America perspicuity became a democratized affirmation of religious equality.” The Bible became the people’s book, and with that came that suspicion of the expert which might have been a healthy antidote to that professionalization and compartmentalization I mentioned a moment ago, but in practice leads to something close to anarchy in popular interpretation.

The tendency towards anarchy was intensified by two further characteristics of American

religion which emerged strongly in the age of the Western Frontier: pietism and anti-intellectualism. For the Pietist, the cure for scripture's apparent obscurity lay in one's heart, not in one's brain. Ardor, not learning, passion, not thinking would make everything plain.

The religion of the heart need not be opposed to religion of the mind, but in our national experience it has lent itself readily to an alliance with anti-intellectualism. In the nineteenth century, as the frontier rolled westward, we Presbyterians experienced that alliance acutely in the debates over the need for an educated clergy. From the pragmatic concern that the settlers in the new territories would be left without any spiritual guidance if they had to wait for enough candidates to make it through seminary, there rather soon developed a persuasion in many quarters that preachers with advanced degrees were not just an expensive luxury but likely to be out of touch with the real lives of people. What could they know about the Bible if they didn't know about life? What was needed was not preachers with book-learning, but preachers who were born again, with the fire of the Spirit in their bellies. Thus the same protestant tradition that gave to this country much of its zeal for education and many of its pioneering educational institutions also contributed to that pervasive anti-intellectualism that infects every part of our national life.

Meanwhile, the universities and other educational institutions began to discover a powerful tension between their protestant roots and their roots in the Enlightenment. That earlier struggle for liberation of the soul of the believer from the Roman hierarchy now had its counterpart in the struggle for liberation of the mind of the scholar from the institutions of Protestant scholasticism. So if in many of the churches there persists a pervasive anti-intellectualism, in the universities there grows up a pervasive intellectual anti-religionism.

The biblical scholar is caught in between. To the religious person outside the university, the biblical scholar's professionalization looks more and more like secularization. The success of historical research, which was supposed to make everything clear, instead serves only to make the Bible more and more obscure. The past recedes from our world. We learn how very different the ancient Israelites and the early Christians were from anything we experience. The biblical

scholar's methodological skepticism is hard to distinguish from unbelief, and of course it may lead to the latter. Yet within the university, the biblical scholar remains in most cases completely isolated from colleagues in other departments, who are likely to regard his whole field of study as a relic from the Age of Superstition.

And so we get that peculiar schizophrenia that makes popular discourse about religion so bizarre in the present-day mass media. At one end of the spectrum you have many self-styled evangelicals who make the *Left Behind* novels the best-selling books in the world. These Bible believers are embracing a peculiar kind of pre-millennialist narcissism, the roots of which lie in a heresy that was introduced in the early nineteenth century, the Dispensationalism of John Nelson Darby and his American followers. For these believers, most of whom are deeply distrustful of professional biblical scholarship, this strange and complex fantasy story is the literal sense of the Bible. More bizarre, but fully understandable in today's political climate, is the cynical exploitation of this set of beliefs by NeoCon strategists, who see in the rather weird role played by a restored state of Israel in Dispensationalism's projection of the latter days a means to gain religious support for their imperial and thoroughly secular plans for the Middle East.

At the other end of the spectrum, we find the democratization of nineteenth-century modernist historical criticism. Thus every new archaeological or manuscript discovery is promoted in the mass media as finally offering us the key to understanding who Jesus really was and what really happened in early Christianity. If there is a hint of the sensational in the discovery, and if there can be added the possibility that the truth has been kept from us by a dark conspiracy of the institutional church, then the results are made for television or for the blockbuster best-seller. Among the best known of these efforts to exploit the innocence of the mythical "intelligent layman" is the Jesus Seminar, about which Luke Johnson has written with acerbic wit and deadly accuracy. It turns out, of course, that the Jesus Seminar is perhaps the least irresponsible of such attempts to bring modern historicism to the masses. At least its publicists were genuinely trying to revive the mission of late nineteenth century historical criticism: to liberate the individual reader from the oppressive dogmas of institutional religion.

That is, to restore the literal sense as the historical sense, meaning thereby the history as reconstructed with some new piece of evidence as the universal key. By the time we come to Dan Brown's delightful fantasy, constructed with the novelist's delicious freedom to make up facts out of thin air, we are not surprised to find millions of readers prepared to believe that the *Da Vinci Code* actually reveals real secrets.

The history of the doctrine of the clarity of scripture, the belief that the meaning of scripture is transparent to the innocent reader, or the skillful reader, or the pious reader, thus seems to be the history of a self-consuming idea. The plain sense as it once existed, the common sense found in the text by the authoritative tradition, has vanished, and in its place is a chaotic puzzle to be decoded at the whim of whatever interpreter you may trust. The net result is that the situation warned against in the Letter to Ephesians rules popular religion in America: we are like "children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Eph 4:14 NRSV). The solution, Paul's disciple wrote, was to grow up. I put it to you that the doctrine of scripture's transparency, which has served various polemical purposes in the history of doctrine, is not for grown-ups. The conceit that "the Bible clearly teaches" this, that, and the other thing, is one of those childish things we ought to put away.

Trying to Rescue the Plain Sense

There have been a number of attempts in recent years to rescue the doctrine of scripture's clarity, and with it the notion of the plain or literal sense of the text. For example, James Callahan, the evangelical scholar I quoted earlier, is at pains to show that the doctrine has meaning only contextually. Its context is specifically the tradition of protestant hermeneutics, and its function is to describe how the text functions within the protestant community. What is clear in scripture is not any and every fact, viewpoint, or doctrine, but precisely that one central story that is essential for human salvation.

That certainly moves in the right direction. Here Callahan is adopting much of the program

that Hans Frei and several of his students, none of whom would call themselves evangelicals in Callahan's sense, have been working out. It was Frei who first suggested, as Kathy Tanner puts it, that the *sensus literalis* of scripture is a quasi-sociological category, "part of the self-description of the Christian community." Clarity is not a property of the text itself, but "a product of an interpretive tradition." Tanner goes on to suggest that, while such a way of thinking about interpretation looks very conservative on its face, it has in fact a built-in requirement for continual self-criticism. Her language is a little complicated, but I think it is worth quoting at length: "A tradition self-critical of its own specifications of the plain sense will arise...when the network of conventions that the plain sense helps to constitute turns back on that notion and complicates its function." Two factors are important: the practice of the canon, which by limiting the scriptures that are authoritative, implies that they have to be continually reinterpreted, and "the practice of classifying the plain sense of these texts under the rubric 'narrative.'" Classifying the plain sense as narrative is, of course, Hans Frei's distinctive turn—though he would have said he learned it from Karl Barth, who (David Kelsey remarked) regarded the whole Bible as the first non-fiction novel. Tanner thinks that move saves the Bible from those ways of construing it that get people into the kind of dilemmas represented by my dog owner at Bethel. So long as the nature of the plain sense is defined as, say, teaching cultic acts or forms of behavior, as rules or regulations or theological concepts, then it tends to be construed as something timeless and unchanging. But narrative is by its nature at one step removed from the act of "applying" it to the situation of the community. "The formation of a Christian character is always set as a task, in other words, by such a structural indeterminacy in Christian conventions of appealing to texts."

I like that. It reminds us of the crucial point made many years ago by David Kelsey, that the way the Bible is used in theology depends on the way you construe the Bible, that is, what you take the Bible essentially to be. My dog owner implicitly construed it as a giant and complex rule book. If it said you don't take the price of a dog into the temple, then you don't take the price of a dog into the temple. Period. Well, you couldn't be quite literal about it. For "temple" presumably you had to read "church," and since the whole business about vows was

incomprehensible, better forget that altogether and just avoid selling dogs. Never mind the selectivity that every reader of the Bible as rulebook inevitably falls into. It would never have occurred to my dog owner, or anybody else at Bethel Presbyterian, that by the same logic they ought not to have whipped cream on their jello, though any Orthodox Jew could have told them that. The Bible as rule book, in order to work at all, very much needs Mishnah and Talmuds and Responsa, and it's hard to see where it ends. Pretty much the same is true of the Bible as treasury of obligatory beliefs. What is the biblical doctrine of marriage? (There isn't one, so far as I can see.) What does the Bible teach about homosexuality? (In its plain sense, absolutely nothing, because "homosexuality" is the invention of a peculiarly modern construction of sexuality unknown to anybody in antiquity including the biblical writers.)

And yet the rulebook advocates have on their side the fact that, when you consider the genres of the biblical texts, there is a lot of it that sounds quite decidedly rule-like. Of course, there are a lot of other genres as well: there are proverbs and riddles, wisdom sayings of all sorts, fables and short stories, poems and hymns, bits of liturgy and prayers, and a whole bunch of letters, some of which are really pamphlets in letter form, and some things hard to classify. In other words, to classify the plain sense of scripture as narrative, you have to leave out a lot, though I like the idea of constructing a kind of master narrative out of the whole thing and making that narrative a touchstone by which our interpretation of all the parts has to be tested in various, constantly evolving ways. I think that is something like what George Lindbeck means in talking about the *intratextuality* of the church. What worries me about such a construal, however, is that it seems to entail a sectarian ecclesiology. There are some good things about that in today's world: implicitly it renounces the triumphalism that has tacitly controlled our use of the master narrative, and which has so commonly devolved into our approval of the various forms of imperialism we have invented. But to be satisfied with the sectarian limits of our hermeneutics will mean in our present situation, I am afraid, to abandon the public square to that polarization between the Fundamentalists and the naïve antireligionists that presently, *faute de mieux*, dominates all the mass media.

I think, on the whole, it is better to give up the notion of the *claritas scripturae* altogether, to stop telling people that the Bible clearly teaches anything, to admit to them that for the Bible to teach you anything you must be willing to submit to a rigorous discipline that entails, among other things, learning to be comfortable with ambiguity and a willingness to admit that there are things we do not know. Personally I agree with the “radical” suggestion of Maurice Wiles, the former Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford. He would renounce altogether the concept of the Bible as “binding authority” (the phrase is John Barton’s), adopting instead the phrase “indispensable resource” to describe scripture as authoritative. This would “make it easier for the church to acknowledge the varied nature of the stories to be found in the scriptural record,” including the huge role of conflict within the church that produced some of the variety. “And having come to a fuller recognition of that, we will be the more ready to acknowledge the continuing presence of diversity and conflict in the later church, not simply as evidence of a sadly fallen later age but as a characteristic of how things are, for good as well as for ill.” “For if the truth by which we are to live is not authoritatively given in the past but continually to be discovered in the present, such a process of discovery is bound to involve experimentation, with attendant error and conflict.”

Living with Obscurity

Let us then renounce the phrase, “The Bible clearly teaches...,” and every time we hear it, let us immediately be on our guard. Of course it is a convenient shorthand to personify the Bible as agent, in this case, as teacher. Saint Paul did that, when he quoted a text in Romans 10:6 with the introduction, “The righteousness of faith says...” But let us remember that when Paul said that, he then proceeded to give that text a meaning that was outrageously different from its contextual, grammatical plain sense. In our situation, when people say, “The Bible clearly teaches,” instead of, say, “We can learn from the Bible if we stand within a certain community’s tradition,” or “We can find these ideas in scripture if we construe scripture in such and such a way,” when they make the Bible the agent of their assertions they are really *masking* the locus of the authority they are claiming.

It is better to confess obscurity. To be sure, part of the obscurity is the result of the fact that we are sinners, all of us, as Calvin and Luther said. But part of it is the result of the fact that “we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end” (1 Cor 13:9f., NRSV). As Hans Frei has said, “Let us assume that the notion of a right interpretation of the Bible is itself not meaningless, but it is eschatological.” He was thinking, I suppose, of what Paul said a few verses after the ones I just quoted: “For now we see through a glass darkly”—or in more contemporary English, “Now we see puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully as I have been fully known.” And then he adds, you will recall, that the thing that endures above all is love. That might be worth remembering amidst all our hermeneutical conundrums.

One last word. What has all this to do with Jesus, the ostensible subject of these lectures? Well, for one thing, this: New Testament writers celebrate Jesus as the fulfillment of scripture. Yet we have seen that in order to see the events of the Jesus story as fulfilling scripture, then the literal sense of scripture, however construed, had often to be stood on its head. That was the reason for the vast interpretive drive of the first followers of Jesus, as I explained in my second lecture. Paul knew that better than anybody. For him to give up the clear meaning that scripture had held for him was like having to die and to live again as if a new person were living in him. That’s why he knew that the knowledge that counts comes only at the end, that the knowledge by which we struggle to live in the present is ἐν αἰνίγματι, like the puzzling reflections in a mirror.

Timothy Radcliffe, scripture scholar and former Master of the Dominican Order, has understood the implications of this quite clearly. He takes as his motto Emily Dickinson’s line, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant/ Success in circuit lies.” He applies that to what he has learned about studying scriptural texts: “You cannot march in and claim their meaning with the aid of some grand theory. Study is much more like sneaking up on the meaning of the text, trying this approach and then another, inching one’s way towards understanding.” And the prayer of people who teach and study in universities, he goes on, should echo Blake: “May God us keep / From single vision / And Newton’s sleep.” So, he says, universities must, as their first duty, be “places

of resistance to the imperialism of the single vision.” And positively, they must be “places where we learn to talk to strangers.” What it might mean in the twenty-first century to talk to strangers about Jesus will be the question I’ll take up in my final lecture tomorrow.