

The Clarity of Scripture, Part 1

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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The doctrine of the clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture (that the central message of the Bible is clear and understandable, and that the Bible itself can be properly interpreted in a normal, literal sense) has been a cornerstone of evangelical belief ever since the Reformation.

The dominant Roman Catholic idea had been that the Bible was obscure and difficult to understand. But the Reformers disagreed, arguing instead that anyone who could read could understand biblical teaching. Rather than limiting biblical interpretation to the clergy or the Magisterium, the Reformers encouraged lay Christians to study and interpret God's Word on their own. All of this was premised on the Reformed belief that the Bible itself was inherently clear, and that God had been able to communicate His message to men in an understandable fashion. As Luther explained to Erasmus:

But, if many things still remain abstruse to many, this does not arise from obscurity in the Scriptures, but from [our] own blindness or want [i.e. lack] of understanding, who do not go the way to see the all-perfect clearness of truth.... Let, therefore, wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear Scriptures of God.... If you speak of the internal clearness, no man sees one iota in the Scriptures but he that hath the Spirit of God.... If you speak of the external clearness, nothing whatever is left obscure or ambiguous; but all things that are in the Scriptures, are by the Word brought forth into the clearest light, and proclaimed to the whole world. (*Bondage of the Will*, 25-29)

While such an understanding, as Luther openly admits, did not demand complete agreement among Protestants on every secondary doctrine, it did establish an important principle: *That the Word of God was revealed in an understandable way, that its central message is clear, and that (because it is clear) all men are fully accountable to its message.*

In contrast to this, the teachings of Brian McLaren (and others of his Emergent persuasion) directly assault the doctrine of biblical clarity. Instead of promoting a settled confidence in the fact that the Bible can be understood, McLaren does just the opposite. And he does so in at least five important ways.

1. McLaren and Doctrinal Uncertainty

First, McLaren undermines the clarity of Scripture by denying that biblical doctrine can be held with any degree of certainty. Certainty, of course, comes from clarity. Where there is no clarity, there is no certainty. And vice versa.

For the Reformers, it was because the Bible was clear that they were certain about its central message. But not so for McLaren, who says : "Certainty is overrated . . . History teaches us that a lot of people thought they were certain and we found out they weren't." And in another place :

When we talk about the word 'faith' and the word 'certainty,' we've got a whole lot of problems there. What do we mean by 'certainty'? . . . Certainty can be dangerous. What we need is a proper confidence that's always seeking the truth and that's seeking to live in the way God wants us to live, but that also has the proper degree of self-critical and self-questioning passion.

In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren even makes it a point to champion ambiguity. He writes,

A warning: as in most of my other books, there are places here where I have gone out of my way to be provocative, mischievous, and unclear, reflecting my belief that clarity is sometimes overrated, and that shock, obscurity, playfulness, and intrigue (carefully articulated) often stimulate more thought than clarity.(pp. 22-23)

So it comes as no surprise, then, when he readily admits that he is not even sure if what he is espousing is correct.

If I seem to show too little respect for your opinions or thought, be assured I have equal doubts about my own, and I don't mind if you think I'm wrong. I'm sure I am wrong about many things, although I'm not sure exactly which things I'm wrong about. I'm even sure I'm wrong about what I think I'm right about in at least some cases. So wherever you think I'm wrong, you could be right. If, in the process of determining that I'm wrong, you are stimulated to think more deeply and broadly, I hope that I will have somehow served you anyway. (Ibid., 19-20)

For McLaren, benefit comes not from being right, but from dialoguing with those of all different viewpoints. Thus, there is great reward in always pursuing but never finally arriving at truth. Correctness in doctrine is something that cannot be attained--at least not with any degree of certainty. In McLaren's words, "The achievement of 'right thinking' therefore recedes, happily, farther beyond our grasp the more we pursue it. As it eludes us, we are strangely rewarded: we feel gratitude and love, humility and wonder, reverence and awe, adventure and homecoming"(*Generous Orthodoxy*, 296).In his view, Christians "must be open to the perpetual possibility that our received understandings of the gospel may be faulty, imbalanced, poorly nuanced, or downright warped and

twisted . . . [and must] continually expect to rediscover the gospel" (Ibid., 261).

McLaren rightly anticipates the fact that theological conservatives will find such an approach to biblical doctrine unacceptable.

If, for you, *orthodox* means finally "getting it right" or "getting it straight," mine is a pretty disappointing, curvy orthodoxy. But if, for you, orthodoxy isn't a list of correct doctrines, but rather the *doxa* in orthodoxy means "thinking" or "opinion," then the lifelong pursuit of expanding thinking and deepening, broadening opinions about God sounds like a delight, a joy. (Ibid., 293-94)

By reducing biblical doctrines to "opinions," McLaren denies both Scripture's clarity and its authority. Because the Bible is unclear, the chorus of divergent interpretations are all granted equal validity. This means, then, that the authority of any one viewpoint (as that which is correct) vanishes, since all sides are equally reduced to nothing more than personal opinion.

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