

LECTURES ON THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH THE TRUE VISIBLE CHURCH OF GOD ON EARTH by Dr. F. Pieper.²³

FIFTH LECTURE: A CHURCH BODY IS AN ORTHODOX CHURCH IF IT HOLDS FAST TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE CLARITY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE.



Above all things, one must **know the languages** in which Holy Scripture lies before us. If you wish to understand Holy Scripture in the original languages, then you must learn, above everything else, the original languages of the Scriptures; and, of course, not in a way where you can translate a passage with difficulty and with the help of a dictionary; but instead **you must learn the languages** so that they become familiar to you. If the original languages do not become familiar to you, **then the Scriptures are not clear to you in the original languages.** But then you should not also accuse the Scriptures of being dark (Ed. obscure), instead, when looking for the blame, you must look at yourself. This applies also to the reading of Holy Scripture in translations.

Many, also Lutheran Christians, in their hearts accuse Holy Scripture of being dark. When they hear the sentence spoken: "Holy Scripture is absolutely clear," then, although they may agree with this outwardly, yet in their hearts they put a question mark behind the clarity of Scripture. Why is this? The reason for this is: they do not read Holy Scripture diligently. "They are not familiar with the Scriptures," as Luther says; they read perhaps once a week in Holy Scripture and so Holy Scripture remains unfamiliar and dark to them. One must diligently study the Scriptures. Whoever is a diligent reader of Holy Scripture will also agree with ever greater confidence with the judgement which Holy Scripture passes about itself, namely, that it is a light to our path.

What Luther Teaches on the Clarity of Scripture.

Luther writes further (V, 456ff): "But if anyone of them attacks you and says: You must have the interpretation of the fathers, for Scripture is obscure, you must reply that this is not true. No clearer book has ever been written upon earth than Holy Scripture, which, compared with all other books, is like the sun compared with all other lights. They say this only to lead us away from Scripture and to exalt themselves as masters over us so that we should listen to their dreams. It is indeed a great and atrocious shame and vice perpetrated against Holy Scripture and all Christendom, to say that Scripture is obscure and not so clear that everyone may understand it and teach and prove from it his faith. Note this: Would it not be a great shame for you and me to be called a Christian and yet we would not know what we believed? But if I know what I believe, I know also what is written in Scripture, for Scripture teaches no more than Christ and the Christian faith. Hence if the believer only listens to Scripture, it is so clear and lucid to him that he could say without the glosses of all fathers and teachers: 'That is true, and that I also believe...'"

"It is indeed true that some passages in Scripture are obscure, but they teach nothing else than what in other places is set forth in clear and lucid passages. But then the heretics came and interpreted the obscure passages according to their own opinions, and with them they attacked the clear passages and the foundation of the faith. So the fathers fought against them with the clear passages and with them shed light upon the obscure, thus proving that what is said in the obscure passages is the same as that (said) in the clear..."

²³ **Dr. F. Pieper** (1852- 1931) delivered these lectures to the entire student body of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in the so-called "Lutherstunden" or **Luther Hours**. He followed a tradition started by Dr. Walther. On September 4, 1885 **Dr. Walther** stated: "We call these Friday evening lectures, which form, as it were, the conclusion of the week's instruction, 'Luther Hours,' chiefly because in these lectures I let our beloved father Luther, the God-appointed Reformer and the common teacher of our church, speak to you." (Walther, "Law and Gospel," p. 344). In these lectures Dr. Pieper deals with significant points found in Walther's outstanding book, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church the True Visible Church of God on Earth," and further explains them to his audience. This particular series

“Be fully assured and do not doubt that there is nothing clearer than the sun, that is, Scripture; even if a cloud passes before it, there is nothing else behind it than the same clear sun. If, then, there is an obscure passage in Scripture, do not doubt that behind it is surely the same truth which in another place is (taught) clearly; let him who cannot understand the dark (passages) hold to the clear.” (Exposition of the 37th Psalm [1521], V, 456 ff.; SL V, 334ff.).

The Entire Christian Doctrine is Revealed in Bible Texts which do not Require Interpretation

Regarding the clarity of Scripture we do not reject the work done by the expositors (Ed. commentators). That would be wrong. But the service that the expositors provide for us does not consist in this that they themselves explain Holy Scripture, but instead solely in this that they **show how Holy Scripture explains itself**.

Therefore, the pope hangs on so tenaciously to the position that the Scriptures are a dark book, because he himself wants to interpret the Scriptures, he wants to act the role of Oedipus. If the pope lets go of his fundamental position that Holy Scripture is a dark book, then he would have to resign. Then he would also not be able to build his empire with “tradition”. With the clear Scriptures in their hands Christians would reject all traditions that contradict the Scriptures. Therefore the pope must make the Scriptures dark to Christians, so they do not dare to argue against tradition with the Scriptures. Indeed, even his so-called “infallibility” would be of no help to him, if he were to let the position of the clarity of Holy Scripture stand, because then Christians would also judge him by the Scriptures. Then if he comes with his edicts (decrees) against the Scriptures, the same would happen to him as happened to the god Dagon which fell over when placed beside Israel’s Ark of the Covenant²⁴. No error can stand up beside the clear Scriptures, not even the papacy. That is why it is of the utmost importance for the pope to declare that Scripture is dark. I have already drawn your attention to the group of dark passages where there is no direct association with the doctrines of faith, but instead they contain historical events and chronological details. However, there are also such passages of Holy Scripture which deal with the doctrines of faith and still present difficulties for the expositor. In the face of such, how do the Scriptures remain clear?

As **Luther** explains²⁵ if there are passages of Holy Scripture, which, although they deal with doctrines of faith, are nevertheless dark, then there is contained in these passages nothing else written there than that which lies revealed in the clear passages. The same doctrine which, for example, is revealed in twenty-five places with quite clear words, may perhaps be presented in five places somewhat veiled; and intentionally so, namely, as Augustine says, for the purpose of preventing weariness [Ed. satiety], of encouraging diligent reading of the Scriptures and of continuous reflection on the words of Scripture. One could say: Is that not an arbitrary assumption? Not at all! **This assumption is based on Scripture itself**. Because Holy Scripture calls itself a light, so clear, that also the simple-minded and the foolish can understand it, all doctrines of the Scriptures must be revealed in passages where they present no difficulties for the uneducated and the lesser experienced. That is why Luther characterizes the true and the false teachers thus: The **true teachers** proceed in such a way that they **hold the clear passages against the dark ones**, and in the light which these clear passages shed on the doctrines, they expound the dark passages. The **false teachers** do it the other way round; as much as it is possible **they seek out the darkest passage** of Holy Scripture, put in their own meanings and from there now seek **to pervert the clear passages**. We have an example for this with the Chiliasts. When the Chiliasts wish to prove their Chiliasm, they particularly love to go into the Revelation of St. John, which, according to its whole nature as a book of prophecy, would have to present difficulties with the interpretation. In accordance with the Revelation of St. John they seek then to interpret all of Holy Scripture.

Luther’s position is this, as has been mentioned before: **All** of Christian doctrine is revealed in such passages of the Scriptures which do not require interpretation, that is, texts where obscurities do not need to be removed, but instead can be understood by mere listening and reading. This has already been said by

²⁴ 1 Sam.5:2.ff.

Augustine, as well as also by Luther and Chemnitz, and the theologians who came after who had Luther's spirit. In our time the opinion has underhandedly taken hold in the church that the Scriptures must first be "worked on exegetically," before one could obtain the Christian doctrines from them with certainty. In this respect it becomes clearly evident how far one has departed from the Lutheran name, from Luther and the Lutheran Church. They scarcely dare to go near the Scriptures without commentaries. But it is nevertheless obvious that the understanding of the Scriptures **are not determined first of all by the use of commentaries**, but instead by **mere listening and reading**. As it follows from Col. 4:16²⁶ and 1 Thess. 5:27²⁷, the apostolic letters were understood by mere listening and reading. Therefore **Luther** says: "When the believer only listens to the Scriptures, then they are so clear and bright to him that, he without all the glosses (notes) of the fathers and teachers, says: 'That is true; that I also believe.'" All that matters is that **one understands the language of the Scriptures and makes himself familiar with it**. Thereupon **Luther** points out again and again, that, according to its own declaration, Scripture contains "nothing more than Christ". **Christ is the scope and the real content of the whole Scriptures** (Acts 10:43²⁸; 1 Cor. 2:2²⁹). Now since Christ in His Person and in His work of Redemption "is known by clear and plain passages," what does it matter, "if some passages which deal with the same subjects are still dark?"

Reasons Why Scripture Is Dark to Many

Then what is the reason why Scripture is and remains dark to many? To this Luther (Pieper summarises Luther, Ed.) says:

1. The knowledge of the language is lacking or also one does not make himself familiar with the language of Scripture. "Otherwise nothing is more easily understood than God's Word." "No clearer book has ever been written upon earth than Holy Scripture." Also we must emphasize this for our time: If people nowadays would read the Scriptures as diligently as they read newspapers and other publications, then they would not accuse the Scriptures of being dark.

2. In the Scriptures one must distinguish between the "that" and the "how". The Scriptures reveal clearly **that** God is Triune, and Christ is God and Man in one Person, that Christ has through His substitutionary work and suffering reconciled us with God, and **that** we have now through faith in Christ righteousness, life and salvation without the works of the Law. But **how** this all happens and **how** it is possible, the Scriptures do not reveal and it is also not necessary for us to know.

3. The false teachers have made the clear passages in the Scriptures dark for themselves and others because they have always mixed the questions in regard to the how into the Scriptures. So the task falls upon the faithful teachers to **leave out** the questions in regard to the how and to **lead Christians back to the Word of Scripture and to keep them there.**

4. In regard to the understanding of Scripture there is also a blindness (delusion) through God's just judgment. He who does not want to believe God in His Word, but instead wants to hold to his own thoughts when faced with God's Word, and therefore wants to instruct God, to him will happen what Christ expressed with the words: "**That seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand**" (Luke 8:10) and: "**I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and the prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes**" (Matt. 11:25).

5. Because of their natural condition, all people are blind in regard to the wholesome understanding of the Scriptures. Therefore it is necessary while listening to and reading the Scriptures to pray: "Lord, open my eyes, that I can see the wonders of your Law."

²⁶ Col.4:16, "And when this epistle (letter) is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea."

²⁷ 1 Thes.5:27, "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren."

²⁸ Acts 10:43, "To Him (Christ) give all the prophets witness that through His name, whosoever believeth in Him, shall receive remission of sins."

Luther expresses himself also about this chief point in the following words (XVIII, 2066ff):

“If in some places there is any obscurity in Scripture, it is because of the **words and idiom**, or to express it in Latin or Greek, because of the **grammar**; and it is commonly such an obscurity that does not hinder the recognition of the principal figure and all the fundamentals of Scripture; for what greater, higher, or deeper mystery can there be than Christ? But now since the seal has been opened (Rev. 6:1) and the stone has been rolled back from the grave (Matt. 28:2), and so the greatest mystery has been made manifest, namely, that Christ, the eternal Son of God, is true Man (Heb. 2:14,16), that there is an eternal God in three Persons (1 John 5:7), that Christ died for our sins (Rom. 4:25) and rules forever in heaven (Mark 16:19), as this is taught publicly in the whole world so that even the children hear and know it, what greater or more obscure matter or mystery can there be than Christ? If you take Christ out of Scripture, tell me, what mystery is left? Therefore it is very foolish and unchristian — since it is true that the chief parts [of the Christian faith] and everything a Christian must know, stand in clear and bright light, taught in Scripture in plain language — that because of some passages you would say: ‘There are still great hidden things concealed in them,’ though there can be nothing greater than to know Christ. Even if in some places of Scripture the passages are obscure, they are nevertheless clear in other places. This certainly is the one chief thing or matter, namely, **faith and Christ**, which Scripture teaches all men, here in clear and lucid words and there in obscure and dark expressions. What does it matter if the fundamentals of the whole Bible are set forth in plain language as, for example, in the epistle to the Romans, should some passages, which treat of the same matter, still be obscure?....

“However, if there are some, as the sophists and others, to whom the fundamentals of Scripture and the Word of God are **hidden**, that is not owing to the obscurity of Scripture, but **rather to their own blindness**, namely, that **they are so hardened** that they neither know nor care to know the evident truth, as St. Paul says of the Jews in 2 Cor. 3:15: ‘Even unto this day the veil is upon their heart’; and again in chapter 4:3: ‘If our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost.’ If indeed in that way and for that reason I must regard Scripture as obscure because I could not understand much of it, then I might also say that the sun is dark, were I to veil my eyes or step out of the light into darkness. But why do these poor, blind people accuse Scripture and the holy, pure Word of God, charging it in their blindness with being obscure?....

“So also the examples amount to nothing by which you secretly wish to stab at — I do not know what — concerning the three Persons of the Godhead (1 John 5:7), the communion of the human and divine natures in Christ (John 1:14), and the sin against the Holy Ghost (Matt. 12:13); of these articles you say that they are still obscure and not yet explained. If by that you mean the vain wrangling of the sophists which they started in connection with these teachings, what cause has the Word of God and the pure Holy Scripture given you that you blame it for the abuse of these wicked sophists? **Scripture certainly is sufficiently clear** when it says that there are three Persons, but one God (1 John 5:7), that Christ is true God and true man (Gal. 4:4; Heb 2:14), and that there is a sin against the Holy Ghost which will not be forgiven (Matt. 12:31; Mark 3:26~29). **There is nothing dark or obscure about that.** But the manner in which all this takes place, Scripture does not describe; nor is it necessary for us to know this.

“With regard to these teachings the sophists have **made known their own dreams according to their own minds**. Blame them, but **Scripture is guiltless**. However, if by your words you mean that these very articles were obscure, you again must not blame Scripture, but the Arians and their fellows, to whom the clear Gospel was hidden so that through the blindness of Satan they could not understand the clear passages concerning the Trinity and the humanity and divinity of Christ.

“But to express it briefly; there is a **two-fold clarity and a two-fold obscurity of Scripture**. The one is **outward, namely, in Scripture itself as it lies before us**. With regard to that **there is nothing obscure or doubtful, but everything is set forth to the whole world, clearly and lucidly, in unmistakable Scripture passages**. The other is the **inward, in the heart of man**, so that he **cannot understand and know the spiritual truths and matters which Scripture teaches** (1 Cor. 2:14). If you speak of this kind of obscurity, there is no man on earth who can understand or perceive even the smallest tittle of Scripture except those

who have the Spirit of God, for regarding these matters all men are by nature and descent blind and have a darkened mind so that, though they may read and speak much of the Scriptures, they do not perceive, know, or recognize anything concerning them, nor do they believe sincerely or truly that there is a God or that they have their body, life, and creation from God, just as Ps. 14:1 says of this congenital blindness: ‘The wicked said in his heart: God is nothing, there is no God’ (Luther’s translation). For indeed without the Holy Spirit no one on earth can know or understand Scripture, not even the least [thing] in Scripture.” (Reply to *Erasmus’ Tract On the Freedom of the Will* [1525], XVIII, 2068—2072, SL XVIII, 1681ff. Dr. J.T. Mueller’s translation taken from Walther **True Visible Church**, pages 58-60)

Rely On Clear Texts of the Bible Not on Man’s Interpretation of It.

When we Lutherans maintain the distinction between orthodox church bodies and sects and say that only the church body which remains in all parts with God’s Word is an orthodox church body and, in comparison, the church body which in the doctrines of faith deviates from God’s Word is to be called a heterodox church, a sect, then also the **objection** is put to us by the **unionistic side**: “Who is to say with such certainty, if a church body has remained with God’s Word or not? It depends on the **interpretation** of the Scriptures.” They do not want to say that the Reformed had no Scriptural basis for their particular doctrines, but by this they want to say: Zwingli and Calvin and their followers **had only interpreted** the Scriptures differently than Luther and his people. Indeed, if we examine more closely this basis of unionism, then we find revealed in it its **chief lie**³⁰: “Actually, a person cannot be exactly sure who stands on Scripture, because it depends not so much on the Scriptures as on the **interpretation** of the Scriptures and this interpretation is naturally different with different people.”

This error that the correct understanding of Scripture does not so much **on Scripture itself** as on the **interpretation** of it is a position that not only the papal church confesses and practises, but it is a position which also governs the whole of modern theology; indeed it is a position which in itself has chiefly an appearance of truth for many a naive Christian.

However, you **must under all circumstances** hold fast to the belief that **absolutely nothing depends on the human interpretation of the Scriptures**. After all – of what matter is it to me finally – since I as a **Christian want to base my faith on God’s Word** how this or that teacher in the church has interpreted God’s Word. Indeed, if it is clearly evident that a teacher offers **his own interpretation** of the Scriptures, then no Christian should believe such an interpreter.

(Delivered on 6 December, 1889.) (To be Continued.)

(Headings and italicised emphasis added. Larger paragraphs have been broken down into shorter ones)

+++++