

**Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*. New Studies in Biblical Theology. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006)**

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"Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this." 2  
Timothy 2:7 (NIV)

Mark Thompson has written a very useful book on an important topic, that of the doctrine of Scripture and particularly the "clarity" of scripture. His work sets out the classical view of the doctrine and responds to the traditional and contemporary challenges to it. He presents a thoughtful and theological evangelical response. His work is not strikingly original and it clearly draws on John Webster, Kevin Vanhoozer and Peter Jensen, as well as making extensive appeal to Luther, Calvin and Barth. Originality is not a great virtue in theology, and the book is only stronger because it draws on the work of others. Indeed this exemplifies one of the implications of the book, that the Bible must be read in the communion of the saints. The book offers some very clear guidance through complex theological, philosophical and hermeneutical debates and will be of great assistance to students who are trying to explore these areas. The argument of the book is clear and for the most part convincing.

Chapter one sets the question of the "clarity of scripture" in the context of traditional and contemporary challenges. The traditional objections appeal to God's incomprehensibility, the need for the church's interpretation, the genuine humanity of scripture, the fact of diverse interpretations offered by interpreters who claim to be equally committed to the Bible, and the Bible's own testimony to its lack of clarity (2 Pet 3:16; Luke 24:25ff.; Acts 8:34). Thompson shows that the contemporary intellectual context makes the doctrine of the clarity of scripture more problematic. He rehearses the development of postmodernism, and the accusations that the Reformed evangelical doctrine of scripture is too wedded to the rational epistemology of modernity. He gives a further treatment of the challenge of postmodernity by outlining its literary theory in which interpretation is everything and the reading community, not the author, produces meaning(s) implying that there is no "plain meaning" of the text. Thompson looks at the way Christian theology has both embraced and resisted postmodernity. This section is perhaps too one-dimensional, since the "embrace" of postmodernity is as highly variegated as the phenomenon itself, and the authors to whom Thompson refers (Franke, Grenz, Rachke, Westphal) would all be critical of much of "postmodernism". Thompson aligns himself with those he presents as the critics of postmodernism (Carson, Erickson, Helseth and Taylor). It is interesting, however, that his next step is not to offer a critique of postmodernism. Rather he seems to accept Callahan's judgement that many recent attempts to affirm the clarity of scripture are "tangled, pessimistic and defensive" (45). His response is to offer a theological

exposition of the clarity of scripture. This is a move which seems to accept many of the concerns of postmodernity.

Having surveyed the challenges to the idea of the clarity of scripture Thompson suggests that it is a doctrine worthy of re-examination, since it is not simply a modern, or even Reformation, doctrine; and its demise seems to have led to a crippling lack of confidence in Christian theology and ethics.

Thompson's restatement of the doctrine begins with a brief (and admittedly incomplete) review of theological method. He makes three key claims: theology is at its most basic talk about God (49), and so is Trinitarian (50) and rests on "God's prior decision to be known" (51). From these flow an important implication "Christian theology can only claim truth and authority in so far as it conforms to God's self-revelation" (52). Finally he reminds us that theology is at the same time doxological and apologetic: it "takes place in the presence of God and in the eyes of the world" (53). The implication of this discussion is that the doctrine of scripture is not "prolegomena" for theology, rather "this doctrine says something about God" (54). This simple step is profoundly significant and is reminiscent of Barth's rejection of prolegomena. The commitment to locate the doctrine of scripture in a well rounded theological presentation of the work and character of God is a welcome development in evangelical thought. It can also be seen in two recent contributions to the doctrine of scripture, T. Work's monograph on the *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) and the collection of essays edited by Paul Helm and Carl Trueman on the reliability of Scripture, *The Trustworthiness of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Neither of these is referred to in *A Clear and Present Word*, but they would seem to be working in a similar direction, the second being closer to Thompson than the first.

Thompson then sets out an account of revelation as God's activity, an account that is the necessary context for thinking about the attributes of scripture. He follows Peter Jensen and develops the theme of "the God of the gospel" (see P. F. Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, Nottingham: IVP, 2002). The gospel makes it clear, writes Thompson, that "to understand the God of the gospel we must pay attention to Jesus Christ, who he is and what he has done" (55). Further, the gospel reveals that "God is sovereign and his purposes will be fulfilled" and that he acts freely with no external constraint. This freedom, Thompson shows, is expressed in the incarnation and so in redemptive love. The standard lines of a reformed understanding of the gospel are here apparent, with a stress on sovereignty of God in redemption. The presentation then turns to the nature of the gospel as a "message" and the related claim that God has "spoken" the gospel. Thompson endorses recent defences of the idea of God's speech (K. Vanhoozer, N. Wolterstorff, M. Horton, T. Ward). He reviews the biblical material and concludes that "the assumption that the living God speaks ... is pervasive in both testaments" (63). He makes the connection that Horton also makes between speech and "relationships" (Horton's preferred term is "covenant"). The nature of divine speech in the economy of redemption is, claims Thompson, a reflection of the fact that words "are ingredients of the mutual self-giving of the divine persons" (64). Thompson does not refer here to an inner-Trinitarian covenant, but his exposition would certainly fit this. Perhaps his initial comments that "we cannot claim to know much about the eternal self-communication" of the Trinity stops him from formulating a specific claim about God's inner words.

Thompson further asserts that "there is no gap" between who God is and how he expresses himself toward us (64). This is a problematic element in his approach. It appears to be a

claim for univocal revelation (a claim not unexpected from a work dedicated to D. B. Knox). Thompson's doctrine of revelation would be stronger if it included a recognition of the analogical element of revelation.<sup>[1]</sup> (There is, in fact, a "gap" between the reality of God and his true revelation of himself, and we are not able to fully explicate the nature of the "gap" (since to do so would imply that it could be overcome entirely). Thompson warns against "overextending" both Luther's *theologia crucis* with its emphasis on *Deus absconditus* and Calvin's doctrine of accommodation. He rightly stresses that language is God's gift and that we should not overstate its fragility (69). Even accepting these warnings, it is still worth asking if the absence of an appreciation of the analogical nature of all language about God opens Thompson's position to the danger of an over-confidence and a tendency to explain what should remain "mysterious" in revelation. To put this point in the context of previous debates, it seems that Thompson's position is likely to be closer to Gordon Clark than to that of Cornelius Van Til, when in the view of this reviewer Van Til's position is to be preferred.<sup>[2]</sup> A recognition of the analogical nature of revelation would properly focus the doctrine of perspicuity on the covenantal purposes of scripture, which Thompson properly affirms (65).

Thompson also addresses the common refusal to strictly identify the words of scripture with revelation. He notes that even Webster, with whom he has much in common, rejects this identification (73). He reminds us that Karl Barth is a key contributor to this tendency, and he pays Barth's concerns appropriate regard. Barth sought to avoid bringing the knowledge of God into the realm of natural theology, a move which he feared would "violate the freedom and sovereignty of God" (74 quoting *CD1/2*, 522f). The claim that the words of scripture are immediately the word of God would, Barth felt, threaten the supremacy of Christ as the revelation of God. Thompson's response to these concerns are well made. He points out that words are involved in the revelation of the Word, that is Jesus was a prophet (though more than a prophet). Telford Work's exposition of the role of the scriptures in the life and mission of Christ would further strengthen Thompson's case. He also appeals to the earlier discussion of the place of human language to claim that Barth overplays the limitations of human language. As noted above a recognition of the analogical nature of knowledge of God would allow a great appreciation of this point in Barth's thought. It is, however, the case that Barth does place too much stress on the limitations of human language. Thompson asks, perceptively, why a text inspired, commissioned and authorised by God would threaten his sovereignty. He also points out that the exegetical and historical roots of Barth's doctrine of the three-fold form of the word of God are not secure (75-77).

Having argued that Barth's rejection of plenary inspiration is not compelling, Thompson comments that Barth reminds us that "the Spirit's involvement with the text is not complete once the Scriptures have been written" (77). So he gives illumination an important place in a doctrine of perspicuity. This claim is important in the light of assertions of the "death of the author". Human texts may be released by their authors onto a sea of interpretations, but the Bible as divine-human text travels with its divine author as the continually active pilot!

In the third chapter Thompson seeks to show that a doctrine of the clarity of scripture concords with the actual teaching of scripture. He disputes claims that the doctrine is imposed on rather than drawn from scripture. He examines Jesus' acceptance of the OT and argues that Jesus assumed that "when the words of Scripture are read or heard, they will be understood, at least well enough understood to warrant an acknowledgement that he is who he says he is and that his words are true (87). He finds a similar pattern in the

apostles' treatment of the Old Testament (88-93). He then treats the classic texts which affirm the accessibility of the OT (Deut 30:9-14; Josh 1:8-9; Ps 119:105, 130; 2 Kngs 22:11ff.; Neh 8:1b-3, 7-8; Isa 55:10-11). On the Nehemiah reference Thompson, with many before him, points out that the clarity of the text does not remove the role of exposition, but that "exposition can proceed on the assumption that the text is clear" (100).

Thompson also deals with the parts of scripture which seem to be explicit counter-evidence for the clarity of scripture. Jesus' statement about the parables stopping understanding (Mark 10:4-12) is explained as a statement about "the condition of those who hear" (104). This seems a little too neat, in that Jesus does say that the form itself is part of the judgment on Israel. The Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 recognises that he needs someone to guide him. Thompson appropriately takes this as a demonstration that "even for the insider under the Old Covenant the gospel is necessary as the proper interpretive framework for understanding those [OT] promises" (106). The classic text on the clarity (or otherwise) of scripture is 2 Peter 3:14-16. Thompson points out that this claims that Paul's writings can be understood (so v. 15), but that they require effort at some points and can be misunderstood by the "ignorant and unstable". His conclusion from the survey of biblical material is that they do "not suggest uniform simplicity" for the Bible; "understanding is not always automatic or simple ... God has placed both heights and depths in Scripture, given us passages so simple a child can understand them and others so intriguing they engage the ablest minds for years". Further "God has given us resources to help us as we read: his Spirit who has never abandoned his word, the fuller context of the Bible, and a fellowship of believers" (110).

The aspect of scriptural evidence with which the book does not deal is the implicit evidence against the doctrine of perspicuity. That is, how do we assess the parts of scripture which, as Peter observes, are hard to understand. This examination, if it had been done, could only have been suggestive. Thompson's thesis and the classic doctrine, do not require him to demonstrate that all parts of scripture are very clear, or equally clear, or even relatively clear. It would be impossible to determine how much of scripture should show an appropriate level of clarity, or what this level should be. However, an examination of some of the 'hard sayings' would be interesting from two perspectives. First it could help to show that Thompson's view of scripture concords with the features of the text of scripture. Second it would allow Thompson to show the reading practices which his construction of the doctrine suggests.

The fourth chapter takes up the questions of hermeneutics. Thompson gives a perceptive introduction to the "hermeneutical challenge" which has developed in Western thought since the 1980s. He finds the roots of this challenge in scepticism. He does not, however, dismiss the challenge as mere unbelief, rather he takes the challenge seriously and seeks to answer it. He briefly traces contemporary hermeneutics from roots in the Enlightenment to the postmodern view that readers are the "judges" of meaning. He highlights the tendency for modern and postmodern hermeneutics to "secularise and deabsolutise Scripture" (118, quoting Webster, 2005). In response he stresses that a theological account of Scripture will remind us that it cannot be read "like any other book". The implication of this is in the direction of recent attempts to offer a "theological interpretation" of the Bible (see the recently launched *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, as well as the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) and the new commentary series from Brazos Press.)

Thompson offers five insights which can be gained from considering the hermeneutical challenge. The first of these is that the literary form of scripture is not a dispensable shell and the second is the related recognition that, while the words of scripture are referential, this "does not exhaust their function" (125). This marks a step away from D. B. Knox's claim that "all revelation is propositional revelation." [3] Thompson explains that "paying attention to what is ... being done by the words is just another facet of taking those words ... seriously" (126). As a third insight he affirms that "reading takes place in a context" and so the goal of interpretation is not an abstract objectivity. The implication of this insight is not that all we can ever have are untestable subjective readings, for the theological account of Scripture with its divine author and his redemptive purposes are key to the context in which it is read. Thompson also deals with the "historical-critical" study of scripture which has dominated the academy for the last two centuries. He affirms that this has brought gains, but at considerable cost. Finally he accepts, to some extent, the "hermeneutic of suspicion" and agrees that the misuse of Scripture by the powerful "is not hypothetical" (130). These five affirmations are significant. It would be fascinating to see how Thompson would develop each and put them into practice.

After stating his acceptance of some of the insights of the hermeneutical challenge, Thompson offers a substantial "theological protest" against much modern hermeneutics. This protests rest on his theological account of scripture. From this he develops two main thoughts. First he insists that God remains the active author of scripture and so the Bible is not simply another text. Second he argues that the person who reads the Bible today shares an eschatological location in common with all previous readers. This response is a very appropriate one. It is, interestingly, not a foundationalist response. That is, Thompson does not attempt to argue that all language is meaningful and all authors "living and active", rather he argues that the Bible is *sui generis*. He notes that for Barth a general hermeneutic can only be developed from "learning to listen to the Bible" (119, n. 25.) Thus Thompson's work in fact has a great deal in common with post-foundationalist approaches.

The final chapter of the book summarises the conclusions and restates the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture for today. It opens with a fascinating account of the development of the doctrine through the interaction of Erasmus, Luther, Bellarmino, Whitaker and Turretin. This discussion is a model of historical theology in the service of constructive theology. It attends carefully to the context of each writer and outlines neatly the main points. Thompson reviews the arguments, many of which have already featured in the book, concluding that "the great classical treatments of this doctrine during the time of the Reformation are more robust and less naïve than is generally acknowledged" (157). He admits that in some nineteenth century approaches the clarity of scripture was treated incautiously. He mentions Hodge's emphasis on "the right of private judgement" as parallel with the individual rights in a democracy (158). Presumably Thompson would agree that the influence of modernity weighed too heavily on some of these statements, so that the clarity of scripture seemed to rest on the power of human reason. He insists that the classic statements include the ongoing work of the Spirit and the importance of reading "in and with the church".

The book concludes with the assertion that the perspicuity of scripture is "a doctrine for the times." Although Thompson seeks to present a position similar to that of Luther, Whitaker and Turretin, he recognises the need to do more than simply reprise these positions. He aims to articulate a contemporary statement of the doctrine (159-60). He asserts that the demise of biblical literacy in Western culture and even in the church demands a restatement of the doctrine, as does the questioning of the relevance of the

Bible in Christian ethics and belief. He argues that, while acknowledging the complexity of issues, "our confidence in the goodness of God and his capacity to make his mind known to us without distortion should generate an expectation that the basic contours of a Christian response to even the most recent developments in thought and practice can be found in scripture" (162). He sets this claim in the context of a "spiritual struggle" that each of us has, for as sinners we resist the claims of God. He points out that the discussion of our view of Scripture can not be reduced to a theoretical one about the relative obscurity or referential capacity of texts. So Thompson repeats his basic claims that "the principal response to almost all the objections raised against the doctrine ... is in fact located in the field of theology" (164). His assertion of the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture rests on "God's involvement with this text, not just at the point of composition but all the way through the activity of reading the Bible" (165). It also depends on the claim that human language is suitable for divine speech. It must recognise Jesus Christ as the centre of God's revelation and so read all Scripture in its relation to him. An account of the clarity of the Bible must recognise that difficulties and challenges in reading it come from a variety of sources — the complexity of God's purposes, our lack of familiarity with the text, its world and its message and the effects of sin. Finally he repeats his assertion of the need to read the Bible as part of the church community. He summarises the doctrinal assertion as follows: "the clarity of Scripture is that quality of the biblical text that, as God's communicative act, ensures its meaning is accessible to all who come to it in faith" (170).

This is a very useful introductory volume on an important contemporary question for evangelical theology. It is encouraging to see that a work with such an explicit interaction with traditional systematics has been published in the *New Series in Biblical Theology*. It is to be hoped that further works of this ilk will appear in the series. The book is well presented, though the lack of a subject index is disappointing. It probably will not win over postmoderns who are critical of a classic evangelical view of scripture, but that is not its aim. It will help those who share the classic view to appreciate it better and articulate it more clearly.

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[1] On this see M. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 7-9 and 243-51.

[2] Van Til asserted that the radical distinction of creature and Creator means that all knowledge of God is analogical: "all human predication is analogical reinterpretation of God's pre-interpretation"; C. Van Til *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978), 171. Clark accused Van Til of holding a position in which no knowledge is possible: "if no proposition means to man what it means to God ... it follows by rigorous necessity that man can have no truth at all"; G. H. Clark, "Apologetics" in *Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. C. F. H. Henry (New York: Harper, 1957), 159. Van Til argued that Clark's view requires that real knowledge must be exhaustive so that "he must know everything or he knows nothing", *Introduction*, 171. On Clark see G. B. Weaver, "Gordon Clark: Christians Apologist" in *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*, ed. R. Nash (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1968), 298.

[3] D. B. Knox, "Propositional Revelation, the Only Revelation" in *Selected Works Volume I - The Doctrine of God*, ed. T. Payne (Kingsford, N.S.W.: Matthias Media, 2000).

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