

## True Humility and the Clarity of Scripture

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 382, 387-391, emphasis added and English updated.

### 2 Peter 1:19-21

**19** And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; <sup>20</sup> knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, <sup>21</sup> for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit. (NKJ)

The substance of the gospel contains nothing except Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom. Christ had been manifested in the flesh and power was exhibited by Him. By these two concepts we have the whole gospel; for we know that He, the long-promised Redeemer, came from heaven, put on our flesh, lived in the world, died and rose again; and, in the second place, we perceive the end and fruit of all these things, that is, that He might be God with us, that He might exhibit in Himself a sure pledge of our adoption, that He might cleanse us from the defilements of the flesh by the grace of the Spirit, and consecrate us temples to God, that He might deliver us from hell and raise us up to heaven, that He might by the sacrifice of His death make an atonement for the sins of the world, that He might reconcile us to the Father, that He might become to us the author of righteousness and of life. He who knows and understands these things is fully acquainted with the gospel. . . .

Peter now shows that the truth of the gospel is founded on the oracles of the prophets, lest they who embraced it should hesitate to devote themselves completely to Christ; for they who waver cannot be otherwise than remiss in their minds. . . .

In short, Peter reminds us that as long as we sojourn in this world, we have need of the doctrine of the prophets as a guiding light; which being extinguished, we can do nothing else but wander in darkness; for he does not disjoin the prophecies from the gospel, when he teaches us that they shine to show us the way His object only was to teach us that the whole course of our life ought to be guided by God's word; for otherwise we must be involved on every side in the darkness of ignorance; and the Lord does not shine on us, except when we take His word as our light. . . .

Peter teaches that all are immersed in darkness who do not attend to the light of the word. Therefore, except you are resolved willfully to cast yourself into a labyrinth, especially beware of departing even in the least thing from the rule and direction of the word. Nay, the Church cannot follow God as its guide, except it observes what the word prescribes.

In this passage **Peter also condemns all the wisdom of men**, in order that we may learn **humbly to seek, otherwise than by our own understanding, the true way of knowledge; for without the word nothing is left to men but darkness.**

It further deserves to be noticed, that he pronounces on **the clearness of Scripture**; for what is said would be a false eulogy, were not Scripture fit and suitable to show to us with certainty the right way. Whoever, then, will open his eyes through the obedience of faith, shall by experience know that the Scripture has not been in vain called a light. **It is, indeed, obscure to the unbelieving**; but they who are given up to destruction are willfully blind. . . .

Execrable, therefore is the blasphemy of the Papists, who pretend that the light of Scripture does nothing but dazzle the eyes, in order to keep the simple from reading it. But it is no

wonder that proud men, inflated with the wind of false confidence, do not see that light with which the Lord favors only little children and the humble. . . .

What does Peter mean when he says that “no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation”?

Peter means that then only are the prophecies read profitably, when we renounce the mind and feelings of the flesh, and submit to the teaching of the Spirit, but that it is an impious profanation of it, when we arrogantly rely on our own acumen [intelligence], deeming that sufficient to enable us to understand it, though the mysteries contain things hidden to our flesh, and sublime treasures of life far surpassing our capacities. And this is what we have said, **that the light which shines in it, comes to the humble alone.**

But the Papists are doubly foolish, when they conclude from this passage, that no interpretation of a private man ought to be deemed authoritative. For they pervert what Peter says, that they may claim for their own councils the chief right of interpreting Scripture; but in this they act indeed childishly. By the word *private*, Peter does not mean *individual* interpretation, so as to prohibit individuals the right to interpret. On the contrary, Peter shows that whatever men bring of their own (i.e., from their own wisdom, apart from God’s Spirit) is profane. Were the whole world unanimous and were the minds of all men united together, still what would proceed from them would be private or their own; for the word is here set in opposition to divine revelation; so that the faithful, inwardly illuminated by the Holy Spirit, acknowledge nothing but what God says in His word.

However, another sense seems to me more simple, that Peter says that Scripture came not from man, or through the suggestions of man. For you will never come well prepared to read it, except you bring reverence, obedience, and docility; but a just reverence then only exists, when we are convinced that God speaks to us, and not mortal men. Then Peter especially bids us to believe the prophecies as the indubitable oracles of God, because they have not emanated from men’s own private suggestions.