

The plain, difficult sense of scripture

Calvin argued for the self-evident clarity of the Bible—the same Bible he wrote thousands of pages about.

by [Mark Labberton](#) in the [April 12, 2017](#) issue



Pieter Holsteyn II, *Ioannes Calvinus natus Novioduni Picardorum*, engraved print, 1629–1677. ©Trustees of the British Museum, used via [Creative Commons license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

In his preface to the Geneva French Bible, John Calvin exhorts: “You who call yourselves bishops and pastors of the poor people, see to it that the sheep of Jesus Christ are not deprived of their proper pasture; and that it is not prohibited and forbidden to any Christian freely and in his own language to read, handle, and hear this holy gospel.”

This statement is about the church and its book, a community made by and for knowing God's purposes and thereby reflecting God's glory by reading, handling, and hearing this good news. For Calvin, the life, identity, and well-being of the church can only be sustained and enacted by the Word of God that constitutes, redeems, and re-creates our life. By this pasture alone does knowledge of God come uniquely and specially to God's people. What the church is hungering for, what alone can nourish and sustain us in our life of faith, comes from our having direct and unmediated access to the Word written.

Calvin, like many of the Reformers, spoke confidently about "the perspicuity of Scripture." He was convinced that just as the gospel of Jesus Christ is available for every kind of person, so the Bible, which proclaims this good news, must be as well. This double conviction is evident from his very first Reformed writing, the preface to Olivétan's New Testament. He explains that the fulfillment of the Old Testament law and the reconciliation of God in Christ "is what is stated plainly in the [New Testament] and set forth there openly." The purpose of the translation is "to enable all Christians, men and women, who know the French language, to understand and acknowledge the law they ought to obey and the faith they ought to follow." Scripture makes plain both our human need and God's way for salvation; this is the core of the claim of perspicuity.

Calvin's training in rhetoric frames the backdrop to his view of divine revelation as God's speech: the perfect divine rhetoric explains the success of God's self-revelation. The implicit elements of this revelatory rhetoric include the speaker (God the Father), the speech (God the Son), the voice (God the Holy Spirit), the speaker's story (God's mighty acts and words), the speaker's book (the Bible), the speaker's preachers (clergy), and the speaker's hearers (the church). These dimensions of God's revealing Word form a theological and rhetorical unity as God's speech. William Bouwsma captures Calvin's view in this way: "God's discourse is not couched in the timeless abstractions of logic. . . . Like a skilled orator he speaks to [people] in a language adapted to their capacities and their needs, taking historical and cultural differences into account and adapting his communication to the times."

Calvin and the other Reformers are the impetus of a vision that continues today. Amity Press in China, now the world's largest Bible publisher, has produced well over 100 million Bibles. Confidence in the perspicuity of the Bible, and of God's dynamic revelation by Word and Spirit, still calls and shapes God's people.

The great irony about the claim of perspicuity is that it is not perspicuous, or at least not as clear as it might sound. The greatest evidence that perspicuity is not self-evident is provided by Calvin himself, who argued for the perspicuity of the Bible while writing thousands of pages of commentary to help make plain to the ordinary reader what the scriptures were saying and teaching. What was plain and clear plainly needed some explaining.

The point here is not to be cynical about the claim of perspicuity, but to point to what we all know—that the scriptures can be clear but not easy. I can offer my own witness to this reality. Growing up outside the life of the church with no specialist reading skills, I began to read and reread the New Testament. I was without instruction in almost any of the historical, cultural, political, or theological issues of the text. I was by no means sure there was a god, or whether, if there was a god, this text and its apparent claims were true or relevant to some possible divine being. Initially, I had no sense of reading out of any self-conscious search for God. It simply seemed to me that a literate person would be acquainted with the Bible, and so I read.

To my utter surprise, this Bible proved itself to be perspicuous to me, by laying out in ways I could grasp that I was known and that in the reading of this text I was being loved, sought, convicted, called, and redeemed by the true and living God who came to save us, Jesus Christ. The clarity of scripture was in this sense plain to me.

But the plainness also made clear that to respond to this text would be to take up the most difficult, lifelong challenge I could imagine. It would mean inhabiting and being inhabited by the complex story of God that made claims about creation, human identity and purpose, moral reality, human suffering and pain, power and injustice, failure and grace. Transformation can sound like a promise, and surely it is one. But that promise includes the painful challenge of being remade.

The apparent democratizing of divine knowledge that the perspicuity of the Bible provided for was affirmed by the Reformers, but the priesthood of all believers did not mean the equality of all readers. Calvin could imagine Bible reading occurring only in the context of Christian community and not by isolated readers on their iPhones between dumbbell sets at a 24-hour fitness club. This shift would have been literally unimaginable for the Reformers, because for them, reading was a communal act that extended back in time through history (including biblical history) and encompassed all its many members and readers. In the “proper pasture” Calvin

envisioned, the sheep did not find the pasture or graze there alone.

Furthermore, in the Reformed tradition, some readers in the Christian reading community were to be of greater importance and have more sway than other readers. Calvin readily admits that Bible reading is a learned skill and itself a process of learning, not uniformly comprehensible. As with the Ethiopian eunuch, “those things which are hid from us, we must pass over until we see greater light . . . Scripture shall be made more familiar by use. . . . The Lord never keeps the eyes so shut, but that, as soon as they are once entered, the way of salvation appears unto them in the Scripture.”

The people of God were to be a reading community, but not a reading community in which all readings are created equal. It can be argued in fact that the Reformed tradition substituted a priestly mediated table with a preacherly mediated Bible. To this day, the meta-message of Calvin’s tradition is that while all sheep may have access to the perspicuous text as life’s “proper pasture,” grazing there is best done under the guidance and direction of the best possible readers. In the course of “reading, handling, and hearing the holy gospel,” what we can trust as clear is the exposition of a well-trained preacher, who in turn depends on the professional academic readers’ commentaries.

Deference to perspicuity, therefore, can come to seem like a justification for both giving and taking away the Bible from the community of faith. Giving the Bible to the people is basic to some of the instincts of the Reformation, but so is the practice of taking the Bible away from the people and giving it to pastors, or even more so to the academy. While anyone can and should read the Bible, not all readers will do so well or wisely. What, then, makes for a good Bible reader? How do skills as readers and faithfulness as readers interact with one another? Is a highly trained, technical reading of, for example, 1 Corinthians 13 necessarily a better reading than an obedient, embodied, nontechnical reading?

If reading scripture doesn’t produce changed lives, how is it relevant?

For many ordinary readers who live and breathe and read and pray and believe in postmodern culture, all we have is context. Our reading is affected by who we are, when we read, where we read, with whom we read, and so on. On a systemic level, we always read in a communal context, shaped by the sociology, gender, race, class, and more that surrounds us. This is the inescapable, defining context that is

not settled in the text but affected by what is in front of the text and greatly influences everyone's ability to read and hear the Word of God. That I am a tall, white, educated male influences how I, and people like me, hear the perspicuous Word of God.

This contextual embeddedness can lead to the skeptical conclusions about knowing, language, and texts that are at the core of many current hermeneutical debates. Theological knowledge that is claimed accessible through an objective text and mediated by a hierarchy of privileged knowers has become for many problematic and unacceptable. In a culture that makes knowledge claims per se questionable, many people are anxious to find not a perspicuous text but a perspicuous community—a perspicuous church—that authentically shows their knowledge claims. This searching dramatically affects how the church sees itself and its mission. It also affects how and why the Bible is read.

Surely one of the plainest teachings of scripture is that only God is God. The first commandment makes this claim perspicuous. While the 16th century wanted to ensure people had access to the perspicuous text that pronounces this teaching, the 21st century wants to see people who perspicuously live this claim.

It is also evident, in history and today, that many plain readers of the scriptures do not actually believe or live the plain truth that God alone is God. We in fact do want both God and mammon, or God and reputation, success, power, wealth, fame, satisfaction, health, safety, and much more besides. A plain and faithful reading of scripture may help us gain everything that truly matters, but it will also lead us to lose what does *not* truly matter. This reality affects our reading. Frankly, we don't like it—and we dislike it so much that we radically alter the plain meaning of scripture for the sake of what we want more. The history of Bible readers does not reveal a people who bow before God alone. To many, this failure of Christian readers to demonstrate what they confess makes the readers and their text irrelevant.

If the clear window of scripture doesn't produce lives changed by that vision, then why should it be of significance or relevance? This question is at the heart of the crisis of claims to theological knowledge today. After all, is it not the history of plain readings that has justified the abuse of women, or slavery, or apartheid, or the tolerance for Jim Crow, or bolstered the American nationalism that has justified the use of torture in defense of our self-interests, or the fabrication of a prosperity gospel, or a tolerance for injustice that makes it God's issue and not ours? As plain

as it is that God alone is God, readers still have a hard time taking that reading and letting it change the way they read themselves or the world around them. Our plain reading is often just our plain, self-justified reading, the plain reading that leaves me or us alone, rather than the plain reading that is meant to make us new.

“The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it” is understood by some to be an expression about a perspicuous text. But that apparently contextless claim does not matter if those who make it fail to understand the disjunction of such a perspective to many people who are awaiting the lived evidence that only a perspicuous people can provide. The church’s mangled reading exposes that what we claim to see and affirm so clearly from the perspicuous Bible is plainly not what we live. And that becomes the turning point of critique, either of the Bible or of the church or of both.

The Reformers assumed that the Bible is able to make God’s ways plain.

Plainness is not easy. The reading community of the church is vital, not all readings or readers are created equal, and encountering God through scripture is still less about mastering the text than being mastered by the text. Accessibility, literacy, and scholarship all matter tremendously, but so does context and faithfulness in reading and living the text so its meaning becomes perspicuous to our world.

I was converted again to this conviction one night in northern Uganda. The Lord’s Resistance Army was still at its evil games, and children slept in “night commuter” camps to try to stay alive and not be captured and tortured into becoming a child soldier. This night, as every night, hundreds of children came to sleep together in the rough of an empty school. Only one adult was stationed there—a middle-aged woman available to help and comfort any who might have need. Her husband and children were at their home a few blocks away. She explained that she came each night as a volunteer. We talked, and eventually I asked her why she was doing this. She talked about the children’s need and her desire to do what she could under such difficult circumstances and in the face of such fears.

Still wanting to know more, I pressed, “But what motivates you to care? Why do you do it?” She looked me up and down and finally said, “Well, I am what you call a Christian. I read my Bible every day, and every week I go to a church where we eat something called the Lord’s Supper. I can’t read the Bible every day and share in that meal and not come here at night.”

The question of perspicuity is shockingly alive and well—especially when such plainness makes sophisticated readers of a technically inexhaustible book want to spend still more time in the “proper pasture” to which Calvin calls us.

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