

The Service & Use of the Scriptures

extract from Proposition III § iv, v, vi

§ iv Nothing can be the only, principal, or equitable<sup>1</sup> rule which does not universally reach every individual that needs it to produce the necessary effect, or if it necessarily excludes many, who are within the visible church and may, without absurdity or even with great probability be considered part of the elect, but because of some innocent and sinless defect, a natural, harmless and blameless imperfection they are excluded from using it either completely, or at least in part. But concerning the Scriptures, deaf people, children, and idiots<sup>2</sup> cannot have the benefit of the Scripture. Shall we then affirm that they have no rule to lead them to God, or that they are all damned? Such an opinion is obviously absurd and inconsistent with the justice and mercy of God. I do not know of any sound reason that can justify it. Now, if we suppose that some of them are under the dispensation of the New Covenant (and none will claim this is an absurdity) we cannot claim that they are without any rule and means of knowledge, seeing that it is expressly stated, “They shall all be taught by God” (John 6:45) and “They shall all know me, from the least to the greatest” (Hebrews 8:11).

Secondly, even if we were rid of this difficulty, how many illiterate but good people are there in the church of God, who cannot read anything in their own mother tongue? Although this imperfection may be inconvenient, I doubt we can safely say it is sinful. These people have no direct

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<sup>1</sup> from the Latin *adæquata*.

<sup>2</sup> The word Barclay uses, “idiot,” sounds very offensive to the modern ear, but to use a modern euphemism such as “retarded” would be anachronistic. In Barclay’s time the word was also used for people who lack education.

knowledge of the rule of their faith; their faith must depend on their trust in other people's reading or telling it to them. In this case the changing, addition, or omission of one little word may cause the poor listener to make a very dangerous mistake, by which he may either continue in an iniquity out of ignorance, or believe a lie with confidence. For example, in their catechisms and public instruction<sup>3</sup> to the people, the Papists have boldly cut away the second commandment, since it strikes so directly against their worship and use of images.<sup>4</sup> For many of these people, who receive this false opinion because of this omission, it is simply impossible, or at least very hard, to find out about this abuse.

Additionally, suppose that everyone could read the Scriptures in their own language, where could you find one person in a thousand who has the thorough knowledge of the original languages in which the Scriptures were written, and who could directly receive their benefit in that respect? Isn't it true that all must depend on the honesty and faithfulness of the translators? How uncertain a foundation this is for a man to build his faith on is fully shown by the many corrections, emendations, and various attempts which have happened even among Protestants, in which the newer ones blame and correct the earlier ones, as guilty of defects and errors. Learned men admit (and I could prove it

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<sup>3</sup> Here we follow the Latin text, which is much clearer than the English: *in Catechisimis suis & publicis plebis instructionibus*.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:1-17 (and Deuteronomy 5:6-21) give us the text of the ten commandments, but don't indicate how they should be numbered. Catholics, Protestants, and Jews number them in three different ways, although they all count ten. Catholics and Jews consider verses 3 and 4 as one commandment, whereas the Protestants consider these verses as two separate commandments. The Jews count verse 2 as the first commandment; Catholics and Protestants don't consider it a separate commandment. In verse 17, Catholics consider the prohibition on coveting the neighbor's wife as a commandment separate from the prohibition on coveting other things; the Protestants and the Jews count this verse as one commandment.

at length, if it were appropriate for this book) that even the most recent translations into English need to be corrected.

Finally, there is just as much difficulty even for those who are skilled in the original languages, who cannot receive the mind of the authors so directly that their faith does not at least obliquely depend on the honesty and trustworthiness of the transcribers, since everyone admits that the original copies are not now in existence. In his time Jerome<sup>5</sup> complained about the transcribers, saying that “they didn’t write what they found in the text, but rather what they understood.” And Epiphanius<sup>6</sup> says that in good and correct copies of Luke it was written that Christ wept, and that Irenaeus<sup>7</sup> cites it, but the Catholics blotted it out, fearing that heretics might abuse it.<sup>8</sup> Other fathers also say that whole verses were taken out of Mark, because of the Manichaeans<sup>9</sup> . . . .

We are only rid of the difficulties that occur to us concerning the Scriptures through the clearness which the Spirit gives us. I myself have been a witness of this real and undoubted experience, and greatly wondered at the love of God for his children in these days. For I have known some of my friends, who profess the same faith with me, who are faithful servants of the Most High God and full of divine knowledge of his Truth as it was directly and inwardly revealed to them by the Spirit from a true and living experience; these friends were not only ignorant of Greek

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<sup>5</sup> Jerome (c. 340-420) was the translator of the Latin Vulgate, the official text of the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church for more than a thousand years.

<sup>6</sup> Epiphanius of Salamis (C, 340-403) is considered a Father of the Church.

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202) was bishop of Lyons beginning 189.

<sup>8</sup> Jerome, *epist. 28 ad Lucin.* page 247. Epiphanius in *Anchor. Tom. 2. oper.* RB

<sup>9</sup> Manichaeism was a dualistic religion to which Augustine belonged before he converted to Christianity.

and Hebrew, but some of them could not even read their own native language. When they were pressed by our adversaries with some citations from the English translation, and found that these citations disagreed with the manifestation of Truth in their hearts, they boldly affirmed that the Spirit of God never said that and it was certainly wrong, for they did not believe that any of the holy prophets or apostles ever wrote it. When I seriously examined the case, I really found these things to be errors and corruptions by the translators. Most translations do not give us the simple, naked<sup>10</sup> meaning of the words, but rather strain the words to express what comes nearest to the opinion and notion the translators have of the Truth. It seems to me that this incident suits very well with what Augustine said.<sup>11</sup> After saying “That he only honors the books that are called canonical by believing that the authors did not err when they were writing,” he adds, “and if I find anything in these writings that seems contrary to the Truth I shall not hesitate to say, either the book is faulty or erroneous, or that the translator didn’t understand what was said, or that I have not understood it.”<sup>12</sup> This shows that he believes there may be errors in the transcripion or in the translation.

§ v. If someone asks me whether I mean by this that the Scriptures are completely uncertain, or useless?

I answer, Not at all. The thesis itself declares what high opinion I have of them. Provided that the first\* place is given to the Spirit from which the Scriptures came, the place the Scriptures themselves give to it, I freely give the Scriptures the second place, without taking anything away

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<sup>10</sup> From the Latin *simplicam & nudam*, the English only says “genuine.”

<sup>11</sup> Augustine of Hippo (354-430) Father and Doctor of the Catholic Church.

<sup>12</sup> Epist. 19, ad Hier. Tom ii fol. 14 RB

from them,<sup>13</sup> and this is what the Scriptures say about themselves. The apostle Paul mentions this in two places: (Romans 15:4) “For the things that were written in the past were written to teach us, so that through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope.” (2 Timothy 3:15-17) “The Holy Scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

For though God chiefly leads us by his Spirit, still he sometimes conveys his comfort and consolation to us through his children, whom he raises up and inspires to speak or write a timely word. In this way the saints are made instruments in the hand of the Lord to strengthen and encourage one another, and this also tends to perfect them and make them wise for salvation. Those who are led by the Spirit cannot neglect what proceeds from the same Spirit in another person, but rather they naturally love it and are wonderfully encouraged by those words, spoken\* or written.\* These mutual outpourings of the heavenly life tend to enliven the mind when at any time it is overcome by sadness\* or weariness.\* Peter himself declares that this was the purpose of his writing (2 Peter 1:12-13): “For this reason I will not neglect to remind you of these things at all times, though you know and are established in the truth you now have; I think it is right, as long as I am in this bodily tabernacle, to stir you up by reminding you.”

God himself is the teacher of his people; nothing is said\* more explicitly than this, that those who are under the new covenant do not need any man to teach them. Yet it was a fruit of Christ’s ascension that teachers and pastors were sent to perfect the saints. The same work is attributed to

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase is only in the Latin: *nihil detrahens de eo*.

the Scriptures as to teachers; the Scriptures to make the man of God perfect, and the teachers for the perfection of the saints.

Under the new covenant, teachers are not to go before the teaching of God himself, but rather to follow after it. In the same way they are not to rob us of that great privilege which Christ has purchased for us by his blood. In the same way the Scripture is not to go before the teaching of the Spirit, or to rob us of it.

It has pleased God that we see, in the Scriptures as in a mirror, the conditions and experiences of the saints of long ago. So that, finding that our experience resembles theirs, we might be more confirmed and comforted, and our hope of attaining the same goal might be strengthened. By observing the providence which accompanied them, seeing the snares they were exposed to, and beholding how they were delivered, we may be made wise for salvation, and reproof and instructed in righteousness at the proper time.

This is the great work of the Scriptures, and their service to us: that we may witness them fulfilled *in us*, and that we may discern the mark of God's spirit and ways upon the saints, by the inward acquaintance we have with the same Spirit and work in our hearts. The prophecies of the Scriptures are also very encouraging and profitable for us, since the same Spirit enlightens us to see them already fulfilled and yet to be fulfilled. In all this it can be seen that only the spiritual man can make right use of them; they are able to make the man of God perfect (that is, not the natural man). What was written in the past was written for *our* encouragement, *we* who are the believers, *we* who are the saints. . . .

§ vi. We have shown the use and the necessity\* of the holy Scriptures to the Church of God when they are used\* in and by the Spirit. Therefore we consider them a secondary rule. Additionally, everyone acknowledges that they were

written by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and that the errors which we suppose may have slipped in by the injury of time are not enough to prevent a sufficient and clear testimony to all the essentials of the Christian faith. Therefore we consider them to be the only fit outward judge of controversies among Christians, and whatever doctrine is contrary to their testimony can be justly rejected as false. For our part, we are very willing to have all our doctrines and practices tested by them; we have never rejected that test, nor will we ever reject it as the judge and test in all our controversies with our adversaries. We are also very willing to accept as a positive and certain maxim, *that whatever anyone may do that is contrary to the Scriptures should be considered and judged to be a delusion of the devil, although under a pretense of being led\* by the Spirit. . . .*

Sources: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Proposition III § iv, v, vi (Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2002) pp. 72-78 and Roberti Barclaii, *Teologiae verè Christianae apologia*, facsimile (Amsterdam: Jacob Claus, 1676) pp. 43-47.