

James Callahan, *The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 272 pp.

There are many issues facing evangelical theology today. However, few of them are as significant as the question of the clarity of the Bible. The doctrine of inerrancy is irrelevant if the Bible is not understandable. The Reformation heritage championed by modern evangelicalism was a movement based largely upon a renewal of Bible study for all people. However, linguistic, literary, and theological studies over the last thirty years, including those by evangelicals, have left the impression, good or bad, that the evangelical world may be heading toward its own version of technical elitism with respect to Bible study. It is sometimes hard to see how the average man in the pew really has access on his own to the meaning of the words of Scripture in light of many methods and conclusions current in evangelicalism today.

However, the issue of the understandability of the Bible is not a simplistic one. James Callahan's timely work, *The Clarity of Scripture*, helps the thoughtful evangelical to traverse this troublesome matter by raising many issues that must be addressed in the present postmodern climate. He rightly notes that the issue involves a "sometimes complicated network of themes: matters of Scripture's authority, history and literary quality (its realistic texture), origin, inspiration, and message, and the subject of its meaning" (p. 14). He states as one of his goals the revival of "what has become a subject of disdain in certain circles" (p. 12). To be sure, the overall outlook of Callahan raises some concerns when, for example, his objectives are stated in this way:

Most important, it is not my goal to champion a retreat to the good ol' days when people did not question Scripture's authority, sufficiency and clarity. The struggle is as much with self-critical awareness wherein what is clearest from one perspective is indistinct from another, and I do not wish to retreat from this encounter. The assertion of Scripture's clarity does concern the character of Scripture itself but not without immediate attention to Scripture's readers and the readers' communities (p. 13).

His focus on the readers of the Bible, and the ecclesiastical communities to which they belong, may highlight the subjective side of Bible understanding more than many evangelicals are willing to do. Furthermore, the highlighting of self-critical awareness shows Callahan's commitment to the post-critical mindset, which lends itself more easily to post-conservative or post-liberal analyses.

Any evangelical who has a commitment to the grammatical-historical understanding of Scripture will no doubt feel a measure of discomfort with this approach. Notice the following statement carefully:

The theological appreciation for the type of precritical interpretative interests we have been pursuing—the clarity of Scripture understood by means of Scripture's texture—may be able to find a home within a postcritical hermeneutical landscape (with a shared admission of critical self-interest and the ethical recognition of plain or ordinary readings). Instead of seeking *the* comprehensive hermeneutical model, which is just as positivistic, objectivistic and biased in liberal as well as conservative circles, postcritical biblical interpretation seeks to recognize the consequence of critical self-interest (and recognizing my particularity as well as others'), rather than renouncing the prejudice of advocacy interpretations" (p. 249).

Thus, in a nutshell the book is an attempt to conflate and synthesize a form of the traditional evangelical dedication to the Bible's authority with customary liberal commitments to critical evaluation on the issue of the Bible's clarity. Callahan's basic thesis may be, in the end, incompatible with grammatical-historical interpretation.

If the evangelical reader keeps Callahan's basic framework in mind without reacting polemically to the overall approach and conclusion, he will profit from the discussions about singular issues. For example, Callahan does highlight the key passages in the Bible that deal with the clarity issues even if those passages are not dealt with in a manner in keeping with historical evangelicalism (p. 33ff.). He also reviews the necessary and crucial landscape of the history of the doctrine of clarity (chapters 2-5). Of special interest, especially to dispensationalists, is the discussion of the hermeneutical dual between the school of Antioch and that of Alexandria in the third to seventh centuries (p. 80-91). Callahan also provides a complete and instructive chapter on the history of the Protestant appreciation for the doctrine of clarity (p. 127-60). In this way, the evangelical reader may obtain the historical background to the issue of the clarity of the Bible that is often missing from his own self-understanding in the matter.

The scholar Callahan writes to other scholars in this book. It is not a book for the average Christian who does not have the background in the technical vocabulary along with the historical and theological issues raised. It probably would not serve well as an introductory book to the issue at the Bible college or seminary level. However, it would be a useful resource for analysis of the issues involved for thinking pastors and for students at the doctoral level. In using it, one will readily see the impact of postmodernism on the doctrine of bibliology in general and the doctrine of the clarity of the Bible in particular.

*Reviewed by Dr. Mike Stallard*