

A Disputation On Holy Scripture Against The Papists Especially Bellarmine And Stapleton

CHAPTER XIII

“THAT SCRIPTURE IS TO BE INTERPRETED BY SCRIPTURE”

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It remains now in the last place for us to prove that these means are to be used; which is a corollary from the conclusion already demonstrated, that scripture is its own interpreter. For if scripture interpret itself, then we must apply these means to obtain the interpretation of scripture; since those who would use other means do not allow to scripture the power of expounding its own meaning. But scripture does indeed explain itself with the utmost plainness and perspicuity, if we will only attend to scripture thus explaining itself; and although it may not in all places leave absolutely no room for doubt, yet it does so in most, and the most necessary places, and in the principal articles of our faith. We have examples of this sort of interpretation in the scriptures.

For the scripture, where it speaks with some obscurity, explains its meaning sometimes immediately after in the very same place, sometimes accumulatively in several other places. This I will briefly illustrate by examples of both sorts of interpretation. In Isaiah ii. 1, we have: “Look unto the rock whence ye were hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye were digged.” The language is obscure and ambiguous; but the obscurity is wholly removed by the words which follow: “Consider Abraham your father, and Sarah who bore you.” What better expositor do we require? Gen. xv. 2, Abraham says to the Lord: “What wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eleazar of Damascus?” These words are somewhat dark, but light is thrown upon them presently after: “Behold, thou hast given me no seed, and lo, my servant born in my house is my heir.” What could possibly be spoken more plainly?

Gen. xi. 1, the whole world is said to have been of one lip and, to make this better understood, it is immediately subjoined, that their speech was the same. Exod. xx. 4, in the second precept of the decalogue, we are commanded to “make no graven image, nor likeness of any thing;” and the reason of the law, subjoined immediately in a large exposition, makes the meaning of the law still more evident. Isaiah i. 2, “I have brought up children, and they have rebelled against me,” saith the Lord; and then immediately shows that this declaration concerns the Israelites: “Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.” Isaiah liii. 1, “To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed ?” —the meaning of this is plain from the preceding clause, “Who hath believed our report?”—so as to make it evident, that the gospel is denoted by the arm of the Lord.

In the sixth of John Christ is described as having discoursed at large of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, and having given grievous offence by that discourse not only to the Capernaïtes, but also to his own disciples. Wherefore, to prevent that offence from sinking too deep or dwelling too long in pious minds, Christ himself at the last explains himself, saying, that the time should come when they should see the Son of man ascending up; that it is the Spirit that quickens, while the flesh profits nothing; and still more plainly, that those words which he had spoken were Spirit and life. So plainly, so carefully, so largely does Christ remove that stumbling-block from his discourse, and teach us that he spoke of a spiritual, not a carnal and bodily, sort of eating and drinking.

Paul says, 1 Cor. v. 9, "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to keep company with fornicators" but what sort of fornicators he meant, he presently indicates; not those who were strangers to the Christian name and profession, but those who, professing to be Christ's adherents, abstained not from fornication and such-like similar enormities; with such he hath forbidden us to have any familiarity, and hath clearly explained his mind upon that subject. So, in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians, speaking of marriage, he drops these words, "This is a great mystery" where, foreseeing that some would hence infer that marriage was a sacrament, he subjoined what absolutely removes the ground of such a surmise, "But I speak concerning Christ and the church" in which words he protests that it is not matrimony, but the union of Christ and the church, that is styled by him a mystery.

Such examples are innumerable, wherein it is apparent that the Holy Spirit hath been careful that what he might seem at first to have expressed with some obscurity, should afterwards be clearly explained, so as to free the reader from all difficulty. Now if I were to attempt to prove by examples, how those things which are expressed with some obscurity in one place are explained with the utmost clearness in other parts of scripture, I should scarcely come to any end. For the usage of scripture is to send us, for the true meaning of one part of scripture, to another; so that, in this way, we do not rest or acquiesce in any single portion, but embrace the whole body of the sacred volumes in our reading and meditation. Passages must therefore be compared with one another, if we desire rightly to understand or gain a firm hold of scripture.

The prophetic scriptures illustrate the books of Moses, and the whole old Testament is opened out in the new. In Exod. iii. we have the words, "I am that I am," and, "I am hath sent me to you." What is the meaning of these expressions? What else but this, that God is eternal and immortal, unlike the other deities of erroneous creeds. Now this is elsewhere expressed without any ambiguity of phrase. Isaiah xliii., "Before me there was no God formed, neither after me shall there be any;" and Isaiah xlviii., "I am the first, and I am the last:" and, in infinite other passages of both Testaments the same truth is most manifestly established.

When the devil abused the scriptures, Christ restrained him by the authority of the scriptures, Matt. iv.; thus instructing his church to refute those opponents who torture scripture into various senses by testimonies of scripture compared together, skillfully applied and correctly understood. Christ condemns and sets aside that licentious custom of divorce, which the Jews had taken up from a false exposition of the Mosaic law, no otherwise than by interpreting the law and explaining it by another passage of scripture, Matt. xix. Christ refutes and convinces by the testimony of scripture the Sadducees who denied the resurrection, and founded their denial upon a subtle piece of reasoning, Matt. xxii. The apostle in his epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Hebrews, and in almost all the rest, quotes so as that if we were not (as he says of the Jews) "dull of hearing," and were earnestly desirous, without pride or prejudice, to handle, peruse, revolve, search, examine the scriptures, to learn the scriptures from the scriptures themselves, and to deem no expositor of the Holy Spirit better than the Holy Spirit himself, we should assuredly be seldomer at a loss to understand the scriptures. But, whereas we read or consider the scriptures with but slight attention, and follow the changeful and manifold opinions and interpretations of men, we are distracted by doubtful and almost infinite judgments, and imagine I know not what obscurities, and become blind as the bats, seeking light in the very blaze of noon.

Let us next see briefly what the fathers determined respecting these means of interpretation. Basil, in his treatise of the Holy Spirit, c. 1, bids us "investigate the meaning concealed in every word and syllable." The expediency of doing this he proves thus: The scope of scripture is, that we may be made like to God; such a likeness cannot have place without knowledge: now "knowledge comes by instruction," and "of instruction the beginning is speech, the parts whereof are syllables and terms." The same Basil, in his Ascot. Quest. 267, hath these words: "Whatsoever seems to be spoken ambiguously or obscurely in some places of holy scripture, is cleared up by what is plain and evident in other places." What is this, but the very thesis which we maintain? So then, if we would understand the ambiguities and obscurities which meet us in every direction in the study of scripture, we must consult other passages, and compare scripture with itself. Ireneus, Lib. II. c. 473, says that all scripture is in harmony with itself, and that the parables (that is, the more obscure sentences) are in harmony with the places perspicuously expressed, *et quo manifesta sunt absolvent parabolis*; that is, that light is so reflected upon the obscure places from the clear, that no one who does not choose it, can possibly err and be misled.

Origen, in his 24th Homily upon Numbers, tells us: "The discovery of what we seek in the scriptures is much facilitated by adducing from several places what is written upon the same subject." Tertullian, in his book *de Virginibus Velandis*: "Arise, O truth, thyself expound thine own scriptures, which custom knows not; for had it known them, it would not have existed." And in his book against Praxeas: "Scripture is in no such peril as to need help from thy reasoning, lest it should seem to contradict itself. It hath reason, both when it determines God to be but one, and when it shews the Father and the Son to

be two, and is sufficient for itself." Hilary, in his 9th book upon the Trinity: "Let the meaning of what is said be gathered either from the preceding, or from the following context." Ambrose, Epist. 7, Lib. II., says that Paul interprets himself in most passages; and likewise Chrysostom, Horn. 9, upon 2 Cor.: "Every where, when he uses any obscure expression, he presently again explains himself" Cyril, in his Thesaurus, Lib. viii. c. 2, says that "we must observe the circumstances, time, subject, and person, in order that we may investigate the true meaning."

But most clearly of all Augustine, in his four books of Christian Doctrine; in three of which he treats of the method of finding out the true sense of scripture, and in the fourth, the mode of teaching others what we now understand. And forasmuch as the end of all scripture is, as Augustine observes, the love of God and of our neighbour, he therefore treats of this in his first book, and determines that without any doubt that is no true interpretation which does not serve to build up the edifice of this genuine charity. Having handled this matter, he comes closer to his subject, and pronounces the difficulty of understanding things to lie in the signs wherewith the things are denoted. Such signs he distinguishes into the unknown and the ambiguous. He treats of the unknown in the second book, and of the ambiguous in the third. He first defines and divides a sign in several chapters, teaching us that it is sometimes taken strictly and sometimes figuratively; whence he says that the obscurity of the scriptures is occasioned, of which obscurity he sets forth the various uses. Then, in c. 8 he enumerates the canonical books; because, as he says, the first task is to know the books, to read them through, and commit them to memory. Then he exhorts us to seek in those passages which are clearly expressed the precepts of living and the rules of faith; since all that make the complex of faith and a good life may be found in what is so expressed. Having mastered these, which are the plainer parts, he bids us proceed to the more obscure; and in c. 10, he returns to signs, which he says are unknown either in the words or in the sentence. Lest any one, therefore, should err on account of his ignorance of the signs, he delivers in cc. 11, 12, the general precepts for acquiring an acquaintance with the art of grammar, which is a requisite condition for learning the sense of scripture. He affirms skill in the three languages to be greatly needed, and bears his testimony to the great aid to be derived from a multitude of learned interpreters: but if interpreters do not agree, he teaches us that recourse must be had to the Hebrew and Greek originals. Afterwards he shows that physics, and arithmetic, and music, and specially logic, upon which he speaks largely, are useful to a divine for understanding the scriptures; and, whilst he maintains that these philosophic arts are of great advantage to the students of theology, he yet reminds us that we do not addict ourselves to them immoderately; because many, though not all, of the discourses of the philosophers are superstitious, false, and impious. He directs the reader also to study history, through ignorance of which many persons have fallen into error, cc. 27, 28; and concludes that the philosophers have many things agreeable to our religion.

In his third book he discusses the ambiguity of signs, which happens in many

ways: for sometimes they are taken strictly, sometimes metaphorically and figuratively; sometimes it is doubtful how the sentence should be stopped or pronounced; upon which subject he lays down this general rule, that we must never depart from the rule of faith: furthermore, that we must take care not to understand strictly what is spoken figuratively, c. 6; for it is a pitiable bondage of the soul to take signs for things. Many chapters and many rules are occupied with this subject. He subjoins another general rule, that some precepts are proposed to all in common, some privately to special persons; and that these are to be diligently distinguished the one from the other. Then he adds another, that we ought not to imitate every thing that is related or even praised in the scriptures; and this other, that the clear places must be applied to understand the obscure; which point he frequently repeats. Then follow the rules of Tychonius, seven in number, which may be read in Augustine himself. These rules he calls the keys "whereby the mysteries of the holy scripture are unlocked." It is surprising that Augustine, when anxious to prescribe the best method of understanding and expounding scripture, did not remind us that the bishop of Rome was the sole certain interpreter of scripture.

The same Augustine, in his Book of 83 Questions, Ques. 69, says: "The circumstances of scripture generally throw light upon the meaning, when those things which lie round the scripture and touch upon the present question are handled in a diligent discussion" Jerome too, on Isaiah, c. 19: "It is usual in scripture to subjoin plain words to obscure ones, and to express in a clear form what was first spoken enigmatically²." In his epistle to Pammachius, 'which is prefixed to his commentary upon Hosea, he says that "the scriptures are the sealed book," 'which none could open, or unlock its mysteries, but the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Jerome, therefore, does not recognise the pope as the public interpreter of scripture. But how then shall we understand the scriptures? He subjoins: "We must pray to the Lord, and say with Peter, 'Declare unto us this parable'."

Why should I enumerate other authors, even papists? Gerson, in his treatise *Quo Veritates sunt Credendo*, says, p. 1: "The scripture expounds its own rules by themselves, according to the several passages of scripture." And in his book of Communion in one Kind, he says that the scripture is "like one connected speech, whereof one part confirms, elucidates, and explains another : " and hence he concludes with Augustine, that "one scripture should be compared with other passages of holy scripture." Again, upon Canticles, p. 3: "One passage of scripture can lend an exposition to another." Augustinus Steuchus, upon Genesis, c. 2, says: "God was not so unmerciful as to wish that men should be tortured throughout all generations by ignorance of this matter; since he did not permit the existence of any one place in scripture which we cannot understand, if we will only weigh it carefully. For, as Theodoret says in this place, 'Holy scripture, when it designs to express any thing of importance, explains itself, and does not suffer the hearer to go wrong°.'" *Hieronimus ab Oleastro* prescribes sixteen canons, in the beginning of his commentary upon the five books of Moses, highly useful for the reading and understanding of the scriptures; the drift of all which canons is to enable

us to interpret scripture by scripture, not to direct us to have recourse to external means whenever we would expound a difficult place in scripture. Thus then we close this question.

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