

## FOR THE SAKE OF OUR SALVATION: The Truth and Humility of God's Word

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Christian tradition has always seen a close relationship between the pages of Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ. Both are designated the Word of God because both participate in the mystery of God revealing himself and his will in human form. Scripture is the Word inspired; Christ is the Word incarnate. In the former, the divine Word is expressed in human language; in the latter, the divine Word is enfleshed in human nature. The two mysteries are interpenetrating and mutually illuminating.

The implications of this analogy may be drawn out in different ways. Most obviously, the doctrine of inspiration is akin to the doctrine of the incarnation because it entails a historical manifestation of the Word in a divine-and-human form.<sup>1</sup> Further contemplation reveals that the inerrancy of Scripture is a parallel reflection of the sinlessness of Christ, for both are immune to the privations of truth and love which we call error.<sup>2</sup> So too, on a hermeneutical level, the inspired Word must be read in a way that takes full account of its interconnectedness with the incarnate Word.<sup>3</sup> This is to say that biblical exegesis must investigate the historical meaning of Scripture as well as its theological meaning, the two being properties of its human and divine dimensions respectively.

Building on the foundation of this tradition, I propose that more can be said to elucidate the relationship between Christ and the Bible. My aim in what follows is to advance a twofold thesis. First, I argue that the Church's perspective on Scripture derives from Christ's perspective on Scripture. It is Jesus who sets

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1 This point is made in the Second Vatican Council's document on divine revelation: "For the words of God, expressed in human language, have become like unto human speech, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like unto human beings." *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965). Translations and section numbers for conciliar, papal, and curial documents cited in this article follow those given in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. and trans. by Dean P. Béchard (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002) unless otherwise indicated.

2 This point is made by Pope Pius XII in his 1943 encyclical on biblical studies: "For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things 'except sin' (Heb. 4:15), so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect except error." *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit], Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (September 30, 1943), 20.

3 See, for example, Pope John Paul II, Address on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (April 23, 1993), 6–11.

the parameters for what the Church believes and teaches about the Bible, and so it follows that our theology of biblical inspiration must proceed from certain fixed points regarding its origin, authority and truthfulness that are established by the teaching of Christ. Second, I am convinced that Scripture's humble human expression is a mirror image of the humility of Jesus. By this I mean that inspired Scripture, like the incarnate Son, embodies the merciful condescension of God in a way that confronts our intellectual pride and calls us to a humility of heart and mind "for the sake of our salvation."<sup>4</sup>

### *The Authority and Truth of the Word*

Though rarely stated in these terms, the Christian vision of the Bible must be determined by Christ's vision of the Bible.<sup>5</sup> Just as we look to Jesus as the perfection of the human vocation, so also we look to him as "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."<sup>6</sup> Christian belief in the authority and mystery of Scripture is no exception to this principle. By his teaching and example, the Word made flesh transmits to his followers a right understanding of the Word made Scripture.

The gospels have much to say about Jesus' perspective on the Bible.<sup>7</sup> The shape of his thinking on this subject is revealed through the many appeals to the sacred text that occur in his preaching, in his private temptations, and in his polemical engagement with opponents. Virtually everywhere, dispersed throughout all the putative strata and hypothetical sources that are said to underlie the canonical gospels, Jesus appears as one committed to thinking and acting in accord with biblical revelation. Statistical analysis indicates that Jesus referenced the texts of

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4 The celebrated phrase from *Dei Verbum*, 11.

5 For a development of this thesis by a Protestant scholar, see John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1993). Note also the work of R. D. Wilson, "Jesus and the Old Testament," *The Princeton Theological Review* 24 (1926): 632–661.

6 Heb. 12:2.

7 I recognize that the gospels preserve the *ipsissima vox Christi* ("the genuine voice of Christ") and not always the *ipsissima verba Christi* ("the very words of Christ"). Even so, the Pontifical Biblical Commission insists in its 1964 instruction that the evangelists used "different words to express what he [Jesus] said, not keeping to the very letter, but nevertheless preserving the sense." *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* [Holy Mother Church], Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels (April 21, 1964), 9. My approach to the gospels takes full account of this and is fundamentally aligned with the perspective of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as elucidated by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) in *Gospel, Catechesis, Catechism: Sidelights on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 64: "The *Catechism* trusts the biblical word. It holds the Christ of the gospels to be the real Jesus. It is also convinced that all the gospels tell us about this same Jesus and that all of them together help us, each in its own way, to know the true Jesus of history, who is no other than the Christ of faith." For scholarly defenses of the historical veracity of the Gospel accounts, see Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007); and Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

the Old Testament thirty-nine times throughout the four gospels.<sup>8</sup> However, this figure fails to do justice to the data, since countless other times he alludes to the biblical writings in more subtle and sophisticated ways—adopting their wording, utilizing their images, expounding their themes. It is no exaggeration to say that the mind of Jesus was saturated with the teachings and concerns of the Scriptures.

The question of primary importance is how Jesus viewed the nature of the Bible. What kind of “theology of Scripture” is presupposed by his teaching? How did he account for its sanctity and religious authority? There can be no doubt that Jesus maintained a remarkably high view of the biblical Word. His most basic conviction is the notion that Scripture has its origin in God. For Christ, the words of the Bible are the words of his Father, and so its written assertions are nothing less than divine assertions preserved in readable form. Evidence for this outlook appears, for instance, in Matthew 19:4–5, where Jesus regards “what Scripture says” and “what God says” as one and the same thing.<sup>9</sup> In discussing the divine plan for married life, he tells the Pharisees that “he who made” (*ho ktisas*) man and woman in the beginning is also the One who said (*eipen*): “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.”<sup>10</sup> According to Jesus, the voice of the world’s Creator is the same voice that speaks through the human words of the Book of Genesis.

A similar perspective may be adduced from Mark 12:36, where Jesus refers to David being “in the Holy Spirit” (*en tō pneumati tō hagiō*) when he composed the words of Psalm 110. He envisions David, the human psalmist, participating in a supernatural movement of the Spirit when he uttered words that ultimately point to his messianic identity. What is remarkable about this statement is the way that Jesus conceptualizes sacred Scripture as a product of divine and human activity unfolding simultaneously in the process of composition. Because the Spirit superintended the writing of the Scriptures, there is a divine causality that must be recognized and accounted for; at the same time, the concept of a human author scrawling his thoughts on papyrus is just as naturally a part of the picture. So Jesus not only ascribes the biblical writings to the agency of God or his Spirit, but he also affirms the conscious involvement of human authors. In addition to David’s role in the composition of Psalm 110, he speaks of other portions of the Bible being written by figures such as Moses,<sup>11</sup> Isaiah,<sup>12</sup> and Daniel.<sup>13</sup>

8 For the thirty-nine explicit quotations attributed to Jesus, see Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 42–43.

9 For this and similar phenomena in the writings of the New Testament, see B. B. Warfield, “‘It Says:’ ‘Scripture Says:’ ‘God Says,’” in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 283–332.

10 Gen. 2:24.

11 John 5:46–47.

12 Mark 7:6.

13 Matt. 24:15.

An immediate consequence of Scripture's divine origin is its supreme authority. If the Bible enshrines the discourse of God, it must thereby express the will of God. Jesus reveals this perspective as his own in several places in the gospels, most memorably during his showdown with the devil in the wilderness. In the Matthean account of the temptations of Jesus, the Messiah repels his assailant with three quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures. In all three, he introduces the citation with the preface, "it is written" (*gegraptai*), a formula used in emergent Judaism and throughout the New Testament to summarize the belief that Scripture, precisely in its canonical expression, is the incontrovertible foundation for religious faith and life.<sup>14</sup> Jesus confirms this by his first quotation against the devil in Matthew 4:4: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."<sup>15</sup> Insofar as Scripture communicates words that come from God, it lays down inviolable standards that must never be ignored or transgressed.

This perspective is again manifest when Jesus states in John 10:35 that "Scripture cannot be broken" (*ou dunatai luthēnai hē graphē*). In this context, he is rebutting a charge that his claim to be the Son of God amounts to blasphemy. In order to prove otherwise, he appeals to Psalm 82:6, where the judges of Israel are described as "gods" insofar as God's authority was entrusted to them to administer divine justice according to divine law. Jesus reasons that if a divine appellation can be given to men who enact and enforce the Law of God, then no objection can be made for one who performs the works of God.<sup>16</sup> The argument has force, he insists, because the binding authority of Scripture can never be annulled or invalidated. Its testimony is altogether unbreakable. Moreover, the solemn weight of divine authority extends to every part of Scripture, even to its individual words. This is clear from the fact that Jesus' whole argument turns on the use of the term "gods" in Psalm 82.

Finally, if Jesus holds that Scripture comes from God, and that its teachings are invested with divine authority, does it follow for him that Scripture is divinely truthful?<sup>17</sup> The answer that emerges from the gospels is an emphatic yes. Although there is no one passage where Jesus makes this deduction in so many words, the Gospel tradition gives us ample warrant for drawing the conclusion. Consider, for

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14 Matt. 4:4, 7, 10.

15 Deut. 8:3.

16 See John 10:37–38.

17 It should be pointed out that the biblical notion of "truth" conveys the idea of reliability as well as factuality. Thus, it not only entails an accurate presentation of the way things are or were, but it provides sufficient ground for one's trust and confidence as well. For an important survey of the topic, see Roger Nicole, "The Biblical Concept of Truth" in *Scripture and Truth*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 287–298. For an analysis of truth as grounded in God's faithfulness to the covenant, see Oswald Loretz, *The Truth of the Bible*, trans. David J. Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968).

instance, Christ's high priestly prayer in John 17:1–26. Petitioning the Father on behalf of his disciples, he states: "your word is truth."<sup>18</sup> Now, granted, Jesus is not speaking specifically about the Bible in this passage. Nevertheless, the assertion is deprived of meaning if in fact the written Word of God is tainted with misinformation and false representations of reality. The statement affirms something that is true in general; it is not an assertion that characterizes one particular form of God's Word over against another. Instead, it seems that Jesus is explicating the positive content of Israel's belief that "God is not man, that he should lie."<sup>19</sup> Besides, we never see Christ correcting the Scriptures from his transcendent vantage point as the Son of God, as one who knows the Father in a uniquely divine way.<sup>20</sup> Neither does he make merely tentative proposals on the basis of biblical testimony. His every reference to Scripture is made with an unshakeable trust in its reliability.

Similar confidence in the truthfulness of Scripture is displayed when Jesus invokes its prophetic oracles. Christ firmly believed that the Old Testament "must" (*dei*) be brought to fulfillment in him, especially in the events of the Triduum, for the Scriptures had determined in advance that he should be handed over to enemies,<sup>21</sup> reckoned with transgressors,<sup>22</sup> lifted up on the cross,<sup>23</sup> and brought through suffering into glory.<sup>24</sup> It is hard to imagine such a weight of divine necessity on the mind of Jesus unless he was convinced of the absolute truth of the sacred texts. Yet Jesus maintained that the entire Old Testament bore witness to his messianic mission. The testimony of Scripture stretching from the Law and the prophets to the psalms is such that God's plan of salvation is climactically realized in him.<sup>25</sup> For Jesus, then, the Old Testament is anything but a haphazard collection of writings bundling together diverse and contradictory viewpoints. There is a unified plan and perspective throughout, an authentic christological focus that is intended by God. But a unity of purpose at this level presupposes an underlying consistency which would seem to rule out any serious deviation from the truth. It takes only a few dissonant notes to spoil the harmony of a grand symphonic performance.

All of this takes on greater significance when we consider that Jesus' whole mission was "to bear witness to the truth"<sup>26</sup> and to enable his disciples to "know

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18 John 17:17.

19 Num. 23:19.

20 Matt. 11:27.

21 Matt. 26:54.

22 Luke 22:37.

23 John 3:14.

24 Luke 24:25–26.

25 See Luke 24:44.

26 John 18:37.

the truth” by adherence to his word.<sup>27</sup> He claims for himself a personal veracity that, for any other man, would be audacious at best and intolerable at worst. Not even the prophets of Israel, who spoke by the Spirit of God, could make such all-encompassing claims for their teaching. Yet the Gospel tradition lacks any statement or comment that might suggest Jesus was prone, or even potentially liable, to err in his speech. All that he teaches is delivered with absolute authority and without the attachment of disclaimers or qualifications. His words are put forward as a stable foundation of rock upon which to build one’s life in preparation for the final judgment.<sup>28</sup> For these reasons, the authority and reliability of God’s Word in Scripture can be said to stand or fall with the authority and reliability of God’s Word incarnate. The two are inseparably united at the deepest level.

### *The Perspective of the Ancient Church*

The perspective of Jesus on Scripture was immediately taken over as the perspective of the ancient Church. The teaching of the New Testament as well as the earliest Christian writers is merely an echo of the voice of Christ on this subject. In all essentials, from the Bible’s divine origin to its divine authority and truthfulness, there is a consistency and continuity of doctrinal outlook. Even where developments beyond the express teaching of Jesus are evidenced, it is usually an effort to make explicit what is already implicit in his words.

Regarding the divine origin of the Bible, one can find no clearer statement than Paul’s affirmation in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” The crucial expression of the passage is “inspired by God,” which in Greek is the compound adjective *theopneustos*, meaning “breathed by God.” Owing to the influence of the Latin Vulgate, which rendered the expression *divinitus inspirata*, the Church has traditionally spoken of the divine inspiration of Scripture. This is perfectly legitimate as theological terminology, but it should be pointed out that *inspirare* typically means “to breath into,” as its usage in the Vulgate Old Testament makes evident.<sup>29</sup> *Theopneustos*, however, designates a “breathing out” or “breathing forth” of the Scriptures from God as their Source.

The description is obviously anthropomorphic, recalling how human words are merely a breath, a type of exhaling accompanied by a momentary sound. However, this does not mean that Paul thought of the breath of God as something so fleeting and insubstantial. On the contrary, the conceptual background of the expression lies in the Old Testament, where the Lord’s *n š mâ* or “breath” is

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<sup>27</sup> John 8:31–32.

<sup>28</sup> Matt. 7:24–27.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Gen. 2:7; Wisd. 15:11; Sir. 4:11.

the instrument of his infinite power. It brought all of creation into being<sup>30</sup> and performed such mighty feats of deliverance as blasting a path of escape through the Red Sea.<sup>31</sup> To say that Scripture is “God-breathed” is to speak of its divine origin as well as its divine potency as a word that never fails to accomplish God’s purpose.<sup>32</sup>

It is precisely the supernatural source and power behind the Scriptures that makes them “profitable” for Christian teaching. Since God himself brought forth the divine books, they are supremely authoritative for various forms of religious instruction,<sup>33</sup> especially moral formation, as indicated here by their ability to equip the believer “for every good work.” It likewise accounts for the characterization of the biblical texts as *hiera grammata*, “sacred writings,” for they partake of the holiness of God who produced them.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the importance of Paul’s instruction in 2 Timothy, it is only a partial statement on the nature of the Bible. Not only is the scope of the biblical canon left unspecified,<sup>35</sup> but the participation of human authors goes unmentioned as well. In other words, the historical process by which God breathed the Scriptures into being receives no attention. For this dimension of the mystery, which was clearly affirmed by Jesus,<sup>36</sup> we have to look at other passages which describe the Bible as a book that is simultaneously human and divine.

The most important is Peter’s affirmation in 2 Peter 1:20–21: “First of all,” he declares, “you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” This saying extends our vision beyond that of the Pauline text by considering the involvement of human participants in Scripture’s composition. On the one hand, Peter is anxious to deny that biblical prophecy is a strictly natural phenomenon, as though the prophets of Israel communicated only what they imagined the future would bring. In the apostle’s judgment, it is reductionistic and simply wrong to equate prophecy with human speculation about the will of God for his people or about his plan for the

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30 Ps. 33:6.

31 2 Sam. 22:16.

32 Isa. 55:11.

33 Paul also voices this conviction in Rom. 15:4 and 1 Cor. 10:11.

34 2 Tim. 3:15.

35 Contextually it is clear that Paul has the Old Testament in mind, for Timothy could not have known the books of the New Testament “from childhood” (2 Tim. 3:15). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the expression “all Scripture” (*pasa graphē*) is distributive in meaning, extending to every document that is legitimately classified as scriptural. Technically, then, the assertion is not limited to the writings familiar to Timothy. Paul is establishing a formal principle that is directly applied to the Old Testament and yet equally applicable to the scriptural texts of the New Testament. See Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), 189.

36 For example Mark 12:36; John 5:46–47.

days ahead. On the other hand, Peter counters such mistaken notions with the conviction that every prophecy of Scripture comes about by a supernatural operation of the Spirit. Prophetic illumination is nothing less than a gift from God that the prophet is called to mediate to the people of God. Though a certain emphasis is placed on the prophet's role of speaking a divine message in oral form (vs. 21), the statement also has in view the permanent expression of prophetic speech in the written texts of the Bible (vs. 20).

Peter describes the divine influence upon the prophets in terms of men being "moved" by the Spirit. The use of *pherein* ("to carry along") in the passive voice underscores the primacy of God's activity in directing and impelling the prophet according to his purpose. The Spirit, whose influence is decisively more than mere assistance, determines what the prophet utters, much as a strong wind determines the course and nautical speed of a ship driven out to sea.<sup>37</sup> By the same token, the saying does not imply that the prophets were merely passive instruments manipulated by an irresistible force. Peter has in mind the writing prophets of the Bible, and these must not be confused with ecstatic prophets whose faculties were seized by the Spirit and put to use in an altered state of consciousness.<sup>38</sup> Rather, the prophets whose writings became part of the Bible were free and active participants in a concurrent movement of divine and human activity.

Furthermore, because the prophecies of Scripture were given "by" (*hypo*) the divine Spirit, and because the prophets articulated words that originated "from" (*apo*) God as their divine source, Peter concludes that readers have every reason to place full confidence in their message. This, in part, is why he insists that the prophetic word is so "sure."<sup>39</sup> Guaranteed by God, prophetic oracles can always be trusted to reach their fulfillment, even if they appear to be delayed and are forced to suffer the ridicule of scoffers who advance heretical counterclaims (topics of discussion in 2 Peter 2–3).

The supreme authority of Scripture, implied in different ways in the Pauline and Petrine texts just examined, is no less apparent elsewhere in the New Testament. One thinks of the ubiquitous occurrence of the formula, "it is written" (*gegraptai*), to introduce biblical citations.<sup>40</sup> Mirroring the conventional practice of Judaism in general and of Jesus in particular, the earliest Christians held the scriptural Word in such high regard that its authority required no assertion. If it stands written in the Bible, its binding force and prophetic certainty are beyond question.

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37 As in Acts 27:15, 17.

38 One thinks of the example of King Saul, who was "turned into another man" when the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him and caused him to prophecy (1 Sam. 10:6).

39 2 Pet. 1:19.

40 Acts 1:20; 13:33; 15:15; Rom. 1:17; 2:24; 3:4; 1 Cor. 1:19; 2:9, among others.

Part of the reason for this is the belief that God speaks directly to his people through the biblical texts. Regardless of when the books of Scripture may have been written, the speech of God traverses the ages to address the present situation of the faithful. An example of this appears in Hebrews 3:7, where the Holy Spirit is said to speak the words of Psalm 95:7–8 to believers in the first century. The passage is put forward as immediately relevant to the original recipients of the Book of Hebrews, not because the ancient psalmist had this community in mind when he wrote, but because the Spirit “says” (*legei*, present tense) what the Psalm says in the here and now. The voice of the human author had long since fallen silent, and yet the voice of God, proceeding from eternity, is contemporary with every generation that encounters his Word. Once again, the divine authority of Scripture follows from its divine origin, and this prevents its relevance from being locked up in an irretrievable past.

Finally, if the ancient Church embraced the teaching of Jesus on the divine character and authority of Scripture, was it also convinced of the Bible’s divine truthfulness? Here too the evidence supports a decisive yes. But as with Jesus, there is no one passage we can pinpoint that articulates the conviction in so many words. Instead, the total witness of the New Testament displays such an undiluted confidence in the testimony of Scripture that no other conclusion seems possible. Beyond this, there are a few particulars from which a doctrine of the Bible’s trustworthiness may be inferred. For example, recall that Jesus equated the words of Scripture with the words of God,<sup>41</sup> and then spoke of the Father’s word as “truth.”<sup>42</sup> Working from these premises, one can deduce that the Bible, being the written Word of God, must be as truthful as God himself in all that it affirms.<sup>43</sup> This same logic appears to undergird the faith of the apostolic Church. For the early Christian community also believed that the words of Scripture are *ta logia tou theou*, “the oracles of God.”<sup>44</sup> And not only so, but the same Church taught that God can never be the author of falsehood or deception; rather, his divine majesty is *ho apseudēs theos*, “the God who never lies.”<sup>45</sup>

But whatever explicitness is lacking in the New Testament regarding the reliability and truth of the Bible, this belief is stated clearly and unambiguously in the writings of the earliest ecclesiastical authors. Consider, for example, the first-century testimony of St. Clement of Rome, who states in his letter to the Corinthians that the Holy Scriptures are “true” and that “nothing unrighteous or

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41 Matt. 19:4–5.

42 John 17:17.

43 For the importance of establishing the inerrancy of Scripture as a logical deduction from revealed premises, see Roger Nicole, “Induction and Deduction with Reference to Inspiration,” in *Standing Forth: Collected Writings of Roger Nicole* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2002), 151–158.

44 Rom. 3:2; see also Acts 1:16; 4:24–25; 28:25; Heb. 1:5–13.

45 Titus 1:2.

counterfeit is written in them.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in the middle of the second century, St. Justin Martyr counters accusations against the internal consistency of the Bible with the emphatic declaration: “I am positive that no passage [of Scripture] contradicts another.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, before the close of the second century, St. Irenaeus of Lyons contends that “the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and his Spirit.”<sup>48</sup> Without statements to the contrary, either in the New Testament or in the earliest mainstream traditions, we are left to conclude that the historical picture is one of unbroken continuity regarding a Christian perspective on the Bible. From Jesus to the apostolic Church to the pastors and theologians of the second century there is full unanimity of conviction on Scripture’s divine origin, divine authority, and divine truthfulness.

### *The Perspective of the Contemporary Magisterium*

Although it lies beyond the scope of the present essay, the continuance of this perspective can be traced through the patristic and medieval periods up to the very threshold of modernity.<sup>49</sup> It was not until the rise of rationalist biblical criticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the longstanding Christian consensus on the nature of Scripture seemed in danger of collapse, or at least destined for a thoroughgoing modification. At stake was the mystery of Scripture as such, the belief that the biblical Word comes from God, that it carries the authority of God, and that it reflects the character of God as One who is faithful and true.

The Church’s response to this new climate of criticism and its frequent rejection of traditional positions on the Bible began in earnest at the First Vatican Council (1869–1870) and continued for nearly a century, culminating at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The decades between these conciliar events witnessed numerous ecclesiastical interventions, especially papal encyclicals devoted to scriptural studies (1893, 1920, 1943) and periodic statements issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (founded in 1902). Careful study of these pronouncements reveals, not only an openness to legitimate developments in the field

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46 St. Clement of Rome, *Letter to the Corinthians*, 45, 2–3, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd. ed., ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 105.

47 St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chap. 65, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation (New York: Christian Heritage, 1948), 251.

48 St. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, Bk. 2, Chap. 28, 2; adapted from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004 [reprint]), 1:399.

49 For an extensive historical and theological treatment of inspiration, see the remarkable work of Christianus Pesch, *De Inspiratione Sacrae Scripturae* [The Inspiration of Sacred Scripture] (Friburgi Brisgoviae: Herder, 1906). Similar works of note include Augustin Bea, *De Inspiratione Scripturae Sacrae* [The Inspiration of Sacred Scripture] (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1930) and Sebastianus Tromp, *De Sacrae Scripturae Inspiratione* [The Inspiration of Sacred Scripture], 5th. ed. (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1953).

of biblical science, but also a heightened concern to preserve intact the doctrinal patrimony of the Church regarding the supernatural character of the Bible.

The First Vatican Council affirmed the divine origin of Scripture by asserting its divine authorship. Although the language of God as “author” is not part of the referential language of the Bible itself, this became the preferred terminology in Christian theology, going back at least to Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century,<sup>50</sup> to capture the essential meaning of inspiration. In the words of the Council:

These [books of Scripture] the Church holds to be sacred and canonical, not because, having been composed by simple human industry, they were later approved by her own authority, nor merely because they contain revelation without error, but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God for their author and were delivered as such to the Church.<sup>51</sup>

Inspiration is thus defined as a mystery of divine authorship in the literary sense of the term.<sup>52</sup> The definition is further clarified by setting it against misconceptions that had gained currency in nineteenth-century theological discourse.<sup>53</sup> Every major statement of the Church on the subject has since reaffirmed the designation of God as the divine author of the Scriptures.<sup>54</sup> This would become an enduring benchmark of orthodoxy in the debate over “the Biblical Question” in the twentieth century.

50 Pope St. Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, Pref. 1, 2 (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844).

51 First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* [The Son of God], Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, (April 24, 1870), Chap. 2.

52 Even scholars who are otherwise disinclined to see a literary meaning in the Latin *auctor* in earlier Church pronouncements acknowledge that Vatican I describes God as the literary author of the books of Scripture. For example, see Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 22–24. On the use of this language in connection with inspiration, see Augustin Bea, “Deus Auctor Sacrae Scripturae: Herkunft und Bedeutung der Formel” [Divine Author of Sacred Scripture: Origin and Meaning of the Formula], *Angelicum* 20 (1943), 16–31.

53 The mistaken positions are those of Daniel Haneburg and Johann Jahn. The first popularized a view of inspiration in which the books of Scripture were written in a strictly human way but were later approved and endorsed by the Church. The second advanced a thesis that inspiration was equivalent to a charism of negative assistance whereby the biblical authors were prevented from asserting untruths but were otherwise left to write as they pleased. Neither position is acceptable because neither accounts for the historic Christian belief that Scripture is the Word of God and not merely the words of men.

54 See Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893), 41; Pope Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* [The Holy Spirit, the Comforter], Encyclical Letter Commemorating the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome (September 15, 1920), 3; Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1; and *Dei Verbum*, 11.

Of course, the human contribution to Scripture also demanded attention and clarification. In patristic theology, the concurrent authorship of the Bible was often compared to a musician playing an instrument, an analogy that served to underscore the primacy of God's role vis-à-vis the hagiographer's subordinate role in the composition of the biblical writings.<sup>55</sup> In medieval scholasticism, especially in the theology of Thomas Aquinas, the notions of God as the *auctor principalis* and the sacred writer as the *auctor instrumentalis* came into vogue as a way of describing the twofold efficient causality that produced the Bible.<sup>56</sup>

However helpful one regards these traditional notions, they lacked the fuller development that modern times demanded.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Pope Leo XIII advanced the discussion somewhat by describing the charism of inspiration as touching both the intellect and will of the sacred writer: "For, by supernatural power, God so moved and impelled them to write—he was so present to them—that the things which he ordered, and those only, they, first, rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth."<sup>58</sup> Even fuller is the statement proffered by Vatican II: "In composing the sacred Books, God chose and employed certain men, who, while engaged in this task, made full use of their faculties and powers, so that, with God acting in them and through them, they as true authors committed to writing everything and only those things that he wanted written."<sup>59</sup> Hence, not only is the human dimension of Scripture affirmed along with the divine, echoing the teaching of Jesus and the early Church, but a new appreciation for the depth of the mystery is evidenced as well. That is, we are led to see that instrumental causality is nothing less than a participatory causality: God operated "in" and "through" the human authors without suppressing their faculties, overriding their freedom, or preventing their personalities from making a distinct imprint on the biblical texts. In a way that exceeds our comprehension, the sacred authors were true authors caught up into the action of God transmitting his Word in written form.

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55 For early attestations of the analogy, see Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, 9 (in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:133); and Pseudo-Justin, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, 8 (in *Cohortatio ad Graecos; De Monarchia; Oratio ad Graecos*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich Patristische Texte und Studien 32 [New York: De Gruyter, 1990]).

56 See, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* [Miscellaneous Questions], Quod. 7, q. 6, art. 1, reply obj. 1. Note that the traditional concept of instrumental authorship is not a relegation of the human writer to a secondary status, making him less than a true author. To the contrary, it signals an elevation of the writer's natural faculties through participation in the supernatural activity of God, the principal author.

57 It should be noted that Pius XII insisted on the usefulness of patristic and Thomistic concepts of instrumentality in assisting modern theologians to describe the nature and effects of biblical inspiration with greater precision. *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 19.

58 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 41.

59 *Dei Verbum*, 11.

Naturally, the belief that Scripture has a divine *auctor* who inspired its human writers entails the corresponding belief that Scripture carries the weight of divine *auctoritas*. This had never been in doubt in the course of the Church's history any more than it was in the mind of Jesus or his earliest followers. Nevertheless, the challenges of the modern age called for a firm restatement of the fact. On this front, one can do no better than reference the Second Vatican Council, where the authority of the Bible is invoked in connection with theological studies and the various ministries which flow from it. According to the Council, just as the soul animates and enlivens the body, so the study of Scripture must be "the soul" that brings vitality and life to sacred theology.<sup>60</sup> More fundamentally, the Church's teaching office views itself under the authority of the Word: "this magisterium is not superior to the Word of God but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devoutly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully."<sup>61</sup> Suffice it to say, then, that no amount of criticism or skepticism, emanating either from within or without the contemporary Church, has been able to dislodge the conviction that the written Word of God is supremely authoritative for determining the faith and life of the pilgrim Church on earth.

Lastly, the Church remains fully convinced that the inspired Scriptures are trustworthy and true. In this respect too she walks in step with her Lord and her ancient forebears in the faith. But this is also where the Church has encountered the stiffest resistance from the ranks of the modern academy. No one conversant in twentieth-century theology doubts that biblical inerrancy is one of the watershed issues of our time. Here the pressures have been greatest to leave behind, or at least significantly modify, the traditional understanding of Scripture's total immunity from error in favor of a new paradigm that allows factual inaccuracies to stand alongside the truths enshrined in its sacred pages.

It is important to point out, however, that those who dispute the absolute truthfulness of Scripture do not attempt to make their case on historical grounds. They could hardly do so, given the sweeping consensus of the tradition. Rather, the push to limit the inerrancy of the Bible is based on a revised theological methodology. Traditionally, the Bible's freedom from error was maintained as a logical consequence of its divine inspiration. If God is the principal author of Scripture, and God, who is infinite Truth, can only assert what is true, then it follows deductively that the Word of God in Scripture can only contain truth.<sup>62</sup> This is precisely the logical structure of Leo XIII's teaching on inerrancy:

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60 *Dei Verbum*, 24.

61 *Dei Verbum*, 10.

62 One finds this same line of reasoning in the *Catechism*: "God is Truth itself, whose words cannot deceive. This is why one can abandon oneself in full trust to the truth and faithfulness of his word in all things." *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 215.

For all the books that the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Spirit. And so far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church.<sup>63</sup>

Today, however, the deductive method has been sidelined by an inductive method that attempts to define the extent of inerrancy on the basis of exegesis.<sup>64</sup> This approach involves sifting the texts of the Bible to determine, on a case by case basis, where their assertions are reliable and where they are “deficient in truth”<sup>65</sup> that is, reflective of the limitations and imperfections of their human authors. Needless to say, with so many difficulties present in the sacred text, contemporary scholars typically view inerrancy as something restricted to its religious teaching on faith, morals, and sacred history, with matters touching on profane history, geography, and science being subject to the more or less faulty apprehension of the sacred writers. Some would impute error to Scripture’s religious teaching as well.<sup>66</sup>

But the Church herself has never endorsed this new methodology or its consequences. Holding firm the doctrinal stance of Leo XIII, subsequent popes have taught that “we can never conclude that there is any error in Sacred Scripture” and that even its historical texts must be said to “rest on the absolute truth of the facts.”<sup>67</sup> More than once the Church has been forced to correct the mistaken view that biblical inerrancy extends only to matters of “faith and morals.”<sup>68</sup> The Pontifical Biblical Commission likewise affirmed in its 1964 instruction that the

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63 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 40–41.

64 The distinction in methodology is sometimes described as an *a priori* approach, which deduces inerrancy from revealed premises, and an *a posteriori* approach, which works from the written text of Scripture and makes an inductive conclusion based on observations made by the interpreter.

65 This is the memorable expression of Cardinal Franz König made during deliberations over Vatican II’s treatment of divine revelation. See Alois Grillmeier, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Chapter III,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 3:205.

66 For example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 16.

67 Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 5–6.

68 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1; see also Pius XII’s *Humani Generis* [The Human Race], Encyclical Letter on Certain False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine (August 12, 1950), 22.

four Gospels are faithful witnesses to Jesus and that their inspiration by the Holy Spirit renders them “immune from all error.”<sup>69</sup>

The question is whether the unrestricted inerrancy of Scripture remains the teaching of the Church today. It is beyond dispute that this was its official position leading up to Vatican II. But many find in the Council’s 1965 document *Dei Verbum* signs of a new and fundamentally different perspective.<sup>70</sup> Can we finally say, after a century of heated debate and strident restatements of the Bible’s unlimited truthfulness, that the Church has reversed directions and come to accept that the Scriptures are only imperfectly accurate? The whole question turns on a single statement in *Dei Verbum*:

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that we must acknowledge the Books of Scripture as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth that God wished to be recorded in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.

Here the Council contends that every human assertion in the Bible is at the same time a divine assertion made by the Holy Spirit, and that as a consequence of this, the scriptural texts teach truth *sine errore*, “without error.” This sounds like little more than a faithful restatement of the Church’s established teaching on Scripture’s unrestricted inerrancy. However, the document also remarks that the truth which resides in the written Word is recorded “for the sake of our salvation.” This last expression is the peg on which countless scholars hang the weight of an alleged development in the Church’s perspective. The argument is that Scripture’s freedom from error is now linked with truth insofar as it pertains to the saving purposes of God. Truths not directly linked with our salvation, it is said, do not enjoy the same privilege of being preserved from error.

This reading of the document is firmly entrenched in modern Catholic scholarship. Nevertheless, I would contend that the wording of the Constitution does not support such an interpretation. To begin with, the grammar of the text does not in fact delimit the kind of truth under discussion. The prepositional phrase *nostrae salutis causa*, “for the sake of our salvation,” functions as an adverbial phrase modifying the verbal expression, *consignari voluit*, “wished to be recorded.” As such, it elucidates the purpose behind God’s desire to put his truth in the Bible without differentiating between different classes of truths it may be said to

69 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, 11.

70 Brown, *Critical Meaning*, 19, says: “Many of us think that at Vatican II the Catholic Church ‘turned the corner’ in the inerrancy question by moving from the *a priori* [approach] toward the *a posteriori* in the statement of *Dei Verbum* 11.”

express.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, the lengthy footnote attached to this sentence cites multiple sources from the tradition which speak of Scripture's comprehensive conformity to the truth. Thus, in agreement with the document's use of footnotes in general, the references in the present footnote underscore the continuity of the Council's teaching with theological and magisterial positions of the past. Thirdly, analysis of the debates and earlier schemas that led to the final draft of *Dei Verbum* reveal a concern among the majority of the Council fathers, prompting even the intervention of Pope Paul VI, to avoid a wording of the text that would limit Scripture's inerrancy to "saving truth," an expression which could easily be misinterpreted to mean the truths of faith and morals and nothing beyond.<sup>72</sup> Fourthly, since the preceding clause insists that everything (*omne id*) asserted by the human authors is likewise asserted by the Holy Spirit, a restricted inerrancy reading leaves no way to avoid imputing misstatements of fact to the divine author.<sup>73</sup> Yet earlier papal statements declare such a proposition flatly "impossible."<sup>74</sup> Fifthly, it borders on inconceivable that the Council fathers were introducing a development of doctrine with virtually no indication that they were doing so and no explanation as to why the time was ripe for taking such a momentous step. If this were the case, the Council could only be charged with dodging a grave responsibility to the people of God. Taken together, the cumulative force of these observations supports the contention that *Dei Verbum's* teaching on biblical truth stands in doctrinal continuity with previous ecclesiastical teaching on the inerrancy of Scripture. One can legitimately speak of a new emphasis on the Bible's salvific purpose, but not of a fundamental departure from the Church's historic position on its unlimited truthfulness.

In summary, I am convinced that Jesus and the Church of both ancient and modern times share a common outlook on the nature of Scripture. Adherence to the divine origin, authority, and truth of the written Word is upheld consistently and without compromise down through the centuries. It could not be otherwise, I would contend, for these aspects of the biblical mystery are part of the Christian

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71 In essence, the prepositional phrase answers the question "why" God put his truth in the Bible, not "what kind" of truth is recorded there without error. See Augustin Cardinal Bea, S.J., *The Word of God and Mankind*, trans. Dorothy White (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1967), 187–191.

72 The penultimate schema spoke of the Scriptures teaching *veritatem salutarem*, but the text was amended to read *veritatem* without adjectival qualification. See Bea, *Word of God*, 190; Grillmeier, "Dogmatic Constitution," 3:210–215; also Mark Joseph Zia, "The Inerrancy of Scripture and the Second Vatican Council," *Faith & Reason* 31 (2006): 175–192.

73 Consider the succinct words of Luis Alonso-Schökel, "Inspiration," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 3:150: "Since Scripture is inspired by God, it follows that it cannot assert any falsehood: otherwise God himself would be commending falsehood to us on his own authority."

74 For example, Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 40.

deposit of faith which was “once for all delivered to the saints.”<sup>75</sup> From Pentecost to the present day, the Church has maintained Christ’s perspective on the Bible as her own.

### *The Humility of the Word*

It is no surprise that people find it difficult to embrace this “high view” of Scripture advocated by Jesus and the Church. The claims of faith inherent in this perspective are not only unverifiable from a scientific standpoint, but they seem utterly improbable from a rational and aesthetic standpoint. To put it bluntly, the written Word of God strikes many as too human to be divine. Unnumbered intellectuals throughout history have thus faced the scandal of the Bible and chosen to reject it. In this way too the inspired Word treads the path of the incarnate Word and mirrors its mystery.

In point of fact, Scripture will always be a reflection of the Word made flesh. According to the traditional christological analogy,<sup>76</sup> the union of divinity and humanity in Jesus can assist our understanding of the divine and human authorship of the Bible, just as the perfect sinlessness of Jesus is comparable to the perfect truthfulness of the Bible. But what of the cruciformity of Jesus? What of the fact that he was despised as an uneducated and ordinary man claiming to wield divine authority? Even in this respect the Scriptures bear the image of the crucified Messiah. For the texts of the Bible, by presenting their mighty claims in such modest wrappings, are offensive to human pride and elicit the contempt of the sophists of every age.

Too often the humble form of the Scriptures is passed over and left underdeveloped in Christian theology.<sup>77</sup> In one sense, this is perplexing, given the common acknowledgement that the Bible is not just authentically human but sometimes scandalously human. I suspect that many exegetes and theologians find it too awkward and uncomfortable to make this a focus of concentrated study. Or if they seize upon Scripture’s “imperfections” it is with the aim of knocking down traditional conceptions of its sublime flawlessness. Neither of these is a helpful reaction to the humility of the written Word. Instead, I propose that study of this problem offers rich theological insight as well as personal and pastoral applications.

I should first summarize what constitutes “the humble style of biblical language.”<sup>78</sup> By this I mean those less-than-appealing features of the Word that

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75 Jude 3.

76 See nn 1–2 above.

77 A significant exception is the work of the eighteenth-century Lutheran intellectual, Johann Georg Hamann, who placed considerable stress on the humility of Scripture. See especially John R. Betz, “Hamann’s London Writings: The Hermeneutics of Trinitarian Condescension” *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (2005), 191–234, as well as Betz’s article in the present volume.

78 The expression comes from St. Augustine, *Confessions* Bk. 12, Chap. 27, 37, in *A Select Library*

represent stumbling blocks to a belief in the Bible's divine perfection.<sup>79</sup> For instance, one thinks of Scripture's frequent use of anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms to speak of God, who is otherwise said to be "spirit."<sup>80</sup> Many have scorned these as the crude conceptions of an uncultivated people. One could also point to Scripture's unpolished diction and grammatical solecisms, features that make the Word off-putting to educated minds with more refined literary tastes.<sup>81</sup> So too, its penchant for hyperbole and poetic license and approximation fails to captivate those who think that the Bible should have nothing to do with colloquial parlance and speak only with scientific exactitude. Still more scandal is afforded by the numerous alleged discrepancies that make the Bible appear inconsistent with itself, with the documents of ancient history, and with the findings of modern archeology. The collective impression of these "blemishes" causes proud minds to recoil and refuse consent. It is a reminder that unbelief will always remain an option and even the default position of many who find no way to account for Scripture's apparent lack of sophistication.

The question is whether these humble aspects of the Word should stand as barriers to our acceptance of its supernatural authority and reliability. I think not. In fact, I find the mode of biblical communication to be perfectly harmonious with the mystery of Christ himself. The same rationale that underlies the incarnation of the eternal Word also informs the inspiration of the scriptural Word. Neither is intelligible except as an instance of divine condescension—what Chrysostom called the *synkatabasis* of God.<sup>82</sup> This is the theological proposition that God bends down to make contact with human persons in ways that are fitted to their capacity to receive him.<sup>83</sup> It means that God lowers himself in view of our weakness with the aim of lifting us up by his strength. Thus, divine accommodation is not primarily a matter of how the human dimension of revelation limits the divine but of how the divine is made known and rendered comprehensible through the

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*of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]), 1:186.

79 Of course, the presence of these features in Scripture does not rule out the superb literary talents of an Isaiah or an Amos, the style-consciousness of a Luke, the elegant simplicity of a James, or the rhetorical sophistication shown by the author of the Book of Hebrews.

80 Isa. 31:3; John 4:24.

81 Jerome, for example, delighted in classical eloquence but initially rebelled at "the uncouth style" of the Bible (*Epistulae* 22.30). Commenting on this reaction, Benedict XV remarks that Jerome at first "failed to discern the lowly Christ in his lowly Scriptures" (*Spiritus Paraclitus*, 10). Augustine, who likewise struggled to accept the unimpressive style of the Bible (*Confessions* Bk. 3, Chap. 5, 9), held that educated persons drawn to the Church must be taught Christian humility lest they be repelled by the "carnal coverings" of scriptural language (*On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, Chap. 9, 13).

82 See his *Homilies on Genesis*, 17, 1.

83 For a superb analysis of this theme in historical theology, see Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

human. The Word incarnate accomplished this by the assumption of a human nature; the Word inspired achieves this by making use of simple human language. The challenge is to keep the full reality of condescension in view as we interpret the Bible. Even when God packages his perfection and power in lowly tangible forms, we must not allow their sensible exterior to blindfold us to their supernatural interior.

Here it is worthwhile to revisit the christological analogy. After all, the supreme instance of condescension is the kenosis of the Son, who “emptied himself” to become a man.<sup>84</sup> Certainly this entails the eternal Word accepting various limitations and weaknesses of the human condition. The New Testament testifies that Jesus experienced such things as fatigue,<sup>85</sup> hunger,<sup>86</sup> astonishment,<sup>87</sup> grief,<sup>88</sup> and extreme distress.<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, he “humbled himself” to the point of accepting death, “even death on a cross.”<sup>90</sup> Yet virtually none of these empirical observations, which verify the full humanity of Jesus, force us to conclude that Christ divested himself of his divinity or surrendered his inherent impeccability. The weaknesses apparent on the surface of Jesus’ historical life do not cancel or diminish his unseen perfection. At no point did he cease to be “the truth,”<sup>91</sup> the sinless and guileless Word of the Father.<sup>92</sup>

The same is true of the written Word of God. Despite its concrete expression in human language—even plain and sometimes imperfect language—it does not cease to be the divine discourse of God. The Word incarnate was intensely human, yet he never sinned. So too, the Word inspired is intensely human, yet it never errs. Once again it is Jesus who is the key to understanding the mystery of Scripture as simultaneously human and divine, as imperfect in appearance but perfect in reality. In this respect, the Church’s belief in inspiration and inerrancy is simply an extension of her faith in the incarnation.

A similar logic echoes in other halls of theology as well. The notion that God accommodates himself to human weakness by conveying his Word in humble form finds confirmation in Mary’s maternal gift of the Word, in the apostles’ preaching of the Word, and in the liturgy’s actualization of the Word. These events too may be said to illuminate the mystery of divinity and humility coming together in the Scriptures.

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84 Phil. 2:7.

85 John 4:6.

86 Matt. 4:2.

87 Mark 6:6.

88 John 11:35.

89 Luke 22:44.

90 Phil. 2:7–8.

91 John 14:6.

92 Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:22.

Consider first a *mariological* analogy, in which biblical inspiration parallels the Mother of God cooperating with the Spirit of God to bring forth the divine Word. As in the concurrent authorship of the Scriptures, here we have the synchronized actions of two persons, one human and one divine. And just as the sacred writers acted fully and freely under the influence of the Spirit in giving written form to the inspired Word, so Mary acted in perfect unison with the Spirit in giving flesh to the eternal Word. Moreover, because her involvement in the action of God was grounded in a free consent and receptivity to his grace, we can speak of a non-competitive, participatory causality in bringing forth the Word. Mary's fiat, in other words, was no mere passive resignation to the divine plan but rather an active and dynamic embrace of her mission. In her words of acceptance, *genoito moi kata to rēma sou*, "let it be to me according to your word,"<sup>93</sup> the optative mood indicates an ardent wish or desire on her part.<sup>94</sup>

Notice again how the divine Word is communicated by means of the humblest human instrument. Mary was an unknown peasant girl from an obscure village under the heel of Roman domination. Human pride would think it absurd to look with favor upon the low estate of a self-professed *doulē*, a "slave girl,"<sup>95</sup> and yet this is precisely in keeping with the pattern of divine condescension. That the Lord's lowliest creations should be made instruments of his saving power is one of the hallmarks of salvation history.

A second parallel may be called a *kerygmatic* analogy. By this I mean the correlation between biblical inspiration and the preaching of the apostolic Church. Like the sacred writers of Scripture, the apostles brought the life-transforming Word to the world by the power of the Spirit. As a result, their proclamation of the gospel was not reducible to mere human words but was suffused with the plenary authority of God. Paul states as much when he tells the Thessalonians: "when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God."<sup>96</sup> Similar to biblical inspiration, by which the words of God are given permanent expression in the written words of men, the apostolic witness to Jesus was the articulation of a divine Word that effected the permanent founding of the Church in history.

Here too the humility of the Word and those who bear it is pronounced. On the one hand, the gospel kerygma itself, which Paul calls *ho logos ho tou staurou*, "the word of the cross," is a word of foolishness to the sages and sophists of the age.<sup>97</sup> Many indeed take offense at the message of a rejected and humiliated Messiah, for

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93 Luke 1:38.

94 Ignace de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*, trans. Bertrand Buby (New York: Alba House, 1992), 34–35.

95 Luke 1:38, 48.

96 1 Thess. 2:13.

97 1 Cor. 1:18.

it confounds the expectations of reason and throws it into confusion. On the other hand, the humility of the kerygma is something in which the apostles participate in a very personal way. Being subjected to the same dishonor as the Word they declare, they are treated “like men sentenced to death” and even as “the refuse of the world.”<sup>98</sup> One need only peruse the list of Paul’s afflictions in 2 Corinthians 11:23–33 to get a sense of how profoundly the mission of the apostles integrates them into the scandal of the cross and the foolishness of divine condescension embodied in God’s Word.

A third parallel is a *liturgical* analogy. If biblical inspiration consists of the Spirit conveying the Word of God through fallible human instruments, the liturgical celebration is where the Spirit continues to bear the Word into the world through a canonized series of human gestures and utterances. This is accomplished through proclamation as well as sacramental administration. In the eucharistic assembly, the biblical Word is enunciated so that just as its divine message came fresh to the first recipients of the biblical books, so in the context of worship it speaks anew to God’s people and invites them to respond with the same “obedience of faith.”<sup>99</sup> Likewise, by the simultaneous action of the Spirit (epiclesis) and human speech (words of consecration), the Word is made present (confection) and made food (communion). This makes every occasion of sacramental worship a new intervention of God in history, a new event of salvation.<sup>100</sup>

Here the power of God working through human weakness is unmistakable. The functions of the priestly ministry indicate that God continues to use the frailest of natural means to accomplish his supernatural purposes. Empowered by grace, the priest is made to act in the person of Christ, speaking his words, repeating his movements, and setting before us the paschal sacrifice that redeemed the world. And the humble elements of bread and wine that stand helpless before the transubstantiating Word—these are the lowly signs that will be made the Lord’s greatest gift. It is difficult to imagine a more self-abnegating form by which the divine Word should signal his presence among us.

Clearly the humility of the Word, primarily in Christ and secondarily in Scripture, points to a recurrent pattern in God’s efforts to reach the human family with his love. In effect, there is a typology of divine condescension which must be recognized and contemplated in our theology. This is true not only objectively, as impressed in the events and instruments of salvation, but also, as I hope to show, in our subjective response.

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98 1 Cor. 4:9, 13.

99 Rom. 1:5; 16:26.

100 See, for example, Jeremy Driscoll, “The Word of God in the Liturgy of the New Covenant” *Letter & Spirit* 1 (2005), 87–100. For more extensive analysis, consult Scott Hahn, *Letter and Spirit: From Written Text to Living Word in the Liturgy* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

Recognition of Scripture's humility invariably raises the question of its purpose. Why should God express himself and his will<sup>101</sup> in the humble letter of the Bible? My own conviction is that it invites reason to embrace the knowledge of faith, and that it confronts pride with a summons to intellectual humility.

The humility of the Word first of all represents a challenge to the supremacy of reason in the apprehension of reality. Reason, we are prone to forget, has inherent limitations with which one must come to terms. Not only is the intellectual faculty incapable of demonstrating the mysteries of faith disclosed through revelation, but it is also incapable of discovering the plans and purposes of God in history. This is a serious handicap when it comes to interpreting the Bible. It is not that we should retreat into fideism in our study of Scripture, but that we should avoid the irrationality of pure rationalism. One can say that reason functions properly when it accepts its limitations and acknowledges that there are questions it cannot answer. However, when reason comes to see that the act of faith is itself a reasonable act, it can then proceed to an investigation of truth beyond the philosophical and empirical. This is what Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI) terms "a hermeneutic of faith" and urges must become a part of modern biblical studies.<sup>102</sup> Only through supernatural faith is one given access to a transcendent order of knowledge in which the Bible is perceived, not merely as a cultural document or historical artifact in need of decipherment, but as the living Word of God demanding a response from us. In such a context, one discovers that the all-too-human language of Scripture is a manifestation of the foolishness of God that exceeds human wisdom.<sup>103</sup>

Beyond this, I believe that the humble expression of the Word invites us to be healed of intellectual arrogance. This is obviously related to the foregoing comments about reason and its limits. But the fact is that even when faith and reason are working in tandem, the latter is tempted to impose unreasonable restrictions on the former. In the realm of biblical studies, this takes the form of methodological skepticism, otherwise known as "a hermeneutic of suspicion."<sup>104</sup> Not only does

101 Recall that Vatican II describes the revelatory form of God's Word as both personal and propositional: "By divine Revelation God wished to manifest and communicate the both *himself* and the eternal decrees of *his will* concerning the salvation of mankind" (*Dei Verbum*, no. 6, Flannery edition; emphasis added). This personal aspect of revelation is linked with the "sacramentality" of Scripture, on which see F.X. Durrwell, *In the Redeeming Christ: Toward a Theology of Spirituality*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 37–53; and Mary Healy, "Inspiration and Incarnation: The Christological Analogy and the Hermeneutics of Faith," *Letter & Spirit* 2 (2006), 27–41.

102 This was one of the primary theses of his famous Erasmus Lecture delivered in New York in 1988. For the text, see Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: The Question of the Basic Principles and Path of Exegesis Today" in *God's Word: Scripture—Tradition—Office*, eds. Peter Hünermann and Thomas Söding, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 91–126.

103 See 1 Cor. 1:25.

104 For Pope Benedict XVI's critique of this and other philosophical missteps in the critical study

this approach mean that the Bible's sincerity and truthfulness must be proven before it can be accepted, but that the interpreter stands in a position of judgment over the Word, measuring its claims according to his or her own standards.

This is to turn things upside down. The folly of divine condescension urges that we lay aside our hypercriticism and our educated conceit in approaching the biblical Word. It calls for an intellectual kenosis in which the mind adjusts itself to the mode of God's revelation by, in a sense, lowering itself to the same level. An intellect that is humble and receptive to the Word in modest dress is one that tunes itself to the higher wisdom of God and receives the insight that is withheld from "the wise and understanding."<sup>105</sup> It recognizes the truth that God's power is made perfect in weakness.<sup>106</sup>

We have only to turn to the gospels to see what this means in practice. For Jesus embodies the response of personal humility that the form of the written Word requires. Hearing the Scriptures as the voice of the Father, he allowed himself to be formed by its message in all aspects of his human development. His commitments as a devout Jew meant that the rhythms of life followed the dictates of the Hebrew Scriptures as proclaimed in the weekly synagogue liturgies and the yearly temple festivals. Jesus' detailed familiarity with the entire corpus of biblical writings bears witness to his full participation in the religious observances of his people. Even at the point of agony and death the memorized words of the Psalter fall from his parched lips.<sup>107</sup> Everywhere his posture toward the Bible is one of docility and total adherence to its authority and truth.

This is remarkable considering that Christ is the Word of God begotten from eternity.<sup>108</sup> He is the full disclosure of God in the world, the living sacrament of the kingdom of God which he proclaims.<sup>109</sup> This being so, Jesus' submission to the Bible can only be called an act of extreme humility. It is a profound gesture of

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of Scripture, see Scott W. Hahn, *Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), especially 25–40.

105 Matt. 11:25.

106 See 2 Cor. 12:9. The Church has long recognized the value of this principle in connection with the difficulties of the Bible. Augustine, for example, in correspondence with Jerome, holds together a doctrinal commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture with a hermeneutic of humility in interpreting problematic texts. He firmly believes "that not one of their [biblical] authors has erred in writing anything at all," and yet when he stumbles across a passage which "seems contrary to truth," he concludes either that the text was miscopied, mistranslated, or that he simply "failed to understand it" (*Letter* 82). Translation from *Saint Augustine: Letters*, vol. 1, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1951), 392. Leo XIII cited this very statement in recommending such an approach to all interpreters of the Bible (see *Providentissimus Deus*, 41). The passage is also referenced in the final footnote of *Dei Verbum*, 11.

107 Mark 15:34 = Ps. 22:1; Luke 23:46 = Ps. 31:5.

108 John 1:1.

109 For the christology implied in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, see Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 46–63.

self-abasement for the Word made flesh to surrender himself in reverent obedience to the Word made Scripture. Hence, for the interpreter, responding to the humility of the biblical Word means imitating its humble appropriation by the incarnate Word. His example suggests it, and his very words demand it: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart.”<sup>110</sup>

### *Concluding Reflections*

Reflection on the foregoing suggests several ideas that, as I see the matter, must inform our perspective on the nature and purpose of sacred Scripture. These include implications as well as recapitulations touching on the truth and humility of God’s Word.

First, the incarnation of the Word, far from being an isolated truth, is Christianity’s most illuminating truth. It reveals a pattern of divine wisdom that is replicated in myriad forms in the drama of salvation history. The theological use of analogy brings to light many of these imprints of the Word becoming flesh. Inspiration, for instance, is elucidated by the christological mystery, and yet similar lines may be drawn that reveal mariological, kerygmatic, and liturgical analogies as well. More than mere illustrative helps, these are rooted in the typology of God’s actions in history and as such testify to the unity of the divine plan of salvation.

Second, the Church’s perspective on the nature of Scripture is entirely derivative. In all essential respects it is the perspective of Jesus Christ himself which she received as a sacred trust to be faithfully transmitted. Hence the testimony of the Lord regarding the divine excellence of the Bible was embraced from the very beginning as normative for the Christian community. This obliges the Church, not only to promote the fullness of the doctrine and to provide clarification whenever necessary, but to appropriate the inspired Word as Jesus himself did in his historical life. Scripture must shape her thinking and empower her preaching as well as become her prayer and define her way of life. Anything less than this falls short of a total conformity to Christ.

Third, the biblical Word participates in the very mystery it communicates. This is to say that Scripture comes to us in the same manner as the Son comes to us—as divinity clothed in humanity, as majesty cloaked in humility. Like the suffering Messiah, the Bible has all the outward appearance of poverty and weakness; it too is subject to misunderstanding, rejection, and denigration. But this in no way diminishes the full reality that the Church perceives in the Word. The incarnational analogy urges assent to the divine and human dimensions of Scripture without confusion or separation; there can be no legitimate emphasis on one at the expense of the other. Just as the mystery of the God-man is received by the Church in faith, despite reason’s inability to demonstrate it or to exhaust its intelligible content, so too the truth of inspiration is proposed for belief, despite

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<sup>110</sup> Matt. 11:29.

apparent evidence to the contrary. Being a mirror reflection of the Word incarnate, the Word inspired is a treasure in earthen vessels, a communication of the highest divine truths in the humblest of human forms.

Finally, the humility of the Word is a test of our faith and a protest against pride. Reason is liable to take offense at the lowliness of scriptural expression, finding it improbable that God should speak through such a drab and uneven collection of human writings. Still less convincing to reason is the proposition that Scripture is completely and comprehensively true. This makes a posture of faith and humility indispensable to biblical interpretation at every level. For the wisdom of God in Christ is characteristically cruciform, and so it will only appear as foolishness in the eyes of an unbelieving world. Yet the Cross and the canon are the saving power of God for all who receive the Word with the faith that sustains the Church.

Apropos to this closing note, I offer for consideration the incisive words of Benedict XVI, who recently addressed the International Theological Commission on the importance of becoming little in order to perceive the wonders of Christian truth. In contrast to academic currents that make reason the measure of things divine, he remarks: “Then there is the other way of using reason, of being wise—that of the man who recognizes who he is; he recognizes the proper measure and greatness of God, opening himself in humility to the newness of God’s action. It is in this way, precisely by accepting his own smallness, making himself little as he really is, that he arrives at the truth.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Homily, Mass with the International Theological Commission (Dec. 1, 2009), in *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (Dec. 9, 2009), 6.