

THE WORD, SCRIPTURE, AND TRADITION

~: Hans Urs von Balthasar ~:

Scripture is the Word of God that bears witness to God's Word. The one Word therefore makes its appearance as though dividing into a Word that testifies and into a Word to whom testimony is given. The Word testified to is Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, the Word who took flesh in order to witness, represent, and be, in the flesh, the truth and life of God.

The entire revelation concerning salvation is ordered to this manifestation of the Word, as to a central point—in a forward direction in the apostles and in the whole history of the Church to the end of time, in a backward direction in the Old Testament revelation in word and history, backward to the Law and the prophets and even to the creation; for God upholds all things by the Word of his power (Heb. 1:3), creates all things through, for, and by his Word. The Word is at the head of all things and by him all things consist (Col. 1:16–17); and not only is the Word the divine *Logos* [Word], for the Son of Man is the first and the last (Rev. 1:18).

The testifying Word is the sequence of Scripture from Genesis to the Apocalypse which accompanies the progressive revelation of the Word in the flesh and which reflects it as if a mirror—a function which distinguishes¹ it from the former Word. The word of revelation is the Word in the mode of action: God is apprehended in the act of self-communication. The word of Scripture is the Word in the mode of contemplating his own action, recording and elucidating it, something which can only be performed properly and perfectly by the Word himself, since God alone compasses the entire range of his revelation; and only he can assign a valid human expression for it.

The word of revelation is primarily the Son, who speaks of the Father through the Holy Spirit. The word of Scripture is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit who, as Spirit of the Father, effects, accompanies, illumines, and clarifies the Son's incarnation (before and after the event), and who, as Spirit of the Son, embodies his self-manifestation in permanent, timeless forms.

At first sight, therefore, the two lines of the testified and the testifying Word seem to run parallel, but this appearance is deceptive. For both forms of the Word are ultimately the one Word of God testifying to itself in the one revelation.

1 In this distinction, we part company with many Protestants. Scripture is not identical with revelation. And although it is truly God's Word, it is so only in the mode of testifying to his revelation. Scripture is, in fact, only the mode of God's self-witness in words, while there are besides other modes of his self-witness.

The Testifying Word and the Word Testified

Two sets of considerations can help clarify this concept. First, there are, it is true, certain passages in which the contrast between the two forms of the Word is plainly evident. In the Gospel, for example, the Lord speaks, acts, and suffers without reference to the written account, that is, to the Gospel. This account was written down only later by eyewitnesses under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who is already active here as the Spirit of the Church. The Spirit has become, as it were, the most attentive hearer of the Word, but who, because he himself is a divine Person, sets down the divine truth in writing such as he heard it as Spirit and as he deems it important for the Church.

The same is true for all that the apostles did and for the book of the Acts, as well as for all the historical books of the Old Testament, although the two forms of the Word are far less distinct in the prophets and in the Apocalypse. It is true, of course, that even then the Word may first have come to the prophets personally, in a "private" revelation, and the publication made subsequently, in which case it makes no difference whether this revelation was first oral and afterward put into writing, or whether, on occasion, it was taken in writing form from the outset.

Revelation to the prophets and promulgation by the prophets tend to merge together, and form virtually a single act of revelation effected by the Spirit in the service of the coming or past incarnation of the Son. Both acts constitute so complete a unity that there is no reason to postulate a revelation prior to its committal to writing, as, for instance, in the sapiential books where the revelation is transmitted directly to the pen of the inspired writer.

The same is true for the epistles of the New Testament. Admittedly, in the seven letters of the Apocalypse, a certain distinction is required inasmuch as the Spirit first dictates the letters to the churches to the apostle John who then, either at once or at some later time, writes them down; the same is not true of the other epistles. Yet we must not overlook the expository, quasi-contemplative character of both the sapiential books and the apostolic epistles. Just as the former interprets the history of the Jews and their law for the people of God, so does the later interpret the Gospel for the Church. The upshot is that the relationship between the testified and the testifying Word is a fluid one, varying from clear contrast to actual identity. Revelation, then, is effected partly before the writing, partly in the actual writing; in other words, Scripture participates in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.

The second line of thought takes us deeper, and definitely rules out the idea of a parallelism between the testified and the testifying Word. The central Word, which God speaks and which comprises, as their unity and end, all the manifold words of God, is Jesus Christ, the incarnate God. He, however, made his appearance in the sign of obedience, to fulfill the will of the Father, and thereby to redeem and justify the creation.

He fulfills it inasmuch as he lets his earthly life as Word made flesh be fashioned, step by step, by all the forms of the Word in the Law and the prophets. His life is a fulfilling of Scripture.

Therefore, he assimilates the scriptural Word into his own life, making it live and there take flesh, become wholly actual and concrete. As his life proceeds, two things stand out: the Word more and more becomes flesh, inasmuch as he imparts to the abstract nature of the Law and the expectancy of prophecy the character of a divine, factual presence, and the flesh becomes more and more Word, inasmuch as he increasingly unifies the scriptural words in himself, making his earthly life the perfect expression of all the earlier revelations of God. He is their living commentary, their authentic exposition, intended as such from the beginning. He fulfills not only the Word of the Father coming down from heaven, but equally the Word stored up for him in history and the tradition of Scripture—the Word, that is to say, both in its vertical and horizontal provenance.

If he, as the One finally come, is the complete, definitive fulfillment, he is also, as a living person, the progressive, continual fulfillment. And since he is both of these in one, and always remains such, the possibility ensues of there being Scripture even after him, though of quite a different character. The Law and the prophets were like the formal presignifying of the Word that would, at some time, become man: they were God's Word in human form and, indeed, the adequate expression of revelation, a Word not to be superseded or regarded as of merely relative significance.

Jesus, the "Compendium of all the Scriptures"

In this respect, the word of the Old Testament served to define exactly the point of mediatorship, the place and the form in which God was to become accessible to man and of service to him. It was not without reason, then, that the Law drawn up for the men of that time had as one of its functions the foreshadowing of the Eucharist of the New Testament; see, for example, Psalm 118.

And, although Jesus made his life as man the compendium of all the Scriptures, and realized in himself all its promises of eternal life (John 5:39–40), still there can be a Scripture subsequent to him. This fact is proof that the fulfillment of the Father's decree does not imply its annihilation and that Jesus' fulfillment is not a conclusion (as in human affairs) but rather a new opening (as always with God). He makes fulfillment issue in a new promise so as to remain at all times what he is, namely, the One who ever and again fulfills beyond all expectation.²

2 "My words shall not pass away": we may ask whether it is not the case that the words of Moses and the prophets have passed away, and those of Christ not passed away, for what they prophesied has passed away by being fulfilled, but the words of Christ are ever full, ever in process of fulfillment; they fulfill themselves every day, nor are they ever overfilled. It is they, in fact, that are fulfilled in the saints, that are being fulfilled, that will be fulfilled in the future. Or else perhaps we should say that the words of Moses and the prophets are perfectly fulfilled, since,

The Lord remains in the flesh what he is, the Word. He does not dissociate himself from what had been said before his coming, nor from what he himself has said or from what is said about him. The Gospel is the living doctrine proceeding from him, become Scripture, and abiding in the Church, but also a new “incarnate” Scripture, a living participation in his own corporeal nature (as the Church fathers repeatedly testify), and therefore in his own quality of being inspired. Just as the Word he spoke as man is inspired by the Holy Spirit, so also is the written Word; its inspiration is not something past and concluded but a permanent, vital quality adhering in it at all times. It is this quality which allows the Lord to adduce the Word as proof that, in his fulfillment in the Spirit, he transcends all boundaries, all verbal limitations, in his superabundance of life and power.

If then, the incarnate Son merges all Scripture in himself so as to make it fully what it is—namely the Word of God the Father in the Son—he also sends it forth from himself so as to make it fully what it is, namely, the Word of the Spirit whom he sends out at the end of his earthly course, upon his return to the Father. In both forms, therefore, Scripture is not a testifying word separated from the testified but rather the one Word of God in the unity of his incarnation.

In this connection, the patristic idea that Scripture is the body of the *Logos* receives added significance. If, however, we are not to view it as a merely arbitrary piece of allegorizing, we must place it more precisely in the whole setting of the incarnation. The expression, “body of Christ,” can be used in many senses. The basic and primary meaning is the historical body which he took from Mary, in which he lived on earth, with which he ascended to heaven. The final form and purpose of his taking flesh is the mystical, but nonetheless real, body, the Church, the incorporation of humanity into the historical body, and thereby into the Spirit of Christ and of God.

And to make it plain that the historical and the mystical body are not two disparate things but are a unity in the strict sense, there exist two means to effect incorporation, two means which bring about the transition from the first to the second bodily form: the Eucharist and Scripture. They mediate the one, incarnate *Logos* to the faithful, and make him who of himself is both origin and end, the way (*via*); the Eucharist does so inasmuch as he is the divine life (*vita*), and Scripture inasmuch as he is the divine Word and the divine truth (*veritas*).

The Eucharist is the marvelous means of freeing Christ’s historical humanity from the confines of space and time, of multiplying mysteriously its presence without forfeiting its unity and, since it is given to each Christian as his indispensable nourishment (John 6:53–58), of incorporating all into the body of Christ, making them in Christ one body through which courses the divine life. Through the

in their true sense, they are also the words of the Son of God, and are always being fulfilled.” Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 54, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 10, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 504.

Eucharist, the Church comes into being as the body of Christ; and while the one flesh of the Lord is multiplied, mankind divided is unified in it. "And the bread that we break, is it not the partaking of the body of the Lord? Because the bread is one, we though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16–17).

Bread from Two Tables

Scripture contains the Lord as Word and as Spirit, in the same marvelous transcendence of space and time, without the Word ceasing to be unique and individual. Just as the Eucharist does not mean that Christ's body ceases to be one, historical body, so his Word in Scripture does not detract from its being present as a unique concrete reality. The two modes of communication have this in common: they universalize the body of Christ without making it any the less concrete.

The universal validity of the words of Scripture is not to be attributed to the abstract and universal nature of general truths of the human order. Scripture makes the incarnate Lord present in a way analogous to that in which the eucharistic body makes present his historical body. Hence, Origen admonishes Christians to approach the Word in Scripture with the same reverence as they approach the Lord's body in the Eucharist. The patristic tradition is continued in these words of the *Imitation of Christ*:

Two things are needful for me in this life, and without these two I cannot continue to live: God's word is light, and his sacrament living bread for my soul. We can also say that they are two tables set out in the room of God's Church. One is the table of the holy altar; on it lies the sacred bread, the precious body of Jesus Christ. The other is the table of the holy Law; on it lies the sacred doctrine which instructs us into the true faith, and reaches, behind the veil, into the inmost holy of holies.³

"The Catholic Church, next to the body and blood of the Lord, deems nothing so sublime and holy as God's Word in sacred Scripture" (Origen). Both of them are made possible only through the historical Christ and his body the Church; they are both exclusively the gift of the Bridegroom to the bride, and for those outside they are always inaccessible and alien. It is recorded of the martyrs that they died rather than surrender the sacred Scriptures to the heathens, just as Tarsicius died to prevent the Eucharist from falling into their hands.

Both forms are express results of the Spirit acting on what pertains to the Son; to the Spirit, is to be attributed equally the miracle of transubstantiation and the formation of the Word in Scripture. Indeed, it is the work of the Spirit to form

3 Thomas á Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Bk. 4, chap. 11 (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 205–206.

the mystical body of Christ by spiritually universalizing the historical Christ. The profound truth of their relationship is not affected by the fact that Scripture does not contain the Word in the manner of a sacrament. For the Lord is, at all times, ready to give himself to and work in those who receive him in a lively spirit of faith; and he is no less ready to reveal himself in person, as Word and truth, to those who approach the Scripture praying, seeking, and thirsting. *Per evangelica dicta deleantur nostra delicta* ("May the words of the Gospel cleanse us of our faults").⁴

The Gift of the Bridegroom

All this brings out clearly the relationship between Scripture and tradition. The Word of Scripture is a gift of the bridegroom to his bride, the Church. It is destined for the Church and, in this respect, belongs to her; but it is also the Word of God, the Word of the head, and as such it is above the Church. This variable relationship in which the Church exercises control over Scripture, but only insofar as God's Word allows her to do so, is best clarified by the mysterious relationship between bride and bridegroom, a mystery of the divine love. For the more God, in human form and therefore divested of power, delivers himself over to the Church in order to exalt and enrich her, the more must the Church humble herself as his handmaid, and adore, in the Son's humiliation, his sublimest majesty.

If she then recognizes tradition as a source of the faith alongside Scripture, it is far from her intention to evade the authority of the Scriptures by appealing to traditions unknown, perhaps even formed by herself. What she really means is that the letter of Scripture can, after the incarnation, only be a function of his living humanity which, in any case, transcends mere literalness. Scripture itself witnesses to this: "Many other signs also Jesus worked in the sight of his disciples, which are not written in this book . . . many other things that Jesus did; but if every one of these should be written, not even the world itself, I think, could hold the books that would have to be written" (John 20:30; 21:25).

Here, the Word that testifies asserts that the Word testified to, the Word of revelation, is infinitely richer than what can be drawn from Scripture. And here the Word after the incarnation is essentially different from the Word before it. The Old Testament Word was only coming, not a Word finally come and fulfilled. For that reason, it could not have been the subject of a "tradition" (meaning, thereby, the expression of the fullness of the Word manifested, a fullness that bursts all the bounds of Scripture.)⁵

4 Editor's note: These are the words said silently by the priest as he kisses the book of the Gospels after proclaiming the Gospel during the Divine Liturgy. See *The Daily Roman Missal*, ed. James Socias (Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 1993), 572–573.

5 There was, of course, tradition in the human sense, insofar as the fixing of the word in writing came later and harked back to the traditions of centuries—a normal procedure with ancient peoples. This kind of tradition is a sort of pregnancy whose purpose is the bringing forth of a child fully formed, namely, the word of Scripture. In the New Testament, however, Scripture

Regarding the Old Testament word's expression of the Law and the promises, it was on par with what could have been compromised in ordinary speech and writing—it being always understood that this also could only have been assimilated in faith and through the grace of God who spoke it. The Jews, however, had as an object of faith no other divine revelations to Abraham or Moses, no other divine Word to the prophets, than that contained (whether from the outset or subsequently) in their Scriptures. Consequently, there was, in the old covenant, no tradition as a source of faith: the scriptural principle was similar to that of Protestantism in relation to the New Testament.

For it is not so much the organic character of history, as the Tübingen theologians held, that makes tradition a source of faith from the time of the incarnation, but primarily the uniqueness of the person of Christ and of his relationship to his mystical body, the Church. Except for tradition, the Scriptures of the new covenant would resemble those of the old covenant, having its law and promises; it would not be the Word-body of him who also dwells and works in this Church as the living eucharistic body (not present in the old covenant).

In this, the eschatological character of strict Protestantism, which denies the Mass and transubstantiation, is perfectly logical. The God of the old covenant speaks from heaven in explicit language, but he does not deliver himself up to the people. But Christ delivers himself up to the Church because he has delivered himself up for her on the cross (Eph. 5:2, 25), because the Father delivered him up to the cross for her (Rom. 8:32), because he finally delivered up his Spirit on the cross (John 19:30), the Spirit he breathed on the Church at Easter (John 20:22).

So it is that he delivers himself over to the Church as Eucharist and as Scripture, places himself in her hands in these two corporeal forms in such wise that, in both forms, he creates a means of being present in the Church as the one, ever active, unchanging life, life that is yet increasingly manifold, ever manifesting itself in new, astonishing ways. The Word of revelation infinitely surpasses all that the Word that testifies can possibly contain; and in this superfluity becomes available to the Church in the living eucharistic presence of Christ; the necessary reflection of this vitality in verbal form is the principle of tradition.

Scripture is itself tradition inasmuch as it is a form whereby Christ gives himself to the Church, and since there was tradition before Scripture, and since there could have been no scriptural authority apart from tradition. At the same time, Scripture, as the divinely constituted mirror of God's revelation, becomes the warrant of all subsequent tradition; without it, the Church's transmission and proclamation of the truth would be imperiled, in fact made impossible—and the same is true for her holiness—without the presence of the Eucharist.

The Word of Scripture, as God's Word bearing witness to itself, is essentially

is present at the beginning of the Church's history, and is immersed in tradition, which is its vehicle.

threefold, being the Word of God, God's Word concerning the world, and God's utterance to man.

Word of God. It is word, not vision, not feeling, not mere halting speech, such as human speech about God would be at best. A word, that is, of unequaled clarity, simplicity, precision. This character of the Word derives from the two mysteries of the Trinity and the incarnation. Since God has in himself the eternal Word that expresses him eternally, he is most certainly expressible; and since this very Word has taken human form and expresses in human acts and words what it is in God, it is capable of being understood by men. The first would be of no avail for us without the second, the second unthinkable without the first.

The identity of Christ's person in his two natures as God and man is guarantee of the possibility and rightness of the reproduction of heavenly truth in earthly forms, and of its accuracy in Christ. "Amen, amen, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and we bear witness to what we have seen. . . . He who comes from heaven is over all. And he bears witness to that which he has seen and heard" (John 3:11, 32). But this truth of God, with all its precision, is yet personal (the Word being the person of the Son), and therefore sovereign and free.

The Son is not some kind of mechanical reproduction of the Father; he is that regiving which is effected only by perfect love in perfect sovereignty. For this reason, the translation of the divine Word into a human word is itself, through the Son, sovereign and free, and not verifiable other than in the Son himself. "I am the truth." "No man comes to the Father but by me." Faith, therefore, bringing acceptance of the Word, is demanded in that the truth proclaimed is primarily divine (and so surpassing human understanding) and, secondly, personal, that is to say, brought about only by trusting in the freedom of the divine Person who forms it; for, in fact, the exact correspondence between the divine content and the human expression is inseparable from the person of the incarnate Word of God, being itself the effect of the incarnation.

Christology and the Senses of Scripture

In other words, the relation between the human and the divine in Scripture finds its measure and norm in the relation between the divine and human natures in Christ. And just as the whole of Christ's humanity is a means of expressing (*principium quo*) his divine Person (*principium quod*), this, in turn, is a purely human word, but yet, as such, wholly the expression of a divine content.

This concept illustrates how the much-discussed relationship between the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture is a christological problem, one soluble only on the basis that the two senses are to each other what the two natures of Christ are to each other. The human nature we come into contact with first; it is the medium covering, yet revealing, the divine element, becoming transparent in the resurrection, but never, in all eternity, to be discarded or disparaged. The spiritual

sense is never to be sought “behind” the letter but within it, just as the Father is not to be found behind the Son but in and through him. And to stick to the literal sense while spurning the spiritual would be to view the Son as man and nothing more. All that is human in Christ is a revelation of God and speaks to us of him. There is nothing whatever in his life, acts, passion, and resurrection that is not an expression and manifestation of God in the language of a created being.

The perfect correspondence the Son effects between expression and content does not imply that the content, which is divine and indeed God himself, does not surpass the expression, which is in created terms. Christ’s divinity cannot be wholly comprehended through his humanity, and no more can the divine sense of Scripture ever be fully plumbed through the letter. It can only be grasped in the setting of faith, that is to say, in a mode of hearing that never issues in final vision, but in a progression without end, a progression ultimately dependent, in its scope, on the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:3, Eph. 4:7).

Faith, the foundation of all our understanding of revelation, expands our created minds by making them participate in the mind of God, disclosing the inward divine meaning of the words through a kind of co-working with God (1 Cor. 2:9, 16); for this reason, it is the saint, the man most open to the working of the Spirit, who arrives at the closest understanding. He will not do what the ordinary man, so dominated by original sin, does almost unawares, yet with such desperate persistence. The ordinary man will confine the meaning of God’s Word within human bounds, admitting its truth only to the extent that it corresponds to human forms of thought and ways of life, and content himself with the meaning he has managed to elicit at some time or other, as if it was the final one, attempting to do what the Magdalen was forbidden: “Touch me not (that is, do not keep clinging to me), for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17).

The idea that one has understood a passage of Scripture finally and completely, and has drawn out all that God meant in it, is equivalent to denying that it is the Word of God and inspired by him. For the effect of inspiration is not to be seen principally in the absence of error from Scripture, which is only a by-product of inspiration—many a book is free from error without thereby being inspired. Inspiration involves a permanent quality, in virtue of which the Holy Spirit as *auctor primarius* (“primary author”) is always behind the word, always ready to lead to deeper levels of divine truth those who seek to understand his Word in the Spirit of the Church, the Spirit she possesses as bride of Christ.

The primary content of Scripture is always God himself. Whether it is narrating historical events, enunciating laws or relating parables, God is speaking and speaking about himself, telling us what he is and about the manner in which he surveys and judges the world. To penetrate into the spirit of Scripture means to come to know the inner things of God and to make one’s own God’s way of seeing the world.

Scripture, then, as the Word of God, is also his *word concerning the world*, and this, once again, only in relation to its union with the Word of revelation, which is the incarnate Son, precisely because God has made the Son the source of the meaning of the world and sees it in no other connection than in the Son.

In him it was created: the “in the beginning” of creation (Gen 1:1), is to be seen in relation to the “in the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1). Consequently it was created for him as its end, just as, firstly, “we” the believers (Eph. 1:4), and then “all men” (1 Tim. 2:2–6), indeed “all things in heaven and on earth,” were to be planned, chosen, created, and reestablished (Eph. 1:10) in him, so that he, as “first and last,” holds the keys of all (Rev. 1:18). This he is not only as *Logos* but as incarnate and crucified.

God did not plan the foundation of the world and bring it to pass without, in foreseeing sin, forming his decree for the redemption of the world, and this through the future incarnation of his only-begotten Son. Redemption, therefore, is not something in the mind of God posterior to the creation of the world. On the contrary, the world was created in the foreknowledge of its need for redemption, for it to be the stage on which redemption should be enacted. Consequently, it is not only through the eternal Word that this world was conceived from eternity and created by God, but, rather, for the sake of the Word, who was to take flesh, who became flesh and dwelt among us.⁶

Since, then, the whole creation is formed in, through, and for the Son, it participates, in its very root, in his formal character as Word. The Son as the Word incarnate is the supreme and dominant law of the world. This idea is like an eminence from which we may look back and see the Word of God—that is, the Law and the promise, the form of the Word selected by God to enshrine his dealings with mankind—as an anticipation and as a kind of basic setting of the incarnation. And we may also go back beyond the Old Testament and say the same of that form of the Word set in the heart of creation itself, in the “nature” of the creature, replacing for the Gentiles, in whose hearts it was engraved, the Law and promise given exclusively to the Jews (Rom. 2:14–15).

In both cases, that of the Jews and of the Gentiles, the presence of the Word of God within them was the center of gravity and ruling principle of their lives. A human being means one to whom God has spoken in the Word, one who is so made as to be able to hear and respond to the Word. The Alexandrian theology, which derives the rational character of the creation (in a wider sense also the rationality of the subhuman creation) from the presence of the *Logos* within it, agrees here

6 Valentin Loch and Wilhelm Reischl, *Die Heilige Schrift des Alten und Neuen Testaments* (Regensburg, 1889), regarding Eph. 1:4–5.

with modern philosophers such as Dilthey, Heidegger, and Kamlah, who see the significance of the derivation of *Vernunft* (reason) from *Vernehmen* (perception), or Buber and Ebner, who place the essence of created being in its capacity for and capability of the word.

Maximus the Confessor even declared that there are three stages in the realization of the Word in the world: the Word as nature, the Word as Scripture, and the Word made flesh in Christ. Accordingly, the law of history and that of nature is, ultimately, to be measured by the law of Christ, the final and definitive *Logos* of the entire creation, for man finds the word that expresses and “redeems” him only in hearing and vitally responding to the Word of God in Christ. However secular this human word may seem as culture, art, philosophy, pedagogy, and technology, it can yet be a response to God’s call, and so a bringing back of man and the world to God.

Thus, in responding to God’s Word, man will also be enabled to “redeem” the world lying deeply hidden in the nature of things, to say what each thing says (Caudel) and, himself infused through Christ by the Word, to express the creation subjected to him. But this ordering exacts from man that the more he approaches the summit, Christ, the more acute should become his perception of the Word’s concretization in history. In nature, the Word is present in a permanent state; in history, it is present in individual events, in revelation, it has that actuality and singularity of God which transcends all the laws of historical time, just as God reveals himself in the “one man Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. 2:5) in an ever-present “today” (2 Cor. 6:2; Heb. 4:7) without any diminution or staleness.

Nourished by the Word of God

Scripture, therefore, is *God speaking to man*. It means a word that is not past, but present, because eternal—a word spoken to me personally and not simply to others. Just as the Eucharist is not merely a memorial of a past event but, rather, makes eternal and ever-present the single, living body and sacrifice of the Lord, so Scripture is not mere history, but the form and vehicle of God’s Word addressing us here and now.

Man’s life, at its deepest level, is a dialogue with God but one in which God’s Word to man is infinitely more important than man’s to God, and man can respond as he should only through a constant hearing of the Word (contemplation must here be understood as listening). Furthermore, all that God has to say to any man he has spoken once and for all in Christ (Heb. 1:1), so that each of us must individually acknowledge and make his own all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ (Col. 2:3).

When, finally, we consider that Scripture is the divine testimony made by Christ, it is clear that reading and contemplating Scripture in the spirit and guidance of the Church is the most certain means of discerning what, in the concrete,

is God's will for my individual life and destiny, of discovering the means appointed by him. It is here that God has spoken, here that he never ceases to speak in the fullness of his Word. From this source, the preacher steepes himself in the knowledge of the things he has to impart to his hearers, while here each individual believer encounters God's Word addressed to him personally in the most direct fashion. Every word that proceeds from the mouth of God is, as the Lord has said, nourishment for the soul (Matt. 4:4). Thomas Aquinas comments:

One who does not nourish himself on the Word of God is no longer living. For, as the human body cannot live without earthly food, so the soul cannot live without the Word of God. But the Word proceeds from the mouth of God when he reveals his will through the witness of Scripture.⁷

The Word of Scripture is above any other word concerning God; in virtue of its christological form, it is a word opening into God and leading into him. To phrase this in human terms, it is selected by the Holy Spirit with such art that its precision never involves limitation (as is the case with human utterance), that the single truth it conveys does not rule out any other truth, whether allied, contrasting, or complementary; it never bolts any door but opens all locks.

Even the Church's definitions, though infallible and assisted by the Holy Spirit, do not share this special quality of Scripture, for their significance is mostly to put an end to a period of uncertainty, to solve a point of doubt or controversy, rather than to engender a fresh perspective.⁸ However necessary these definitive pronouncements may be for the Church in history, they are by no means the basic sustenance of the Christian.

Since God's truth through Christ is imparted to the soul in Scripture, no dialogue between God and the soul, however interior or mystical, ever takes precedence over Scripture or replaces it. This must be asserted to counter the Protestant tendency to emphasize, on the one hand, the prophetic against the mystical element (Heiler), and on the other, the Word against mysticism (Brunner). To oppose the two is either to revert to an Old Testament idea of the Word, ignoring its aspect as food of the soul and, therefore, its likeness to the Eucharist, or else to misconceive the nature of Christian mysticism, whose only possible norm is revelation as contained in Scripture.

Scripture itself is mystical not only in its being inspired, inspiration being of the mystical order, but also because the whole of it, the Old Testament as well as

7 In *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected Out of the Works of the Fathers*, trans. John Henry Newman, 4 vols. (Southampton: St. Austin, 1997), 1:123.

8 As Scheeben justly observes: "A diligent comparison and reflection on the expressions and indications of holy Scripture affords . . . a fuller, deeper and more comprehensive understanding of revealed truth than is given in the authoritative dogmatic teaching of the Church. *Handbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik*, 3 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1873-1882), 1:122.

the New, describes the continuous sequence of mystical experiences undergone by the patriarchs, prophets, kings, apostles, and disciples. It would be far better for Christian mysticism to recognize in Scripture its true canon, instead of diverting into the obscurities of individual psychology. Christian mysticism is scriptural mysticism, that is to say, a special charismatic form of encounter with the Word. Its function, direct or indirect, is to convey the revelation of the Word to the Church; thus, it is essentially social.

The Spirit lives through the centuries in the Church as the inspired author of the Scriptures, and is ever at work in interpreting the revealed Word, leading the Church deeper “into all truth” (John 16:13); and it continues to act in the “prophets” of the New Testament—those who, along with the apostles, Paul considered foundations of the Church (Eph. 2:10; 3:5; 4:11), in the same manner that he included the prophets of the Old Testament. Admittedly, their writings are not sacred Scripture in the biblical sense, but only because, with the Lord and with his eyewitnesses, God’s revelation had already reached his completion; and therefore Scripture, as the form of the Word testifying to this revelation, had likewise been completed.

However, where revelation is concerned, it is best to avoid speaking of a “conclusion.” The word is inappropriate since the completion of fullness is not so much an end as a beginning. It is the beginning of the infinite pouring out of Christ’s fullness into that of the Church, of the Church’s growth into the fullness of Christ and of God, as described in the epistle to the Ephesians. It is, moreover, the beginning of the outpouring of the infinite riches of Scripture into the Church, whose range the whole of world history will never suffice to exhaust.

Every human book is finite in content. Each can be studied, read, committed to memory, until one day it is mastered and no longer needed. But Scripture is the Word of God; and the more we probe it, the more do its divine dimensions broaden and impose themselves. “Strengthened with power through his Spirit . . . you may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth”—the four-dimensional space of divine truth!—“and to know Christ’s love which surpasses all knowledge, in order that you may be filled unto all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:18–19).

