

Prayer, the Bible, and Hearing God

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IN THE SECOND half of the third century, in Upper Egypt, there was a young man of Christian family and comfortable means; he had just inherited his father's estate, and was relatively unencumbered. He wondered what to do with his life. He found himself thinking of the apostles and how they left everything to follow Christ, and of the wholeheartedness in poverty of the first Christians as described in the Acts of the Apostles. One day he went to church and there heard from the gospel of Matthew: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me." Then, St. Athanasius says, the young man, "as though God had put him in mind of the Saints, and the passage had been read on his account, went out immediately from the church, and gave the possessions of his forefathers to the villagers."¹

Consider the elements of the story. First, the young man, alone in the world but for a sister, wonders what to do with himself. But he is a Christian, and so he wonders what to do with himself before God, thinking of the saints, of their renunciation and reward. That is, he prays about what to do. However, his prayerful reflection on life and the holy life, on his life and the holy life, is informed by Scripture as his thinking of the apostles and the Church in Jerusalem shows. Evidently, the young man has treasured up much of the Bible in his heart, so that it comes easily to mind.

¹ St. Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, §2, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. II, vol. IV, *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius*, trans. H. Ellershaw (1891; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 196.

Second, when he hears Matthew 19:21, he understands it as addressed to him personally.² They are words of Sacred Scripture written long ago; they are words spoken long ago by Christ. But the young man takes them as spoken in his time, his hour, to himself. So hearing, he decides; he acts; and the young man puts himself on the road to the apostolic life in the form of the ascetic life of the desert.

Third, thinking back over his immediate past, Anthony understands that his very thinking of the apostles and the Jerusalem Church were things that God put into his mind to think of/about. That is, he understands these thoughts as what later theologians call “actual grace.” More largely, he understands that his recent life—his state in life, his relative freedom from family responsibilities, his thoughts, his coming to church when he does and hearing what he hears—as something arranged by the providence of God, all conspiring to answer the implied request: O God, what shall I do with my life?³

Now, what is extraordinary in this story is Anthony and the ardor with which he answers the call of God, of Christ, of the Gospel. But what is not extraordinary is that God providentially arranged his life, since he does that for all; or that he put thoughts into Anthony’s head, since we are assured that he gives grace abundantly; or that the thoughts are biblical thoughts, because the Bible exists for this very thing, for us to have the right thoughts on hand for the Lord God to arrange them in our hearts easily and without fuss; or finally, that the Lord answered his prayer, in a comprehensible, straightforward manner, and did so in words of the Bible that Anthony, with absolute correctness and truth, understood to be addressed personally to him when he heard the minister read the Gospel of Matthew.⁴

It is a commonplace to say that Christian prayer is scriptural, that it is based on the Bible or that it is informed by Scripture, or some such phrase. I wish in this essay to defend this commonplace, but in a quite precise form: Christian prayer is scriptural, where Scripture is understood and appreciated *dogmatically*, that is, according to the Church’s understanding of the nature, authorship, and unity of the Bible.

² As also just later he understands Mt 19:21, “do not be anxious for tomorrow,” addressed to him, in Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, §3.

³ See the translation of the above passage in the opening paragraph in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 31: “It was as if by God’s design he held the saints in his recollection, and as if the passage were read on his account.”

⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff begins his speech-act analysis of divine speech with a consideration of the conversion of St. Augustine and the call of St. Anthony; *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

This thesis is important for two reasons. In the first place, and by way of contrast, what is Christian prayer where it purports to be scriptural, but Scripture is not appreciated dogmatically? If I read the Bible historically-critically, attentive to re-constructing the historical circumstances and original communicative intention of the text, but bracketing the relation of the text to God, to the living Christ, to the Holy Spirit dwelling within, it becomes one more historical object, telling me of men and the doings of men, but no longer speaking of God and the doings of his Christ. Evidently, the whole genius of the historical-critical attitude is to erase the “sacred” from “sacred Scripture,” to rub off the “holy” from “the Holy Bible.” So handled, the book is redeemed from the precincts of the sacred and the believing heart and rendered secularly and perhaps also apologetically fungible. At the same time, it is de-activated as an ingredient of prayer. It is most definitely to be feared that many Christians, taking up their Bible, wishing at the same time to be modern and so “critical,” end up side-tracked into questions about what Paul meant or could have meant instead of questions about what the Lord means now, speaking through St. Paul.

In the second place, prayer is often and rightly characterized as “conversation.” Conversation, be it noted, is mutual speaking, mutual hearing. But unless the Bible is understood dogmatically, it becomes difficult to sustain the idea that prayer is conversation, not only our speech to God, but God’s speech to us. How does God speak to us in prayer? The answer, which it is the burden of this essay to develop, is “through Sacred Scripture.” Absent this answer, it will surely be denied that God speaks to us in any straightforward sense. Especially commonly, hearing God speaking to us in prayer may come to be identified as the process of locating some refined, occult, interior experience of the self and the thoughts and emotions of the self. We will think to hear the voice of God in the inclinations of our own heart, now feeling good, now feeling sad, now feeling peace—especially with “oneself”—and now not. But none of that is prayer or has anything to do with prayer. Emotion doubtless there is in prayer: joy, grief, astonishment, confidence, courage, the peace that surpasses understanding. But it all takes place because of hearing, because of remembering words once heard or read, the *words*—the literal, real, quite humanly apprehensible and recognizably determinate words of God speaking, God speaking to us through Scripture.⁵

In what follows, I first provide a simple statement of how prayer works, and how it works as conversation in which God speaks and we

⁵ In case there should be some misunderstanding, let me say that Ignatian discernment of spirits presupposes just that cultivation of Scripture which it is the point of this essay to recommend.

hear him, provided we understand Scripture dogmatically—provided also we *use* it dogmatically. Second, I take up the question of which of the “senses” of Scripture is engaged here. Third, there is a brief reminder of this way of taking Scripture from the monastic tradition. Next the Fathers and of course Scripture itself are enlisted in its witness. Last, there is a word about the God of the Scriptures understood dogmatically, and how only such a God could hear and speak to us in prayer.

How It Works

The idea is very simple, and has been the possession of the Church from the beginning, for it is in large part contained in the confession of God as the author of the Bible. This authorship means that his communicative intentions are to be construed according to the grammar, syntax, and circumstance of the books and texts of which the Bible is composed, but understood within the overarching frame of his authorial motive, which is, ultimately, the salvation of human beings in Christ, and, mediately, the guidance of Christian lives now so that this ultimate end may be achieved.⁶ God’s ability to raise up human agents as instruments of his communicative intention (prophecy, inspiration), and his eternity in virtue of which he can arrange for his speech, first heard at one time, to transcend the limits of time, mean that God can make past inspired composition speak today. But it is God’s authorial motive, a function of the divine intention to save all men (1 Tim 2:4), in virtue of which the Bible is in fact addressed to us now, today, for the guidance of our lives.

The idea, then, is that God is the author of Sacred Scripture; he speaks to us through its words, all of which speak of the Word made flesh. One can say, equivalently, that the Father speaks to us through Christ or through Scripture. Further, this speaking is not simply speculative but practical.

Not everything, however, comes to full expression in the idea of the authorship of God. We need also to invoke a robust idea of providence. We need the idea of providence contained in the Sermon on the Mount: Not a sparrow falls to the ground without our heavenly Father knowing it, and the very hairs of our heads are numbered (Mt 10:29–31). God’s providence extends to each and every detail of the trajectories through time of each and

⁶ For the distinction between communicative intention and authorial motive, see Stephen E. Fowl, “The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematic Theology*, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 71–87, at 74. My deployment of the distinction is not Fowl’s; originally, the distinction was made by Quentin Skinner. Fowl, “The Role of Authorial Intention,” 74, note 6.

every human being, providing them what most aids them in their journey to him through Christ.⁷ This means a coordination of the words of the Bible and their reverberations in our hearts in order to meet our questions for a wisdom both contemplative and practical, both speculative and prudential.

It is the conjunction of God's authorship of the Bible with a strong doctrine of providence that makes it possible to understand how God can speak to us not simply speculatively, as it were speaking the same word to all, but practically, speaking one thing to the individual. The guidance provided in the Bible is indeed and in the first place, we may say, the plan of salvation. But it is also and in the second place necessarily practical. Moreover, it is not just generally practical, in the way, say, that the Ten Commandments are equivalent to secondary principles of the natural law.⁸ This is practical guidance, and guidance relevant to every human moral agent. But the Bible also gives more concretely practical guidance to the prayerful Christian. It is, after all, a concrete agent who reads the Book, seeking guidance about particular decisions that result in action, and action is similarly concrete. Prudence bears on the particular actions to be done or avoided. If, when we consult our friends on matters moral, we consult them for concrete guidance, then we consult the Lord for the same concrete advice. Moreover, if the advice and guidance are not particular, concrete, and prudential, then it is not really the case that the Lord can be the "way," a lamp for our steps and a light for our path. He may be Truth and Life—but not the Way, unless in him, and in him as mediated to us by Sacred Scripture, we behold a concrete pattern for moral action, find particular answers to particular questions, and even, particular words for particular circumstances.

To a man or woman thoughtfully and prayerfully immersed in the songs and stories, commands and meditations, parables and letters of the Bible, the Lord will bring forth that word or that command or that story needed for guidance. And that is how he speaks to us. If the Bible is "in" us, then when we pray and ask and knock, the vocabulary of God's response is ready—all he need do is by his grace bring to our mind, already reverently attuned and listening, the word we need, a word he speaks and we hear.⁹

Prayer and the Senses of Scripture

How should we characterize this sense of Scripture, the practical directives that Anthony and Augustine hear in the passages they take to be directed

⁷ See *Summa theologiae* I, q. 22, aa. 1–2; q. 23, a. 1.

⁸ *ST* I–II, q. 100, aa. 1 and 3.

⁹ I speak of "immersion"; presumably, the practice of Bible dipping or "cutting the Bible" as it is also called tempts providence.

to them? It is difficult to answer this question. It is tempting to take refuge in the notion of “application” or “accommodation.” A preacher, for instance, is said to apply a text to his congregation and the situation of his hearers. He reads, for instance, the Lord’s injunction that we must not judge our brother, and must take the beam out of our eye before we worry about the speck in our brother’s (Mt 7:1–5); and he proceeds to tell his people that they should forebear gossip and detraction. That is “application.” It is by the authority of the Lord that we are all forbidden to gossip and slander one another. But it is by the authority of preacher that we are informed that the passage particularly concerns us, here and now. That does not seem to report the experience of Anthony and Augustine. They take themselves to be addressed by the Lord, and not by some preacher, and not in virtue of their own act of application. Similarly, in accommodating a text, adapting it to some situation not the one it was immediately addressed to, the one who accommodates is neither the human nor divine author of the text, and this is so even where there is some theological ground for it. It may be within the providence of God for this to happen, and, where there is some theological ground for it, there may be reason to classify this as part of the “fuller sense” of the text.¹⁰ But again, this does not seem adequate to the immediacy with which Anthony and Augustine felt themselves addressed. Nor does it seem natural to say they accommodated the text to themselves; it seems more natural to say that they heard the Lord addressing them in the words of the texts.

Are we to say then that what Anthony and Augustine hear is the literal sense of the texts? If by the literal sense we mean what the human author, evangelist, or prophet, intended and understood, the answer must be no. If by the literal sense we mean the sense that is the foundation and point of departure of theology,¹¹ then once again that answer is no, strictly speaking. However, here in this essay, I take as part of my data the fact that Anthony and Augustine understood that the texts in question meant something determinate and practical for them at the time they heard them, and understood that that meaning was addressed to them by the Lord. So, while I do not argue directly from the practical truth, “Anthony, to be perfect, was obliged by the Lord to dispossess himself of everything he owned,” I do argue from the fact that he understood himself to be

¹⁰ So for Pierre Grelot, *The Bible Word of God*, trans. Peter Nickels (New York: Desclée, 1968), 333, accommodation with a theological basis is an application of the fuller sense. He gives as an example of such accommodation the allegory of Sarah and Hagar worked out in Galatians 4. See also *ibid.*, “The Fuller Sense and the Apostolate,” 388–90.

¹¹ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 10.

addressed by the Lord in the words of the scriptural text to do just that. So, traditionally, the Lord's prescription to go and sell what we have if we would be perfect enters as a counsel of perfection into the moral and ascetical theology of the Church. And the fact that Anthony heard himself addressed in the way he did enters into the theological consideration of the relation of Scripture and prayer.

If by the literal sense, however, we mean what the divine author intends, then what Anthony and Augustine heard was the literal sense—or rather, a literal sense.¹² The point of this essay is that, because of the completeness and comprehensiveness of providence, God can speak to those who pray to him through the Scriptures. Or, if we want, we could say that the texts were applied to Anthony and Augustine, but if we do, then it is God in his providence who is doing the applying.

Monastic Life

Christian monasticism is unthinkable without Scripture understood as being able to render the will of God directly to the hearer. The call of Anthony is a sort of emblem of this fact, but it is evident also from the first pages of the Rule of Benedict. We could of course say that the call to become a monk contained in the prologue is “scriptural,” or expressed in the words of Scripture, as with the citation of Romans 13:11, “It is high time for us to arise from sleep,” or Psalm 94:8, “If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts,” and so on through the rest of the nineteen quotations of the prologue. But that would not fully reflect the Rule's own understanding of things. As Anscar Kristensen says, “the Rule is intended simply as an aid for monks to live by the Scriptures.”¹³ In other words, the Rule understands itself to be doing nothing except retailing Scripture and the authority of Scripture, the always contemporary authority of the word of God speaking now to whoever reads the Rule. So in Chapter 7, key to the Rule's understanding of the monastic life, Scripture “speaks to us,” “cries to us,” “commands us,” “exhorts us,” “warns us.”¹⁴ As Kristensen writes: “In the Rule, Scripture is often considered to be speaking directly to the reader or hearer. It is not merely a source of information about the past or even of revelation about the past, but a guide to life here and now.”¹⁵ In this way and so to speak, the

¹² On this view there would be multiple literal senses of a text.

¹³ Anscar Kristensen, “The Role and Interpretation of Scripture in the Rule of Benedict,” in *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 470.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 469.

Rule stands to Scripture for the practical understanding of the ascetic life as the Rule of Faith does for the speculative understanding of the Triune God, the Incarnation, and the work of our redemption.¹⁶ Just as the framework of the Rule of Faith guides our reading of Scripture so that we do not fall out of the truth of God, so the framework of the Rule guides our reading of the Bible for practical purposes. The fundamental thing St. Benedict says to us, therefore, is this: Read the Bible within the framework and according to the practice contained in the Rule, and you will not be led astray in your life as a Christian ascetic.¹⁷

Of course, the Rule does not merely exemplify the above use of Scripture, but it positively enjoins it in the practice of *lectio*. And according to a modern authority on things monastic, "*Lectio* is meant to be a conversation with God about one's life."¹⁸ That is, in reading the Scriptures, the reader hears God, hears him address the reader, and hears him speak about the reader's own life. It is just as St. Jerome says to Eustochium, "let the secrets of your cell always keep you. . . . You pray? You speak to the bridegroom. You read? He speaks to you."¹⁹ As a Rule for reading Scripture, the Rule can be taken to enjoin just that engagement of Scripture that lives in the expectation of conversation with God.

Other Expressions of This in Tradition

The sense of Scripture as speaking to us, and speaking to us practically, and so, in prayer, is well developed in the fathers.

A first witness is St. Athanasius, the *Letter to Marcellinus*, in which he sets out the role of the Psalms in the moral regeneration of a Christian's life.²⁰ The Psalms, the letter explains, contain in a way the whole of Scripture—history, law, prophecy—for it is the same Spirit who is the author of each part of the Bible.²¹ But the peculiar and special grace of

¹⁶ This analogy is suggested, not stated, by Kristensen; *ibid.*, 468.

¹⁷ The other great rules and charters of religious life can function in the same way.

¹⁸ Columba Stewart, O.S.B., *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1998), 41.

¹⁹ St. Jerome, "Letter 22," §25, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. II, vol. VI, *The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, trans. W. H. Freemantle (1892; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 32. For a discussion of *lectio divina* and its theological presuppositions, see Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Ligouri, MO: Triumph Books, 1996), chs. 2 and 3.

²⁰ For a discussion of the letter, see Brian E. Daley, S.J., "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, eds. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 82ff.

²¹ Athanasius, "Letter to Marcellinus," in *Athanasius: The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, §9.

the Psalms is “that it contains even the emotions of each soul, and it has the changes and rectifications of these delineated and regulated in itself.”²² The Psalms heal us, strengthen us, and direct us in that they give us the very words with which to heal passion, acknowledge fault, and restrain wickedness.²³ When we read the other books of the Bible, we read words not our own; but “he who recites the psalms is uttering the rest as his own words, and each sings them as if they were written concerning him.”²⁴ The Psalms “become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and emotions of his soul.”²⁵ As we might expect, this ability of the Psalms to reveal us to ourselves is strictly allied with or even a function of the divine authority with which they were composed.

Each psalm is both spoken and composed by the Spirit so that in these same words . . . the stirrings of our souls might be grasped, and all of them be said as concerning us, and the same issue from us as our own words, for a remembrance of the emotions in us, and a chastening of our life.²⁶

The words are spoken to us, so that speaking them as our own, we may be healed, and as the *Letter to Marcellinus* makes clear, conformed to Christ: “[J]ust as he provides the model of the earthly and heavenly man in his own person, so also from the Psalms he who wants to do so can learn the emotions and dispositions of the souls, finding in them also the therapy and correction suited for each emotion.”²⁷ The therapy of the Psalms conforms us to Christ.

Second, there is St. Augustine in the *Confessions*, who provides as it were an example of what Athanasius is talking about.²⁸ In the ninth book of the *Confessions*, Augustine recalls the extraordinary days immediately after his conversion. “My God, how I cried to you when I read the Psalms of David, songs of faith, utterances of devotion which allow no

²² Ibid., §10.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., §11.

²⁵ Ibid., §12.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., §13.

²⁸ For a comprehensive introduction to St. Augustine’s reading and use of the Psalms, see Michael Fiedrowicz, general introduction, in *Expositions of the Psalms 1–32*, trans. Maria Boulding, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Part III, vol. 15, ed. John Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990), 13–66, especially, on the therapeutic use of the Psalms, 37–43.

pride of spirit to enter in!"²⁹ He illustrates by showing how Psalm 4 supplied him with the words to understand himself, and to declare himself so understood to God. It is a sort of illustration of the doctrine of the *Letter to Marcellinus*.³⁰ He finds in the Psalms both the mirror and the medicine of his soul (*speculum et medicamentum*).³¹

I trembled with fear and at the same time burned with hope and exultation at your mercy, Father (Ps 30:7–8). All these emotions exuded from my eyes and my voice when "your good Spirit" (Ps 142:10) turned towards us to say: "sons of men, how long will you be dull at heart? And why do you love vanity and seek after a lie?" (Ps 4:3). For I had loved vanity and sought after a lie.³²

And so on through the psalm. "And I cried out loud when I acknowledged inwardly what I read in external words."³³ All this is of course for Augustine included within the providence of God guiding him to his true home, the vivid sense of which animates the whole of the *Confessions*.

Third, Gregory the Great explains the sense of Job 33:14 as providing warrant for taking the whole of the Scriptures in the sense in which we have seen Athanasius and Augustine take the Psalms. Elihu says: "God will speak once, and will not repeat the same thing a second time."³⁴ Gregory explains that this is said in view of God's composition of Scripture. "As if he were to say, God does not reply in private speaking to the hearts of men one by one; but fashions His word in such a manner, as to satisfy the inquiries of all men. *For if we look for our own cases one by one, we are sure to find them in the teaching of His Scriptures.*"³⁵ So, for instance, what St. Paul heard and recorded, "my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9), suffices also for us when we want to know the reasons of our sufferings. And again: "He has provided for our

²⁹ *Saint Augustine: Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), bk. IX, ch. 4, §8, 160.

³⁰ As Daley points out, however, Augustine's understanding of who speaks and to whom in the psalms is more articulated than that of Athanasius; "Patristic Exegesis," 84.

³¹ Fiedrowicz, General Introduction, 38.

³² *Confessions*, bk. IX, ch. 4, §9, 160–161.

³³ *Confessions*, bk. IX, ch. 4, §10, 162.

³⁴ This is the translation of Gregory's Latin Bible text by John H. Parker in *A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church*, vol. 36, *Morals on the Book of Job* by S. Gregory the Great (Oxford: J. G. & F. Rivington, 1847), bk. 23, §33, 29; the NRSV (from the Greek) has something quite different.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, §34, emphasis added.

instruction, by what He stated to our fathers in holy Scripture.”³⁶ And, “He includes in holy Scripture whatever can possibly befall each one of us, and has provided therein for regulating the conduct of those who come after, by the examples of those who have gone before.”³⁷ Note here then (1) the authorship of God; (2) God’s providence extending the meaning of Scripture to all men, even to us; and (3) the practical tenor of this providence, of what is said to us in the Bible.

As we should expect, the presuppositions of taking Scripture for prayer include those necessary for pre-modern exegesis in general. These are expressed very concisely by Luke Timothy Johnson.³⁸ First, the Old and New Testaments “form a unity that is grounded in the singleness of divine authorship.” Second, “Scripture speaks harmoniously.” Third, “the Bible, as the Word of God, is authoritative.” Fourth, “Scripture speaks in many ways and at many levels.” Fifth, interpretation is to be guided by “a hermeneutics of generosity or charity.” The first seems to imply the second, third, and fifth presuppositions, and to make possible, if not strictly entail, the fourth. For if God is the author, then, as coming from a single mind and an infinite wisdom, the Scriptures speak harmoniously (the second presupposition), and as proceeding from a wisdom that is a providence whose end is the union of human persons with the Trinity, interpretation must, as St. Augustine taught, serve the charity which is the interior principle of our progress to God (the fifth).³⁹ Further, if God is the author, then evidently the Scriptures are authoritative (the third presupposition). It is necessary to add only that this authority extends not only to how we are to see the world and ourselves in our relation to God, but also to how we are to act. That is, the authority of God is both “speculative” and “practical.” Further, it is necessary to specify as well that the providence of God which that orders all things to himself as the final end of the universe is particular—it embraces each individual man and woman as an individual, each of whose hairs are counted.

³⁶ Ibid., 30.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, “Rejoining the Long Conversation,” in Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, S.J., *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 47, 52, 55, 57, 59. For an equivalent presentation, see also Daley, “Patristic Exegesis,” 74–78; and The Princeton Scripture Project, “Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture,” in Davis and Hays, *Art of Reading*, 1–5.

³⁹ St. Augustine, *Teaching Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana*, intro., trans., and notes, Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Part I, vol. 11, ed. John Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), Book I, ch. 35, §§39 through ch. 36, §§40–41, 123–124.

A Teaching of Sacred Scripture Itself

The use of Scripture recommended in Christian tradition and practice is scripturally warranted. This warrant is to be found not just in a few verses where the New Testament speaks of “Scripture,” meaning the Old Testament, although these statements are not unimportant. So in Matthew 4, the Lord twice takes up the words of Scripture (at vv. 4 and 10) to make sense of and defeat the devil’s temptations. The first of these is particularly striking for our purposes: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” This word of Deuteronomy 8:3 states a general rule, but it is taken by Jesus as now coming from the mouth of God his Father, and he “lives by it.” This is to say that it is on its authority he prefers rather to trust in God than to turn the stones into bread. The truth of the verse is instanced in its being enacted before us as an example.

There are also such verses as 1 Corinthians 10:11. The punishments of Israel in the desert were a warning for the people, “but they were written down for our instruction upon whom the end of the ages has come.” Now, the end of the ages comes upon us in Christ, and so there is the implication that it is the Christological sense of “what was written down” that is for our instruction. For indeed, as Paul explains in this same chapter, the Rock which that followed the people of Israel in the desert and from which they drank was Christ (v. 5). Note, however, that the instruction in question is practical and moral.⁴⁰ Again, 2 Timothy 3:16–17 famously tells us that Scripture is useful “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”⁴¹

Beyond such explicit passages, there is a more fundamental argument whose point of departure Robert Jenson provides in noting that Scripture does not speak about any other people (saving also the Jews) than us, Christians, abiding in the bosom of the Church.

Not only is Scripture within the church, but we, the church, are within Scripture—that is, our common life is located inside the story Scripture tells. The Bible is not about some other folk, and not even the very beginning steps of biblical exegesis may suppose that it is. Send not to

⁴⁰ It seems that we could say that Paul so renders the Old Testament texts in question that they (or the realities they speak of) are found to be both Christological (so, an “allegorical” sense) and exemplary (“tropological”), and he applies the exemplary force to his readers. His application might be thought to have more authority than that of an ordinary preacher. Or should we say that he merely recognizes the application of providence?

⁴¹ See also 1 Corinthians 9:10, Romans 15:4, and 1 Peter 1:10–2.

know for whom the shofar sounds, or who will experience what the prophet foretells: tua res agitur—it is your thing that is at issue.⁴²

Jenson establishes this by calling attention to the open-ended character of the book of Acts. Also, he appeals to the fact of canonization, the meaning of which is that the Church directs the address of these writings to her own future self. This in turn suggests the following connection: Scripture speaks to us because it speaks about us. An Augustinian kind of argument can be deployed at this juncture, an argument that hinges on the Pauline theology of the body of Christ. It can be developed in two steps.

1. In the first place, the New Testament teaches us that the Old is to be read Christologically. More exactly, according to Luke, it is Christ who teaches us that the Old Testament is to be read Christologically. In Luke 24, the risen Lord shows the disciples, first those on the road to Emmaus and second those gathered in Jerusalem, all those things in the Law and prophets and psalms that speak of him. This teaching has already been at work within the preaching of Jesus, as in Luke 4, where the Lord says that the words he reads from the scroll of Isaiah are about him, Jesus, standing in the synagogue at Nazareth. And it is enacted, or acted on, in the time of the Church, as in Acts 8, where Philip delivers to the Ethiopian eunuch the very same Christological reading of Isaiah that Christ himself delivered to the Church in Acts 24.⁴³

This is not a uniquely Lucan theme. All the major voices of the New Testament take it up. In the Fourth Gospel, for instance, Jesus tells the leaders of the people that Moses wrote of him (Jn 5:46). Again, in chapter two, we find that the words of the psalmist are imputed to Jesus. “Believing the scripture,” in verse 22, is believing that Psalm 69:9 (“zeal for your house has consumed me”) was written of Jesus, which is to say that they are his words and that it is his voice which are to be found in the psalm.⁴⁴ In the same way, Psalm 21 is figured as expressing the voice of Jesus in the synoptic gospels

⁴² Robert Jenson, “Scripture’s Authority in the Church,” in Davis and Hays, *Art of Reading*, 30.

⁴³ I have treated this theme in Luke–Acts more fully in “‘Today This Scripture Has Been Fulfilled in Your Hearing’: Scripture, Tradition, and Church in Luke–Acts,” in *Sapere teologico e unità della fede: Studi in onore del Prof. Jared Wicks*, eds. C. Aparicio Valls, D. Dotolo, and G. Pasquale (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 2004), 149–71.

⁴⁴ See, for this handling of John 2, Richard B. Hays, “Reading Scripture in the Light of the Resurrection,” in Davis and Hays, *Art of Reading*, 221–24.

(“my God, my God”) and the same psalm as speaking of him in John (“they parted my garments among them”).⁴⁵ So also in Mark 12, when the Sadducees are accused by Jesus of knowing neither the power of God nor the Scriptures, it is in both cases Jesus of whom they are ignorant. They do not know the power of God that will raise him, and us in him, the power of God at whose right hand the Son of Man will be seated (Mk 14:62 and Dan 7:13–14); they do not know the Scriptures which that present God as so the God of the living that, as he can make descendents for Abraham in his old age, as he can overcome the age of Sarah and the barrenness of Rachel, so he can overcome the last enemy, death.⁴⁶ Finally, Paul too knows the Christological sense of Scripture, most famously and to recall just one place, in 2 Corinthians, where the Scriptures render up their meaning when, in Christ, the veil is taken away from the face of Moses, and we behold the glory of God shining in the face of Christ (2 Cor 3:15–6). But Moses is in this passage also the text of Moses, the Law. Through Christ, knowing Christ, we behold his glory also in the Law, knowing its true meaning, Christ.⁴⁷

2. The Christological reading of Sacred Scripture means that it is also about those who are in Christ, who are one person with Christ, members of his body. If the Church is one person with Christ, such that the Lord says to Paul from heaven, “Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4), then in speaking about Christ, Scripture speaks of us, who are included in the whole Christ, head and members. Therefore, if we have questions about ourselves, and we understand that the Scripture speaks about us, and about us as moral agents, to recall Athanasius, therapeutically, then we may take it also as *addressing* us, as speaking to us. We can take up the first rule of Tyconius, “about the Lord and his body,” included by Augustine in the *De doctrina christiana* and deployed in force in his expositions of the Psalms. Augustine explains:

We know that we are sometimes being given hints that head and body, that is Christ and Church, constitute one person—after all, it was not without reason that the faithful were told “then you are the seed of Abraham” (Gal 3:29), although there is only one seed of

⁴⁵ See, on Psalm 21, Gregory Vall, “A New Method of Exegesis,” *The Thomist* 66 (2002): 175–200.

⁴⁶ For this reading, see Hays, “Reading Scripture,” 224–29.

⁴⁷ For this handling of 2 Corinthians 3, see John Behr, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *The Way to Nicea* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 26–27.

Abraham, which is Christ. So according to this first rule we should not let it baffle us when a text passes from head to body and from body to head and yet still refers to one and the same person.⁴⁸

Where we find a text as spoken *by* us, the body, then we discover something *about* us. And where we discover something about us, we who have questions about ourselves before God, then the text speaks *to* us.

Again, we could say that, for those who are created in and for Christ (cf. Col 1:16), where the Scripture speaks of Christ, it also speaks of us.

There is considerable confusion over the conditions of prayer today, and sometimes it is asked whether we can any longer pray to the distant and immutable and transcendent God of “the Western theological tradition.” The unraveling of such a question would take another essay. Perhaps there can be no satisfactory answer at the abstract level to such a question. Perhaps the only real answer to it lies in the cultivation of the ancient discipline of reading and prayer. Given that experience, one asks about suppositions; and then, since we are inquiring about a lived practice, the suppositions will have a weight to them that, in its absence, no theoretical account can. Only that circle of theory and practice provide the full context for an answer. Even so, it may not be entirely useless to list some of the elements of the theoretical part of a response.

First, the transcendent God of creation is by that fact “closer” to what he makes, sustains, and loves by his power and action, and at every moment than any created thing. If he is distant, he is so as other than us and every worldly thing, as not-us. If he is distant as unavailable to us, that is so because of sin.

Second, the immutable and transcendent and eternal God is not so much a manufacture of “theological tradition” as it is a deliverance of the first article of the creed and the entire patristic tradition, a deliverance shared by both fathers and heretics.

Third, it must be urged, and with the greatest moral and religious conviction, that this God is the only God there is; and therefore, if we cannot pray to him, we will end up praying to a false god, which, in this present age, usually turns out to be oneself (no distant god that!).

Fourth, as it is the transcendence of God that ensures his presence, so it is his eternity that is the guarantee of his speaking at all times through Scripture, and it is his changelessness in wisdom and love that renders him master of our every change, whether of growth or decay, increase or

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, Book III, ch. 31, §44, 189.

decrease, and so able to bring to us just that word of the Bible we need to hear now.

How can I pray to an immutable, eternal, transcendent God? But he is the only one that can be prayed to as necessarily hearing us, certainly present to us. Moreover, he is the only one who can be prayed to, if we hope to be answered, and in words suited to and able to be heard by us.

Fifth, however, and in the end, a Trinitarian answer must be given. The ultimate ground of the possibility of our hearing God is that he is interiorly already expressible and expressed. Only so is there the created expression of him that there is. And the proximate ground of our hearing him is that his eternal expression, his eternal Word, has become flesh, and that this flesh, in the breadth of its temporal career, expresses the person of the Word, a record of whose humanity and its history is found in Scripture. Only just such a God, whose Son-Word has become incarnate and whose human life in turn has also found expression in Sacred Scripture—only this God can continue to speak to us, when the Holy Spirit cries out to him with sighs too deep for words (Rom 8:26). **N V**