

God's Word and Human Speech^{*}

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1. The Problem

THE SECOND Vatican Council, in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, declares, “Holy Mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles, holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety . . . are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit *they have God as their author* and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.”¹ After this statement that the Scriptures have God as their author, the Council refers to men who were chosen and employed by God and who “made use of their powers and abilities, so that with him acting in them and through them, *they, as true authors*, consigned to writing everything and only those things that he wanted.” God is the author of the Scriptures and men are also true authors of the same Scriptures. The statement needs clarification. In particular the two meanings—divine and human—of the word “author” need to be explained. Concomitantly, the meaning of the word “God” needs to be thought about and related to this context.

God and the human writer of a scriptural passage are not “two authors” in the sense in which two human beings can be the co-authors of a composition, with each contributing part of the whole. Nor do we have two authors in the sense in which one person serves as a stenographer for another. In Scripture the divine and the human authors are each

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¹ “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., and Joseph Gallagher (New York: Guild Press, 1966), chapter 3, §11, pp. 118–19. My italics in the text.

fully authoritative in their own way. The God of Christian faith can be the author of the Scriptures even while the human writers are also its authors. God must be so understood that this formulation is not contradictory. The issue is analogous to the mystery of the Incarnation, where God must be understood as so transcendent to the world that the incarnate Word can be both God and man.² The Christian mystery of the Incarnation would be an incoherence or a contradiction if understood within the confines of a non-Christian understanding of the divine, or if it were to be understood as the union of an angelic substance and a human being. The persistent Christological heresies of both ancient and modern times continue to show that a god understood as part of the world could not become man in the way Christians believe that the Eternal Son became man. Analogously, a god who is part of the world could not be the author of the sacred writings in the way that the Council says they have God as their author.

Phenomenology can help address such issues concerning Scripture. It deals with the manifestation of things. It traces the way things can be identified in speech and human experience. It discusses words and their meaning, clarifies how words present things, examines the difference between both speaking and writing and speaker and author, and shows how things spoken about can remain absent and mysterious while still being intended by us.³ Such phenomena occur in our ordinary use of language and our standard experience of things, but they also occur in a distinctive manner in Scripture and revelation, where they need to be described in their own terms.

2. Beatific Seeing and Hearing

We in our present state cannot enjoy the beatific vision, but we do have something like a beatific hearing. Such hearing—as well as the listening associated with it; we need to listen if we are truly to hear—provides the title of this essay, “God’s Word and Human Speech.” God, because he has chosen to do so, becomes present to us in the modality of being heard or at least being heard about, even while we cannot see him. According to our Christian faith, God becomes present to us through human words, which words are also spoken or written by him.

² An analogous understanding is required in the mystery of grace, where the infused virtues and the actions that follow from them are truly our own while still being the work of God.

³ In this essay the term “to intend” is occasionally used with the sense given to it in phenomenology, where it signifies our cognitive relationship to the things we are aware of or are thinking about.

We ourselves, in our day and age, do not literally hear God himself, but we do read about him in the Scriptures. The Scriptures, furthermore, present God as actually speaking to men: to Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and the psalmist. According to the Scriptures, God speaks *to* some human beings directly, not just through angelic intermediaries. Furthermore, he also speaks *with* some human beings, who answer and question him and even argue with him; think of Abraham and Jonah. Man uses his logos, his speech and his reason, not only in regard to God's created world, but even in the presence of God himself, and while his usage of words and reason is reverent, it can on occasion also be audacious. Human reason and its verbal expressions are not extinguished but perfected in the presence of God.

More specifically, in the New Covenant, God—God the Father—speaks to us in a new and distinctive way, in and through Jesus Christ, his eternal Son and eternal Word. God speaks with men by using a particular human voice and making that voice his own. But we ourselves, in our day and age, do not bodily hear the voice of Christ as the New Testament figures did, or as Saul did on the road to Damascus. We hear it through the mediation of words that are written and read, and so we believe even though we have not seen (Jn 20:29). What are words and what is writing, that they can bring God to our minds and hearts, if not to our eyes?

3. The Difference between Hearing and Seeing

To set a stage for the theological issue of God's word and human speech, consider the difference in the natural order between hearing words and seeing things. Hearing makes things present to us, but in a manner that is associated with a distinct kind of absence. If we just hear about something, about some event or entity in the world, we do *not* see it. We hear about it instead of seeing it. Hearsay is not vision. If the thing is there before us on its own, then words spoken by someone else might help us to see it better, but the words will not have brought the thing to us in the first place; and yet that is precisely what words spoken about something absent are able to do. They introduce the thing to us, they bring it to mind. Words can even allow us to reach something that has never been seen by us. They allow us to anticipate seeing something for the first time and to anticipate it thoughtfully, not just as a matter of sensory expectation. Words enable us to know what we are hoping for.

Speech introduces an intellectual sense of absence into our experience. It allows us to think explicitly about what is not here and to intend it in its absence. It also heightens the sense of presence that we become capable of. When we finally see something we have only heard about, we

have a more distinct sense of its being present than we would enjoy if we merely came upon it without such an anticipation. Such presence is more intellectual precisely because of the verbal intervention that has taken place, precisely because the words have come between us and the thing in question. The same thing that we heard about and thought of explicitly as absent has now become present, and this presence is more forceful because of the acknowledged absence that preceded it; the thing is recognized explicitly as not absent any longer and as no longer intended in its absence. We distinctly experience the thing's identity and being.⁴ We experience the specific kind of presence that this thing has.

Words and sights thus involve an interplay between presence and absence, between what is directly given to us and what we can think about but cannot see. This contrast between the present and the absent, as realized in natural vision and speech, occurs also in Christian life, where we deal with a new and eminently radical kind of absence and transcendence. In Christian faith we respond to the God who is not just very far away; he is more distant than that; we *could* not expect God to become presented as one of the things in this world, even though he grants these things their being and is intimately present to them through his causation. It would be an incoherence to expect him to appear as part of the world. God is not part of the world, not even a spiritual part of it or one of its powers. Rather, in the words of the book of Job, he is the one who laid the foundation of the earth and determined its measurements and so is there before and beyond it (Job 38: 1–7). He is not measured within it. But although he cannot be present to us as part of the world, he does come to us through speech. He is presented to us, not only as the one who made and sustains all these things in his wisdom and power, but also as the one who could be in undiminished goodness and greatness even if “all this”—the universe of things—did not exist. This is what it means to say that God is before and beyond the things that are. This is the kind of absence and distance between us and him.

This absence is different from all the varieties of absences that we normally deal with. We cannot overcome it by going somewhere or doing something, not even by going on a pilgrimage or a mission. It is not the absence of an entity whose presence we can achieve by our own management, either with incantations that might call him up or with the help of scientific devices. And yet the God who is beyond our vision can be given to us in words that we hear. Words can bring God to mind and they can somehow let him be “in” our minds. St. Anselm bears witness

⁴ On the relation of names to the presence, absence, and identity of things, see Robert Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence: A Philosophical Investigation of Language and Being* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), chapter 3, 23–32.

to this when he writes in the *Proslogion* that the fool, “when he hears this very thing that I say (*cum audit hoc ipsum quod dico*), . . . understands what he hears (*intelligit quod audit*),” and, Anselm continues, “what he understands is in his understanding (*quod intelligit in intellectu eius est*).”⁵ Words serve as the vehicle that allows this theological presence to arrive in our understanding through faith and so somehow to be in us. Anselm’s argument needs the *dico* and the *audit*, the speaking and hearing and the persons who speak and hear. What are words, that even in this theological domain they can somehow bring to mind what seeing cannot?

In summary, words introduce a sharp differentiation between presence and absence. They do so in regard to ordinary things in the world, but they also let the contrast between presence and absence take on a new meaning and reach into an absence and a hoped-for presence beyond the margins of the world.

4. Writing

Writing introduces an even more acute and comprehensive sense of absence than speech. Writing resembles speech because, in both, the object being discussed can be absent, but it differs from speech because in writing the speaker can be absent as well. When we read something, the page and the script are present to us but our minds are turned toward something other than the page we look at, and in addition we are deprived of the presence of the one who speaks to us in and through that page. The page is there instead of the object and instead of the speaker. The written word is detached from the voice that originally uttered it as well as the hand that wrote it. We may not even know who is the speaker behind the words that lie on the page. The unattached words, however, seem to have great authority precisely because they have been written down, and because they say the very same thing every time they are read.⁶ They are less fleeting than a voice, which vanishes immediately, and they do not waver in their conviction. The written words have greater authority because of their fixity and because someone thought them important enough to set down and to hand on.

Writing involves other absences besides those of the object and the speaker. There might have been a scribe, an editor, and also a publisher, someone who selected these pieces of writing for preservation and replication. We can read the written words of the original speaker, but these

⁵ St. Anselm, *Proslogion*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt, O.S.B., vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946), 101, my translation.

⁶ On the reassuring sameness of written texts, see Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence*, 69.

other mediators also come into play and they contribute to the reading. We might discover clues in the writing that tell us something about these people, but often enough we know practically nothing about them. It is one thing to trust the words of someone who is speaking directly with us, but how can we trust the words of an unknown speaker or writer that have come through so many unknown hands? The written words are present to us—everything hinges on them, and their presence is unquestionable—but their presence is surrounded by multiple kinds of absence.

This complexity of absences occurs in regard to the Sacred Scriptures, and once again the theological context introduces new forms of absence that surpass those found within this world, mysterious and perplexing as these may be. The God we read about in the Scriptures is believed to be the first and ultimate speaker behind these texts. The God who achieved our salvation in the work of his Son is also the God who recorded this achievement in the Scriptures and who now addresses us through them. But since the Scriptures are writings, God as their author is also absent from them, as are the human authors and editors, each in their appropriate manner. The thing we do unquestionably have present to us is the written text, which, however, was brought to us by many different hands.

5. The Church as Speaker of the Scriptures

But we do have a tangible and immediate speaker of the Scriptures. It is the Church. Sacred Scripture does not speak on its own; it exists through time as spoken by the Church. The Church, however, presents herself as the collector and transmitter of the written words, not as the author who could rewrite them (even though she can translate them). Once the Scriptures had been composed and canonized—once remembrance had given way to writing—the Church became the speaker who reads and quotes the Scriptures but not the author who writes or rewrites them. Although she, like the apostles at Pentecost, can express the text in different languages, she leaves the text alone. The Church repeats and interprets these words, but she also subjects herself to their authority and measures herself against them, and she must, consequently, accept them as they are given to her. As the Sacred Constitution on Divine Revelation says in the passage we cited earlier, the Scriptures “have been handed on as such *to* the Church herself.”

The Church and the Scriptures are reciprocally related as part and whole. Each is a whole to the other as part. The writings have been composed, collected, and kept alive within the Church, and in this sense the Church is the whole of which the Scriptures are part. But what the writings narrate, the actors and actions that are contained in the writings,

in turn have established the Church in her being and authority, and in this sense the content of the Scriptures is the whole of which the Church is a part. The Scriptures present the substance and the origin of the Church as well as the normative image to which she must be conformed.

The role of the Church as the speaker of the Scriptures is brought out when she presents the Scriptures as the word of God, but this role is even more vividly performed when the Church reads the biblical passages in her liturgy and when she incorporates parts of the Scriptures in her teachings and prayers and makes it possible for us to think and to pray in the same manner.⁷ We take fragments from the Scriptures and compose our prayers and thoughts from them. Such usage is neither *bricolage* nor a shoring of fragments against our ruin. The Church's use of Scripture in her teaching and actions makes possible for us a way of life that is coherent because reconciled with God. It is in such situations of prayerful reading, whether in the Church's liturgy and teaching or in the private prayer of believers, that the Scriptures most fully come to life. It is there that they serve, not as an object of our curiosity, but as the words through which God speaks to us and we to God. At this point the primary author of the Scriptures, God himself, comes to the fore and acts as author, as the one who authorizes and speaks. At this point the human authors, who have finished their work, recede into the background. As Benedict XVI says, "A voice greater than man's echoes in Scripture's human words: the individual writings (*Schrifte*) of the Bible point somehow to the living process that shapes the one Scripture (*Schrift*)."⁸

Taking the Church as "the closest perceptible speaker" of the Scriptures may be a good way to express the difference between Scripture and Tradition in the Church. If the Church is the one who speaks the Scriptures, she is something distinct from them; she has her own life and

⁷ Ideally the Church would convey to her people a sense of the glory of God as a setting within which the Word of God can be heard and received. The architecture, decoration, and music in churches should serve this purpose. Speaking about Balthasar's theology of "theophany" or "epiphany," Jeremy Holmes writes, "He notes that at decisive places in Scripture God's 'glory' manifests itself *before* his word is heard. Sinai, the burning bush, the calls of Isaiah and Ezekiel, Tabor, Damascus, the beginning of the Book of Revelation. . . . Man hears God's word not in his own power, but through the power of God's grace" ("Translator's Introduction" to Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Holy Scripture," *Nova et Vetera* 5 [2007]: 711). The word of God also makes us more capable of recognizing God's wisdom and power in the cosmos and in natural phenomena. Such epiphanies, however, would remain under-determined and merely bewildering without the words that followed and defined them.

⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xviii.

memory and her own subsistence, as well as her own prudence. She does not disappear into the text or become simply its commentator. She presents and interprets the Scriptures and at critical moments she may need to judge as erroneous certain interpretations of them, but she is there as the speaker who does so, even as she subjects herself to the Scriptures. A speaker who quotes a speech does not vanish into the quotation. The Tradition of the Church, what she hands on in her living faith, is not just the Scriptures but also herself as the one who speaks and interprets them. Scripture and Tradition could be expressed respectively as the Word of God and the immediate, worldly speaker of this Word.

Tradition can also be described as remembrance. As Francis Slade puts it, "Scripture as the New Testament is the Church remembering her beginnings and earliest times. To make sense of these things, these beginnings, meant remembering what had preceded them, the Old Testament. These things were proclaimed, indeed are proclaimed, in the liturgy."⁹ Slade's remarks call to mind a remark of St. Justin Martyr, who refers to the gospels that were read in the liturgy as the remembrances of the apostles, the things recounted from memory.¹⁰ Slade continues, "The Church reminding herself of her first times is Tradition." He also comments more generally on the relationship between Scripture and Tradition: "The Protestants had it exactly backwards. The Church is not founded on Scripture as if Scripture came before the Church and the Church derives from it, so that Scripture trumps Tradition." Scripture is not a detached and isolated text but the written form of memory, and the reading of such writing activates this remembering. To believe the Scriptures is also to believe the Church, whose original witness is expressed and described in the Scriptures.

But besides speaking the Scriptures, the Church also epitomizes them in her creed, the articles of her faith. The Nicean, Athanasian, and Apostles' Creeds are particular formulations of this, but the creed of the Church can be taken in a more general sense as the expression of the substance of her belief. The creed and the catechism of the Church are inseparable from the Scriptures: they need Scripture, but Scripture also needs them if it is to be heard. The Church does not rewrite the Scriptures but she does formulate the creed, which orders the Scriptures and clarifies what is to be taken from them. Doing so is part of her task as the speaker of Scripture. The creed does not simply repeat the Scriptures but

⁹ Personal communication, used with permission.

¹⁰ St. Justin Martyr calls the gospels the memoirs (τὰ ἀπομνημονεύματα) of the apostles. See *The First Apology*, chapters 66–67, in *The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie W. Barnard, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 56 (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 70–71.

specifies explicitly the new dimension of being that comes to light in biblical revelation. Such a highlighting of Scripture is not an external addition to what Scripture says; as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, the creed or *symbolum fidei* "is not added to Sacred Scripture but rather is drawn from Sacred Scripture."¹¹ Such a recapitulation and ordering of Scripture through the creed is a distinct activity that is not more repetition or citation. It accomplishes something that the Scriptures could not do on their own. It is an essential part of the way in which the Church speaks them and the way we as believers listen to and repeat them ourselves. In fact, for the Christian believer the catechesis and life of the Church precede the Scriptures phenomenologically. As Dom Anscar Vonier, O.S.B., puts it, "In most cases, love for Christ exists in the human soul long before the books of the New Testament have been taken up as a spiritual study," and "No one profits by the gospels unless he be first in love with Christ."¹²

6. The Magic of Words

In my remarks on Sacred Scripture I have emphasized the theme of absence, but I now wish to discuss the contrary theme of a direct presence. I wish to discuss the presence of words in their material being. All the absences we have talked about circle around and come to rest on the acoustic or visual presence of the very words that make up Scripture. The words in the Bible, as well as the scriptural words used in teaching and prayer, enter essentially into the transactions between God and man. The palpable words of Scripture are the pivot around which our devotional and theological activities occur. My immediate question is: How can we more fully appreciate the power that the words of Scripture possess in their material and yet thoughtful being? This power was formulated by the prophet Jeremiah when he said, "Your words were found, and I devoured them; your word became my joy and the happiness of my heart, because your name was called down upon me, O Lord, God of hosts" (Jer 15:16).¹³ Jeremiah devours the words he has found; he carries

¹¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 9, ad 1: "Quod quidem non est additum sacrae Scripturae, sed potius ex sacra Scriptura assumptum." This entire question in the *Summa* deals with the Church's formulation of the articles of faith.

¹² Dom Anscar Vonier, O.S.B., *The Personality of Christ*, in *The Collected Works of Abbot Vonier*, vol. 1 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1952), 100-101.

¹³ The Latin Vulgate version of Jeremiah 15:16 is particularly forceful: "Inventi sunt sermones tui et comedi eos et factum est mihi verbum tuum in gaudium et in laetitia cordis mei, quoniam invocatum est nomen tuum super me Domine Deus exercituum." The role of words is mentioned at the beginning of the book of Jeremiah (1:9): "Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth,

out the two activities that human beings do with their mouth, teeth, and tongue, the two activities of eating and speaking, taking in and sending out. How can things like this happen through the simple and ordinary instruments that we call words?

Let us begin again with words in the natural order, and here I would like to introduce a corrective to the way we normally think about words. I wish to claim that it is misleading to think of words as expressing essentially what is in our minds, that is, our ideas or our concepts. We need to find a way to think of words as somehow more obviously containing the *things* that they signify, not simply our ideas of those things. We need to discover or recover what we could call a better “identity theory” of knowledge and signification. It is not enough to say that there is an identity between the thing known and the intellect or the soul of the knower. We also need to say that there is an identity between the thing known and the *word* by and in which it is known. We need to find a way to say that the thing we know does not just enjoy a cognitive existence in our minds, but that as a thing *named* it enjoys something like a cognitive existence *in its name*. I think that such an adjustment in our theory of knowledge will also help us to see that the thing known does also exist in our minds. It will help us clarify what cognitive existence is. It will, in addition, help us to appreciate the force of the words of Scripture.

It seems to me that Thomistic and scholastic theories of knowledge have underplayed the role of spoken words—the external words, *verba exteriora*—in their metaphysics of knowledge. They say that an object (and its form) can enjoy two kinds of existence: real existence in the “external” or “extra-mental” world, and cognitive or logical existence in the minds of those who know it.¹⁴ But I would like to show that the

and the Lord said to me, ‘Behold I have put my words in your mouth’.” God says this in response to Jeremiah’s claim that he is only a youth and “I do not know how to speak” (1:6).

¹⁴ See, for example, Joseph Owens, C.Ss.R., *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), 29–42. As soon as Owens begins his study of being as being, he distinguishes between real and cognitional being: “The same things, quite apparently, can exist in two different ways. They can exist in reality, they can also exist in cognition; or they may have for the moment the one way of existing, while lacking the other. In contrast to the being that is conferred upon things by real existence, existence in the mind or imagination or sensation may be called cognitive being” (31–32). The distinction between real and cognitional existence gives Owens the resources to distinguish in turn between a thing and its being. If a thing can enjoy cognitional being in the imagination, it seems plausible to me to say that it can also have a kind of cognitional being in a picture or in a name, even though such existence would depend on both the human subject and the pictorial or linguistic vehicle.



Jan Lievens, Robert Kerr, 1st Earl of Ancram, Scottish National Portrait Gallery

thing (and its form) can also enjoy an analogous existence in the name of the thing. In fact, I would say that the thing and its form cannot exist cognitively in human minds without the help of names as well as phantasms. A given name serves to specify a phantasm and to register the form that is present within it. The scholastic and Aristotelian theories of knowledge recognize that we need phantasms if we are to think, but I would add that we also need words, whether such words be publicly declared or spoken silently in our hearts. Such spoken words or names are indispensable in human understanding, and our appreciation of Sacred Scripture can be enhanced by recognizing this fact. I would also

say that paying more attention to spoken words would make the scholastic theory of knowledge more concrete and more convincing.

7. Words Contrasted with Pictures

I will develop this desired analysis by comparing words with pictures. Pictures are more tangible and more philosophically approachable than words, so they serve as a good starting point for our study, and the interplay between pictures and words is an extremely rich philosophical game preserve. Consider a thoughtful painting of some person or theme, such as the portrait of Robert Kerr, the first Earl of Ancram, by the Dutch painter Jan Lievens. Kerr had been a friend of King Charles I. On the execution of the king he went into exile in Holland. His portrait was painted by Jan Lievens, who depicted him as old and dignified but also wasted and impoverished. The painting “contains” Robert Kerr, but because it is so successful as a portrait it also “contains” his intelligibility.¹⁵ It captures his intelligibility, that which made and makes Robert Kerr what he is: not only his individuality, but also his humanity, his mind, his aristocracy, and his adversity, along with other things that define him. It contains what can be called his form or *eidos*, but I find it more helpful to use the word *intelligibility* instead.

But the portrait does more than contain the intelligibility of Robert Kerr (as well as the intelligibility of human being, man, dignity, poverty, and the like). It also pictorially embodies it. The portrait is like an instance of this intelligibility—a replica-instance, it is true, but still an instance. It is something like a copy of Robert Kerr: not another Robert Kerr, nor his son or his clone, but a picture of him. It is Robert Kerr again, pictured. It captures him the way pictures capture things, and it does so “outside the mind.” It seems intuitively obvious that the imaged Robert Kerr and his intelligibility are there “in” the picture that is hanging there on the wall. We are not tempted to say that the pictorial presence is only in our minds or only in our concepts.¹⁶

We turn now from pictures to names. The word or the name “Robert Kerr” does not embody Robert Kerr, nor does it embody his humanity or

¹⁵ We might contrast a portrait with a mug shot, which contains scarcely any intelligibility. It does not really say anything about the person it identifies (a good picture is like a predication). The mug-shot photographer does not have to think about his target when he does his work, but Jan Lievens needs to think about his, and he thinks as a portraitist.

¹⁶ Hobbes puts a different accent on these relationships. He says that a picture or statue does not resemble an object but only the artist’s phantasms: “These [statues and pictures] are also called images, not for the resemblance of any corporeal thing, but for the resemblance of some phantastical inhabitants of the brain of

dignity. It is not a copy or image of Robert Kerr as the picture is. It does not show how he looks. The word does, however, contain his intelligibility, and it contains *only* that. The word is more spiritual than the picture because it just contains the intelligibility; it does *not* embody it. The name positively subtracts the embodiment from the picture. But although the word is more spiritual, it is still material. It is a formulated sound or a set of marks. It has its existence in sound waves in the space between speakers or in scratches on paper. But there is in principle no similarity, no iconicity, between the word and the thing, and this very lack of imitation prevents the name from being another pictorial embodiment of thing it signifies. The name as such does not resemble the thing. The more refined spirituality of words also permits words to be combined by grammar into explicit statements and thus allows speech to be more flexible, precise, and declarative than images.

Words are radically different from pictures, but both words and pictures capture and carry the intelligibility of the things they represent. Comparing words with pictures allows us to appreciate more fully the objectivity of words, the fact that they are "out there" and not just in the mind, and yet it allows us to see the difference between names and images. We can appreciate the greater spirituality of words and the absence of embodiment in them. We can also see how words can be used to explain the meaning of a particular picture. Even the title of a picture is a kind of explanation, and a caption defines an image (as a word specifies a phantasm). Our words capture the intelligibility more precisely and explicitly than pictures do, which by themselves rather suggest than declare what they mean. Pictures call for words for their explanation, and words call for pictures for their embodiment.¹⁷

This is the magic of words. They capture and carry the intelligibilities of things and weave them syntactically into statements, arguments, narratives, and conversations. Our use of words enables us to become datives of manifestation and agents of truth, as we enter into our mother tongue, use our inherited language with greater or lesser proficiency, and thereby play our part in the distributed rationality that is the human conversation. We make things clear for one another and for ourselves.

My claim about the role of words does not contradict the scholastic understanding of knowledge, but it does complement it. It does so by

the maker." *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chapter 45, p. 448. See also p. 446, where images made by artists are said to be "representations of their own fancies."

¹⁷ We should also recall that words used to tell a story function something like pictures: a narrative remains verbal but it engenders a pictorial embodiment in the reader's imagination.

adding the verbal dimension to the activity of knowing. Scholastic philosophy insists on the role of phantasms. My approach adds words, which words can also be spoken silently and hence internalized.¹⁸ The interplay of pictures and words as public phenomena is paralleled by the interplay of phantasms and speaking that goes on “inside” us in the conversation of the soul with itself. This conversation is, after all, where the *Confessions* of St. Augustine take place, that is, where Augustine speaks to God, in the manner proposed to us biblically by the psalms. Augustine uses words as well as phantasms to do so, and he takes these words from Sacred Scripture. We do have concepts in our intellects, but they are more inseparably associated with words than the scholastics seem to have acknowledged.¹⁹

¹⁸ There are two kinds of imagined words or imagined speech: (1) we might imagine ourselves speaking with someone else, and (2) we might speak with ourselves silently and imaginatively, when, for example, we are trying to resolve a problem. The second kind is a form of real speaking. See Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 143–47. The issues of the “internal word” and the “intelligible species” are treated on pp. 286–303 of this book.

One might ask how Augustine in the *Confessions* uses these two kinds of internal speech as he addresses God. He does not simply imagine himself speaking with another person. Nor is he merely trying to figure out the solution to a problem, a procedure in which he would essentially be speaking with himself. Augustine is speaking to someone who, according to the faith of the Church, can be understood as truly present to us within our internal life, someone who is more deeply present to us than we are to ourselves. Augustine speaks to someone who hears him. Each person has a singular sense of the presence of God or of the divine; it is analogous to and related to the unique sense we each have of the presence of “myself.” See James G. Hart, *Who One Is: Book 2: Existenz and Transcendental Phenomenology*, *Phaenomenologica* 190 (Berlin: Springer, 2009), 538: “God as You is, in contrast to Others, not singled out from among others known in the third-person, as is our use of ‘you.’ . . . When I faithfully think of God of necessity God does not remain a third-person but uniquely second-person. God’s being You contrasts with all You’s who are one among many.” Such an internal sense of God is derived from the liturgy and public prayer in which God is addressed.

¹⁹ A few words about St. Anselm might serve as a complement to my remarks about Augustine. The phenomenon of pictures plays a strategic role in my argument. I use it as an analogy: the way things and their intelligibilities exist in pictures sheds light on the way they can exist in their names. I would like to draw a contrast between this argument and a step made by Anselm in chapter 2 of the *Proslogion*, where he makes use of pictures in his effort to show “That God truly exists.” Anselm uses pictures to bring out the contrast between something’s being in the mind and its being understood to exist: “For when a painter thinks beforehand (*praecogitat*) what he is going to make, he does have in his understanding (*habet quidem in intellectu*) what he has not yet made, but he does not yet understand it to be (*nondum intelligit esse*).” After he has done the painting, however, “he both

8. The Name of God

When we look at the portrait of Robert Kerr, we “see” him and his intelligibility, which his name registers and contains. What intelligibility do we grasp when we read the Sacred Scriptures? We can distinguish three dimensions in the things that are presented to us in the Bible. First, the words of Scripture simply inform us about a lot of things and events, some of them rather anecdotal (such as St. Paul’s shipwreck near Malta) and some of them monumental (such as Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac or the passage of the Jews through the Red Sea). Many words and many intelligibilities are used to describe such events and to convey various teachings to us. Many phenomena are recorded and stories told. But, second, all of these things and teachings are not just worldly occurrences; they are presented as God’s actions and teachings in the world, in Jewish history, and in the life of Jesus and the Church. They are presented as the works of God. But, third, the Scriptures do not stop with such deeds and teachings. The events, actions, and discourses in their turn go so far as to reveal the one who acts in them: they reveal something about God himself. They do not just imply God, as nature does; they reveal him as the one acting in the events that are narrated and as the one teaching what we are taught. The Scriptures even give us the name for God, and

has in his understanding what he has made and understands it to be” (*Proslogion*, 101, my translation).

Anselm starts with the planned picture in the painter’s intellect and moves to the actual picture, whereas my argument begins with the actual picture and with what the viewer—any viewer, not the painter only—recognizes in it. Also, Anselm deals with the difference between the *picture’s* being in the mind and its being among things, but I deal with a thing and its intelligibility as being in the picture. My usage is more phenomenological, his more conceptual.

In chapter 10 of the *Monologion* Anselm uses the example of the craftsman (*faber*) to speak about the status of the form that exists prior to things that are to be created: “What else is it [this antecedent form] than a certain spoken expression (*locutio*) of things within reason itself, as when a craftsman who is going to make something by means of his craft first says (*dicit*) this work within himself by means of a conception of the mind (*mentis conceptione*)?” (24). Anselm does not say that the craftsman just imagines what he is going to make; he says that he speaks it in his mind. The relation between speaking and conceiving—word and offspring—should be noted. Anselm also discusses externally spoken words and considers them far less important than “the natural words (*naturalia verba*)” of the mind: “Where these [the natural, internal words] exist, no other word is necessary for knowing the thing (*ad rem cognoscendam*); and where these cannot exist, no other one is useful (*utile*) for manifesting the thing (*ad rem ostendendam*)” (25). Anselm’s thoughts are obviously influenced by St. Augustine.

in giving us his name they also identify him and reveal his intelligibility to us, in a way and to a degree that is appropriate for our present time.²⁰

But I need to correct the way I have put it; I have been saying that the Scriptures reveal God's intelligibility to us, but I should say that *God* reveals himself to us. God is the authoritative speaker of the Scriptures, and in all their complexity and variety it is always God who manifests himself in the events and statements that they contain. He even tells Moses (and indirectly us) the name by which he should be identified.

In both the Old and New Testaments we learn the name of God in order to be able to say things about him and about what he has done, but that is not all; we learn his name in order to be able to address him. In the Old Covenant God reveals his name to Moses and the Jewish people, and in the New Covenant Jesus reveals the name of God—God the Father—to his disciples and to us. He does so not as a lawgiver or prophet but as the Eternal Son, not as the one chosen by God but as the one sent by him and from him. Christ speaks and acts with the authority and the

²⁰ There is no ordinary proper name—such as *Jupiter* or *Isis*—for God in the Bible. Such a proper name would connote an inappropriate familiarity and it would also suggest that its bearer was one of many gods. The name revealed to Moses in response to his question (Ex 3:13) is starkly singular and not one proper name among many. It transcends names and their meanings as its bearer transcends things and their definitions. It may signify the one who simply is, or the one that causes things to be, or the one that will be whatever he will, or the one who will be faithful. (All such meanings reflect and imply one another; God could not be truly faithful if he himself were subject to destiny.) The name revealed to Moses is more of an extreme description than a personal name; it may also be simply a refusal to give a name. As Pope Benedict XVI says, “God’s answer to Moses is thus at once a refusal and a pledge. He says of himself simply, ‘I am who I am’—he is without any qualification. This pledge is a name and a non-name at one and the same time” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 143).

Other Old Testament names for God, such as *Adonai*, *Elohim*, and *El*, are words that designate divinities but that become proper to God as he becomes understood as the only one to whom they can truly apply. When this occurs they cease to be common nouns. God becomes revealed as not simply the greatest of the gods but as the only one, and the sense of divinity is changed. The others are seen to be not gods at all, not just as a matter of fact but even as a possibility. What people had taken as a common noun was discovered to be particular, but not as one name among many. (When a Christian loses his faith, the word *God* loses its particularity of meaning for him and becomes a common noun again. It is also no longer used as a name to address someone.)

In the New Testament the name *Father* becomes paramount because of the way that Jesus speaks of God. His way of using this word is self-involving in such a manner that it leads Thomas the apostle to address the risen Christ as “My Lord and my God.” In the New Testament the name of Jesus acquires, in a derived way, the power and quality that had been proper to the name of God himself.

status of the God of the Old Covenant. In doing so he reveals the name and the intelligibility of the Father to bring us into the life that comes from the Father; the paradigmatic revelation of the name of God occurs in the prayer that Jesus gives to his disciples when they ask him to teach them to pray. He does so by his words, but also essentially by his actions and his death and resurrection.

We do not discover nor do we invent the name for God. We do not find God's name by investigating nature or history, nor do we devise it by our wit. We are biblically given his name, by himself and by his Son. In this way, we "find the right word" to use when we enter into the presence of God or speak with others about him. But if the right word for something captures the intelligibility of that being, can we claim that God's intelligibility is present to our minds? Does God himself somehow cognitively exist in us and do we understand what he is?

Such claims would be pretentious, not to say irreverent. The name of God is not like other names. It is not the word for one kind of being among others. It is the name for the source of things, which is beyond them all and before their beginning. It does not express the greatest or best thing we can conceive, but that than which nothing greater can be thought and that which is beyond our understanding. It does not point beyond intelligibility but to an intelligibility that we can only darkly apprehend; it gives a new sense to what we mean by intelligibility.

This name is not an indefinite symbol. It is extremely specific and even indexical. The name of God is the most proper of all names; it cannot be shared by anyone else, even though it is shared in God's own life by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It signifies the Creator of all the things that are and the Savior who has spoken to us and thereby raised our speech into a new dimension and made it possible for us to respond to him. God has entered into our discourse as he has entered our world, and he has done so through speech and writing. The fact that there is a biblical text enables and allows us to use the name of God. This biblical text, furthermore, does not merely give us the name by itself; it also tells us what the bearer of that name has done and so tells us something of what he is. It embeds this word into his actions and teachings in the Old Covenant, and it tells us about his actions and teachings as he became part of his creation in the person of his Son. The text informs us about things that happened in our world and it presents them as the actions of God. In doing so it brings out something like the "properties" of God and it also shows how people should—and how they should not—respond to him. The name is not a mere encryption but part of a narrative and a form of address. It thereby gives us a glimpse of an understanding and opens the possibilities of faith.

Our minds and our souls are changed by this word and we exist differently because of it. If we receive this name in faith, we become capable of living in response to the One it signifies and addresses. Since an understanding can provide an opening for action, the life of the Church and the lives of her saints can be seen as attempts to manifest the meaning of the name of God. Christian language is internal to a way of life, and to know the idiom of this language is to know the idiom of this way of life.²¹ We are enabled to live with God and to anticipate seeing him in his kingdom, and these possibilities have been opened to us, rational animals that we are, through the words of Scripture and the names that Scripture gives us.

9. Allowing Words to Do Their Work

Words capture the intelligibility of things, and if they are proper names they also grasp particular things themselves in their intelligibility. If this is so, then the very words exercise a power on those who hear and use them. Just having the words exist around us, just hearing them and speaking them, and even just bringing them to mind in silent speech and in the listening associated with internal discourse, is to have the things they signify somehow present to us and in us. The words do the work. What we need to do is to let them sink into us and shape our minds. Even if we do not understand them fully, and even if we do not yet assent to them, they are there exercising their effect. Words can work on us even if what they signify is still only obscure to us. Even as vague and enigmatic, the things and their intelligibilities are fully there, in their entirety, to exercise their logical implication. They have their fields of force. In the case of the Sacred Scriptures, we need to let the words work on us and let them take possession of our minds, which is equivalent to letting the

²¹ This sentence is an adaptation of one written by Donald W. Livingston in *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 140: "Moral language is internal to a way of life, and to know the idiom of a moral language is to know the idiom of a way of life." In my text I state that understanding can provide an opening for action. It does so when the thing understood is the kind of thing that offers a possibility of acting. There are some understandings that reach beyond action. In the outermost reaches of theoretic philosophy, we can come to know things that cannot be affected by what we do; we cannot really do anything about the principle of noncontradiction, for example, or about the ultimate laws of nature, or about the principles of being. We can only contemplate such things, we cannot *do* anything in regard to them. Christian faith changes the way we are related to ultimates, because it says that our understanding of the primary principles of things (the truths about God), besides being a contemplative activity, also calls us to act in response to them. We can strive to obey the will of God or we can turn away from it.

understood presence of God become more and more vivid to us. The words of the gospel, with God as their author, have their own way of doing what they do. They have their own insistence.²² Unbelief can be seen not just as a denial of what these words say, but as a refusal to let them enter into us.

Of course, as the Scriptures themselves repeatedly remind us, words alone are never enough. Because of what they express in the Scriptures, they will not have been truly accepted if they have not flowed over into responsive action. Hearing must lead to faith and faith must express itself in hope and in charity. Such responses, however, are themselves given their form through the words that have made them possible. There cannot be hope and charity without faith, nor can there be faith without receptive hearing. Perhaps we are so concerned about not falling into a merely verbal faith that we underestimate the effect that the words themselves can have.

10. The Critical Project

Since these words are human things, however, they can be examined by human sciences, and so before concluding I would like to say a word about critical methods in biblical studies. In the foreword to his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI says, "The historical-critical method—specifically because of the intrinsic nature of theology and faith—is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work. For it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about historical events." And he goes on to say, "Faith must expose itself to the historical method."²³ In the

²² It is true that we might resist accepting the words of Scripture; some people might go beyond denying them and may try to eradicate them as a bodily verbal presence. We might also try to resist the insistence of words in other domains, as in science or history or in regard to a story that someone else is telling us. There again we would enter into a curious kind of divided thinking: something is presented for our consideration and we voluntarily turn away from the evidencing of the things in question. We don't want things to be that way and we don't want them to be said that way. The topic in question might deal simply with a minor issue and our reluctance to face it may have little impact on us and other people. The issue at stake in the words of Holy Writ is more substantial, however, since these words present us with the name of God, and so both the insistence of the words and our acceptance or refusal of them would have a unique and definitive character.

²³ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, xv. Benedict emphasizes the importance of reading the Bible as a whole, which allows one part to shed light on another. The various parts of the Scriptures are intricately interwoven. The injunction to read the Bible as a whole is not a scientific, historical principle. It is related to the understanding of God as author of the Scriptures.

exegesis of the past century and a half, we have seen the development of historical criticism, source criticism, and form criticism. These scholarly efforts have helped us understand the Scriptures, and they are legitimate because of the mystery of the Incarnation. God became man in history, and so his human presence must be historically visible. His historical presence in the new dispensation is reflected in Old Testament, which anticipated the Incarnation, as God chose a particular people and became present to them and to the nations as Savior in the world.

Furthermore, the human authors of the Sacred Scriptures were writers whose intentions we may be able to determine by appropriate methods. Authorial intent leaves clues in the text, and so does the work of scribes, editors, and publishers. If, for example, the stories of Jonah or of Esther were deliberately composed as stories and not as historical recordings, and if we had at first read them as historical narratives, it would be good for us to learn what their human authors wanted them to be. This sort of form criticism can help and not threaten us in our reading of the Scriptures. The scriptural writers announce God's presence, and a clearer understanding of what they intended to say can only help us to better receive the Word of God.

But there is one aspect of these scientific procedures that I would criticize, and it is the word *criticism*. I would offer a critique of criticism. Why not just call these activities something like historical investigations (instead of historical criticism), source inquiries (instead of source criticism), and form studies (instead of form criticism)?²⁴ The term *criticism* has a Kantian overtone and it recalls the *Critique of Judgment* or the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the Kantian project, everything, even reason itself, has to be brought before the tribunal (the *Gerichtshof*) of reason. Philosophic reason sits there as judge and carries out its critical judgments "in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws."²⁵ Even religion must be evaluated within the bounds of reason alone. Religion has to present its credentials, its permits to be believed. Who or what is philosophic reason to judge things in this way? What kind of sovereignty does it claim? In this Kantian project, philosophy does not receive and contemplate things, it does not wonder at and clarify what is there, it does not merely distinguish things one from another, nor, in the case of Christian faith, does it simply contrast revelation with other forms of manifestation; instead, it claims that it can determine what really is there, and it claims it can do so on its own terms, the terms of pure reason, not on the terms

²⁴ The term *Formgeschichte* is less offensive.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 9, Preface to the First Edition, A xii.

of what is being presented for recognition, not in terms of the being of things. Critical reason claims that it is able to administer the acid test that will determine the truth of things.²⁶ The evidentiary role of prephilosophical reason is taken over by philosophy. In this project, philosophy governs and judges; this is the Enlightenment, not the perennial philosophy. We need to deconstruct the constructivist philosophy and let things be what they are and show up for what they are, including the things of revealed faith. We need to restore and save the phenomena, including the manifestations given in faith.

The New Testament declares to its readers that the God who created the world and who guides the people he has chosen has become present within the world and among that people as the man Jesus of Nazareth. This revelation occurs in what the New Testament says about Jesus, in what it says he said and did, and in the way it describes people's reactions to him. Some people, such as the apostles and disciples, are described as recognizing the man Jesus as somehow the presence of God himself; others are described as outraged by his claims of affiliation with the God he calls his Father and by the actions he performs with an authority that seems to be that of God himself. In the New Testament, God is presented not only as Creator and providential power but as becoming part of his creation and his people as the Savior of men. This revelation does not just tell us about a particular divine accomplishment; it also deepens our understanding of what God is. It shows that God's transcendence is so intense that he could become part of his creation without diminishing his divinity.²⁷

Or perhaps, instead of saying that it deepens our understanding of God, we should say that it makes more clear to us the unknowability of the God who is so revealed; we know in a new way how God exceeds our understanding. The God who creates the world is beyond our comprehension because of his power and eternity and his difference from

²⁶ It is not the task of philosophy to determine "what really is there." That is the task of prephilosophical reason, the reason that brings things to light and verifies them in keeping with the manner of manifestation proper to those things. Philosophy can assist such prephilosophical intelligence by clarifying what is going on, but it does not replace it. In particular, religious thinking has its own manner of bringing things to light.

²⁷ See N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 712: "The challenge comes down to a much narrower point, not simply to do with worldviews in general, or with 'the supernatural' in particular, but with the direct question of death and life, of the world of space, time and matter and its relation to whatever being there may be for whom the word 'god,' or even 'God,' might be appropriate. Here there is, of course, no neutrality. Any who pretend to it are merely showing that they have not understood the question."

things created, which give us only the faintest glimpse of his being. The God who becomes incarnate and redeems us through his suffering and death on the cross is beyond our comprehension because of his unimaginable mercy and love. We might come to an appreciation of God's power through the spectacle of his creation, once we realize that the whole of things cannot account for itself, but who could have anticipated that God himself would save us and would set things right in this way? We might have expected that God might save us through a man, but not that he would redeem us as a man and by descending to this ultimate humility of service. Such redemptive action could not have been anticipated by us, but once it was accomplished its perfection and suitability become evident. What more glorious way could have been conceived for the victory of God over the death and disorder of sin? What more internal way of healing could have been devised? What implications does it have for the way we understand ourselves and conduct our lives? This action of God as an agent within the world deepens the Old Testament demand for a decisive response in faith, a response different from the dialectical inquisition to which religious myths and legends give rise. It calls for theology and not just philosophy.²⁸

God's act of redemption discloses his love for us, and it also reveals the ingenious benevolence that has been at work from the beginning in the being of things. It reveals in addition the kind of generosity that exists between the Father, Son, and Spirit: it reveals something of the life within God himself.²⁹ When Christ says, "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30) and "The Father is in me and I am in the Father" (Jn 10:38), he speaks both as the eternal Son and as the man Jesus.

This action of God is presented in the Scriptures and epitomized in the creed. Is this action somehow visible to historical method? It depends on what historical inquiry is supposed to discover. History does not just describe bodies in motion. It attempts to recover the intentions and understandings of the people who made the history. It also attempts to recover the understandings of those who recorded it (to the extent that the historian is investigating a text and not things just left behind by the people in question).³⁰ What did Jesus understand himself to be doing,

²⁸ See Erik Peterson, "Was ist Theologie?" in *Theologische Traktate* (Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1951), 14–27. Peterson says, "There is theology only in Christianity and only under the precondition that the incarnate Word has spoken about God" (27).

²⁹ The primary exegesis of God's action in the world is given in the teachings and especially the parables of Jesus.

³⁰ What is the difference between written texts (*scripta*) and things just left behind (whether *facta*, such as tools, pots, and shelters, or *relicta*, such as bones and wastes)?

what did his interlocutors take him to be doing and saying, and what did the authors of the New Testament believe him to have done? The historian is obliged to present such intentions and understandings, whether he agrees with them or not.³¹ He may decide to work independently of the creed of the Church, but he cannot define his project as an *alternative* to the creed without becoming something other than a historian himself and thereby composing a creed or recapitulation of his own.

Earlier we claimed that the Church's reading of Scripture involves remembrance and that all forms of reading engage memory. What sort of remembering is proper to the historian's attempt to recover the historical Jesus? The danger involved in a purely historical approach is that one may be inclined to think first that Scripture trumps Tradition and second that history trumps Scripture.

11. Conclusion

The issue in the critical project is philosophical and theological, not just historical. The historical and linguistic investigation of the Bible need not neutralize the words of Scripture and render them powerless. Our historical studies of the New Testament need not deconstruct the person of Christ and turn us into modern analogues of the people at Nazareth, who, when Jesus returned to them, took offense at him and said that he is just one of us, nothing more (Mt 13:54–58, Mk 6:2–3). Because God became man, the words of Scripture can be understood as both human speech and the word of God. In both human reason and Christian faith, words are the element in which we live. They are charged with intellectual energy and make possible the kind of life that defines us in our humanity. In the Scriptures and the faith of the Church words enable us, through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, to become affiliated into the life of God himself.

³¹ Wright, discussing the Resurrection in St. John's Gospel and the role of the historian, says: "John intends the narratives to be understood realistically and literally. Of course, he also intends that all kinds of echoes and resonances be heard within them; he always does; but these remain echoes and resonances *set off by a literal description of a concrete set of events*. This is not to say, of course, that we as historians can yet pronounce on the likelihood or otherwise of such events as having taken place. It is simply to insist that, precisely as historians, in this case readers of ancient texts, we are bound to conclude that this is how John intends us to understand them. . . . The multiple meanings the stories have are multiplications of the basic point, and as with all multiplication you cannot start with zero. The writer believes that these things happened. The indications are that any sources he may have used believed it too." *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 675. Wright offers another comparison (681): "You only get overtones when you strike a fundamental."

The words of Scripture are part of the mystery of the Incarnation and not an afterthought. They are an analogue to the Eucharist, food for the intellect as the Eucharist is food for the soul, and both Scripture and the Eucharist find their place in the corporate community that is the Church. God became present in the world at a given time and place (there and then) and as a consequence he is present always here and now. The words of Scripture activate this presence and make it possible for us to believe in the risen Jesus even though we have not seen him. They enable us to find life in the word that is his name (Jn 20:28–31; 1:12).³² **N-V**

³² I wish to thank John C. McCarthy and Kevin White for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.