

THE INTERPENETRATION OF INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY AS A HERMENEUTIC FOR CATHOLIC EXEGESIS

∞: Joseph C. Atkinson ∞:

John Paul II Institute

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concepts of divine inspiration and inerrancy, to explore if they are causally connected and to determine the extent of their importance, if any, for the development of an adequate Catholic hermeneutic. Since the rise of modern rationalistic methodologies, the traditional Catholic teaching that Scripture is both divinely inspired and inerrant has been called into question both explicitly and implicitly.¹ This confusion is part of a broader “crisis in biblical interpretation,” as Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, has described it.²

At the heart of this hermeneutical crisis is the rejection or weakening of the traditional “incarnational” understanding of Scripture—namely, that the Word of sacred Scripture, like the hypostatic Christ, is at once fully human and fully

1 Alexa Suelzer indicates the range and effects of these attacks: “More than 250 years have elapsed since the inauguration of modern biblical research. For much of that time the Old Testament has been submitted to devastating attacks from every quarter. By their denial of the supernatural order, rationalism and deism made the Bible irrelevant as a communication of the Word of God to men; de-Christianized humanism reduced reading the Bible to an aesthetic experience; evolutionism considered all religions a deterministic development from primitive forms, allowing no place for the free intervention of God in history.” “Modern Old Testament Criticism,” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 604. These attacks against the supernatural dimension of Scripture arose from the anthropocentric turn which was effected during the Enlightenment period. Previously, authority was situated in an objectively received text, given with divine sanction. From the Enlightenment onward, authority would reside increasingly within the human intellect alone. Avery Dulles in his treatment of biblical hermeneutics rightly identifies the issue of authority as critical in the controversies over the nature of Scripture: “For many of our contemporaries, the term authority is a pejorative one, evoking suspicion and hostility. ... [The sacred writers] were witnessing to a divine revelation which they had received as a pure gift in trust for others ... to anyone who accepts this claim and belief, the testimony of the biblical witnesses shares, in some sense, in the authority of God himself.” “The Authority of Scripture: A Catholic Perspective,” in *Scripture in the Jewish and Christian Traditions: Authority, Interpretation, Relevance*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 14. Hence a conflict arises between the Scriptures and our own autonomous authority. David R. Law identifies several foundations for the present-day crisis in accepting the biblical witness: “the modern emphasis on autonomy,” “suspicion of the past,” and the “rise of historical scholarship.” *Inspiration* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 3–15.

2 See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

divine.³ The written Word, like the incarnate Lord, holds both dimensions—the human and the divine—in a necessary and dynamic relationship. In the modern context, particularly with its anthropocentric focus, this divine-human interplay increasingly has been downplayed or neglected.⁴ Modern critical methodologies focus exclusively on the human dimension of the biblical text while neglecting or rejecting the divine dimension, especially the essential issues such as the divine authorship of all parts of Scripture without limitation and its consequent freedom from error.⁵

Historically and theologically these three concepts—divine authorship, plenary inspiration, and inerrancy—have been critical to a proper Catholic exegesis of Scripture. Ultimately, our understanding of Scripture and its interpretation will have to come back to the incarnation of the Word of God. This paper will argue that, as with the incarnation, it is necessary to keep both the human and divine dimensions of Scripture in a healthy, fruitful tension. Only then can we avoid making interpretive errors and encounter the reality of the sacred text.

The Problems in Modern Exegesis

There is a wide consensus that fundamental problems exist in modern biblical exegesis, especially its reliance on diachronic analysis, which emphasizes almost exclusively the historical character and the cultural conditioning of the biblical text.⁶ It is important to note that these problems are being raised by those com-

3 The foundations for this affirmation are to be found in the prologue to John's gospel (John 1:1–18). As we will see below, the Catholic magisterium solemnly affirmed this strict parallel between the nature of Scriptures and the nature of Christ.

4 This can be seen by the general lack of interest in the concept of inspiration. As Paul Achtemeier notes: "It is surprising and puzzling that the discussion of the doctrine of inspiration, within the past two or three decades, has been notable more by its absence than its presence. It has been honored by being ignored in many circles." *The Inspiration of Scriptures: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 4.

5 See Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation*, 2: "The [critical] methodology itself seems to require such a radical approach: it cannot stand still when it scents the operation of man in sacred history. It must try to remove all the irrational residue and clarify everything. Faith itself is not a component of this method. Nor is God a factor to be dealt with in historical events." Ratzinger acknowledges that improvements have been made but he still urges a profound critique of the critical methods so that what is of value can be saved. See *Biblical Interpretation*, 5.

6 There are numerous works which provide a critical analysis of the state of higher critical methodologies. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 567–606; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), xxv–xlv; Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960); Issac M. Kikawadia and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986); Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961). See generally, Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: Pauline, 1993); Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation*.

mitted to the use of these methods in their own exegetical work.⁷ As a consequence, other methods based on a synchronic approach to the text and which take account of rhetoric, the reality of symbolic and typological thought, and the like—approaches once rejected by critical methodologies—have developed rapidly over the past few decades. Still there is little consensus as to how we can securely arrive at the truth in Scripture.

The struggle over the nature of the Scriptures and their authentic interpretation has not abated in the twenty years since Ratzinger's now classic Erasmus Lecture. At the heart of his concern was the need to challenge certain philosophical assumptions that underlie modern exegetical methodologies.⁸

The time seems to have arrived for a new and thorough reflection on exegetical method. ... What we *do* need is a critical look at the exegetical landscape we now have, so that we may return to the [biblical] text and distinguish between those hypotheses which are helpful and those which are not. ... Scientific exegesis must recognize the philosophic element present in a great number of its ground rules, and it must then reconsider the results which are based on these rules.⁹

7 For example, see Westermann: "Recent Pentateuchal research on the whole shows that one has to treat the classical criteria for source division with much greater caution and that without exception they have lost their certainty." *Genesis 1–11*, 576. Wenham notes: "Some of the most deeply rooted convictions of the critical consensus have been challenged in recent years. ... The striking thing about the current debate is that it emanates from within the heart of critical orthodoxy. ... There is now widespread recognition of the hypothetical character of the results of modern criticism." *Genesis 1–15*, xxxiv–xxxv.

8 Joseph A. Fitzmyer understands the depth of Ratzinger's critique: "Moreover, Cardinal Ratzinger does not find fault with the method only because of what some of its practitioners do with it, but maintains that 'its erroneous application is due to the defects of the method itself ... it contains such significant mistaken assumptions that a reexamination of it is now incumbent upon all who would affirm the perennial importance of God's written Word for the Church.'" *Scripture, the Soul of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 35. Ratzinger points to the problem of uncritical acceptance of hypothetical conclusions in the modern academy: "[Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann] believed they had at their disposal the perfect instrument for gaining a knowledge of history. ... Why, even today in large part, is this system of thought taken without question and applied? Since then, most of it has simply become an academic commonplace, which precedes individual analysis and appears to be legitimized almost automatically by application." *Biblical Interpretation*, 14.

9 Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation*, 21–22. It is important to note that Ratzinger calls for a return to the biblical text. Focus had shifted away from the text which, in some cases was seen as not being authoritative since the "canonized text" was considered only the historically and or culturally conditioned stage within an evolutionary process. Subtexts (previous formulations from competing or vanquished theological voices) were thought to be equally valid. Ratzinger's call remains relevant. Our present need is to recover once again the importance of the text as received canonically and as possessing definitive authority for the community of the Church.

This is a startlingly honest call for self-critique that few in the academic biblical establishment have been willing to make.¹⁰ It acknowledges the value of modern critical methodologies inasmuch as they are necessary to establish the human reality of the text. But at the same time, Ratzinger sees how some approaches have distorted the text precisely because of certain faulty underlying presuppositions.¹¹ Thus a critical evaluation of these methods is needed to affirm those methods and principles that truly establish the historical and human dimensions of the text and to identify those methodologies and presuppositions that are faulty and lead to distorted readings of the text.¹²

Looking back, we can see Ratzinger's Erasmus Lecture as a bold call to rescue historical critical methods from their own inherent weaknesses. According to Ratzinger, Scripture must be studied as not only a historical and literary text, but as a text that claims to reflect the divine Word. Modern exegesis, however, "completely relegated God to the incomprehensible, the otherworldly and the inexpressible in order to be able to treat the biblical text itself as an entirely worldly reality according to natural-scientific methods."¹³ But Scripture is the Word of God and is ultimately a communication from him. Thus, any approach that ignores or rejects this dimension inevitably starts from a place of distortion. Critical to the recovery of a proper hermeneutic, then, is the recovery of the divine horizon of Scripture.

For Ratzinger, properly constructed critical methods are necessary to secure the human dimension of the sacred text, but the human words need to be regarded as imbued with the Spirit of God and, as such, always simultaneously a divine Word. Only if a critical method coheres properly with the dual nature of Scripture will it enable us to encounter and explain the biblical text. If there is a disconnect between method and text, such an approach can only distort. It is the thesis of this paper that one can find in the body of Catholic teaching, the Church's magisterium, sound principles by which authentic exegesis can be carried out.

10 In today's academic atmosphere, it would be easy to mislabel such criticism as a form of obfuscation. See Fitzmyer's critique of Ratzinger's lecture in *Scripture, the Soul of Theology*, 38, n. 51.

11 "But today, certain forms of exegesis are appearing which can only be explained as symptoms of the disintegration of interpretation and hermeneutics. Materialist and feminist exegesis, whatever else may be said about them, do not even claim to be an understanding of the text itself in the manner in which it was originally intended." Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation*, 5.

12 "In order to arrive at a real solution, we must get beyond disputes over details and press on to the foundations. What we need might be called a criticism of criticism." Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation*, 6.

13 Ratzinger, *Biblical Interpretation*, 17.

Scripture's "Self-Consciousness" of its Nature

In his hermeneutics, Hans Gadamer has developed what can be described as a "perspectival" approach.¹⁴ That is, one can look at a reality from various viewpoints that may not initially correspond with each other but each of which provides an essential way of looking at the text. In this vein, I wish to propose three essential perspectives that come from Scripture itself and that are critical in arriving at an understanding of Scripture's "self-conscious" awareness of its own nature.

First, there is the witness to the divine encounter that is captured in the scriptural texts.¹⁵ The frequent appearance of phrases such as, "Thus says the Lord," "the Lord said," or "God said," demonstrate that the original biblical authors believed they were recording direct communications from God.¹⁶ The biblical texts then attest to the authors' belief that an external, objective Word of God was given and received within human history.¹⁷ This Word was not a human creation, but rather an authentic Word originating within God, communicated by God adequately through the instrumentality of human language to his people and received integrally by them. The primary activity and the initiative lay with God. The clear emphasis is on the objective Word received.

Second, the Scriptures witness to the permanent validity of this divine Word. Thus, while the text is necessarily conditioned by the culture in which it originates, at the same time it goes beyond those limiting factors. This is clearly enunciated during the prophetic period. Because of its apostasy, Israel was faced with imminent national destruction. In the face of this existential doom, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed a word of ultimate restoration. This Word, delivered from God, was to sustain Israel during its exile; in the midst of all destruction, this Word perdures and alone can be trusted. As Isaiah proclaimed: "The grass withers, the flower droops, but the Word of our God stands forever."¹⁸

Because the prophetic word enunciates the will of God and is his Word, it is the enduring norm by which history and individual lives will be judged. This perdurance of God's Word is revealed within the structure of salvation history, in which there is a progressive unfolding of the prophetic witness. The Word given is fulfilled generations later in vastly different cultures and circumstances—yet it is always the same Word. The revealed Word constitutes God's relationship with

14 See Brice Wachterhauser, 'Gadamer's Realism: The 'Belongingness' of Word and Reality,' in *Hermeneutics and Truth*, ed. B. Wachterhauser (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1994) 148–171.

15 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture translations are my own and are intended to reproduce the original Hebrew and Greek to the extent possible.

16 The expression "Thus says the Lord" is used 389 times; "the Lord said" (846); and "God said" (440).

17 For example, see 1 Thess. 2:13: "Receiving the Word of God through hearing us, you received not a word of men but, as it truly is, a Word of God."

18 Isa. 40:8.

creation and with history and it structures both history and creation.¹⁹ It is not merely descriptive but creative, a Word of power.²⁰

Jesus is reflecting traditional Jewish understanding of the revealed Word when he states that Scripture is “not able to be loosened (Greek: *luthēnai*)” which, in essence, means Scripture cannot be broken. All that is written (*graphē*) determines history and will be fulfilled.²¹ While any divine communication is given in terms of a specific cultural moment, it also possesses at the same time a quality that prevents it from being bound to that moment alone. Because of this “eternal” dimension to the Scripture, Jesus can state that “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that goes out of the mouth of God.”²² Thus, even the earliest strata of biblical revelation is considered to be of ever-present value, crossing over millennia of cultural changes.

The Word is always more than a recital of history. To see the Bible as only recorded history is to miss its ultimate purpose and to misconstrue the nature of the Scriptures, which is to enable our union with God. The Second Vatican Council’s *Dei Verbum* (1965) begins by stating: “Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God ... speaks to men as friends ... lives among them, so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself.”²³

The Word thus becomes the means by which an encounter with God is effected and by which we come into union with him. Paul realizes the relationship of the sacred word to the spiritual life, calling it “the sword of the Spirit,”²⁴ an essential element for our spiritual warfare. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ shows that the Word must form the foundation of every Christian’s life or one is lost.²⁵ The Letter to the Hebrews sees the Word as a living reality, sharper than a two-edged sword, that can pierce into the absolute depths of our being, revealing the truth.²⁶

19 The relationship of Word to creation is evident in Gen. 1, 2, where God’s Word structures creation. The relationship between Word and history is manifest in the New Testament’s presentation of Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, which were always oriented towards their teleological conclusion in him (see Luke 24:27, 44). Thus history is yet determined by the Word of God: “Thus shall my Word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty because it will do (achieve) that for which I delight and cause what I sent it for to thrive.” Isa. 55:11.

20 Compare Heb. 1:3.

21 See John 10:35.

22 Matt. 4:4.

23 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* [The Word of God], Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, (November 18, 1965), in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Bécharde (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 19–31. Hereafter abbreviated SD.

24 Eph. 6:17.

25 Matt. 7:24–27.

26 Heb. 4:12–13: “For the Word of God is living and active (effective) and sharper beyond all two-

Scripture clearly partakes of culturally constructed norms of language and expression, and of history; these parameters must always be respected and understood properly. However, they do not limit the activity of God but rather are the vehicles chosen by him to proclaim his truth for all time. The truth of the Scriptures is not “bound” by cultural conditions to its own frustration but instead is expressed adequately through them. While the Word is bound in history as to expression, history is caught up in the Word as to meaning.

The third point is that as Scripture reaches its fulfillment in Christ, it is revealed that the inscribed Word is intrinsically related to the person of God. Genesis 1 shows that creation is effected by God speaking his Word; later this same Word is spoken to the prophets, which they faithfully receive and announce to God’s people. In the prologue to the Gospel of John, there is a two-fold development. First, this Word spoken by God was always with him, and is, in fact, God, himself. Second, this same Word that had been spoken and which shares in the nature of the Creator has taken flesh and walks amongst us. “The Word became flesh and dwelt [*eskēnōsen*] amongst us.”²⁷ Jesus underscores this Word-Person complex when he states, “I am the way, and the truth and the life.”²⁸ Truth is normally understood as propositional truths that cohere with reality. But here, Jesus is saying that truth is a divine Person. This surely is a mystery that goes beyond our ordinary conceptual categories. In both John’s prologue and in this saying of Christ, Scripture is witnessing to an ontological bond between the written Word and the person of God. The Word once uttered in creation, now in the incarnation takes flesh and becomes a Person.

The “God-breathed” Scriptures

With the revelation of Christ, the Word can no longer be understood simply as something external to God. Whatever is the precise relationship, it is not extrinsic. This ontological bond between God and Word appears to be the foundation for 2 Timothy 3:16, which introduces a precise term to help us understand the God-Word relationship:

All Scripture is inspired by God [Gk.: *theopneustos*—literally, *God-breathed*] and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.

edged swords, penetrating as far as the division of the soul and the spirit, and also of the joints and marrow, and is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

27 John 1:1–3. The verb *eskēnōsen* is particularly evocative here because it literally means “to pitch one’s tent,” an allusion to the Tabernacle, the tent-like structure (*miškan*) where God abided in the midst of Israel. The Word takes flesh from Mary and pitches his tent in order to dwell amongst us.

28 John 14:6.

Two points need to be investigated to understand the full impact of this verse. First, there appears to be some ambiguity in translating the first three words of this text.²⁹ Paul Achtemeier rightly notes that it is possible to translate this phrase as either “all (or every) Scripture is God-breathed,” or as “every inspired Scripture.” The first means that all Scripture comes from God and is inspired, while the second makes a distinction between those Scriptures which are inspired by God and those which are not. Achtemeier concludes that “there is no sure way to determine” which way the translation should go. Others disagree strongly with this conclusion.³⁰

For example, Richard Smith lays out evidence that makes fairly clear what the natural reading of the text is. He notes that in the previous verse,³¹ Paul had referred to the sacred writings that Timothy had learned as a child, that is to the writings of the Old Testament corpus. In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul clearly refers again to these same writings.³² The “Scriptures” that Paul is talking about, then, are those that make up Judaism’s sacred corpus. Since there is no definite article in the Greek text, the phrase should be read “every Scripture.” And since the term “God-breathed” or “inspired,” is an adjectival form and parallels the adjective “useful,” and since “useful” is a predicate (the writings are useful), it would seem that “God-breathed” should also be treated as a predicate (the writings are God-breathed). This is virtually the same construction found in 1 Timothy 4:4 (“For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”) To translate this as “every good created thing is not to be rejected” is unacceptable because it opens the possibility that there were some things that were not created good. The translation here in 2 Timothy 3:16, therefore, should be “every Scripture is God-breathed.”³³

Achtemeier contends that “there is no sure way to determine whether the author of this verse wanted to stress that every Scripture is both inspired and useful for teaching ... or whether he wanted to stress that inspired Scripture is useful.”³⁴ But this posits a dual form of Scripture (particularly in reference to the Old Testament)—texts that are inspired by God and those that are not. This, however, does not cohere with the beliefs concerning the Old Testament within either the Judaism at the time or the early Christian community.

The second point to consider is the meaning of *theopneustos*, often translated as “inspired.” Rightly understood, this Greek word portrays the dynamic relation-

29 For one examination of this problem see Achtemeier, *Inspiration*, 106–108.

30 See Richard Smith, “Inspiration and Inerrancy,” in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 501–502; Edward Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 18–23.

31 2 Tim. 3:15.

32 *Graphē* is the New Testament shorthand for Israel’s sacred Scriptures. See Luke 4:21; John 2:22; 7:28, 42; 10:35; Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:8; 1 Tim. 5:18; James 2:23; 1 Pet. 2:6.

33 This seems to be the position of Pierre Grelot, *The Bible, Word of God: A Theological Introduction to the Study of Scripture* (New York: Desclée, 1968), 35, 49, 57.

34 Achtemeier, *Inspiration*, 107.

ship between God and the Scriptures. The word is composed of *theos*, meaning “God” and *pneō*, meaning “to breathe.” Literally, the word means “God-breathed.” This is closely linked to the Old Testament concept of prophecy where an objective Word of the Lord is received by a member of the community through the gift of prophecy.³⁵

Smith shows that this verbal adjective can be taken as either active (“breathing God,” that is, giving thoughts about him) or passive (“breathed by God, himself”). However, when this adjectival form is used with God elsewhere, it is normally passive and the four times it is used in pre-Christian literature, *theopneustos* is passive.³⁶ Smith concludes: “The passive meaning reflects the Jewish notion of the divine origin of Scripture, and the early native Greek-speaking interpreters of the passage unanimously interpreted the word in a passive sense. Scripture, then, is something that has been breathed by God—in other words, the very breath of God himself ... it bypasses consideration of any human causality.”³⁷

This text, then, gives us a fairly precise understanding of the God-Word relationship. However, it is an understanding that is often at odds with the Latin term “inspiration.” David Law points out that “the basic meaning of inspiration is the breathing in of the divine Spirit into a human being who, under the influence of the Spirit, then communicates God’s Word to his fellow human beings. These divinely inspired utterances were eventually consigned to written form.”³⁸

Philologically, “*in-spiration*” lays the emphasis on the divine breathe that enters into a human person who, then inspired, can write certain religious truths. But this is not, strictly speaking, the meaning of *theopneustos*. In fact, this anthropocentric emphasis tends to distance the written word from God. The stress of 2 Timothy 3:16 is that the writings are “breathed out” by God, thus coming from him, with the implication that they are then received by the person he designates. It is this divine origin that gives the writings their authority. In using the idea of breath (*pneustos*), the text links the sacred writings with the interiority of God.³⁹ It should be noted that while 2 Timothy 3:16 emphasizes the divine origin of the Word, it does not say, nor does it deny, anything about the human dimension of Scripture. This later insight will be the great contribution that the modern era will articulate, especially in the key paragraph 11 of *Dei Verbum*.

35 For example, Jeremiah opens his prophecy by saying: “And the Word of the Lord was to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you’” (Jer. 1:4–5). Clearly, the prophet is not claiming these words were merely his own personal thoughts about God but rather the content he had received from God.

36 Smith, *Inspiration*, 501–502.

37 Smith, *Inspiration*, 502.

38 Law, *Inspiration*, 49.

39 See 1 Thess. 2:13.

The Word of God and the Words of God

It is clear that the incarnation is critical for any adequate understanding of the nature of Scripture. This was noted by Pope John Paul II, who described the ontological link between the written Word and the Word incarnate this way: "It is true that putting God's words into writing, through the charism of scriptural inspiration, was the first step toward the incarnation of the Word of God." The Pope here invites us to imagine the forming of the first Hebrew Word of revelation and seeing that as the first step by which Christ assumes human flesh. In each, the Word is embodied in a specific manner; they are only different expressions of the same reality. The Pope underscores this by further referring to "the strict relationship uniting the inspired biblical texts with the mystery of the incarnation."⁴⁰

This understanding is reflected in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church's* teaching on the nature of Scripture: "Through all the words of sacred Scripture, God speaks only one single Word, his one utterance in whom he expresses himself completely." The *Catechism* explains with a reference to St. Augustine:

"You recall that one and the same Word of God extends throughout Scripture, that it is one and the same Utterance that resounds in the mouths of all the sacred writers, since he who was in the beginning God with God has no need of separate syllables; for he is not subject to time."⁴¹

In this Augustinian view, the many words uttered within time as Scripture are ontologically bound to the one eternal Word, Jesus Christ, and are an expression of him. From this premise, certain conclusions flow. As John Paul II stated: "Just as the substantial Word of God became like men in every respect except sin, so too the words of God, expressed in human languages, became like human language in every respect except error."⁴²

We should note, however, that this incarnational understanding conflicts with many of the methodologies and presuppositions of modern exegetical studies. In contemporary practice, we find an overriding conviction that only the human dimension of Scripture can be properly taken into account in exegetical research. When this presupposition is in force, we are left with a text that can only be seen as historically and culturally conditioned, a product of fallible human creators. While it is legitimate to study the texts this way, if the exegete does not move

40 Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 23, 1993), 6 (*SD*, 170–180, at 173–174).

41 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 102.

42 John Paul II, Address (April 23, 1993), 6 (*SD*, 173–174). John Paul notes that this phrasing is from Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and that it is quoted virtually verbatim by Vatican II in *Dei Verbum*.

beyond the human dimension to consider the divine, such an approach will result inevitably in distorting the text. Rudolf Bultmann is a classical example. He began with the presupposition that miracles cannot happen; thus, other ways had to be found to explain the miracles attributed to Jesus. By this presupposition, the historicity of the gospel accounts are thus jeopardized and the text becomes increasingly distanced from the reader.

Any method that brackets out the divine dimension of Scripture unwittingly effects a dichotomy between the human text and the divine Word who informs the text. This is, in effect, a kind of reverse monophysitism applied to the Scriptures—the divine nature of Scripture is denied, leaving it to possess only a human dimension which, of necessity, is vulnerable to the effects of our fallen state. This error has led the Church to argue for a proper christological understanding of the Scriptures. It is precisely the dynamic interplay between the interpenetrating divine and human aspects of the text that prevents error and allows the truth of the text to be appropriated in fully human terms.

The Mystery of Divine and Human Authorship

Modern critical approaches to Scripture are reflective of the larger cultural concerns of autonomy and human freedom that have developed steadily from the Enlightenment. This driving concern with human autonomy has led to an anthropocentric preoccupation in approaching the text. For many, it seems, it has become impossible to see how a writer can freely exercise his human capacities as an author if there is a controlling divine influence. To this way of thinking, to assert that God is the true origin (*auctor* or “author” in Latin) of Scripture, renders the human agent a passive instrument who contributed nothing. However, as Karl Rahner shows us, fear that the human element is diminished and human freedom abolished in the dual divine-human authorship is ill-conceived. In his study on inspiration, Rahner suggests that rather than diminishing human capacities, the divine presence enhances them:

Remembering the well-known analogy between the incarnation in the flesh and in the Word ... we may state that the free spontaneity of Christ's humanity was not lessened by the divine Person to whom this human nature belonged; not even though this humanity was first established in a supreme and unparalleled manner in the person of the *Logos* [Word] ... In a similar fashion the same thing happens in the case of the writers if they are authors ... and not just secretaries. They will then be authors no less, but even more so, than they would be in the natural case of human authorship. Inspiration does not restrain what is man's own, but frees it; it implies no act of unimaginable compromise,

but an application of the basic relationship between God and man.⁴³

Rather than pitting the divine against the human, Rahner sees how the two cooperate and how, through the union with the divine, the human becomes even more authentically human. Properly understood, divine inspiration requires a fully alive human agent. In this christological paradigm, one does not have to be afraid of a fully human contribution to Scripture nor deny the effect that the divine presence has either on the human agent or on the text.⁴⁴ In touching Scripture we are touching on the incarnation.⁴⁵ Hence, Vatican II makes the bold statement: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord.” This can only be true if the Scriptures have an ontological connection with the Lord.⁴⁶

43 Karl Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 2nd. rev. ed., *Quaestiones Disputatae* 1 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 14, n. 4. Cardinal Augustin Bea had made a similar proposal and is quoted by Rahner: “The instrumentality of the human originator has to be considered and interpreted in such a way that it should not only explain the literary special characteristics of the writings themselves, but also that in every accuracy and literalness these human originators are not only secretaries of God but real human authors. ... Its subordination to the divine ... makes human authorship all the more real and intensive,” in “Pio XII e le Scienze Bibliche” [Pius XII and the Biblical Sciences], in *Pio XII Pontificus Maximus Postridie Kalendas Martias*, 1876–1956 [Festschrift in Honor of Pope Pius XII on his 80th Birthday] (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanas, 1956), 71, quoted in Rahner, *Inspiration*, 16.

44 John Paul II comments: “It is in the intimate and inseparable union of these two aspects that Christ’s identity is to be found, in accordance with the classic formula of the Council of Chalcedon (451): ‘one person in two natures.’ ... The two natures, without any confusion whatsoever, but also without any possible separation, are the divine and the human.” *Novo Millennio Ineunte* [At the Beginning of the New Millennium], Apostolic Letter at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 (January 6, 2001), 21. In applying the Chalcedon formulae to biblical hermeneutics, we see a need to fully re-integrate the divine dimension so that the two natures are never separated.

45 *Dei Verbum*, 21 (SD, 28).

46 By contrast, Raymond Brown sees the incarnation paradigm in a different light. He writes: “There is a *kenōsis* involved in God’s committing his message to human words. It was not only in the career of Jesus that the divine has taken on the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7). If one discovers religious errors, one does not seek to explain them away; one recognizes that God is willing to work with human beings in all their limitations. ... Cardinal [Franz] König and others had pointed out the kinds of errors that do exist in Scripture.” *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 17, 19. The *kenōsis* that Paul speaks of in Phil. 2:7 is the preparation for the incarnation. An essential Catholic belief is that God prepared for this through the immaculate conception of Mary, so that Christ would receive a humanity that had not been tainted by sin. To save the world, the eternal Word does go through a *kenōsis*; but it is not Christ taking on a sinful humanity but rather a sinless one. In applying this to the Scriptures, the magisterium, as John Paul II pointed out, draws the parallel exactly. Just as Christ took flesh without sin, so too the Scriptures are God’s Word in human words but without error. If this parallel is true, then the question is: how does permitting an understanding of Scripture that contains error impact our understanding of the incarnation?

Magisterial teaching is a child of its own particular times. That is to say, the Church in her formal pronouncements is usually responding to specific critical issues that threaten the faith. Until the Enlightenment, the Christian world held fairly unanimous beliefs about the divine inspiration of Scripture and inerrancy. Consequently, there was little need to formally state these beliefs because these were commonly held doctrines; they all participated in the same cognitive pre-suppositions.⁴⁷ Even during the Reformation the issue was not the nature of the sacred text but how that text was to be interpreted. As James Burtchaell notes: “The Reformers and counter-Reformers were disputing whether all revealed truth was in Scripture alone, and whether it could be dependably interpreted by private or by official scrutiny. Despite a radical disagreement of these issues both groups persevered in receiving the Bible as a compendium of inerrant oracles dictated by the Spirit.”⁴⁸

The change in the cognitive landscape was due to the increasing influence of Enlightenment ideas, particularly those growing out of its anthropocentric orientation. The resultant “succession of empirical disciplines newly come of age,” including archaeology, geology, paleontology, and the development of literary criticism, all raised substantial challenges to traditional beliefs about the Scriptures.⁴⁹ These same principles began to inform critical exegetical models and often, as the Pontifical Biblical Commission noted, “these methods ... have shown themselves to be wedded to positions hostile to the Christian faith.”⁵⁰ As the divine authorship was being rejected, along with the ideas of inspiration and the truthfulness of the witness of Scripture, the magisterium began to issue official clarifications. These were meant to counter critics outside the Church who questioned traditional doctrines, but also were meant to address problematic theories on inspiration and inerrancy by theologians within the Church.

The Spirit, the Church, and the Truth

But what does it mean for the Church to make decisive interventions when theological problems arise? What is the Church’s role in determining truth?

47 “The rise of modern critical study broke the chain of continuity which had hitherto existed between the modern reader and his medieval and early Christian predecessors. ... The unity of the Bible was the fundamental premise upon which all were agreed.” G. W. H. Lampe, “The Reasonableness of Typology,” in *Essays on Typology*, G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe (London: SCM, 1957), 14. Bruce Vawter acknowledges that “it would be pointless to call into question that biblical inerrancy in a rather absolute form was a common persuasion from the beginning of Christian times, and from Jewish times before that. For both the Fathers and the rabbis generally, the ascription of any error to the Bible was unthinkable.” *Biblical Inspiration* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 132.

48 James T. Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration Since 1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969), 1–2.

49 Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 2.

50 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible*, Introd., Sect. A (SD, 246).

Interestingly, the Scriptures themselves witness to the Church's indispensable role in the discerning of truth. 1 Timothy 3:15 states that the Church is 'the pillar (*stylos*) and foundation (*hedraiōma*) of the truth.' What this means is fleshed out in the Council of Jerusalem,⁵¹ which, was called by the apostles to resolve a critical issue of faith—how is one saved. What is critical for us is to note their self-conscious understanding of the nature of their proceedings and their final conclusion.

They did not conceive themselves as an organization of men of faith who, through their good will and rational investigation, would reach a conclusion; if that had been the case, their determinations would, at best, be prudential and certainly refutable at later stages.

Instead, the Scriptures witness to a unique fact—that the Church from its inception understood that it was being led into all truth by the Holy Spirit⁵² and that through a charism given to the apostolic leadership, truth could be definitively known. During this first debate within the Church, there was an interplay between the human dimension (Scriptural study, argumentation, prayer) and the divine dimension that would guarantee that the Church would know the mind of the Holy Spirit. The Church understood itself as the organic Body of Christ with the capacity and vocation to discern binding truth because Christ was truly present and leading his Church. The Church does not make or create truth but discerns it. Certainly, the Church can grow in its understanding of any truth and articulate it in more profound ways. What it cannot do is overturn prior determinations of truth.⁵³ This is the fundamental meaning of Tradition.

Just as in the early Church there were various tensions over the nature of salvation, so too from the early 1800's there were radical challenges to the traditional understanding of Scripture. From the outside, these challenges were coming from rationalistic sciences and critical methodologies. Within the Church, however, there were also some theologians proposing different theories to effect a rapprochement between the new worldview and traditional dogma, often by rejecting some fundamental truth that the Church had already discerned.⁵⁴ This was a time of great tension and the Church was forced to respond magisterially to these dangers. The decrees and encyclicals of this period need to be read within this larger context.

We can sympathize with the situation of the popes and Church officials, given the virtual hegemony of rationalistic categories of thought in our own modern world. Many today have rejected the organic nature of the magisterium

51 See Acts 15.

52 See John 16:13.

53 Dogmatic truth is different from "prudential decisions" that must be made from time to time for the best interests (*bene esse*) of the Church. The latter do not touch on matters of faith and morals and are by nature reformable according to circumstance.

54 See Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 2.

and instead substitute a mechanical model in its place. This leads to a situation in which one selectively chooses from magisterial teaching those parts that support a particular theological opinion and ignore those parts that challenge it. Alternatively, one pits certain magisterial teachings against others to achieve support for specific theological positions. Such a mechanical understanding cannot account for the divine presence and guarantee which Christ, himself, gives to the Church. With the mechanistic model of the Church, our ability to know the truth with certainty is gravely diminished. The organic understanding of the Church, deeply rooted in the Pauline epistles, coheres more deeply with the nature of truth, and safeguards our ability to know the truth with certainty.

The Development of the Doctrine of Inspiration

It is clear that the last one hundred fifty years has seen a profound evolution in our understanding of the Scriptures. This does *not* mean that what was believed earlier was erroneous or rejected. In principle, growth in Christian doctrine conserves what has already been determined, allows for a continuing deeper grasp of the truth, and enables a more precise articulation of doctrine.⁵⁵ To oppose the “truth of the past” to the “truth of the present” comes from a confusion over the nature of truth and institutes a falsifying tyranny of the present moment.

One can perceive a theological trajectory in the Church’s understanding of Scripture. With each stage, the understanding of the human involvement in Scripture has become more secure. Initially, as in the christological debates, this security was gained primarily through the identification of theological errors. Later, once the theological ground had been cleared, positive constructions could be made that demonstrated the full interplay between the divine and human, without a diminution of either’s role. To properly understand the development of magisterial teaching, it is necessary to closely examine the surrounding context.

The decrees of the Council of Trent were written in response to the challenge of the Reformation. In emphasizing the absolute authority of the Word of God, the Reformers were not arguing over the nature of the sacred texts *per se*. Both sides accepted the Scriptures in terms of the commonly held opinion of that day—that they were inerrant divine oracles. Martin Luther wrote: “We may trust unconditionally only in the Word of God and not in the teachings of the [Church] Fathers; the teachers of the Church can err and have erred. Scripture never erred.”⁵⁶

55 See John Henry Newman, *An Essay On Development Of Christian Doctrine*, Chap. 5 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1989 [1845]), 169–206.

56 Paul Althaus citing Luther in *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 6 n. 12, cited by John D. Woodbridge, “Some Misconceptions of the Impact of the ‘Enlightenment’ on the Doctrine of Scripture,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 413, n. 50. There are some who dispute Luther’s high view of Scripture. However see John Montgomery, “Lessons from Luther on the Inerrancy of Holy Writ,” in *God’s Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1973), 67 where Montgomery also offers Adolf von Harnack’s testimony: “It happened that his

Likewise John Calvin called the Scriptures: “the inerring standard,” asserting that it was “free from every stain or defect,” and “the certain and unerring rule.”⁵⁷ In his commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16 (“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”), Calvin states: “We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God; because it has proceeded from him alone, and has nothing belonging to man mixed with it.”⁵⁸

If these ideas were novel or an attack on the faith of the Church, the magisterium would have had to respond to refute them. But Trent never mentioned the matter. On the other hand, Trent did establish that all the books found in the Catholic canon, including the so-called deuterocanonical books rejected by the Reformers as “apocrypha,” were indeed sacred Scripture. The Council underlined this by stating that God is author of all these books: “[The Synod] venerates ... all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both [testaments].” Trent also gave voice to the then-current understanding of inspiration: the Scriptures were “dictated, either by Christ’s own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost.”⁵⁹ While this gives expression to the immediacy of God’s participation in Scripture, it does not explicitly take up the issue of human agency. However, this realistic sense of the authorship of God will be used centuries later in formal definitions that establish Scripture as free from all error—precisely because God is author.⁶⁰

The other key point—and perhaps the most important one in that contemporaneous situation—was Trent’s insistence that there was an intrinsic relationship between the Word and the Church. The Scriptures not only had a divine origin but were also “preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.”⁶¹ Both the divine and the ecclesial dimensions of Scripture were necessary.

The reality of an authentic human dimension to the Scriptures was only discerned slowly. What proved difficult was to understand the interplay between human agency and divine inspiration. From the late sixteenth century, beginning with Leonhard Leys (also known as Lessius) onwards, theories were put forward

[Luther’s] church arrived at the most stringent doctrine of inspiration.” *God’s Inerrant Word*, 69, citing *Outlines of the History of Dogma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957 [1898]), 561–562.

57 The sources in Calvin (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:149; *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, 1:506; and *Commentary on the Psalms*, 5, 2), are cited by John H. Gerstner in “The View of the Bible Held by the Church: Calvin and the Westminster Divines,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 391.

58 John Calvin, *2 Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. Thomas Allan Smail, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

59 Council of Trent, *Decree Concerning Acceptance of the Canonical Scriptures and Apostolic Traditions* (April 8, 1546) (SD, 3).

60 Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* [The God of All Providence], Encyclical Letter on the Study of Scripture (November 18, 1893), 20 (SD, 37–61, at 54–55).

61 *Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures*, (SD, 3).

that saw inspiration primarily in the content of the Scripture and not the actual words.⁶²

Lessius and others suggested that not every word of Scripture had to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and formed by the Spirit in the writers' mind. Moreover, they suggested that not all scriptural truths and statements came from the Holy Spirit and that texts could be approved as Scripture after they had been written as long as there was no error in them.⁶³ While it was laudable that these theories sought to understand the human author as making a genuine contribution to the composition of Scripture, some of these early hypotheses ended up limiting the idea of inspiration such that the whole text was not inspired. The question was right but the formula was wrong. In attempting to enhance the human dimension, the divine aspect was diminished.

By the time of Vatican I (1869–1870), there were a number of theories focused on the meaning and extent of inspiration. Two in particular were dealt with by the Council.⁶⁴

Daniel von Haneberg in 1850 rejected plenary verbal inspiration—that is, the belief that God had inspired the actual words of the whole scriptural text, both Old and New Testaments. Instead, he suggested the Bible had three possible types of inspiration: *antecedent* (the passive human author received words directly from God); *concomitant* (God inspired the idea but the sacred author provided the words with God preventing him from making errors); and *consequent* (the sacred author writes the book without divine assistance and later the Church accords it canonical status). Haneberg's approach tended to divide Scripture into human and divinely controlled elements. It should be noted, however, that Haneberg assumes inerrancy as a mark of canonicity.

Another theory taken up by Vatican I is Johann Jans's "assistance theory," by which inspiration is understood as the divine assistance given to protect a written text from error.⁶⁵ This is a minimalist understanding of inspiration that limits the activity of God to assuring that the text contains no error. The actual wording of the text is primarily a human achievement, having little or no relation to the influence of God.

Vatican I, in its decree on revelation, intervened to respond to these and similar ideas:

62 See Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 88–120, esp. 98–99. In essence, God is responsible for the content which is inspired, whereas man is responsible for its expression, with the proviso that a specific divine assistance was given to make sure the human expression were apt. Hence, these theories were also called "concomitant" or "divine-assistance" theories of inspiration.

63 See the excellent analysis in Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 44–58.

64 Vawter, *Inspiration*, 70–71.

65 See Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 50–51.

These books the Church holds to be sacred and canonical not because she subsequently approved them by her authority after they had been composed by unaided human skill, nor simply because they contain revelation without error, but because, being written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author, and were as such committed to the Church.⁶⁶

The decree also affirms several key principles that provide the framework by which the human-divine agency question can be properly worked out. First, it assumes there are no errors in the text. This was not in dispute and did not need to be defined. It was simply the *sententia communis*—the commonly held position of the Church. Thus, the inerrancy of Scripture is simply mentioned in passing as an accepted reality. Second, the decree carefully delineates the dynamic relationship between the Church and the Scriptures. The Church cannot “make” a text inspired; this comes from God alone. The Church can only discern and acknowledge what is the Word of God. Implicitly, the decree formally acknowledges the substantial reality of both Church and Scripture in such a way that neither collapses before or is absorbed by the other. Vatican I, then, provides the necessary precision that will allow for a proper articulation of the Church-Word relationship at a later date. This decree opened the way to see that the Church and Scripture exist in a positive dialectical relationship, each informing the other. Third, the Scriptures have authority not because of some subsequent confirmation by the Church but precisely because God is author. Consequently, that which is not inspired and that which is not authored by God cannot be his Word, nor can it be part of the canon. The decree does not particularly help in securing the human dimension of Scripture but it does provide essential precisions that will later help in the articulation of the Church’s relationship to the Word.⁶⁷ Fourth, the decree affirms positively that inspiration resides in the books that were inspired, and not just the human writers.⁶⁸

Discerning the “Limits” of Inerrancy

Following Vatican I, questions emerged about the nature of inspiration. The problem was that a number of the proposed solutions tended in fact to limit inspiration or inerrancy. In 1870 Cardinal Johannes Baptist Franzelin, advanced a theory that tried to separate out divine formal matters of dogma from its human expression.

66 First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius* [The Son of God], Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (April 24, 1870), 2, 7 (SD, 14–18, at 16–17). As Vawter notes, “It is also quite clear that [Vatican I] intended to reject most firmly the opinions of Haneberg and Jan.” *Inspiration*, 70–71.

67 *Dei Verbum*, 10 (SD, 23), deals with this issue in terms of the magisterium, Tradition and Scripture and shows how the magisterium “is not above the Word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on.” This is the clearest articulation of the Church-Word relationship and is dependent on Vatican I’s earlier precision.

68 See Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 74.

The divine author was said to be responsible for dogmatic thought whereas the human author was responsible for the manner of expression.⁶⁹ Another approach was to limit inerrancy only to issues of faith and morals. Blessed John Henry Newman used the phrase “*obiter dicta*” to suggest that Scripture was composed of inspired religious, dogmatic teachings, but also of *obiter dicta* (other side issues) that were not authoritative. This formulation did not explicitly state that the *obiter dicta* could be erroneous. However, in his private correspondence, Newman wrote about his belief in partial inspiration that extended only to Scripture’s teachings on matters of faith and morals.⁷⁰ During this same period, François Lenormant and Salvatore Di Bartolo were examples of those explicitly proposing limited inspiration. However, Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Providentissimus Deus*, effectively put an end to these theories.

The immediate cause for *Providentissimus Deus* was the public defense of Alfred Loisy (who would later be excommunicated) by Maurice d’Hulst, the rector of the Institut Catholique de Paris. Leo also wanted to directly address the issues that “rationalists” (such as Loisy) had raised and which had seemingly undermined the reliability of the Scriptures. But the fuller intention of the encyclical was to encourage better scriptural studies in the Church and provide authoritative principles for the development of proper exegesis.⁷¹

Confronting the anthropocentric turn of the age and the development of rationalistic methodologies in science and in exegesis, Leo focused on the supernatural element of the Scriptures by establishing that God is truly the author of Scripture in a meaningful, concrete way, and not just as a vague force or influence.

For, by supernatural power, he so moved and impelled them to write ... that the things which he ordered, and those only, they, first, rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth. Otherwise, it could not be said that he was the author of the entire Scripture. ... “Therefore,” says St. Augustine, “since they wrote the things which he showed and uttered to them, it cannot be pretended that he is not the writer; for his members executed what their Head dictated.”⁷²

69 See Vawter, *Inspiration*, 72; Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 120.

70 See Burtchaell, *Catholic Theories*, 78. Newman’s original essay (“On the Inspiration of Scripture,” *The Nineteenth Century* 15:84 [February 1884] and his subsequent tract (“What is of Obligation for a Catholic to Believe concerning the Inspiration of the Canonical Scriptures” [May 1884]) are available online: <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/miscellaneous/scripture.html>.

71 See Jean Levie, *The Bible, Word of God in Words of Men* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1961), 61.

72 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 56).

We should note that here, perhaps for the first time in the Church's magisterium, there is an opening for the human-divine interplay active in Scripture where man is not merely passive. Clearly, the focus is still on the primary authorship of God who communicates to the writer who writes only what God wills; therefore what is written is from God. Yet it is also clear that there is genuine communication going on in which the writer understands rightly what is communicated, commits himself to faithfully reproducing what he has been given, and then uses appropriate words. The human will and capacities are clearly active in this process, as Leo describes it. The key is that the writers are never acting independently. They are part of an organic whole in which the Head is speaking to them, but in such a way that their personalities or wills are not annihilated.

In addressing the numerous theories circulating at that time, Leo rejected the idea of partial inspiration in the strictest terms:

But it is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred. ... For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost.⁷³

In this sweeping decree, Leo confirms, contrary to Jahn and Haneberg, that inspiration extends to all the parts of the Scripture that are canonical. This response also counters the weakness of Franzelin's proposal of limited inspiration for Leo seems to apply inspiration to the words of the sacred books. Each book "wholly and entirely" comes about at the "dictation of the Holy Spirit." Thus the Scriptures could not be divided into formal ideas and material words, as Franzelin had proposed. It would seem rather that inspiration touches the very words of Scripture—yet how that happens is not yet discerned.⁷⁴

Inspiration and Inerrancy: Their Intrinsic Relationship

To avoid possible contradictions and problems in the biblical texts, some theologians had urged that one could have an inspired text with some parts safeguarded from error (those pertaining to faith and morals) while other parts are not so protected from error. Leo rejects this suggestion as well, stating that only an integral vision of inspiration was acceptable.

⁷³ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 56).

⁷⁴ While the consequence of this teaching would seem to lead to verbal inspiration, at best it can only be said perhaps to be implicit. "In the production of a literary document thought and word are so intimately bound together that it seems artificial to separate the two. ... Consequently, inspiration extended not only to the biblical ideas but also to the words—not that God dictated the words to the writer, but the writers' selection of words was constantly under the directing and driving force of God's inspiration" Smith, "Inspiration and Inerrancy," 511.

So far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true.

This statement affirms that if any text is inspired it cannot err. Therefore, it is useless when faced with difficulties in the text to propose that somehow the text is fully inspired yet part of it has erred. As Leo presents his case, this is logically impossible. His reason again goes back to the nature of God. Inspiration means that God is producing the text, the whole text, such that it is truly his Word. For the text to be in error is to either deny that God inspired the text or to assert that God can speak that which is not true. Nor can biblical scholars get out of difficulties by positing that the human author has erred but not God. Again, this is illogical because the text ultimately is authored by God. There is a triple helix, as it were, of divine-human authorship, inspiration, and inerrancy, and this cannot be broken.

Leo established the inerrancy of Scripture in absolute terms. Bruce Vawter, who does not agree with the traditional doctrine of inerrancy,⁷⁵ candidly notes that “the Pope’s preoccupation throughout [the encyclical] was with the question of scriptural inerrancy. ... In Leo’s mind the sacred books were wholly inerrant (*ab omni omnino errore immunes*) precisely because of their divine authorship.”⁷⁶ Leo put it this way:

All the Fathers and Doctors agreed that the divine writings, as left by the hagiographers, are free from all error ... for they were unanimous in laying it down, that those writings, in their entirety and in all their parts were equally from the afflatus of Almighty God, and that God, speaking by the sacred writers, could not set down anything but what was true.⁷⁷

The encyclical establishes the doctrine of plenary inerrancy in several ways. First, by asserting that God really is the author of all the sacred texts. What is written by the human writers is also “set down by God” and therefore must be true. No wedge can be driven between the humanly written words and God’s Word. They are one and the same reality. “We cannot therefore say that it was these inspired instruments who, perchance, have fallen into error, and not the primary author. ...

75 See Vawter, *Inspiration*, 147, 151.

76 Vawter, *Inspiration*, 73.

77 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 21 (SD, 56).

Otherwise, it could not be said that he was the author of the entire Scripture. ... Such has always been the persuasion of the Fathers."⁷⁸

Thus, the text is both man's word and God's, with God being the primary Author or efficient cause. In essence, the human words coincide with God's Word and are not something other than of God. Given the interpenetration of human words with the divine Word, the intrinsic and inseparable relationship of inspiration to inerrancy, and the Church's teaching that all the canonically received Scriptures are wholly and completely inspired, Leo concludes: "It follows that those who maintain that an error is possible in any genuine passage of the sacred writings, either pervert the Catholic notion of inspiration, or make God the author of such error."⁷⁹

Given the grave crisis of biblical interpretation that was occurring in his day, Leo supplements his logical argumentation by invoking the ecclesial guarantee for what he is presenting. He states that his teaching on inspiration and inerrancy is nothing other than the ancient faith of the Church.

[The canonical books] are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost ... that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church, solemnly defined in the Councils of Florence and of Trent, and finally confirmed and more expressly formulated by the Council of the Vatican.⁸⁰

Benedict XV's 1920 encyclical, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, did not add anything new but reinforced the principles that *Providentissimus Deus* had laid down, confirming what "our predecessor of happy memory, Leo XIII, declared to be the ancient and traditional belief of the Church touching the absolute immunity of Scripture from error."

Benedict's expressed concern was that despite this ancient and traditional teaching, there were "even children of the Catholic Church" who rejected it.⁸¹ Accordingly, he used his encyclical to clarify some misappropriations of Leo's

78 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 56).

79 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 21 (SD, 56).

80 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 56).

81 Pope Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* [The Holy Spirit, the Comforter], Encyclical Letter Commemorating the Fifteenth Centenary of the Death of St. Jerome (September 15, 1920), 18 (SD, 81–111, at 87, 88).

words. Benedict also helped to further advance the Church's understanding of the extent of inspiration—affirming the proposal that inspiration extends “to every phrase—and, indeed, to every single word of Scripture.”⁸²

Pope Pius XII begins his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) by reiterating his allegiance to Leo's teaching and establishing *Providentissimus Deus* as foundational for Catholic exegesis—indeed it is “the supreme guide in biblical studies.” While this encyclical has subsequently been interpreted as a liberating break with the Church's traditional teaching, such a reading is not supported by Pius's text. Pius himself states that he is “ratifying and inculcating all that was wisely laid down by our predecessor [Leo].”⁸³

Divino Afflante Spiritu must instead be understood as a genuine development in exegetical approaches that is in unquestionable continuity with the teachings of *Providentissimus Deus*. Pius specifically reaffirmed the Church's teaching against continued attempts to restrict inerrancy to only matters of faith and morals. Pius concurs with Leo's rejection of any limits to the Bible's inspiration:

When subsequently some Catholic writers, in spite of this solemn definition of Catholic doctrine—by which such divine authority is claimed for the “entire books with all their parts” as to secure freedom from any error whatsoever—ventured to restrict the truth of sacred Scripture solely to matters of faith and morals, and to regard other matters, whether in the domain of physical science or history, as *obiter dicta* [incidental or collateral] and—as they contended—in no wise connected with faith ... Leo ... justly and rightly condemned these errors.⁸⁴

In his desire to demonstrate the truthfulness of Scripture, Pius urged “prudent use” of some newer approaches to scriptural interpretation for the express purpose of “explaining the sacred Scripture and in demonstrating and proving its immunity from all error.”⁸⁵ Most importantly, Pius gave formal approval to the study of literary forms, thus allowing the human dimension of the text to be fully explored.⁸⁶

82 Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 19 (SD, 88).

83 Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit], Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (September 30, 1943), 2 (SD, 115–139, at 88).

84 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1 (SD, 88).

85 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 38 (SD, 129).

86 “For the ancient peoples of the East, in order to express their ideas, did not always employ those forms or kinds of speech which we use today; but rather those used by the men of their times and countries.” Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 36 (SD, 128–129). As Levie points out, this study was not to be “a subjective process” but “an objective investigation of the intentions of the authors of times past.” *Bible, Word of God*, 167. Indeed, Pius intended this study to help

The justification for allowing this confident and rigorous investigation into the human dimension of the divine Word lies in the relationship of Scripture to the incarnation. Pius establishes a strict relationship between the Word inspired and the Word incarnate:

For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, “except sin,” so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error.⁸⁷

Pius’ deepening understanding of the human dimension of Scripture, to be gained through prudent study of its literary structures, and his emphasis on the christological structure of Scripture, represent enormous advances. It should be kept in mind that Pius articulated several precisions necessary to keep the divine-human relationship in balance. First, the Word of God is fully human (“like to men in all things”); there is no room for any docetic understanding of the Scripture.⁸⁸ Second, the words of Scripture are truly God’s words “expressed in human language.” The divine origin is clear. Finally, Pius affirmed that the words of Scripture are human in every way except error. In this analogy, to speak of error in Scripture would be comparable to speaking of sin in the incarnate Christ. Pius thus proposes a christological paradigm that makes possible a dynamic understanding of Scripture.⁸⁹

Vatican II and the Truth of Sacred Scripture

The Second Vatican Council’s *Dei Verbum* marked a major contribution to the development of the Church’s magisterial teaching on the nature of revelation. Yet, as in the case of Pius XII and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, some have sought to portray *Dei Verbum* as a break from the Church’s tradition. For example, Vawter maintains that the Council did its best to withdraw “from the traditional yet unofficial

us grasp the genuine dynamics and structures of human language: “When then such modes of expression are met within the sacred text, which, being meant for men, is couched in human language, justice demands that they be no more taxed with error than when they occur in the ordinary intercourse of daily life.” *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 39 (SD, 130).

87 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 37 (SD, 128).

88 See Levie, *Bible, Word of God*, 164.

89 Pius XII was not giving blanket approval to historical critical methods. As Levie notes about the encyclical, it is “very circumspect, as precise as it is balanced in its demarcation of the limits of each of the rules it lays down.” *Bible, Word of God*, 143. The same Pius was later to issue the encyclical, *Humani Generis* in which he “deplored a certain too free interpretation of the historical books of the Old Testament.” Although these books do not conform to contemporary historical methods, he said, they “do nevertheless pertain to history in a true sense.” *Humani Generis* [The Human Race], Encyclical Letter on Certain False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine (August 12, 1950), 38 (SD, 143).

designation of [Scripture] as inerrant.”⁹⁰ The Council, in his interpretation, limits inerrancy by teaching that the sacred writers were inspired but that “a certain truth only is ascribed to [them], and that only as it is the vehicle of a divine salvific intention.”⁹¹

This is typical of a certain reading of *Dei Verbum*'s crucial paragraph 11 that has gained hold in the years since the Council.⁹² This reading is opposed by the official reading of the text, which understands *Dei Verbum* to be in continuity with the Church's traditional teaching, only articulating that teaching positively, giving space for both the divine and human dimensions of the text. At the root of these two vying interpretations are very different presuppositions about the nature of Scripture, the dynamic human-divine relationship, and the role of the Church and Tradition in securing the truth.

To understand what the Council fathers intended in *Dei Verbum*, we need to study the stages in the document's evolution,⁹³ as well as the official determinations given by the Council's theological commission. It is also crucial that we not separate the document from the organic, continuous teaching of the Church, but rather see it as firmly rooted in that Tradition. Paying attention to these criteria prevents misunderstandings from taking root and directs us instead towards a richer appreciation of the authentic nature of the biblical text itself and its central salvific role in the Body of Christ, the Church. In turn, we will find in *Dei Verbum*'s christocentric emphasis the principles by which the modern biblical crisis can be addressed properly.

90 Vawter, *Inspiration*, 147

91 Vawter, *Inspiration*, 147. Elsewhere Vawter has written: “Biblical inerrancy’ or ‘infallibility’ in the fundamentalist sense ... is the product of the scientific age in the age of rationalism, a simplistic response to both. It is definitely not one of the authentic heritages of mainline Christianity.” “Creationism: Creative Misuse of the Bible,” in *Is God a Creationist?: The Religious Case against Creation-Science*, ed. Roland Mushat Frye (New York: Scribner, 1983), 76.

92 Vawter acknowledges what he calls “a certain tension” between the *Dei Verbum* and the “earlier pronouncements emanating from ecclesiastical authority.” *Inspiration*, 148. And Raymond E. Brown illustrates how modern exegetes separate what Jesus or Paul affirms from historical reality: “I do not believe that demons inhabit desert places or the upper air, as Jesus and Paul thought. ... Jesus and Paul were wrong on this point. They accepted the beliefs of their times about demons, but those beliefs were superstitious.” “The Myth of the Gospels Without Myth,” *St. Anthony Messenger* (May 1971): 47–48

93 “In accordance with the legitimate method of the interpretation of conciliar documents in general, here also the whole discussion in the Council and the Theological Commission must be used as sources for a better understanding.” Alois Grillmeier, “Chapter III: The Divine Inspiration and Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967–1969), 3:199–246, at 209.

In keeping with the nature of the Council, *Dei Verbum's* aim was not to proclaim any new doctrines but rather to enunciate authentic Catholic teaching in modern terms. Indeed, the Council fathers begin *Dei Verbum* by confirming the document's organic link to the magisterial patrimony, stating that they were "following in the footsteps of the Council of Trent and of the First Vatican Council."⁹⁴ This would not seem to suggest the Council intended any radical redefinition of the Church's understanding of Scripture.

In addressing inspiration, *Dei Verbum* begins with the epistemological question of the adequacy of language and its relationship to revelation. Again it affirms its continuity with the Tradition—quoting Vatican I to state that the purpose of revelation is to enable religious truth to be known "with solid certitude and with no trace of error."⁹⁵ Human language is thus capable of expressing the truth free from error. This is followed by a declaration that "sacred Scripture is the Word of God," which is further specified as "consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit."⁹⁶ This teaching, as we have seen, flows directly from Scripture itself, and is a simple reaffirmation of the Church's constant belief.

Given the turbulent climate of biblical studies in the decades prior to the Council, it was not surprising that no other topic was more greatly debated by the Council fathers than that of inspiration and inerrancy. As Ratzinger later commented, with the introduction of the first draft of *Dei Verbum* "the inevitable storm broke."⁹⁷ Both those seeking greater ecumenical openness and those seeking to change the Church's teaching on inerrancy fought against the acceptance of the traditional sounding first draft. The atmosphere was so tense that seven days after its introduction, Pope Paul VI removed the text from the Council and set up a commission to reformulate it.⁹⁸ The bishops as a whole were clearly divided as to what the Church should teach on this issue and it was evident that for some, the document on revelation was not merely to be "updated." Among the contentious issues involved were the material completeness and sufficiency of Scripture, the role of modern exegetical endeavors, Tradition, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the historicity of the Gospels.⁹⁹ The often heated debates led to another direct intervention by Paul VI asking for clarification of the latter three issues, including

94 *Dei Verbum*, 1 (SD, 19).

95 *Dei Verbum*, 6 (SD, 21; Latin: "firma certitudine et nullo admixto errore").

96 *Dei Verbum*, 9 (SD, 23).

97 Joseph Ratzinger, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Chapter II, The Transmission of Divine Revelation," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967–1969), 160.

98 Ratzinger, "Divine Revelation," 161.

99 Ratzinger, "Divine Revelation," 155–166.

inerrancy.¹⁰⁰ Only when the Council's Theological Commission gave a definitive interpretation and the wording of the draft was changed to prevent the notion of inerrancy from being restricted or limited, was the text of *Dei Verbum* finally approved.

The original draft of chapter 3 of *Dei Verbum* (paragraphs 11–13) was entitled “The Interpretation of Inerrancy” and it used traditional propositional language. In the conciliar spirit of *aggiornamento* (“bringing up to date”), the Council sought to articulate its doctrine in a positive fashion. Thus, negative formulations, such as “inerrancy,” were transformed into positive constructions, such as “truths of salvation.” Some Council fathers wanted to move beyond *aggiornamento* and argued that the document admit that Scripture, rather than being without error, actually spoke in a way that was wanting in truthfulness (*deficere a veritate*).¹⁰¹ Cardinal Franz König led those favoring this move toward a conciliar declaration of limited inerrancy. Others opposed the effort as a novelty that stood in opposition to all magisterial teaching on the subject.

To advance his argument, Cardinal König rose during the debates and cited three well-known exegetical problems: First, in Mark 2:26, Jesus states that David went into the House of the Lord and ate the bread there at the time when Abiathar was the High Priest. This appears to be in conflict with 1 Samuel 21, which dates the incident to the high priesthood of Ahimilech. Second, Matthew 27:9–10, attributes the prophecy concerning Judas's death to Jeremiah when it appears that the citation is actually from Zechariah 11:12–13. Finally, Cardinal König cited Daniel 1:1 that puts the conquest of Jerusalem in the third year of Jehoiakim, while Jeremiah puts it in the fourth year of his reign.¹⁰²

No Council father stood up to counter these assertions. Of course, these apparent discrepancies have long been recognized and possible solutions could have been proffered, including one from St. Augustine.¹⁰³ For instance, in Mark

100 Ratzinger, “Divine Revelation,” 164.

101 See Grillmeier, “Divine Inspiration,” 206.

102 *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* [Synodal Acts of the Ecumenical Council Vatican II], 32 vols. (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–), vol. 3, pt. 3, 275–276.

103 Augustine was well aware of the problem but, precisely because he believed Scripture to be inspired and God's Word, he believed there can be no error. Consequently he sought to resolve what appeared to be a discrepancy. He first noted that Jeremiah's name “is not contained in all the codices.” He personally could not accept this as a solution as too many codices did have the name. (This is a good example of textual criticism.) He then made the acute observation that if Matthew had made an error, it would surely have been pointed out to him by someone reading the text. Therefore the explanation must lie elsewhere. Augustine assumed therefore that God had a reason to have Matthew report this and remarked how “all the holy prophets, speaking in one spirit, continued in perfect unison with each other in their utterances.” This resonates somewhat with the idea of being able to refer to all the prophets by mentioning one

2:26 the preposition (*epi*) could mean “in the time of” and would thus only indicate that Abiathar was still alive at the time but was not necessarily the High Priest.¹⁰⁴ The attribution of the quote to Jeremiah in Matthew 27 can be seen as a device by which the name Jeremiah stands for the whole book of the prophets or, given that the quoted text from Matthew contains elements from both Zechariah and Jeremiah in it, only the greater prophet has been mentioned.¹⁰⁵ The apparent dating problem in Daniel might be resolved in a number of ways, including taking into account differences between the Babylonian and Israelite methods of reckoning time.¹⁰⁶

Archbishop Paul-Pierre Philippe strenuously objected to Cardinal König’s proposal, arguing that moving the Council in this direction would contradict the constant magisterial teaching of the Church. The original draft of *Dei Verbum* had stated in unambiguous language that the Scriptures were “absolutely immune from error.”¹⁰⁷ Given that the Vatican’s Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office

major one. *The Harmony of the Gospels*, Bk. 3, Chap. 7, 28–30, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]), 1:191–192.

104 See also the solution of William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 115–116 in which he cites Mark 12:26 (“have you not read in the book of Moses, concerning the bush”) where the reference is simply the place in the scrolls where reports of this incident can be found. The idea here is that Mark can use *epi* to mean the general place of something. In the passage challenged by Cardinal König, the idea would be that “in the era that Abiathar was still alive and had been High Priest sometime during that era.” In other words, while *epi* indicates a place or time, it has the sense of pointing in the more generalized direction of something.

105 See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., ed., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 399–400. This book notes that the prophecies of Zechariah are mentioned four times in the New Testament but the prophet’s name is never associated with them. This suggests that the solution may come from the fact that the prophets were collected together and Jeremiah, leading the corpus, became the way to refer to them all.

106 In Babylonian reckoning, the first regnant year counted only after the year of ascension to the throne. See Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1964), 314–317. It is interesting to note that D. J. Wiseman suggested several ways of solving this dating problem in Daniel: “If Daniel ... is here using the Babylonian system of dating (post-dating, allowing for a separate “accession” year) while Jeremiah (Jer. 25:49; 46:2) follows the usual Palestinian-Jewish antedating (which ignores “accession-years”), there is no discrepancy.” “Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel,” in *Some Historical Problems in the Book of Daniel*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (London: Tyndale, 1965), 17. These are not necessarily the only solutions but they do show ways in which difficulties can be addressed. This requires the texts be read in their Semitic context, with an understanding of biblical literary techniques, historical and linguist constructs, and cultural norms. Using only a Western lens, the text would naturally seem to contain “errors.”

107 The original draft reads: “Ex hac divinae Inspirationis extensione ad omnia, directe e necessario sequitur immunitas absoluta ab errore totius sacrae scripturae.” *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti*, vol.

had created this initial draft, it would seem likely that this language was intended to reflect the commonly held doctrine of the Church. But in pursuing the goal of *aggiornamento*, the Council wanted a new draft that would positively address the issues at hand. Thus began a lengthy and contentious amendment process.

In the end, the debate on inerrancy focused on the wording of a single phrase in paragraph 11. The third draft of the document stated that what was asserted by the human authors was also asserted by the Holy Spirit. At this stage, the draft still retained the word “inerrancy” as a title.¹⁰⁸ With the fourth draft, this term was dropped and the reality of inerrancy is positively described in the following phrase: “The whole books of Scripture with all of their parts teach firmly, faithfully, wholly and without error the saving truth [*veritatem salutarem*].”¹⁰⁹ However, it quickly became apparent that the expression *veritatem salutarem* was going to be problematic. If *veritatem* (truth) is modified by *salutarem* (saving), the text would imply that only texts concerned with faith and morals were inerrant. This, of course, was what Cardinal König and others had been advocating. Archbishop Philippe countered:

If it says the holy books “teach the saving truth [*veritatem salutarem*] without error,” it seems inerrancy is restricted to matters of faith and morals. ... Such a circumscription of the object of inerrancy is not possible. I think therefore that this formulation cannot be harmonized with the enduring doctrine of the magisterium of the Church. ... Therefore, it must not be said that the holy Scripture “teach” the saving truth without error because it then introduces a division amongst the assertions of the Scriptures themselves, as if they taught some truths which pertained to salvation without error, and then others not having such content and hence are not under inerrancy.¹¹⁰

I, pt. 3, 18. See also Grillmeier, “Divine Inspiration,” 199–200: “The text ... presented to the Council fathers in the first session was ... Chapter II, “De Scripturae Inspiratione, Inerrantia et Compositione Litteraria” [The Inspiration of Scripture, Inerrancy, and Literary Composition]. ... Thus the ‘absolute inerrancy’ of Scripture is stated here in very strong terms.”

108 See Vawter’s analysis, *Inspiration*, 146.

109 *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti*, vol. 4, pt. 1, 355.

110 *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti*, vol. 4, pt. 2, 979–980 (Lat.: “Si dicatur libros sacros ‘veritatem salutarem ... sine errore docere,’ videtur inerrantia restringi ad res fidei et morum ... talis circumscriptio obiecti inerrantiae admitti non potest. Censeo enim hæc dicta cum firma doctrina Magisterii Ecclesiae componi non posse. Igitur, non est dicendum libros sacros veritatem salutarem sine errore ‘docere,’ quia tunc discrimen insinuat inter ipsas Scripturæ assertiones, quasi aliæ veritates ad salutem pertinentes sine errore docerent, dum aliæ tale contentum non haberent ac proinde inerrantiae non subessent.”)

The *relators* from the Council's Theological Commission weighed in during the debates and clarified why the term *veritatem salutarem* was used in the fourth draft. They stated that it had been inserted in order to satisfy the requests from the Council fathers so that the effect of inspiration (*effectus inspirationis*), which presumably refers to inerrancy, would be expressed positively (*positive exprimeretur*), and that the object of inerrancy would be clearly circumscribed (*clare circumscriberetur*).¹¹¹ Certainly paragraph 11 begins positively by speaking of truth in affirmative terms (what the human writers affirm, God affirms), thus avoiding the earlier negative concept of "language without errors." It thus provided one way in which inerrancy could be applied to a text.¹¹²

It was evident, however, that *veritas salutaris* could be read as limiting inerrancy and this raised grave concerns. As Alois Grillmeier noted, the September 22, 1965 vote of the Council demonstrated that "the fathers feared this false interpretation" of the phrase.¹¹³ The fathers asked the Theological Commission to provide the meaning of the term *veritas salutaris*. The Commission replied: "The expression *salutaris* should in no way imply that Scripture is not, in its totality, inspired and the Word of God."¹¹⁴ Despite this precise explanation, a number of Council fathers were not satisfied that the inerrancy of Scripture was safeguarded. "A large number of fathers"¹¹⁵ suggested that the *salutaris* be deleted so that *truth* would not be restricted. "Their reasoning," Grillmeier records, "was that the expression 'truth of salvation' would, as against the documents of the teaching office, limit inerrancy to matters of faith and morals."¹¹⁶ Finally, Paul VI sent a letter to the president of the Theological Commission suggesting that the commission consider dropping

111 See *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti*, vol 4, pt. 1, 358; vol. 4, pt. 2, 979. Vatwer understands that the Council fathers wanted to "sharply circumscribe" inerrancy (*Inspiration*, 145), but he reads the Latin *clare* in a somewhat adversarial manner; the term is better translated "clearly circumscribe." This better coheres with *Dei Verbum* 11's beginning statements about biblical affirmations.

112 For instance, when a parable is spoken, the historical reality of the events depicted in the parable is not being asserted. What is being asserted is the contents of the parable (its teaching) and the historical fact that it was spoken.

113 Grillmeier, "Divine Inspiration," 211. "In its reply ... the Theological Commission had to go into the main difficulty: 'the truth of salvation' (*veritas salutaris*) restricts inerrancy to statements on faith and morals (*res fides et morum*) and is thus contrary to the documents of the [Church's] teaching office."

114 Grillmeier, "Divine Inspiration," 213. The problem is that some would separate inspiration from a guarantee of truthworthiness. Leo XIII went to the heart of that question: "So far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true." *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (*SD*, 55).

115 Grillmeier, "Divine Inspiration," 211.

116 Grillmeier, "Divine Inspiration," 211.

the phrase *truths of salvation* altogether.¹¹⁷ All of this textual history suggests that not only the Pope, but a significant number of the world's bishops, were concerned to preserve the organic continuity of the Church's teaching on scriptural inerrancy.

In the end, after much struggle, *veritem salutarem* was indeed dropped and in its place another phrase substituted—"the truth, which God wanted put into sacred writing for our salvation [*veritatem, quam Deus nostrae salutis causa litteris sacris consignari voluit*]." Vawter candidly observes, "There is no doubt that the change was papally instigated and was intended to pacify certain conservative reactions." He also acknowledges that the change was made because "a significant number of the fathers objected to the earlier formulation [*veritatem salutarem*] as a reversion to the old idea that inerrancy could be limited."¹¹⁸ With the new language, all but five Council fathers voted for the final draft. That suggests that virtually all of those who had been alarmed by the possibility that limited inerrancy might creep into the conciliar text were satisfied that the final language would preclude such a misinterpretation.

The last piece in the interpretive puzzle is the value of footnotes. The footnotes appended to paragraph 11 were used to ensure a proper interpretation of the text as a whole, and in particular, the phrase "that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation."¹¹⁹ Grillmeier notes: "Another way of avoiding a misunderstanding of *veritas salutaris* seemed to be the addition of a note in the official text. This was to give sources for the expression (such as Augustine and the Council of Trent), as well as to protect it against abuse and wrong interpretation by references to the encyclicals *Providentissimus Deus* and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*."

This is precisely what the notes to the final text of paragraph 11 hoped to do as well—as an examination of the references chosen demonstrates. The most important footnote, number 5, is attached to the section that deals with the truth-claims of Scripture. This section contains the critical phrase "truth which God wanted ... for the sake of salvation [*veritatem, quam Deus nostrae salutis causa*]."¹²⁰ There is a problem with the standard English translation of this section because the footnote number is placed mid-sentence just before "for the sake of salvation," seemingly implying that the references have nothing to do with that phrase. However, an

117 Grillmeier, "Divine Inspiration," 213. See also Vawter, *Inspiration*, 146.

118 Vawter, *Inspiration*, 146.

119 Grillmeier, "Divine Inspiration," 211.

120 The conciliar text refers to the standard collection of magisterial teachings, the *Enchiridion Biblicum: Documenti della Chiesa sulla Sacra Scrittura* [Documents of the Church Concerning Sacred Scripture], eds. Alfio Filippi and Erminio Lora, 2nd. ed. (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1993); hereafter abbreviated *EB*. The references are to *Providentissimus Deus*, 18, 20–21 (*EB* 121, 124, 126–127); and *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 3 (*EB* 539).

examination of the Latin text shows that the footnote is actually placed at the end of the sentence and thus covers all that the sentence affirms.

The fact is, the passages cited by *Dei Verbum* 11 contain the strongest and most authoritative language in the magisterium concerning the plenary inspiration of Scripture and the consequential plenary inerrancy which flows from that and makes a causal connection between the two. The footnotes refer to the following teachings:

It is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred.¹²¹

So far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true.¹²²

... that those writings, in their entirety and in all their parts were equally from the afflatus of Almighty God, and that God, speaking by the sacred writers, could not set down anything but what was true.¹²³

“It is absolutely wrong and forbidden either to narrow inspiration to certain passages of holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred ... as it is impossible that God himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and constant faith of the Church.”¹²⁴

The magisterium’s strongest articulation of plenary inspiration and inerrancy, *Providentissimus Deus* 20, is referenced twice in this footnote. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the footnotes were crafted to reassure the Council fathers that the Church’s traditional teaching on inerrancy was being preserved. As a final assurance, paragraph 11 ends with a quote from 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is divinely inspired.” What is unusual here is that the Council mentions specifically the “Greek text” of the Scripture, probably to point readers to the term *theopneustos*

121 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 55; EB 124).

122 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 55; EB 124).

123 Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 21 (SD, 56; EB 126–127).

124 Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 3; Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, 20 (SD, 117; EB 539).

(“God-breathed”) found uniquely in this text. This term, in all probability, holds the key to the proper interpretation of the nature of Scripture.

Given the Council’s desire to “update” the presentation of the Church’s doctrine, it is understandable that traditional language yielded to more positive formulations. At the same time, *Dei Verbum* presents a richer and more developed understanding of the nature of the truth-claims in Scripture, one that accounts for the interpenetrating authorial-divine affirmations. Despite the tensions and indeed diametrically opposed opinions in the Council as to the meaning and extent of inspiration and inerrancy, the idea of limited inerrancy or inspiration was not endorsed. To have done so, as a significant number of Council fathers understood, would have entailed rejecting the whole of the Catholic Tradition.¹²⁵ Indeed, given the history of the text that we have just reviewed, it is difficult to see how *Dei Verbum* could credibly be interpreted as advocating a position of limited inerrancy.¹²⁶

Christological Perspective

A final element of *Dei Verbum* that can help in resolving the modern crisis in biblical interpretation is its christological structure. Both the Council as a whole and *Dei Verbum* itself had a decidedly christological emphasis that acted as a kind of “hermeneutical control.” Beyond the numerous references to Christ as the Word, paragraph 13 of *Dei Verbum* draws the direct parallel made between the incarnation and Scripture: “For the words of God have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the eternal Father was in every way made like men.”

This christological dimension of the Word must always be accounted for in any exegetical encounter with the Word. In fact, it becomes the clue to unravel the modern exegetical crisis. In the first centuries, the Church had to unravel the “exegetical” crisis of the Word enfleshed. What was the true nature of Jesus Christ? Faithful to the written Word and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church was able to articulate what she had always experienced. Jesus is truly God and truly man,

125 Augustin Cardinal Bea, “Vatican II and the Truth of Sacred Scripture,” *Letter and Spirit*, 1 (2005): 173–178.

126 On this point, it must be said that there must be credible limits to which one can push the interpretation of a text—whether it be the Scriptures or conciliar documents. To go beyond this limit is no longer to be working with the text or to be bound by it, but rather to be controlled by something outside of the text. There must also be congruence between interpretation and the markers of objective reality—such as history, true literary forms, authoritative traditional understanding, and the coherence of the Scriptures as a whole. Otherwise we are caught in a world of deconstructionism, left with only a disintegrated text, rudderless, and wandering aimlessly. It is only as we seek the objectivity of truth that we are drawn up into reality that frees us from all false images and which allows us to enter into true communion with our fellow man, with our true selves, and finally with God.

yet without sin. If this is a true analogy, the exegetical crisis over the nature of the Word inscribed needs to be resolved in a similar manner.¹²⁷ This is eminently valid because the enfleshed Word and the inscribed (written) Word are intrinsically linked, as the prologue to John's gospel asserts.

Because the Word became flesh, it can be now posited that what one says of the Word inscribed should also be said of Christ. The Scriptures therefore, like the *Logos's* incarnated presence, are truly human and truly divine, yet without error. Thus, through the analogy of the Word incarnate and the Word inspired, it becomes possible to understand with greater depth St. Jerome's insight that knowledge of Scripture is knowledge of Christ.¹²⁸

127 Fitzmyer, among others, has reservations about applying this incarnational understanding to the Scriptures: "[Hans Urs von] Balthasar also calls Scripture 'the body of the *Logos*' and denies that this patristic idea, according to which both the Eucharist and Scripture mediate to the faithful the one incarnate *Logos*, is 'a merely arbitrary piece of allegorizing.' ... But what else is it? This is a good example of the scholarly *Schwärmerei* ["excessive or unwholesome sentiment"] to which those who advocate a spiritual exegesis of Scripture are led. It is not 'exegesis' at all; it is eisegesis." *Scripture, the Soul of Theology*, 91.

128 Jerome stated the point negatively: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ [*Ignoratio enim Scripturarum ignoratio Christi est*]." *Commentary on Isaiah 1:1*, Prol., quoted in *Dei Verbum*, 25 (SD, 30).