

HOLY SCRIPTURE AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

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I am delighted and honored to take part in this International Congress commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the dogmatic decree by Vatican II on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. The topic for this session calls for examination of those attributes of Holy Scripture which promote the principle of unity. Insofar as I can determine, and also discern in the text of *Dei Verbum*, there are three fundamental characteristics of Scripture that define its very nature and call for Christian unity. These are 1) the primacy, 2) the ecclesial character, and 3) the theological witness of Scripture. These basic characteristics, inseparably intertwined, forever beckon God's people to unity. However, Christian unity has never been uniformity but has always included plurality and diversity. In particular, biblical and historical studies of the past century have cast indisputable light on the amazing development and variety of forms in language, concepts, teachings, practices, patterns of order, and methods of interpretation associated with the biblical tradition in both Judaism and Christianity. Discussion about unity must therefore also engage the question of legitimate diversity. Today, in view of the plurality and long-established traditions of the various churches, talk of Christian unity can be realistic to the extent that allowable diversity is given its due. The question of how unity and plurality are to be properly managed is, of course, a related major theological and hermeneutical issue at the center both of the life of the Church and the ecumenical task itself.

The Primacy of Scripture

The term "primacy" as such does not occur in the text of *Dei Verbum*, probably out of caution for several reasons. In Roman Catholicism primacy has been associated with the office of the Pope. In Protestantism it has often served as a code word for the emphasis on *sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone as the singular standard for faith and life. In Orthodoxy primacy is accorded to the life of the Church in its fullness of clergy and laity. Perhaps the most immediate reason for the omission of the term is the distinct concern of *Dei Verbum* not to detract from the role of tradition and the authority of the Church in the interpretation of Scripture, issues of indispensable importance to both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

But *Dei Verbum* leaves no doubt about the normative status and priority of Scripture as divine revelation. Scripture makes manifest God's personal self-disclosure and the revelation of God's eternal will for the salvation of all (II.1, 6). The gospel is "the source of all saving truth and moral teaching" (II.7). Scripture is the "soul of sacred theology" and its "primary and perpetual foundation" (VI.24). The Church has always regarded the Scriptures as "the supreme rule of faith, and will ever do so" (VI.21). The primacy of the Bible is thus powerfully promulgated, yet with a significant qualification pertaining to tradition and the authority of the Church. Scripture is primary and supreme, but "together with sacred tradition" (VI.21, 24). The point is subtle but clear; it is not *sacred tradition* that is primary and supreme *together with Scripture*, but the other way around.¹ Primacy yes, exclusivity no, because Scripture and tradition belong together, issuing from the same reality of God's personal presence and saving activity. As we know, Vatican II took a bold step forward by its declaration in *Dei Verbum* that there is one source of revelation, "one sacred deposit of the Word of God" (II.20), made manifest through an integral unity

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture, the Soul of Theology* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994), pp. 79-80, interprets *Dei Verbum* more sharply on this point: "Scripture may be regarded as the *norma normans non normata*, the norm that norms (but is) not normed, because it is unmanipulable (*unverfuegbar*) by either the Tradition or the magisterium . . . Tradition, however, is the *norma normata* (the normed norm), i.e., it is normed by Scripture. Thus related to Tradition, Scripture is the source of the life of faith in the Christian community, and hence the wellspring of theology."

between Scripture and tradition. The decree was also careful to state that that sacred deposit was committed to the Church, and its interpretation entrusted “exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church” (II.10). These matters of course continue to be crucial topics in the ecumenical discussion.

The greatest boon to the spirit of Christian unity in the twentieth century has been the biblical renewal in the Roman Catholic Church, a renewal that has impacted all aspects of its life, theology, and ministries. The virtual “rediscovery” of the Bible in Roman Catholicism is, of course, both presupposed and advanced by Vatican II. It was long in preparation through the remarkable revival and flowering of Roman Catholic biblical studies in interaction with the prevailing Protestant biblical scholarship in the twentieth century.² Notwithstanding the tensions and problems involved, especially with regard to the proper use of the methods of biblical criticism, the overall benefit has been immense and timely. Timely in the sense that, just as the World Council of Churches as the chief ecumenical body and forum of innumerable churches seemed to be losing energy during the past decades,³ the Roman Catholic Church took up the task through bilateral dialogs and seems now to have become the strongest voice for Christian unity highlighted by the ecumenical efforts and world-wide witness of Pope John Paul II himself.⁴ The overall benefit is also immense in the sense that, in a world of rampant secularism and religious pluralism, those who labor to keep alive the hope of Christian unity, striving to overcome the utterly shameful and self-destructive Christian divisions, perform a most precious and holy service to Christ who calls us to unity. At the center of this unexpected ecumenical role of the Roman Catholic Church is in large measure the commitment to the principle of the primacy of the Bible. In other words, the inspirational force and ecumenical outreach of the Roman Catholic Church is connected to the acknowledgment and application of Holy Scripture for what Scripture truly is, the supreme record of God’s revelation and saving truth for the people of God. Future hope and effective initiatives toward unity will depend on the common obedience of all churches to the truth claims of Scripture as the revelation of God’s Word for the healing and unity of all humanity.

From the Orthodox side the teaching of *Dei Verbum* on the primacy of Scripture is welcome in almost its entirety. The divine origins and centrality of the Bible are clearly set forth. The bond between Scripture and tradition is affirmed. The teaching authority of the Church in service to and not above the Word of God, as *Dei Verbum* states (II.10), is properly invoked.⁵ About the only significant point of debate is the nature of the teaching authority of the Church, the one side locating it in the ministry of the Pope, the other side finding it in the ministry of the shared episcopate expressed through councils. This issue has been the subject of dispute for centuries between the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox.⁶ For the Orthodox, pertaining to Christian unity today, the great challenge is the question of biblical renewal. It is a paradox that, while Orthodox worship and theology are saturated with the language and verities of Scripture, the actual life of the Orthodox

² This story and its attendant controversies is told by many, including Joseph A. Fitzmeyer (see above, note 1) and Raymond E. Brown, especially in his *New Testament Essays* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968) and *Biblical Exegesis & Church Doctrine* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press 1985).

³ This is by no means to disparage the permanently valuable work of the World Council of Churches through its Faith & Order Conferences and its theological documents, above all *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1982), which has received the widest possible circulation among churches throughout the world. See also *Apostolic Faith Today* ed. Hans-Georg Link (Geneva: WCC, 1985) and *Confessing the One Faith* (Geneva: WCC, 1991).

⁴ A notable example is the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint (That They May Be One)* by which John Paul II invited all churches and theologians to offer constructive critiques of the Petrine ministry as an instrument of ecumenical unity.

⁵ The authoritative Orthodox perspective on these topics is found in numerous articles by Georges Florovsky collected in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View, Vol. One, The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont: Nordland Publishing Company, 1972).

⁶ A standard Orthodox statement is by Kallistos Timothy Ware, “Primacy, Collegiality, and the People of God,” in *Orthodoxy: Life and Freedom, Essays in Honour of Archbishop Iakovos*, ed. A. J. Philippou (Oxford: Studion Publications, 1973), pp. 116-29. See also the recent essays on the Petrine ministry by Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians in *Il ministero petrino: cattolici e ortodossi in dialogo*, ed. Walter Kasper (Rome: Citta Nuova, 2004).

people is not sufficiently stirred by the evangelical message of the Bible. Orthodox biblical studies for various reasons have been largely confined to the academic classroom, without significant impact either on contemporary Orthodox theology or the set ways of thought and action of most clergy and lay leaders.⁷ Thus the often formally invoked and celebrated witness of the Church Fathers regarding the centrality and primacy of the Bible is not adequately actualized at the level of the Church's ongoing life. The prophetic and evangelical message of Scripture seems to be unnecessarily overlaid by centuries of institutional aspects and habits that need to be renewed and enlivened by the power of God's living Word.⁸ I can say all these things, of course, because I am Orthodox and love Mother Church. My main point, however, is this: the gifts and contributions of Orthodoxy to the cause of Christian unity today and in the future, if this be taken truly in earnest for the sake of Christ, cannot be fully actualized without an authentic biblical renewal through the encouragement of biblical studies and the application of the principle of the primacy of Scripture to all levels and aspects of church life.

On the Protestant side the first thing to be said is a word of gratitude for steadfastly keeping the advocacy of the primacy of the Scriptures in the forefront. Polemics and prejudice ought not to diminish profound appreciation of the Reformation accents on grace, gospel, personal faith, personal obedience to God's Word, lay ministries, evangelism, and mission. And much remains to be learned from our Protestant brothers and sisters. With regard to Christian unity, however, things are very difficult. The sheer pluralism of Protestantism offers, at least in human terms, few hopes for substantive steps toward ecclesial unity. The paradox here is that the very churches that proclaim the primacy of the Bible are themselves chaotically divided, clinging to their own particular traditions. There can hardly be stronger evidence for the fact that the principle of the primacy of Scripture, however true and definitive, does not of itself suffice for Christian unity. Real unity cannot be achieved without reference to the question of the normative interpretation of Scripture, just as *Dei Verbum* teaches, that is, the whole issue of the role of Church and tradition in the formation, transmission, and interpretation of the Scriptures. Can more Protestants forthrightly redefine *sola Scriptura* no longer as a polemical slogan but for what it truly intends, namely, the primacy of the Scriptures, taught of old by the

⁷ Because of language barriers, it is hard to know what is exactly happening in various Orthodox countries. As far as Greece is concerned, in a candid and insightful article on Scripture and Orthodox Theology in the periodical *Theologia* 56 (3, 1985), pp. 504-18), Savas Agourides, the dean of Greek New Testament scholars, places Greek biblical studies in the context of the socio-political dynamics of modern Greece struggling toward modernization amidst cross-currents of Byzantine traditionalism and the Enlightenment. In this ambiguous and uncertain social context, according to Agourides, biblical scholarship retreated into safe academics, being intimidated by Byzantine traditionalism falsely claiming the spirit of the great Church Fathers, and failing to work toward a renewal among the Greek people by integrating Scripture and the Church's worship life. Further on Orthodox biblical studies and bibliography, see Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective* (Brookline: Holy Cross Press, 1997). Holy Cross Press is about to publish (Fall 2005) numerous conference papers (October 2003) on scriptural interpretation by Orthodox scholars through *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 47 (1-4, 2002, delayed issue) and in a separate volume under the title *Sacred Text and Interpretation: Perspectives in Orthodox Biblical Studies, Papers in Honor of Savas Agourides*, edited by the present writer.

⁸At the hierarchical level, Metropolitan Chrysostomos of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, offers a mild call for changes in the Church pertaining to the rejuvenation of lay ministries, marriage after ordination for deacons, and fasting adaptations in a piece "Ekklesia gerasmene?" ("An Aged Church?") appearing in *Episkepsis*, February 1, 1991, a bulletin of the Orthodox Center of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Geneva. However, given the overwhelming authority of tradition in the Orthodox consciousness, which includes heavy clericalism, the Metropolitan has to speak guardedly and justify even the activation of the laity as a legitimate and permissible task. At the popular level, over the last several decades, the strong and persistent, if also at times strident, call for renewal in the Orthodox Church by Eusebius Stephanou, a Greek Orthodox priest and former professor at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, who has been rather marginalized as a "protestantizer" (while critics offer little positively), has impacted the lives of relatively few North American Orthodox Christians, whereas otherwise Stephanou's has largely been a voice in the wilderness. Among his books are *Desolation and Restoration in the Orthodox Church* (Fort Wayne: Logos Ministries, 1977), *Pathway to Orthodox Renewal* (Fort Wayne: Logos Ministry, 1978), and *Sacramentalized But Not Evangelized* (Destin: St. Symeon the New Theologian Press, 2005).

Church Fathers and powerfully retrieved by the Reformers?⁹ Can more Protestants look to the classic tradition of the universal Church as a required reference for the theological interpretation of Scripture and a step toward Christian unity?¹⁰ Can more Protestants move toward a catholic understanding of the faith just as Catholics and Orthodox seek to move toward an evangelical understanding of the faith?¹¹ Only the positive answers to these and other such questions can gradually establish broad currents of shared theological thought and thus a wide communal consensus among the churches for substantive discussions and by God's grace significant progress toward unity.

The Ecclesial Character of Scripture

By "ecclesial" I mean communal, that is, issuing from the life of the Church, belonging to the Church, and thus both attesting to and promoting the well-being and unity of the Church. I have already mentioned the teaching of *Dei Verbum* regarding the single source of revelation, "the one sacred deposit of the Word of God (II.10), received, transmitted, and authoritatively interpreted in the living tradition of the Church. Here I wish to underline that the authority of Church and tradition, closely bonded with the authority of Scripture, is not merely an official and legal matter as one might suppose from the canonization of the Scriptures. The terms "ecclesial" and "canonical," although related, can be distinguished.¹² "Canon" and "canonical" were applied to the biblical writings in the third (Origen) and mainly the fourth century, long after the bulk of these documents had already attained the status of Holy Scripture in the Christian tradition. Even then the term "canonical" implied something intrinsically authentic and true, something fully to be trusted and followed as a standard of faith and life. To be sure episcopal decisions and decrees of councils played a role in the canonization process. Nevertheless, a legal understanding of the formation of the biblical canon, as might be insinuated by any kind of biblical or ecclesial fundamentalism, would be a distortion of the true nature of Scripture.

Far from a legal process, the origins and formation of the Bible may be likened more to the process of birth, issuing from the very "womb" of the communal life of God's people. The story of the formation of the Bible, in parallel to the witness of the individual books themselves, is the same story of God's people wrestling with God's Word, whether oral or written, seeking to sustain and advance the community's life, identity, unity, and mission. When the faith community is perceived as a living organism nourished and guided by

⁹ Paul R. Hinlicky, "The Lutheran Dilemma," *Pro Ecclesia* 8 (4, 1999), pp. 394-95, argues that the polemical principle of *sola Scriptura*, based on the notion that the Bible is self-interpreting, self-destructs by reason of the ever increasing divergent interpretations, and that the classical standard is *prima Scriptura*, not *sola Scriptura* which would put into doubt the Trinitarian doctrine itself.

¹⁰ Here it is necessary to note as well the startling loss of biblical authority in the Protestant mainline churches, brought about by acculturation and secularization in modern and post-modern times, especially over such issues as doctrine, gender, and sexuality. Prominent Protestant scholars, lamenting the "chaos and devastation" in the mainline churches in America, call for a reversal and efforts to "reclaim" the Bible for the Church, not only at the level of theological scholarship but above all in the hearts and minds of believers themselves. See *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

¹¹ In the United States, the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, directed by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, which has been publishing the journal *Pro Ecclesia* since 1992 and some fifteen books, has served as an influential forum for the convergence of evangelical and catholic traditions. See for example *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*. The Orthodox generally find it more difficult to converse with Evangelicals. See *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

¹² Harry Gamble, "The Formation of the New Testament Canon and Its Significance for the History of Biblical Interpretation," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation, Vol. 1, The Ancient Period*, eds. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), pp. 418-21, points out that the formation of the Bible was essentially the outcome of Christian worship and preaching rather than canonical decisions whether episcopal or conciliar. He writes that Scripture was received as both authoritative and coherent on the basis of its overall story and central message, and not by its numerically determined outer limits.

God's Spirit and not merely as an institution of laws, customs, and councils, then the full significance of the ecclesial character of Scripture is clearly seen as part of the work of the Spirit and the charismatic life of God's people. In the striking imagery of *Dei Verbum*, the one reality of God's Word in Scripture and tradition, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, is like a "mirror" in which the Church on its part beholds the face of God and God on His part ceaselessly converses with the Bride of His beloved Son (II.7-8). Thus, according to *Dei Verbum* (II.8), "the living voice of the gospel resounds in the Church, and through her, in the world, leads unto all truth those who believe and makes the Word of Christ dwell abundantly in them" (cf. Col 3:16). Two examples may illustrate this integral ecclesial character of Scripture.

Among God's gifts to Israel – the election, the covenants, the worship, the promises, and the Messiah – the Apostle Paul highlights also the law, the Torah, which he calls "the oracles of God" (Rom 3:2; 9:4-5). Paul and other New Testament authors invoke as well the authority of the larger corpus of sacred writings, "the law and the prophets" (e.g., Mat 5:17; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Rom 3:21). The Evangelist Luke mentions all three categories of the emerging corpus of the Jewish Scriptures when he refers to "the law and the prophets and the writings" (Luke 24:44). During the first century, however, the formation of the Scriptures was yet far from completion in either Judaism or Christianity. The choices of books for inclusion and the communal dynamics were fluid and diverse as various groups, Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Christians, were defining and interpreting their own versions of the Scriptures. Despite their differences, however, all parties equally shared the common convictions that a) a corpus of sacred documents existed that were inspired by God and expressed His will, and b) that these sacred texts belonged to God's covenant community whose identity, unity, and life they nourished and guided. As Paul put it: "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4).

Some hundred years later St. Irenaeus was the first to raise the question of the relationship between Scripture, tradition, and Church to the level of conscious theological and hermeneutical reflection.¹³ In the face of competing alternatives by Marcionites, Valentinians, and other Gnostics, Irenaeus contended that the Scriptures belonged only to the universal Church, to those who from the beginning lived by the true *hypothesis* ("governing sense" or "subject matter"¹⁴) of the Scriptures, that is, the rule of faith. For Irenaeus, the rule of faith comprehended none other than the basic truths of the gospel, rooted in the Jewish Scriptures, and centered on the redemption through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. These gospel truths were now being wildly distorted as various groups rejected the true creator God and Father of Jesus Christ, cut their moorings with the Jewish heritage, proposed a hierarchy of deities, and denied the reality of Jesus' incarnation and death. The Marcionites had their New Testament Bible comprised of Luke's Gospel and ten Pauline letters, expurgated of all things thought by Marcion to be Jewish. The Valentinians and others produced a plethora of new revelation books to serve their bizarre speculations. Later the Montanists claimed new revelations equal or even superior to that of Christ. But the faith and life of the apostolic community was not at the mercy of the winds. The universal Church claimed to be apostolic precisely because it could demonstrate faithfulness to the apostolic preaching and teaching. It could point to a network of leaders and congregations, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna, communicating and sharing a unified vision of the apostolic gospel and practice. Finally, the apostolic community could appeal to its own Christian Bible of the Old and New Testaments, now substantially in place, in coherence with the whole stream of its apostolic tradition and functioning as a definitive part of the authoritative standards and boundary marks of the Church.

¹³ See most recently John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 33-44.

¹⁴ So Harry Gamble, "The Formation of the New Testament Canon," p. 420.

Today, thanks to modern biblical and historical studies, we know that the origins and formation of the Bible were extremely complex. Multiple oral traditions with their own growth and ongoing adaptation preceded the composition of biblical documents by decades and even centuries. Not infrequently the documents themselves, such as the Pentateuch and the Gospels, passed through a process of redaction, shaped and reshaped according to the needs of the faith community and the perspectives of their authors. These documents gained authority within the communal tradition only gradually, and chiefly through selection and continued usage, and not without disputes within the broader community itself. Eventually the biblical canon, developing variously in diverse localities,¹⁵ came to include writings as different as Leviticus and Daniel in the Old Testament, and as the Gospel of John and the Epistle of James in the New.

However, the phenomena of historical complexity and diversity of themselves underscore the powerful unifying force of religious tradition and of the faith community. There is no other explanation for the incorporation of such a rich variety and diversity of books, theological perspectives, and practices in the Scriptures, than the all-embracing influence of the Church and its tradition. Protestant scholars now freely concede this “organic relationship” between Scripture, tradition, and Church, and that “to acknowledge the authority of the canon is to acknowledge the authority of the tradition which gave rise to it.”¹⁶ Scripture, tradition, and Church are part of the same stream of God’s dealing with His people and can no longer be played off against one another as alternative authorities or alternative starting points. Scripture cannot be opposed to the Church and its tradition because the Word of God itself establishes community with visible footprints in history.

On the other hand the Church cannot be said to be over the Scriptures because, although the Church’s tradition of faith was the touchstone of the acknowledgment of biblical authority, yet the Church is always accountable and obedient to God’s revealed Word made manifest in the Scriptures. Scripture and tradition are interdependent and mutually supportive.¹⁷ The old polemical dichotomy of Scripture verses tradition has essentially been overcome. There is no question of one being set above the other. Just as Scripture in worship and teaching molded the rule of faith, so also the rule of faith was a decisive factor in the selection of the scriptural writings. Thus the biblical principle of the primacy of Scripture is inseparably connected to the ecclesial principle of the constitutive role of the Church. These two principles together, the biblical and the ecclesial, grounded in the worship and teaching of the Church, have always intended “to establish unity for the Church, but not a unity involving uniformity.”¹⁸ Put another way, the double achievement in the ancient universal Church of the formation both of the biblical canon and the interpretative theological tradition that accompanied it, while allowing for remarkable creativity and variety, provides the classic paradigm and the historic standard in the quest of Christian unity for all generations.

¹⁵ It is interesting that the ancient Syriac Church included only 22 books in its canon of the New Testament, indicating that the value in the canonization of the Scriptures is in its corpus as a whole and not the exact numerical limits.

¹⁶ Harry Gamble, “Canon: New Testament,” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 858-59.

¹⁷ By tradition I understand those beliefs and practices associated with the rule of faith, that is, the doctrinal sense resident in the larger tradition of the Church. All churches have valuable traditions by which they live, but not all traditions can be set up as absolutes for Christian unity. The distinction between traditions with a small “t” and Tradition with a capital “T” is useful and valid, but still leaves the discussion open about its concrete application. Moreover, just as in the case of Scripture, there is no “fundamentalism” of tradition to be claimed because the living tradition of the Church always included creativity and not mere commitment to stifling dogmatism and denial of freedom to think. See Alister E. McGrath, “Reclaiming Our Roots and Vision: Scripture and the Stability of the Christian Church,” *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, p. 85, who cites approvingly Jaroslav Pelikan’s *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). See also Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, known for his emphasis on acquiring the mind of Scripture and of the Fathers, and not citing them in slavish way.

¹⁸ Rowan Greer, “Biblical Authority in the Early Church,” in *the Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1. pp. 1026-27.

The Theological Witness of Scripture

By “theological” I do not mean something separate from the “historical” but rather that which is ultimately significant within history, i.e., what Christians know and confess to be saving experiences, saving convictions and truths of the revealed yet hidden mystery of the Triune God. The biblical and ecclesial principles for which I have argued above already establish theological positions grounded in the witness of Scripture itself. Those who hold to the Bible and the Church with the seriousness and commitment that the Scriptures themselves teach ought to be able to achieve a consensus in broad terms.¹⁹ The burning questions about Christian unity, however, involve additional specific issues such as the understanding of redemption in Christ, the relationship between Word and sacrament, the nature of authority and order in the Church, the ministry of the Pope, and not least the long disputed question of the *filioque* between Western and Eastern Christians.²⁰ These and other issues will continue to engage various forms of ecumenical dialog. The publication of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in 1999 by Catholics and Lutherans is a bold and encouraging example of ecumenical growth. Of course much remains to be done and it must be done with discernment, patience, and prayer as we grow in unity of hearts and minds. What I wish here to suggest is a perspective on the theological witness of Scripture that can serve as helpful context for the discussion of the more specific disputed issues.

What is the central purpose of the Bible? It is to proclaim and celebrate God’s self-giving to the world, and together with that message to call women and men to share in God’s life of love and holiness. The text of *Dei Verbum* eloquently states the case. On the one hand God “in His goodness and wisdom and out of the abundance of His love, speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself” (I.2). On the other hand God’s people gratefully respond to God with obedience of faith, entrusting themselves wholly to God, sharing fellowship with God and each other through the reverent hearing and confident proclaiming of God’s Word, in order that “the whole world may believe; by believing, it may hope; and by hoping, it may love” (Preface and I.1, 5).

Theological discourse invariably spirals into abstraction. Participants often lose sight of the difference between the trees and the forest. Allow me to state the obvious: Christian existence is first of all a way of life with God, a way of personal encounter with Christ, a way of communal life with others in the Spirit, with prayer, worship, holiness, righteousness, and service in witness to God and His kingdom. From this perspective nothing is more authoritative and effective, nothing more accessible and inspiring, than the use and application of the Scriptures for the spiritual vitality and moral guidance of God’s people.²¹ But here, too, in profound repentance and love of Christ, in renewal of hearts and lives, lies the deepest hope for Christian unity. The Church Fathers have taught us that the reading of Scripture is to be accompanied through genuine repentance, fervent prayer, purity of heart, and the life of virtue. The essence of the matter is not mere knowledge of the Bible but the Bible’s very enactment and embodiment in corporate and

¹⁹ One of the merits of modern biblical study, according to Raymond R. Brown, *New Testament Essays*, p. 38, is that it “has pinpointed how many of the traditional divisions among Christians really flow from the Bible and how many are the products of post-biblical theological development.” In other words, the Bible, approached through balanced historical critical studies, provides common ground for overcoming the traditionally divisive issues.

²⁰ A theological solution to this issue is at hand, thanks to the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, but its reception by the churches is understandably extremely slow for lack of pastoral preparation as a base for sound ecumenical moves. See *Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ: Ecumenical Reflections on the Filioque Controversy*, ed. Lukas Vischer (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981) and Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, “The *Filioque*: Dogma, Theologoumenon, or Error?” in his book *The Good News of Christ* (Brookline: Holy Cross Press, 1989), pp. 196-232.

²¹ One of the striking marks of *Dei Verbum*, along with its theological grounding, is its emphasis on the accessibility of the Bible and the encouragement for its reading on the part of clergy, the religious, and lay people, equating ignorance of the Scriptures with ignorance of Christ (VI.25).

personal life.²² Without this level of living faith, of devoted discipleship, of love of the brothers and sisters, of spiritual renewal and prayerful accountability to God, there can only exist yawning ecclesial gaps that no amount of doctrinal discussion and ecumenical wisdom can ever bridge.

The theological perspective of Scripture is summed up in the Christian Good News – the gospel of Christ and salvation in His name. Jesus in His person and ministry did not only proclaim but also embodied and enacted the active presence and power of God’s rule. He exorcized the demons, healed the sick, forgave the sinners, inviting all to the banquet of God’s love. The early Christians, after the events of Jesus’ cross and resurrection, placed Christ Himself at the center of their proclamation. The Apostle Paul declared that the gospel does not merely tell about but rather that it *is* the revelation of God’s righteousness and power for salvation to all who believe (Rom 1:16-17). Both the message of Jesus about God’s kingdom and the apostolic gospel about the redemption in Christ were not just new theological teachings but the pronouncement of actual blessings manifest in the transformed life of those who joined the Jesus movement. Thus the overall purpose of the Bible, as well as the intent of the gospel, both drive believers to unity through shared participation in God’s victory over the evil powers, God’s gift of new life in Christ and the Spirit, God’s inauguration of God’s new world where love, mercy, justice, peace, and joy take hold and reign. To take this life-giving message joyfully to heart and put a shoulder to the task of manifesting God’s rule in the world is to exemplify and witness to the living message of Scripture as a call to faith, reconciliation, and unity. Men and women themselves become “living bibles” (*empsychoi bibloi*) in the striking image by the Church Fathers.

The gospel is the indisputable core message of the Bible, the center of the entire biblical story. The gospel is God’s active Word of life. But it is also a message that carries truth claims. Focus on the truth claims of the gospel sheds light in all directions. For example the proclamation that Jesus is Lord and that no one can confess this truth apart from God’s Spirit (1 Cor 12:3; cf. 8:6), both presupposes a deepening experience of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, and leads over several centuries to the articulation of the historic Trinitarian doctrine. In this manner, through the explication of the doctrinal tradition of the Church, the biblical confession in the living and true God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit becomes the foundation of the universal Church and the touchstone of Christian unity. In a closely related way the gospel as God’s Word, far from being a kind of disembodied and free-floating oracle, addresses concrete persons “from faith to faith” (Rom 1:17) and creates a historical community, the reality of the Church as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. The very meaning of covenant underlines the unity between God and His people in the Old Testament on the one hand, and Christ and the Church in the New on the other. All these elements of revelation, God, God’s Word and deed, and covenant community, form a seamless unity and constitute a mandate for Christian unity to which the book of Ephesians gives eloquent and powerful expression: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6).

To give another example, the gospel as the criterion of truth bridges the Old and the New Testaments, and also the past, present, and future of God’s Church. With regard to the Old Testament, it is the gospel that announces its fulfillment in Christ and the gospel’s doctrinal implications that provide the standard of its interpretation as Christian Scripture. With regard to the Church, it is the gospel that connects the new life in Christ with the Jewish heritage and establishes the doctrinal perspective pertaining to faith and morals by which the Church lives and securely passes on the blessings and truths received from God. I have already referred to the gospel as the basis of the rule of faith by which the

²² James C. Howell, “Christ Was like St. Francis,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, eds. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), pp. 101-03.

Church stood firm over against astonishingly distorted teachings about God, the Old Testament, and the incarnation and death of Christ by Marcion and other Gnostics. It was through the same doctrinal sense resident in the gospel and clarified by the rule of faith as circumstances required, that the New Testament Scriptures themselves were in decisive part selected and gathered into a sacred canon, becoming the primary standard of Christian life and thought. In all these cases, however, the Church and its tradition played a constitutive role, not apart from the gospel but in the interpretation and application of the gospel. Scripture is always interpreted Scripture.²³ In this sense those who earnestly work for Christian unity may come to agree with the qualification in *Dei Verbum* that “it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed” (II.17).

Today a number of voices, claiming scholarly legitimacy, advocate ideas as radical and revisionist as any coming from the second century Gnostics. We hear that the apostles themselves somehow got it all wrong. The Apostle Paul allegedly erred when he declared that there was but one apostolic gospel (1 Cor 15:1-11; Gal 1:6-9) because there were supposedly several gospels, and virtually all of them different from the true intent and message of the “historical” Jesus, who is yet to be defined by any discernible consensus among those voices. We hear that early Christianity was in utter disarray, the so-called “proto-orthodox” being one small group among many in the second century, but yet eventually becoming dominant through cruel suppression of legitimate or even better options by oppressive bishops and rigid church rules. This is a case where the interface with modern and post-modern culture, just as in the case of the interface with Hellenistic culture, turns theology into an ideology gone wild. The unequivocal answer to those contentions can only be the same as that given in Christian antiquity: the truth of the apostolic gospel, the rule of faith, and the witness of the historic Church, requiring faithfulness and unity, for without these there is no gospel and no future for the Church.²⁴

The sacred Scriptures indeed contain an astonishing diversity of theological, cultural, and historical traditions. The canonization of the Scriptures does not by any means imply that all traditions and teachings in the Bible are equally true and valid.²⁵ The New Testament itself demonstrates a rich variety of Christological titles, images of the Church, and theological perspectives. That various New Testament traditions may accent the teachings of Jesus or His healing powers, or that some traditions stress Jesus’ cross and resurrection, while others His humiliation and exaltation, or His descent and ascent, does not necessarily signify divergent gospels and divergent communities, but rather different and enriching aspects of the same gospel in the broad tradition of the Church. The variety and diversity find their unity in their common convergence on Christ, the core good news, as well as the overall story of Scripture. The blessings of the gospel itself, of which heart is Christ and His saving work, are variously interpreted by the Apostle Paul as justification, expiation, redemption, reconciliation, new creation, and glorification. There is

²³ The issue of hermeneutics is huge and cannot be taken up here. I have tried to deal with this issue in *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective*. Suffice it to say that variety in interpretation is undisputed in the Jewish and Christian tradition as part of their richness. Scholarship, too, plays a valuable role in the Church’s use, interpretation, and application of the Bible. Difficulties arise when scholarship completely loses its ecclesial moorings, its regard for theological truth, and its loss of biblical authority. The result is an academic artificiality in scholarship itself and a uselessness of its findings for the life and mission of the Church. The chief problem in biblical scholarship lies not in its methods but the Enlightenment philosophical presuppositions that stain the results.

²⁴ Such theological defense permits, of course, no escape from the task of historical demonstration through balanced and sound scholarship. See Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002). Johnson, pp. 19-24, severely critiques the historiographical perspectives of radical scholars whose analyses and reconstructions end up trivializing both God’s Word and the reality of the Church.

²⁵ Already the Apostle Paul, on the basis of the gospel, set aside the comprehensive cultic and legal traditions of Old Testament as criteria of salvation for Christian Gentiles. The Greek Church Fathers themselves showed no small reservations about the literal teaching of predestination and a millennial kingdom in the apocalyptic traditions of the New Testament. For most of us today it is equally clear that the institution of slavery and the subordination of women, which can be supported from a literal reading of the Old and New Testaments, are not expressions of God’s eternal will.

no need either to isolate or much less to oppose the meaning of these key concepts. Both the forensic and transformational categories of thought are both present in Paul as they are in Athanasius.²⁶ Through discerning dialog the Orthodox may learn to read the story of salvation not only in the perspective of *theosis* (deification) but also in that of justification, while Protestants Catholics may be open to learning the reverse.

In like manner, the diversity and struggles attested in the early Church do not necessarily cancel out the framework of church unity around Christ, the gospel, and fundamental elements of church order. The Apostle Paul had to swallow his pride to leave behind a successful mission and go up to Jerusalem to meet in council with James, Peter and others for the sake of the unity of Christ's body. The vision of the early Church was wide enough to include in its canon the Gospels of Matthew and John, but not the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Truth. Justin Martyr testifies that the Church in the second century was broad enough to include Jewish Christians, who preserved obedience to the Mosaic Law while being faithful to the gospel of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, but not broad enough to include the Ebionites, the Valentinians, and the Marcionites.²⁷ Further, the network of leaders, communications, and mutual help between the Christian congregations in Jerusalem, Caesarea, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Smyrna, Rome, and Lyons provide strong evidence for the unity of universal Church which is both a gift and an achievement in the vicissitudes of history.²⁸ Indeed, without appropriate trust, communications, order, and discipline, even creeds do not suffice for unity.²⁹ The apostolic gospel, the rule of faith, and the witness and order of the historic Church can serve as touchstones for Christian unity today in the great task of reclaiming the fullness of both Scripture and Church in our times.

²⁶ For the Orthodox, Athanasius' brilliant essay *On the Incarnation* is the standard patristic reference for the teaching on *theosis*, the understanding of salvation as freedom from the power of corruption and transformation in Christ and the Spirit. However, it is often not noted that in the same work Athanasius speaks of Christ's death on the cross as "the center of faith" (*On the Incarnation*, 19), that Christ "died on behalf of all" and in "exchange for all" (8-10), and that He "bore the curse laid on us" in order "to settle man's account" and free humanity from "the primal transgression" (25). On the other hand, Lutherans discuss the theme of union with Christ in Luther and find the doctrine of justification in the Seven Ecumenical Councils! See Georg Kretschmar, "The Lutheran Doctrine of Justification and the Seven Ecumenical Councils," *Lutheran Forum*, Summer 2000, pp. 112-19, and Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

²⁷ *Dialogue with Trypho*, 35.6; 47.3.

²⁸ The Orthodox patristic scholar John Behr, "Scripture, the Gospel, and Orthodoxy," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 43 (3-4, 1999), pp. 223-48, strongly argues for doctrinal unity based on the gospel in the early Church over against Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy* (1934) but concedes that the gospel "has never been perfectly manifest or realized within any community" and that there is no "lost golden age of theological or ecclesial purity," 225. Behr sees that the rule of faith is a working out of the doctrinal implications of the gospel, but ends up declaring there is "no such thing as dogmatic development . . . but ever new, more detailed and comprehensive explanations elaborated in defense of one and the same faith," p. 248, indicating the difficulty of the Orthodox to countenance the historical nature of the Christian faith. One could, of course, argue that "dogmatic development" pertains not to the immanent mystery of the God as Trinity but precisely the "detailed explanations" of that mystery revealed and understood in both Scripture and tradition, with decisive new elements of understanding and explication on the way.

²⁹ For the ecumenical necessity of church discipline today, see Ephraim Radner, "To Desire Rightly," in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), pp. 213-28, who among other things writes that "the self-ordering of the church is evangelically essential, not only functionally supportive," because ecclesial disorder "is destructive of the reality of the gospel," p. 226.