

Biblical Interpretation as a Prophetic Charism in the Church

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“THE CRISIS OF FAITH IN CHRIST in modern times began with a modified way of reading sacred Scripture—seemingly the sole scientific way.”¹ This statement, penned by Joseph Ratzinger two years before he became pope, explains the decisive importance he attributed to a reform of biblical interpretation within the task of renewing the Church at large. A concern for the proper interpretation of Scripture had long been at the heart of his theological work. When he was elected to the See of Peter in 2005, Ratzinger had already spent more than half a century as a theologian whose work was articulated in distinctively biblical terms and who often reflected on questions of exegesis, faith and theology.² His 1988 Erasmus Lecture on “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis” built on his earlier work diagnosing the problems in modern critical exegesis and pointing the way toward a more adequate hermeneutic.³ As prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,

¹ Benedict XVI, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, trans. Michael Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 9.

² For a good overview of Benedict’s biblical approach to theology, see Scott Hahn, *Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009).

³ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in Richard J. Neuhaus, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on the Bible and the Church*, Encounter Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 1–23. A new translation of the German

he continued to closely follow developments in biblical scholarship. As pope, he summoned the world Synod of Bishops to address the theme “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” following it two years later with his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*. He declared a year of St. Paul in 2008–9, urging all Catholics to familiarize themselves with the writings of the apostle. Finally, one of his highest priorities as pope was to complete his three-volume work of biblical Christology, *Jesus of Nazareth*, a book that applies the principles articulated in the 1988 address and other works, modeling a biblical theology that integrates the tools of modern scholarship with faith in Scripture as a living word from God.

At the heart of Ratzinger’s work on biblical interpretation is his critique of the modern bifurcation of exegesis and faith, and his call for the recovery of a hermeneutic of faith that does justice to both the divine and human dimensions of Scripture. Such a hermeneutic, as Pope Benedict pointed out in *Verbum Domini*, presupposes a reliance on the Holy Spirit, for “without the efficacious working of the ‘Spirit of Truth’ (Jn 14:16), the words of the Lord cannot be understood.”⁴ He went on to support this principle by quoting no less than five authorities from Christian tradition: Irenaeus, Chrysostom, Jerome, Gregory the Great, and Richard of St. Victor. The liturgy too witnesses to the necessity of the Spirit for biblical interpretation, especially in the ancient prayers invoking the Spirit before the proclamation of the readings: “Send your Paraclete Spirit into our hearts and make us understand the Scriptures which he has inspired; and grant that I may interpret them worthily, so that the faithful assembled here may profit thereby.”⁵

This article takes Ratzinger’s proposal for a hermeneutic of faith as a starting point for exploring the thesis that biblical interpretation in the Church is an inherently prophetic activity, that is, an activity that entails

original, which includes some sections missing from the earlier published edition, is given in José Granados et al., eds., *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, Ressourcement (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–29. In this essay I use the earlier translation, the one actually delivered by Cardinal Ratzinger in New York, except where noted.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2012), 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, quoting *Sacramentarium Serapionis II (XX): Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum*, ed. F.X. Funk, II (Paderborn, 1906), 161.

a Spirit-conferred understanding of divine revelation. I will begin by offering a brief resume of Ratzinger's diagnosis and his prescription for placing biblical exegesis on a more sound footing. I will then consider his proposal in light of what the New Testament itself teaches regarding an adequate hermeneutic for the interpretation of Scripture. In the third part I will turn to Kevin Vanhoozer's theory of speech acts as a helpful lens for reflecting on what it is we do when we interpret Scripture. As we will see, Scripture presents itself as a divine act of communication, the completion of which requires the illumination of the reader's mind by divine grace. In biblical terms, this grace is a participation in the charism of prophecy. Finally I will conclude by suggesting some theological and pastoral implications of this prophetic understanding of the work of biblical interpretation.

Ratzinger's Diagnosis and Prescription

Ratzinger begins his critique by observing that modern biblical criticism began with a euphoric confidence that, freed from the constraints of tradition and dogma, it could finally deliver a strictly objective knowledge of Jesus, ancient Israel, and the early Church. In this new approach, underpinned by Enlightenment rationalism, faith was considered an impediment to an objective reading of the text, a bias that had to be methodologically excluded. "Faith itself is not a component of this method, nor is God a factor to be dealt with in historical events."⁶ If God is not an actor on the stage of history, then the biblical text is a purely human reality that has to be analyzed within a strictly human horizon. The exegetical task, then, came to be envisioned as that of dissecting texts in order to excise their "mythological" elements—their claims regarding divine intervention in human events—and explain these in terms of purely worldly causality.

But this approach, Ratzinger maintains, did not deliver on its promises. Instead of producing scientifically assured and agreed-upon results, it led to "the sprouting of ever more numerous hypotheses which finally turn into a jungle of contradictions."⁷ Moreover, Scripture was now viewed as a collection of disparate texts written by a variety of human

⁶ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis," 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

authors, which no longer had an overarching unity. It came to be regarded as “a cacophony of voices and sources, patched poorly together, and edited to further political and religious agendas.”⁸ Not surprisingly, in response to these developments, systematic theologians distanced themselves from biblical scholarship and sought for “a theology which was as independent as possible from exegesis.”⁹ For preachers and pastors, it became more difficult to explain in what sense Scripture has normative authority for Christian faith and life.

Ironically, Ratzinger argues, the zeal of the critical methods to expose the biases and ideologies of biblical authors has been accompanied by a striking blindness to their own prejudices. Underlying these supposedly neutral methods are often unexamined and faulty philosophical premises. The laser beam of criticism thus needs to be focused on the critical methods themselves—not to invalidate them but precisely to free them from their own distortions and retrieve what is genuinely valuable in them. Foremost among the presuppositions that need to be reexamined is the notion that faith must be excluded for the sake of objectivity. In fact, as philosophical hermeneutics has long recognized, the ideal of approaching a text with absolute objectivity is an illusion. Every interpreter brings a perspective, a set of fundamental presuppositions that guide interpretation. If one systematically excludes Judeo-Christian faith—that faith within which the Scriptures were written—one substitutes not neutrality but rather an alien set of presuppositions. As Pope Benedict states with limpid clarity in *Verbum Domini*, “The lack of a hermeneutic of faith with regard to Scripture entails more than a simple absence; in its place there inevitably enters another hermeneutic, a positivistic and *secularized hermeneutic* ultimately based on the conviction that the Divine does not intervene in human history.”¹⁰ Thus the exclusion of faith is itself a bias that precludes understanding the biblical text on its own terms.

Ratzinger’s proposal for a truly adequate hermeneutic, one that moves beyond the limitations and distortions of historical criticism, is

⁸ Joseph Atkinson, “Scripture and the Exegete: Reflections on Ratzinger’s Erasmus Lecture Twenty Years Later,” *Incarnate Word* 2 (2009): 609–41; here 614–15.

⁹ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” 3.

¹⁰ *Verbum Domini*, 35b. Emphasis in the original.

a new synthesis of rigorous historical research with an openness to “the inner dynamism of the word.”¹¹ The exegete must not “approach the text with a ready-made philosophy” or “exclude a priori that (almighty) God could speak in human words in the world.”¹² Rather he must be “ready to accept that the truly original may occur in history, something which cannot be derived from precedents but which opens up out of itself.”¹³ Only such a hermeneutic of faith is adequate to the claim of biblical religion that God has entered time and space. Historical events are not mere ciphers for theological ideas; rather, they are themselves a “word” from God, as the Hebrew word *dabar* with its dual meaning of “word” and “event” suggests.¹⁴

From this principle Ratzinger derives two “rules” of biblical interpretation. First, “both word and event have to be considered equally original.”¹⁵ That is, one cannot posit a dichotomy such that the meaning of Scripture lies solely in hypothetically reconstructed raw historical events, stripped of the theological clothing given them by the biblical authors—or conversely, that it lies solely in spiritual truths abstracted from the narration of supposedly unhistorical events. Rather, God’s revelation takes place through words and deeds having an intrinsic unity. As *Dei Verbum* expressed it, “The deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.”¹⁶

Second, exegesis must allow for the “organic *continuity* of meaning which exists between the Old and New Testaments.”¹⁷ All Scripture is a unity, the unifying principle of which is Christ, the Word made flesh, and the historical subject to whom this word is addressed, the one people of God. “To read Scripture as a unity therefore means to read it from

¹¹ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20. Ratzinger expresses the point with equal clarity in his introduction to *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), xv.

¹⁵ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” 20.

¹⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* (1965), 2.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” 20. Emphasis in the original.

the Church as its existential locus and to regard the faith of the Church as its true hermeneutical key.”¹⁸

On one point Ratzinger concedes perhaps too much to the modern view of the exegete’s task. He states that “texts must first of all be traced back to their historical origins and interpreted in their proper historical context. But then, in a second exegetical operation, one must look at them also in light of the total movement of history and in light of history’s central event, Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ This two-step procedure implies, if unintentionally, that faith becomes hermeneutically relevant only *after* the crucial exegetical judgments have been made. That is, before one moves to a theological interpretation, questions regarding the background and meaning of the text are first asked and answered within a purely historical framework. But as Ratzinger himself already noted, in the interpretation of history there can be no “pure objectivity.”²⁰ A purely secular investigation of historical origins will lead to purely secular results. It is as though a psychologist were to evaluate Jesus’s claims and actions from a purely secular clinical perspective, which by definition considers human causality alone, and only afterward to consider the question of his divinity. In this case one risks having already arrived at the conclusion of some of Jesus’s contemporaries: “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (Jn 6:42); or even, “He is out of his mind” (Mk 3:21; cf. Jn 10:20). As Al Wolters has compellingly demonstrated, the interpreter’s stance of faith, or lack thereof, inevitably influences every step of exegesis, even such apparently neutral and technical operations as textual criticism and lexicography.²¹ A hermeneutic of faith, then, is one that rigorously investigates the historical origins of the text, but as open *from the beginning* to the transcendent mystery contained in the word. In *Verbum Domini*, written twenty-two years after the Erasmus Lecture, the pope expressed this more nuanced view: “To distinguish

¹⁸ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” in *Opening Up the Scriptures*, 6. This is in one of the sections missing from the original English edition of his lecture.

¹⁹ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis,” 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹ Wolters, “Confessional Criticism and the Night Visions of Zechariah,” in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 90–117.

two levels of approach to the Bible does not in any way mean to separate or oppose them, nor simply to juxtapose them. They exist only in reciprocity. Unfortunately, a sterile separation sometimes creates a barrier between exegesis and theology, and this ‘occurs even at the highest academic levels.’²²

The Biblical Hermeneutic of the New Testament

Ratzinger’s thesis concerning the unity of word and deed, old covenant and new, is of course rooted in Scripture itself. The effort to develop an authentically Christian hermeneutic must therefore include a study of what the New Testament teaches and models concerning biblical interpretation—part of theology’s perpetual task of *ressourcement*. What implicit hermeneutical principles underlie the New Testament’s assertions regarding the interpretation of Scripture? How can they be properly transposed into today’s postmodern critical context and integrated into an adequate hermeneutic?

A prominent theme in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels, is precisely that of the *misunderstanding* of Scripture. In the Synoptics, Jesus repeatedly reproaches the scribes and Pharisees—the experts in biblical interpretation—with the rhetorical question, “Have you not read . . . ?”

“Have you not read what David did, when he was hungry, and those who were with him . . . ?” (Mt 12:3)

“Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female . . . ?” (Mt 19:4)

“Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of babes and nurslings you have brought perfect praise?’” (Mt 21:16)

²² Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* 35.

“Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’” (Mt 21:42)²³

Of course the scribes and Pharisees have read and quite likely memorized all these texts, yet are apparently blind to their true meaning as it comes to light through Jesus’s own words and deeds. Likewise, Jesus sharply admonishes the Sadducees,

“Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?” (Mk 12:24)

Their rejection of the doctrine of the resurrection demonstrates their failure to penetrate the meaning of God’s self-identification in Scripture as the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob: “he is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Mk 12:27). In each of these instances, Jesus’s reprimand suggests that the problem is not merely methodological. It is not that they have failed to apply the proper exegetical techniques to the biblical text, but that their hearts are closed to a revelation of its true meaning. The very people entrusted with authority to interpret Israel’s Scriptures have, despite their erudition, completely missed the true significance of the holy texts (cf. Acts 13:27). Jesus’s admonitions serve as a perennial warning to biblical exegetes. Having analyzed the text from every methodological angle, could we merit the reproof, “Have you never read . . . ?” Pope Benedict alluded to this danger in his opening address for the 2008 Synod:

St Augustine recalls the scribes and Pharisees who were consulted by Herod when the Magi arrived. Herod wants to know where the Savior of the world would be born. They know it, they give the correct answer: in Bethlehem. They are great specialists who know everything. However they do not see reality, they do not know the Savior. St Augustine says: they are signs on the road for others, but they themselves do not move. This is a great danger as well in our reading of Scripture: we stop at the human

²³ Cf. Mt 9:13; 12:5, 7; 22:31; Mk 2:25; 12:10, 26; Lk 6:3.

words . . . and we do not discover the present in the past, the Holy Spirit who speaks to us today in the words from the past.²⁴

A similar motif runs through the Gospel of John. Jesus admonishes the Jewish authorities: “You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; but it is they that bear witness to me . . . If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (Jn 5:39, 46–47). He thereby indicts his opponents on their own grounds: They appeal to the writings of Moses to justify their rejection of Jesus (cf. Jn 6:30–31; 9:29), failing to recognize that those very writings bear witness to him (cf. Jn 7:42; 20:9).

But it is not only Jesus’s adversaries who are biblically inept. His disciples too are continually confronted with their own inability to grasp the meaning of the Scriptures. Jesus repeatedly affirms that his passion and Resurrection will take place in fulfillment of biblical prophecy (Mt 26:31, 54, 56; Mk 14:49). Yet each time he predicts his passion, his words meet with incomprehension (Mk 8:31–32; 9:10, 32). Luke reports that the disciples “did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, that they should not perceive it” (Lk 9:45; cf. 18:34). Like the scroll sealed with seven seals in the book of Revelation, the Scriptures are locked, and no one possesses the hermeneutical key that opens up their meaning.

The hermeneutical key is, of course, the passion and Resurrection of the Lamb. The incomprehension of the disciples is a pre-Paschal failing that the evangelists portray retrospectively in the light of Easter faith. The Fourth Gospel often alludes to this post-Paschal enlightenment. In the episode of the cleansing of the temple, the disciples are puzzled by Jesus’s claim that he will raise up “this temple” in three days. But after his Resurrection, they “remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken” (Jn 2:22). The meaning of his entry into Jerusalem seated on a young donkey is likewise opaque: “His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him” (Jn 12:16). Until they encounter the

²⁴ Benedict XVI, opening address at the 2008 World Synod of Bishops.

risen Lord, even the empty tomb and folded burial cloths are an enigma: Peter and John are perplexed because “as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (Jn 20:9).

It is Luke who depicts in most detail the passage from ignorance to enlightenment. In the story of the journey to Emmaus, the risen Jesus rebukes the two disconsolate disciples, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Then “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:25–27). Whereas previously the Scriptures were an insoluble enigma, now they appear as a luminous, unified whole bearing witness to a single plan of salvation culminating in Christ’s Paschal mystery. The enlightenment of the two is repeated for the eleven when the risen Lord “opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead’” (Lk 24:45–46). Only such a divine work of interior illumination enables them to grasp the inner unity of salvation history, centered on Christ.

Jesus’s Resurrection enables his followers to perceive that Scripture has been fulfilled in him. However, it is only at Pentecost that the *apostles themselves* become competent and authoritative interpreters of the Scriptures. Pentecost, as Luke portrays it, is the Spirit’s decisive empowerment of the Church to understand and proclaim the Word that God has spoken in Christ. Immediately after the descent of the Spirit in Acts 2, Peter delivers his Pentecost speech, an authoritative interpretation of both the Pentecost event itself and Jesus’s Paschal mystery. His entire speech is an act of biblical interpretation, centered first on a passage from the prophet Joel and then on Psalm 16. It is worth examining Peter’s speech in some detail to uncover his hermeneutic.

Peter begins by quoting Joel, making minor alterations to the text to bring out his own particular emphases:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in

those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”
(Acts 2:16–18)

Whereas Joel used the expression “afterwards” (Jl 2:28), Peter amends it to “in the last days,” indicating that the outpouring of the Spirit signals the arrival of the end times, God’s decisive intervention in history to bring his plan to its culmination. What just occurred, Peter claims, is the fulfillment of God’s promises to pour out his Spirit, no longer selectively on a few individuals with special tasks such as kings, prophets, and liturgical artisans, but indiscriminately on all God’s people: men and women, young and old, slave and free. The gift of the Spirit is closely linked with prophecy, the ability to speak God’s word under the inspiration of the Spirit. The first effect of the universal outpouring of the Spirit is a universal dissemination of the prophetic charism.

In the background of the Joel passage is an earlier Old Testament episode, the appointment of seventy elders in Numbers 11. In that narrative, God “took some of the spirit that was upon [Moses]” and placed it on the seventy who would share his burden of leadership. Numbers tells us that immediate effect of this impartation was that the elders “prophesied, but they did so no more” (Nm 11:25), suggesting some kind of charismatic phenomena that were clearly observable but short-lived.²⁵ When two men who remained in the camp also exhibited the same prophetic behavior, Joshua objected to Moses that they had not been with the registered group. The punch line of the story is Moses’s exclamation in reply: “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!” (Nm 11:29). Later in Israel’s history, the prophet Joel alludes to this implicit prayer to affirm that in the messianic age God will indeed bestow on the whole people his Spirit, with the consequent gift of prophecy. Peter in turn quotes the Joel text in Acts 2 to declare that Moses’s yearning and God’s promise through Joel have now been superabundantly fulfilled. The eschatological gift of the Spirit, far from rendering prophecy obsolete, has made the Church a community of prophets. Peter further highlights this point by appending to the quotation a phrase not pres-

²⁵ For the association of prophecy with observable charismatic phenomena, see also 1 Sm 10:1–16; 19:20–24.

ent in Joel, “and they shall prophesy” (2:18). Through the rest of the Acts narrative, Luke depicts this declaration being fulfilled to the letter as members of the Church, men and women alike, receive prophetic words, visions and dreams, and perform prophetic signs and wonders in Jesus’s name.²⁶

After interpreting the Pentecost event as a fulfillment of passages in Joel and Numbers, Peter proceeds to a biblical explanation of the mission of Jesus. That it is Peter who does so—Peter who had previously so *misconstrued* biblical prophecy that he vigorously opposed Jesus’s intent to go through with his passion (cf. Mt 16:22; Mk 8:32)—highlights the hermeneutical change wrought by the Spirit. Peter is now able to explain with boldness (*parrēsia*; cf. Acts 2:29) and conviction that the scandal of a crucified Messiah is precisely the plan of God as foretold in the Scriptures. He does so by interpreting Psalm 16, a psalm of David, typologically in reference to Christ.

The psalmist, Peter observes, expresses confident trust that God will save him from death: “For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let your Holy One see corruption” (Acts 2:27). But as Peter points out to his listeners, the fact that David’s tomb “is with us to this day”—in sharp contrast to Jesus’s *empty* tomb (Lk 24:1–8)—means that this prophetic hope could not have referred to David himself. Rather, the psalm looks forward prophetically to Jesus the messianic descendant of David, speaking of his Resurrection from the dead and exaltation at God’s right hand. Peter concludes his speech by coming full circle, declaring that it is Christ’s glorification that has made the eschatological gift of the Spirit available to all: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear” (Acts 2:33). It is precisely the gift of the Holy Spirit that has enabled Peter to understand the deeper meaning of Psalm 16, hidden under the letter until Christ’s Resurrection from the dead.

Peter’s speech, as Luke portrays it, is the inauguration of the church’s mission to authoritatively interpret and proclaim the word of God. As

²⁶ Cf. “wonders” and “signs” in Acts 2:19. These two terms are used in the Pentateuch to describe the miraculous deeds of Moses (Dt 34:11) and were traditionally associated with the charism of prophecy.

apostolic teaching, Peter's speech, like the New Testament as a whole, has an original and definitive quality that does not belong to subsequent teaching. Because God has spoken his final word in Christ, no new revelation is to be expected after the apostolic age. But it does not follow that the prophetic charism is no longer needed for the *interpretation* of revelation. Indeed, such a claim would be contrary to the whole thrust of Acts 2, which emphasizes that the prophetic gift of the Spirit—limited and temporary in the seventy elders of Israel, universal and permanent in the Christian community—alone gives access to the mystery of God's plan, foretold in Scripture and definitively fulfilled in Christ.

The letters of Paul assert in a different way but with equal insistence the necessity of the Spirit for biblical interpretation. Two texts are particularly noteworthy in this regard. In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul alludes to a text of Isaiah in describing the role of the Spirit, not only in regard to biblical interpretation but in regard to any understanding of the mystery of Christ. "None of the rulers of this age understood this [God's hidden wisdom]; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,' God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:8–10, paraphrasing Is 64:4). The realities never before seen, heard or conceived refer not in the first instance to future heavenly glory, but to the Paschal mystery itself: the crucifixion of the Lord of glory (2:8). This mystery exceeds the natural capacities of the human mind and is therefore accessible only through the Spirit, "For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (2:10; cf. Eph 3:18–19). The Spirit is the light that enables a believer to comprehend the inmost divine mystery, the unfathomable love revealed and given in the kenosis of God's Son. Only by the Spirit of God are we able to "understand the gifts freely given us by God" (1 Cor 2:12). Paul goes on to declare that not only the understanding but also the transmission of divine revelation is a Spirit-inspired activity: "we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:13).²⁷

²⁷ The same principle is expressed in 2 Peter, applied specifically to biblical interpretation: "no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pt 1:20–21).

In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul takes up the problem of the failure of many Jews to recognize any reference to Christ in the old covenant. Citing the passage in Exodus where Moses's face became radiant from being in the presence of the Lord (Ex 34:27–35), Paul writes that the Israelites' "minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed" (2 Cor 3:14–16). With the image of a veil Paul suggests a spiritual blindness, resulting from hardness of heart, that blocks access to the dazzling light of divine revelation.²⁸ The remedy for such blindness is to "turn to the Lord," as Moses removed his veil whenever he entered the presence of the Lord (Ex 34:34). The notion of "turning" implies a conversion of heart. Paul continues: "Now the Lord [i.e., the Lord to whom we turn] is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17–18). Turning to the Lord is, in effect, to receive the Holy Spirit, who opens up the Scriptures that were previously veiled. The Spirit does so, paradoxically, not by "unveiling" the Scriptures but by "unveiling" the face of the believer, bringing about an inner transformation that allows one to gaze on the Lord's glory. Thus there is an inseparable connection between the Spirit's work in the interpretation of Scripture and in the personal transformation of the interpreter. As Henri de Lubac put it, an adequate hermeneutic must "take into account the connection between spiritual understanding and the personal conversion and life of the Christian . . . the relationship between 'New Testament' and 'New Man,' between newness of understanding and newness of spirit."²⁹

The New Testament's insistence on the role of the Spirit in biblical interpretation became a recognized principle in Christian tradition. This work of the Spirit was often described, either explicitly or implicitly, as a prophetic grace in continuity with the prophetic grace of bib-

²⁸ The "hardened minds" of 2 Cor 3:14 is an allusion to the "hearts of stone" oracle in Ez 26:26. See Thomas Stegman, *Second Corinthians*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 90.

²⁹ De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O'Neill (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 144.

lical inspiration. Commenting on Ezekiel's warning to false prophets, "Woe to those foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing" (Ez 13:3), Origen writes, "Just as the person who received the order to say these things needed the Holy Spirit, so the person who wants to explain what is secretly signified therein needs the same Spirit."³⁰ He goes on to assert that what was true of the words of the Israelite prophets is equally true of the words of Christ and the apostles. Gregory the Great likewise comments, "Just as the Spirit of life touches the mind of the prophet, he also touches the mind of the reader."³¹

Thomas Aquinas explicitly described the interpretation of Scripture as a grace belonging to the order of prophecy: "In the New Testament those who explain the prophetic sayings are also called prophets, because Sacred Scripture is interpreted in the same Spirit in which it is composed. And so we read in Sirach 24:33, 'I will pour out teaching like prophecy.'³² *Dei Verbum* quotes Jerome in reaffirming this ancient principle, which had also been taken up by William of St. Thierry and many others: "holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written."³³

Scripture as an Illocutionary Act

Even where biblical scholarship formally acknowledges the principle of interpretation "in the Spirit," it does not always succeed in carrying it out in practice or in articulating a hermeneutic that adequately accounts for it. Recent developments in the philosophy of language, however, can

³⁰ Origen, *Homilies on the Book of Ezekiel* 2.2; translation adapted from Ignace de la Potterie, "Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Spirit in Which It Was Written," in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. René Latourelle (New York: Paulist, 1988), 220–66.

³¹ Gregory, *Homilies on the Book of Ezekiel* VII.11–12, quoted in Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, trans. Edward Hagman (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 28.

³² Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans* 12.8 (Marietti edition § 978), my translation. See Francis Martin, *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word* (Naples, FL: Sapientia, 2006), 7–8.

³³ *Dei Verbum* 12, quoting Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians* 5.19–20. Cf. William of St. Thierry, *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei* I.10.31, quoted in Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 29. For details on the patristic background of this principle, see de la Potterie, "Interpretation of Holy Scripture."

help provide a theological grounding for this principle. In particular, Kevin Vanhoozer's theory of communicative action can help us appreciate the full implications of the Christian understanding of Scripture as God's word.³⁴ Vanhoozer, a systematic theologian in the Reform tradition, has developed a hermeneutical proposal that draws from J. L. Austin's speech-act theory and applies it to biblical texts. As Vanhoozer notes, speech act theory emphasizes that language does more than simply refer to states of affairs. All discourse is, in fact, intentional action; that is, it is action that aims at accomplishing *something*.³⁵ Every statement is in some sense a "mission statement," in which a speaker intends to communicate something to someone. Intentionality is an irreducible aspect not only of speech but of human action in general. It is what makes a human act one thing rather than another.³⁶ A slap on the back, for example, may be a greeting, a congratulatory gesture, an attempt to save someone from choking, or an aggressive act, depending on the intent with which it was performed.³⁷ It follows that understanding an action requires recognizing the agent's intention. So too in speech acts, the speaker's intention is what constitutes the act as what it is.³⁸ Vanhoozer gives the example of a speaker who says, "Coffee would keep me awake." The language and syntax of this sentence are perfectly clear; there is no problem decoding the meaning of the words. But what the sentence communicates depends entirely on the speaker's intention in the circumstances in which it is spoken. In one possible scenario, the speaker who has been offered coffee is struggling to stay awake while studying for an exam late at night. In this case, the meaning of "Coffee would keep me awake" is "yes." In another scenario, the speaker has finished studying and would like to retire soon in order to be fresh for the exam

³⁴ Here I am drawing from Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of Covenant," in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 1–49. This article is a resume of Vanhoozer's full-scale work *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998; rev. ed. 2009).

³⁵ Vanhoozer, "From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts," 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

the following morning; in that case, the meaning is “no.”³⁹

Just as the concept of intention enables us to view human actions as more than mere bodily movements, so it enables us to view words and texts as more than mere sound waves and marks on paper. Understanding a text requires consideration of the author’s intention, that factor that accounts for the meaning of the communicative act. Conversely, where an author’s intention is ignored, we lose the act itself. A communicative act such as a wink, for example, is reduced to the blink, a meaningless bodily action. The result is what speech-act theorists call a “thin description.” A thin description is one that relies on lower-level concepts like “rapid contraction of the eyelid” rather than higher-level intentional categories like “flirting.”⁴⁰ Applied to biblical interpretation, a thin description is one that may include philological, grammatical, textual, historical, sociocultural, and political explanations of the text, but fails to account fully for the text as a communicative act. A description is sufficiently thick, on the other hand, when it allows us to appreciate everything an author intends to communicate. It is important to clarify a possible misunderstanding, however. Intention is not to be identified with an author’s hidden psychological agenda; rather, it is what the author is actually doing in the text itself. The search for authorial intention is not a futile exercise in amateur psychology but precisely the means of allowing the author’s communicative act to be completed, resulting in understanding.

Vanhoozer, again relying on Austin, offers a further helpful distinction. Speech acts have three distinct dimensions. First, there is simply the content of an utterance, *the locution*. The second and most important dimension is the speaker’s intention in speaking, the *illocution*. Third is what we might call the byproduct of the speech act or the effect it produces, the *perlocution*.⁴¹ Grasping the distinction between these latter two is crucial to properly interpreting communicative acts. Vanhoozer offers the example of the utterance “Jesus is Lord.”⁴² There are numerous ways to report on what a speaker did in uttering this statement. For example, one might say the speaker (1) emitted sound waves;

³⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

⁴² This example and its categorization are adapted from that of Vanhoozer in *ibid.*, 15.

(2) spoke with a Boston accent; (3) said “Jesus is Lord.” All three of these descriptions remain at the locutionary level; they fail to describe the communicative intent of the speaker. Further, one might say the speaker (4) confessed that Jesus is Lord; (5) told her neighbor that Jesus is Lord; (6) explained how her cancer had suddenly gone into remission. These descriptions, in contrast to the first three, are illocutionary and truly arrive at the communicative intent of the utterance. Finally, one might say the speaker (7) made me feel unspiritual by comparison; (8) provoked a Roman persecution; or (9) led to the conversion of her listener. These last three describe the perlocution or byproducts of the communicative act. A speech act may *produce* perlocutionary effects, but it does not *consist in* such effects. Even if the speaker intends an effect such as the conversion of his hearer, such an effect is still a perlocution. It is what the speaker does *by* the speech not what he does *in* the speech.

How does this analysis of speech acts impinge on biblical interpretation? As Vanhoozer observes, to take the divine authorship of Scripture seriously is to recognize the canon of Scripture as a single complex communicative act on the part of God.⁴³ Interpretation is sufficiently thick when it allows us to appreciate an author’s illocutions, that is, what the author is doing in the text. But some of these illocutions only come to light on the level of the literary whole—the whole book or, in this case, the whole canon. For example, on one level the detailed account of the construction and furnishing of the wilderness tabernacle in Exodus 35–40 is meant to describe for the reader the physical arrangements for Israel’s sacrificial liturgy. But unless we read these chapters in light of the whole Pentateuch, and particularly the creation account in Genesis 1, we will fail to recognize the full communicative intent of the author or final redactor: namely, to portray the tabernacle as a microcosm of the created universe and a partial restoration of the original communion between God and man in Eden that had been ruptured by sin.⁴⁴ But this in turn is not a sufficiently thick description unless we also read the text

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁴ For recent studies of this symbolism, see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 29–80; Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 111–44; and Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1987), 111–84.

in light of the entire canon and arrive at the communicative intent of not only the human author/redactor but also the divine author. In this case the intention, as revealed in the New Testament and especially the letter to the Hebrews, is to portray the earthly tabernacle as a “type” or figure pointing to the true, heavenly sanctuary into which Christ entered as high priest on our behalf (Heb 8:5; 9:11–14), and thus to reveal the entire sacrificial system of Israel as a foreshadowing of the infinitely more efficacious sacrifice of Christ. This is a meaning that goes beyond the intention of the human author(s) of Exodus, but it is not simply a perlocution, an effect the text produces on us when we read it as Christians. Rather, it is a part of the overarching communicative intent—the illocution—of God himself as author.

Returning to the theme of the prophetic gift of the Spirit: what role does the Spirit play in God’s communicative act? As Vanhoozer notes, human authors do their best to ensure that readers correctly perceive their illocutionary intentions, but they cannot guarantee it. Authors are often misunderstood. But God “has no such limits: the Spirit is the ‘lord of the hearing’ . . . the energy that enables the Word to complete its mission.”⁴⁵ Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak . . . He will take what is mine and declare it to you” (Jn 16:13). The Spirit completes the communicative act that is all divine revelation by enabling it to be received and understood according to the intent of the Author. Moreover the Spirit “renders the word effective by achieving its perlocutionary effects,”⁴⁶ that is, its transformative effects in the life of believers. But he does so precisely in and through Scripture’s illocutions, its revelation of God and his plan. The Spirit speaks not an additional word but “what belongs to Jesus.” Perlocutions proceed from locutions and illocutions, not vice versa, as the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.⁴⁷

This understanding of divine revelation as a communicative act, rendered efficacious by the Spirit, also has a negative corollary. As Vanhoozer points out, the rules of human discourse presuppose a kind of

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

covenant—a bond between speaker and hearer such that we agree to be truthful communicators on the one hand and active listeners on the other.⁴⁸ Interpreters violate this covenant whenever we ascribe intentions to authors where there is no evidence of that intention, or when we purvey a reductionist interpretation—a thin description—that fails to adequately attend to what an author was in fact doing. To do so is to “bear false witness”—to do a kind of interpretive violence to the text. To put it differently, the very existence of prophecy entails the possibility of false prophecy, a distortion of the word of God that is a perennial danger both in Israel and the Church. Defective biblical interpretation is, in fact, a form of false prophecy that can be profoundly damaging to the life of the Church.

It is significant that Ratzinger began his 1988 lecture with a humorous yet provocative anecdote, told by the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, about the Antichrist as a biblical scholar, a famous exegete who received his doctorate at Tübingen. Ratzinger thereby alluded to the spiritual struggle and the weighty spiritual consequences involved in biblical interpretation.⁴⁹ Interestingly, Pope Benedict returned to the image of the Antichrist twenty years later in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, where he bluntly stated, “The fact is that Scriptural exegesis can become a tool of the Anti-Christ.”⁵⁰ He notes that the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s temptations portray Satan as a theologian and Bible expert who can quote Scripture accurately. Biblical erudition and mastery of exegetical technique are no guarantee of truth. As the pope affirmed, to acknowledge this “is not a rejection of scholarly biblical interpretation as such, but an eminently salutary and necessary warning against its possible aberrations.”⁵¹

Conclusion

Joseph Ratzinger’s critique of modern biblical interpretation is at the same time a signpost for the way forward. The rediscovery of God’s word as “a wellspring of constant renewal” in the life of the Church,⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁹ I owe this observation to Atkinson, “Scripture and the Exegete,” 612.

⁵⁰ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 35.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* 1.

which he so ardently promoted as theologian and pope, will come about not by rejecting the methods and findings of modern scholarship but by integrating them into a hermeneutic of faith. Only such a hermeneutic allows Scripture to be read as it was written, as a living, divine act of communication whose center and hermeneutical key is the mystery of Christ. As the New Testament itself teaches, reading Scripture in this way is possible only through the prophetic gift of the Holy Spirit, the divine breath that animates the word and makes it ever “living and effective” (Heb 4:12). As St. Ambrose explains, Scripture is *theopneustos* (2 Tim 3:16) not only because it is “inspired by God” but because it “respires God,” it breathes God.⁵³ It is the Spirit who opens up the depths hidden in the word. The work of biblical interpretation is, then, the exercise of a prophetic charism in the Church.

This understanding of the exegete’s task has two implications for the life of the Church that, among the many that could be mentioned, are worth highlighting. First, interpreting Scripture prophetically—in conscious dependence on the Spirit’s inspiration—will restore a sense of the unity of the canon. As mentioned above, contemporary biblical scholarship tends to regard the books of the Bible as a cacophony of diverse voices. Exegetes are generally content to let apparent discrepancies and even contradictions stand as simply indicating different theologies among the various biblical authors, or even among layers of redaction within a single work. This fragmented approach in turn undermines people’s confidence that Scripture reliably communicates truth about God and his will for our lives. Instead, taking seriously the divine authorship entails recognizing all Scripture as a single communicative act on God’s part, the unity of which is revealed by the Spirit within the living tradition of the Church. A deeper reliance on the Spirit’s prophetic guidance could lead to a renewed effort of scholars to show how the different perspectives among the biblical authors are complementary rather than contradictory. It could also contribute to the recovery of what tradition calls the “spiritual sense,” enabling us to recognize God’s gifts in the old covenant as wonderful in their own right and yet also having a yet-more-marvelous hidden significance that points to Christ.

⁵³ Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancto* 3.112, quoted in Raniero Cantalamessa, *The Mystery of God’s Word*, trans. Alan Neame (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 80.

Second, the state of biblical scholarship in the Church has a direct bearing on the quality of preaching, another area of great concern for both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis.⁵⁴ It is observed with increasing frequency that Catholic preaching today is too often stale, banal, and biblically impoverished. Such deficiencies are directly attributable, at least in part, to a reductive understanding of the exegetical task. For at least two generations Catholic ministers of the word have been trained in methods of interpretation that fail to rely on the Spirit's illumination and thus often fail to arrive at Scripture's illocutionary intent. Biblical interpretation, and thus preaching, must once again be recognized as a prophetic task dependent on the anointing of the Spirit. Where preaching is prophetic, there is divine power at work to awaken faith in the hearers, as Paul often asserts,⁵⁵ and to cause their hearts to burn within them, as happened to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. If God's people sometimes appear spiritually moribund, those who interpret Scripture prophetically will put skin and flesh on those dry bones and make them come alive with the life-giving breath of Spirit (Ez 37:4–13). **N&V**

⁵⁴ See Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* 59–60; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 135–59.

⁵⁵ Cf. Rom 1:16; 10:17; 1 Cor 1:18; 2:4; Col 1:6; 1 Thes 1:5; 2:13.