Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation

The Mediation of the Gospel through Church and Scripture

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To Guy Mansini, OSB
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This book has its source in my urgent desire to know our Creator, infinite life and love, the one who sustains us and gives us eternal life with him, for which I am eager. “O God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is. So I have looked upon thee in the sanctuary, beholding thy power and glory. Because thy steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise thee. So I will bless thee as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on thy name” (Ps. 63:1–4).
Introduction

The Letter to the Hebrews proclaims, “God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets,” and, “In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). How, then, do human beings today (“in these last days”) truly receive this merciful revelation? Since “God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets” and “has spoken to us by a Son,” God evidently intended for his revelatory words and deeds to be mediated by the people formed by his covenantal love. Where and in what ways does this mediation take place so that humans in all generations can receive the fullness of the gospel?

The evident answers are the Church and Scripture, or Scripture and the Church. The Letter to the Hebrews itself mediates to us God’s revelation, as does Scripture as a whole. But it is not possible to conceive of Scripture, at any stage of its composition and collection into a canonical unity, outside of the liturgical community of the people of God. The Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten rightly points out that “there is no gospel apart from the church and its sacramental life. . . . There is no such thing as churchless Christianity, for that would posit the possibility of relating personally to Christ without

1. See the commentary on Heb. 1:1–2, paired with 2 Pet. 1:19–21 and 1 Cor. 2:11–13, in Edith Humphrey, Scripture and Tradition, 70–73. Humphrey argues that we should understand the “we” and “us” of 2 Peter 1, Hebrews 1, and 1 Corinthians 2 as the communal “we”—apostolic insights that have been clarified and passed on in the Christian community. In all this, the verbal word, the written word, and Jesus the Word come together, imparted internally among and within the community. To understand the revelation of God involves the vivifying power of the Holy Spirit within those who are teaching such mysteries and within those who are receiving them. Reception is not a private matter, but it is at once personal and communal, pertaining to the “spirit” in each person and pertaining also to the “Spirit” who has been imparted to each as well as to the body of believers. (73)
being a member of his body, the Church.”2 Just as Israel’s Scriptures cannot be conceived outside of the worshiping community, so also the New Testament writings make sense only in light of Jesus’s eschatological reordering of Israel around himself (the messianic King and new Temple) by calling the Twelve and giving them the mission of making “disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). It is in this community of believers that divine revelation has been received, enacted, and handed down.

Yet, is this mediation a faithful one, so that believers are now able to “worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23)? Indeed, James Dunn draws attention to the fact that the New Testament is already “tradition,” and he invites us to consider “what the tradition process has involved and still involves.”3 He finds that “while the core and substance of the tradition remains stable through time and multiple retellings, the forms it takes are diverse and variable.”4 In Dunn’s view the tradition process that we find in the New Testament continues throughout the history of the Church. Along similar lines, Francis Watson has identified a “precanonical phase” in which “gospels proliferate unchecked,” with each adding “its own distinctive material while selecting, interpreting, and reinterpreting material derived directly from its predecessors.”5 Indeed, for Watson, cognizant of the early Church’s privileging of quite different texts in different local churches, “The fourfold gospel represents a decision about community order and organization rather than a historical, literary, or theological judgement about the nature of earlier gospel literature.”6 But for

2. Braaten, “Problem of Authority in the Church,” 55; see also Robert Jenson’s Canon and Creed. As Jenson states, “In some academic and ecclesial circles, canon and creed are even assumed to be in competition for our loyalty. The Scripture is regarded as a deposit of ancient Israelite and early Christian ‘religion’; and the creeds are thought to be the result of later and alienating ‘philosophical’ influences. . . . Thus it is widely supposed that we can cling to Scripture or cling to church doctrine, or possibly to both in different contexts, but cannot cling to both with the same grasp” (2). For a particularly rich meditation on the church, tradition, and Scripture, see Dumitru Staniloae, Experience of God, chap. 4: “The Church as the Instrument for Preserving Revelation.”

3. Dunn, The Oral Gospel Tradition, 353. See the valuable discussion provided by D. H. Williams, Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism, chaps. 2 and 3.

4. Dunn, The Oral Gospel Tradition, 360. Admittedly, Dunn thinks that this stable core allows for profound error in the retellings, so that the doctrinal traditions of the Christian churches are not of much value, in terms of referring to realities, except insofar as they contain the stable core. For Dunn, the content of this stable core does not include the worship of Christ (or Christ’s divinity); see Dunn, Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The Church’s doctrinal tradition, like canonical Scripture itself, does not do away with theological diversity, but it does make judgments that establish boundaries and paths for Christian reflection on faith and morals (much like the canonization of Scripture does). At stake is the intelligibility of the stable core as divine revelation.

5. Watson, Gospel Writing, 413.

6. Ibid., 407. Watson might better have said “as well as” instead of “rather than.” For the significance of eyewitness testimony, see Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses; Bauckham,
my purposes Dunn’s insight suffices to frame the issue; namely, our ability to hear and participate in divine revelation (“the core and substance of the tradition”) is inseparable from the covenantal community’s “tradition process.”

The New Testament itself recognizes this. After Jesus’s ascension, the community of disciples, gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem, takes center stage. After Pentecost, the community spends its days “attending the temple together” and liturgically “breaking bread” (Acts 2:46) as commanded by Jesus. Paul receives “a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12), but he also takes care to confer with Peter, James, and John. The community transmits its faith under the leadership of bishops and elders commissioned by the apostles to “care for God’s church” (1 Tim. 3:5) and to “attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). They are to “maintain the traditions” (1 Cor. 11:2), not least by celebrating the Eucharist as a communion in Christ’s body and blood (1 Cor. 10–11), a communion that makes the Church into “one body” (1 Cor. 10:17), the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27). Jesus promises to be with the community of believers “to the close of the age” (Matt. 28:20) and to guide them by his Spirit “into all truth” (John 16:13).

Put simply, we do not have divine revelation without faithful mediation—and the mediation of God’s words and deeds that we find in canonical Scripture is inseparable from the mediation of the covenantal community. The purpose of this book, then, is to explore the missional, liturgical, and doctrinal forms of the Church’s mediation of divine revelation and to appreciate Scripture’s inspiration and truth in this context. The first chapter examines the Church as a missional community formed by the revelatory missions of the Son and Holy Spirit. The second chapter argues that the liturgy is the primary context for the proclamation, interpretation, and enactment of God’s revelation. The third chapter explores the hierarchical priesthood as an instrument of unity in the mediation of divine revelation. The fourth chapter underscores that the
gospel cannot be separated from the Church’s councils and creeds. The fifth chapter engages the Church’s handing on of divine revelation in Tradition. The sixth chapter focuses on the development of doctrine that occurs as the Church’s understanding of divine revelation deepens under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The seventh chapter discusses the truth of inspired Scripture, with a focus on the question of historical reference. The eighth and final chapter examines the contributions of Hellenistic philosophical culture to the communication of divine revelation in Scripture’s portrait of the living God.

In my view, these eight chapters comprise the foundational elements of the mediation of divine revelation in the Church and in Scripture. Each chapter, however, treats an area of intense debate, not only between Protestants and Catholics but also among Catholics themselves. In dialogue with opposing views, each chapter argues that the Church (and/or Scripture) effectively mediates divine revelation under the guidance of Christ and his Spirit. In making my case, I draw extensively upon Scripture, as well as upon theologians such as Origen, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Henry Newman, Alexander Schmemann, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Joseph Ratzinger. I should note that none of the chapters is comprehensive in the sense of a synthetic survey. Instead, guided by the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum, each chapter engages a portion of the ongoing debate.

This book stands against “ecclesiastical fall narratives,” which call into question the very possibility of truthful mediation of divine revelation. We cannot cordon off the truth of the gospel (let alone Scripture or its interpretation) from the truthfulness of the Church, both because Scripture identifies the Church as the Spirit-filled interpreter of revelation and because historical study shows that scriptural texts and canonical Scripture itself are inextricably

8. The First Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Dei Filius, complements the emphases of Dei Verbum by focusing on the relationship between supernatural revelation, faith, and reason. Dei Filius also reaffirms the teachings of the Council of Trent regarding Scripture and Tradition:

This supernatural revelation, according to the belief of the universal church, as declared by the sacred council of Trent, is contained in written books and unwritten traditions, which were received by the apostles from the lips of Christ himself, or came to the apostles by the dictation of the holy Spirit, and were passed on as it were from hand to hand until they reached us. . . . Now since the decree on the interpretation of holy scripture, profitably made by the council of Trent, with the intention of constraining rash speculation, has been wrongly interpreted by some, we renew that decree and declare its meaning to be as follows: that in matters of faith and morals, belonging as they do to the establishing of christian doctrine, that meaning of holy scripture must be held to be the true one, which holy mother church held and holds, since it is her right to judge of the true meaning and interpretation of holy scripture. (Dei Filius, chap. 3, 806)

With respect to our reception of revelation, Dei Filius emphasizes that the Holy Spirit’s gift of supernatural faith enables us to believe.
embedded in the covenantal community. As a theological study of the mediation of divine revelation, the book complements other studies of revelation that focus on topics such as faith, prophecy, miracles, the perception of revelation, the development of the biblical canon, and so forth.⁹

Catholic Theology of Revelation since Vatican II: A Brief Sketch

Before proceeding, however, let me situate my approach on the broader map of contemporary discussions of the doctrine of revelation. Contemporary Catholic theology of revelation enjoys the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) as its touchstone.¹⁰ As a youthful theological advisor to Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne, Joseph Ratzinger played a major role in formulating the majority response to the preparatory Theological Commission’s Schema Constitutionis dogmaticae de fontibus Revelationis.¹¹ Ratzinger later described this Schema as “a canonization of Roman school theology,” and his summary of its contents identifies the central challenges facing the doctrine of revelation today. “All the relevant questions were decided in a purely defensive spirit: the greater extent of tradition in comparison with Scripture, a largely verbalistic conception of the idea of inspiration, the narrowest interpretation of inerrancy (‘in qualibet re religiose vel profana’), a conception of the historicity of the Gospels that suggested that there were no problems etc.”¹² In the view of Ratzinger and

⁹. On the perception of revelation, see especially Hans Urs von Balthasar, Glory of the Lord, especially vol. 1, Seeing the Form, as well as his Theo-Drama, especially vol. 1, Prolegomena. For a succinct discussion of Balthasar’s theology of revelation as the dramatic manifestation of God’s glory in the kenotic form of Jesus Christ, see Chapp, “Revelation.”

¹⁰. On Dei Verbum and its reception, from the perspective of scholars who came of age in the 1960s and who were significantly influenced by the nouvelle théologie, see Daley, “Knowing God in History and in the Church”; E. Martin, “Some Aspects of Biblical Studies since Vatican II”; E. Martin, “Revelation and Its Transmission”; Farkasfalvy, “Inspiration and Interpretation”; Scheffczyk, “Sacred Scripture”; Vanhoye, “Reception in the Church.”


¹². Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” 159. For the “Roman school” on inspiration, see, for example, Billot, De Inspiratione; Bea, De Inspiratione; Hopfl and Gut, Introductio Generalis. Ratzinger’s essay avoids the exaggerations that one finds in more triumphalistic accounts of the Second Vatican Council, such as Enzo Bianchi’s claim that “after centuries in exile the word of God once more occupies its central place in the life of the Catholic Church” (“Centrality of the Word of God,” 113). Bianchi goes on to say, more soberly but still without documentation regarding actual lay piety and with a seeming animus toward doctrine, that “it is true, of course, that the Catholic Church has always lived by the word of God. But inasmuch as habitual familiarity with the scriptures was reserved to clerics and specialists, the general situation was in fact one in which the centrality of the word was eclipsed, dimmed, as
others, the Schema’s approach largely ignored the crucial historical questions that needed answering. Ratzinger thought that had the Council Fathers accepted the Schema, they would have been shutting down the effort to address the Enlightenment’s historical challenges.  

What were these historical challenges? As Ratzinger says, the main one was that “the sacred books, believed to be the work of a very few authors to whom God had directly dictated his words, suddenly appeared as a work expressive of an entire human history, which had grown layer by layer throughout millennia, a history deeply interwoven with the religious history of surrounding peoples.” A similar situation held for the Church’s tradition and development of doctrine: “Liturgical forms and customs, dogmatic formulations thought to have arisen with the apostles, now appeared as products of complicated processes of growth within the womb of history. And the very human factors in this growth were becoming increasingly evident.”  

it were, by ecclesiastical traditions and a system of doctrinal and disciplinary mediations that intervened between the consciousness of the faithful and the sacred scriptures, which served only in a formal sense as the criterion for the validity or invalidity of the life of the Church” (115). Bianchi’s article includes valuable insights nonetheless, including his warning against “a neo-Marcionist choice of some biblical texts and rejection of others” and his insistence on “the fact that the liturgy and prayer are the authentic and truly fruitful context for the word and that only in union with the Church as a whole can a full understanding of the scriptures be achieved” (135). 

13. Thus Komonchak comments, “The Council can be read as an acceptance by the Church of the challenges of historical consciousness: acceptance of the need and role of critical history; a new awareness of and appreciation for cultural and historical diversity; a greater sense of individual and collective responsibility for the future of humanity. Catholic theology could not but be affected at its roots. The reign of neo-scholasticism ended with astonishing speed. History, social science, and hermeneutics became integral dimensions of the theological enterprise” (“Local Realization of the Church,” 87). See also de la Potterie, “History and Truth,” for a position on “truth-as-revelation” (98) sensitive to the twin problems of historicist and Hegelian understandings of history; and, for the way in which the Church’s acceptance “of the challenges of historical consciousness” was molded by desire for a restored unity of Christ and culture, Reno’s “Rahner the Restorationist.”  

14. Ratzinger, Theological Highlights of Vatican II, 148. For background to this development, see Legaspi, Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies. Legaspi focuses on the contributions made by the German scholar Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791), although historical-critical work has been ongoing at least since the Renaissance. Legaspi helpfully points us to the critique of Michaelis’s approach offered by Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), who questioned “the internal coherence of a method that contextualized the Bible in purely human terms” (Legaspi, Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies, 161). At stake is what notion of “history” we bring to our biblical exegesis: Is it the providential and Christological-pneumatological view of “history” taught by the Bible, or is it a notion of “history” shorn of God? See also along these lines Ratzinger, Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism, xi–xxiv; Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict.”  

15. Ratzinger, Theological Highlights of Vatican II, 148. See also Ratzinger’s “On the Status of the Church and Theology Today,” 379–82, where he describes the background to Gaudium et Spes.
Thus Ratzinger and many others rejoiced when in fall 1962 Pope Paul VI removed the Schema from the Council’s agenda and instead created a “Mixed Commission,” which included Cardinal Frings, to oversee the revision of the Schema. When in 1964 serious work began on the text that was to become Dei Verbum, a subcommission was appointed that included Ratzinger, Yves Congar, Alois Grillmeier, Karl Rahner, and others of generally like mind.16

The approach to divine revelation that informs Dei Verbum can be seen in the work of the Jesuit theologian René Latourelle. Born nine years before Ratzinger, Latourelle published his Théologie de la Révélation in 1963, and in 1966 an expanded edition appeared in English.17 Latourelle recognizes that revelation “is closely bound up with many other realities, such as history, Incarnation, Church, light of faith, the economy of signs (miracles) which accompany or constitute revelation.”18 He focuses on Jesus Christ, who is the incarnate Son of God, and on the faith-filled Church that lives in history. Along these lines, Latourelle states that “we can say that history is revelation, that Christ is revelation in person, that the light of faith is inner revelation, that the Church is concrete revelation, that miracles are a revelation of accomplished salvation.”19 He emphasizes three categories for understanding revelation: word, testimony, and encounter. These three are joined intimately together; for example, a “word”

16. For further historical background to Dei Verbum, see Wicks, “Dei Verbum Developing”; Wicks, “Dei Verbum under Revision”; as well as more specialized articles by Wicks cited in these two pieces. Wicks makes use of diaries and recollections of the Council by notable periti including Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Umberto Betti, and Gérard Philips. See Congar, My Journal of the Council; de Lubac, Carnets du concile; Betti, Diario del concilio; Betti, La dottrina del Concilio Vaticano; Philips, Carnets conciliaires de Mgr. Gérard Philips.

17. See Latourelle, Theology of Revelation. The English edition has a final chapter on Dei Verbum. From the same time period, see also Moran, Theology of Revelation; Rahner and Ratzinger, Revelation and Tradition. Ratzinger’s essay in Revelation and Tradition has been reprinted as “Question of the Concept of Tradition.” See also Ratzinger, Theology of History in St. Bonaventure, 64–69. Discussing Ratzinger’s perspective, W. Wright observes: Revelation, then, involves both the objective content of the Word of God and its subjective reception in believers. . . . The ecclesial reception and interpretation of the realities of Jesus’s life can be regarded as essential to revelation because of the presence of the Word both in the life of Jesus and in the Church and believers by faith. The process of ecclesial reception and interpretation in faith of biblical realities, evident in the New Testament traditions of the institution of the Eucharist, can be extended analogously to the post-biblical Church. The non-identity of revelation and Scripture, the fact that the reality of revelation is more than Scripture, and the presence of the indwelling Word in the Church and believers by faith all create the space for the post-biblical articulation of revelation’s contents in the Church’s dogmatic formulae. (“Pre-Gospel Traditions and Post-critical Interpretation,” 1025–26) See also Canty, “Bonaventurian Resonances”; F. Martin, “Joseph Ratzinger”; Bellandi, Fede cristiana.


19. Ibid.
in this sense has a specific content, addresses or calls another person, and un-
veils something of the interiority of the speaker. As Latourelle says, “Word is
primarily an interpersonal encounter.” As revealed by his word, God “wants
to be a Me addressing You, in an interpersonal and living relationship, with a
view towards communication, dialogue, sharing.” God’s word reveals that
he is love; his word is love. God’s love appears especially in God’s sharing
knowledge about himself with us. Thus Latourelle states, “The mystery of
the Trinity, primarily, is the divine secret par excellence, the secret of divine
intimacy, known only to the three Divine Persons, for only they make up this
secret. . . . In revealing this secret, God initiates man into what is most intimate
in God: the mystery of his own life, the heart of his personal subsistence.” In

teaching us about his triune life, God invites us to share in his life as friends.

In the history of salvation, prophets and apostles give testimony to God’s
word; and Christ preeminently gives testimony. Latourelle remarks, “This
testimony the Church receives, preserves, and protects, but also proposes,
explains, interprets, assimilates, and grows to understand more and more.”
Even the revelatory activity of the holy Trinity can be conceived in terms of
testimony. The Son gives testimony to the Father, but the Father too testifies
to the Son in many ways—by testifying at Christ’s baptism, by raising Christ,
and by drawing people to faith in Christ. Similarly the Son gives testimony to
the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit comes to testify to the Son. Latourelle observes,
“There are three who reveal or give testimony and these three are one. The
testimony is a secret bond between eternity and time, between heaven and
earth.”

The testimony of the apostles to their intimacy with Christ shows
that the Church is established upon “an initiation to the personal mystery
which is he himself [Christ].” Latourelle emphasizes that revelation must be
understood as a communication between persons: “Persons are not problems
which can be enclosed within a formula and solved in an equation. Persons
can be known only by revelation. We have access to personal intimacy only
through the free testimony of the person. And persons testify to themselves only
under the inspiration of love.” Divine revelation abounds in truth content,

20. Ibid., 316. Along similar lines, see Kuntz’s study of Old Testament theophanies, Self-
Revelation of God.
21. Latourelle, Theology of Revelation, 318. For a similar perspective on revelation and faith,
see Ratzinger, Offenbarungsverständnis, especially 88–102.
23. Ibid., 320.
24. Ibid., 321.
25. Ibid., 323.
26. Ibid. It would be a mistake to follow this path to the exclusion of human knowledge of God
by natural reason. On this point see, for example, White, “Toward a Post-Secular, Post-Conciliar

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but this content is not merely impersonal facts about God known outside the realm of living faith, hope, and love.

In comparison to Latourelle’s book, as well as to comparable Eastern Orthodox approaches such as that of Dumitru Staniloae’s *Revelation and the Knowledge of God* (published in 1978 as the first volume of his *Dogmatic Theology*), the leading Catholic treatments of divine revelation in the decade following the Council sound a different and, all too frequently, a discordant note. 27 In *God the Future of Man* (1968) and *The Understanding of Faith* (1974), for example, Edward Schillebeeckx describes his decision to do theology hermeneutically and critically by reconceiving all doctrine on the basis of a new liberative praxis (broadly modeled by Jesus) that anticipates the One who is coming. Schillebeeckx breaks decisively with the approach of his earlier two-volume collection of essays, *Revelation and Theology*, essays that had been

27. Staniloae’s book appeared in English as *The Experience of God*. In this book, Staniloae first treats natural revelation of “the supreme Personal reality” (9) and then explores how “in supernatural revelation, God makes himself known clearly as person, inasmuch as he calls and sends out a particular person to a particular human community” (24). He succinctly treats God’s supernatural acts in salvation history, and he observes that “the truly new and final period is inaugurated by the extraordinary supernatural acts of Jesus Christ” (26). Regarding Scripture and tradition, Staniloae observes insightfully:

The Church is the milieu in which the content of Scripture or of revelation is imparted through tradition. Scripture or revelation needs tradition as a means of activating their content, and they need the Church as the practicing subject of tradition and the milieu where the content of Scripture or of revelation is imparted. But the Church also needs Scripture in order to be quickened through it and grow in the knowledge and experience of Christ, and to apply the Scripture more and more richly in her own life through tradition. (54)

Regarding the Church, Staniloae comments further:

As revelation incorporated and lived out by a human community, the Church herself is a part of revelation, namely, the point where revelation has its final end and begins to bear fruit. In his resurrection and ascension as man, the Son of God had to reach the endpoint of his work of salvation and revelation so that he might send his Spirit through whom he imparts to men his own final state or revelation and might, thus, found the Church simultaneously with the descent of the Spirit into men. . . . Revelation gives birth to the Church as the concrete and continuing means through which the humanity saved in Christ extends outwards in time and space. With this in view, the Church gives rise to the full organizing of her own essential structures, a work carried out and put into practice by tradition at its beginning, but described afterwards only in part within the Scripture of the New Testament. By preserving apostolic tradition in this way, the Church has thereby also preserved the integrity of revelation, even though, on the other hand, she is herself the work of revelation. (56)
at the cutting edge of Catholic theological discourse during the two decades over which they were written. Somewhat similarly, James Burtchaell’s *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration Since 1810: A Review and Critique* (1969) concludes with respect to the inspiration of Scripture that “this has been an unhappy controversy” and that “too many men struggled for too many years to such meagre advantage.” Another representative work, Nicholas Lash’s *Change in Focus: A Study of Doctrinal Change and Continuity* (1973), argues that new creeds will be needed to update and reenvision dogmatic formulae.

In 1983 Avery Dulles’s *Models of Revelation* appeared, rooted in research undertaken in the 1970s and demonstrating a keen awareness of current trends. The first part of Dulles’s book divides theories of revelation into five “models”: propositional doctrine (the neoscholastics, Carl F. H. Henry), salvation history (Oscar Cullmann, Jean Daniélou, Wolfhart Pannenberg), inner experience (Friedrich Schleiermacher, George Tyrrell, William James), dialectical presence (Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann), and new awareness or transformed consciousness (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, Paul Tillich). Dulles indicates the strengths and weaknesses of each approach without fully agreeing with any of them.

In his constructive theological section (part 2 of the book), Dulles develops a “symbolic approach” to revelation, indebted to Karl Rahner’s theology of symbol. Dulles explains that “revelation precedes faith inasmuch as, before anyone can believe, there must be symbols wherein God expresses what he is, and wills to be, for the world. These symbols, before their meaning is understood and accepted, are virtual revelation.” In this sense, revelation has priority.

28. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, especially his nuanced account of the anthropocentrism of Schleiermacher and Ritschl. For Niebuhr, “because God and faith belong together the standpoint of the Christian theologian must be in the faith of the Christian community, directed toward the God of Jesus Christ. Otherwise his standpoint will be that of some other community with another faith and another god. There is no neutral standpoint and no faithless situation from which approach can be made to that which is inseparable from faith” (37). Niebuhr seeks to highlight the experiential and personal dimension of revelation, its existential immediacy (thereby downgrading the historical mediation of revelation), without falling into anthropocentrism or neglecting the centrality of Jesus Christ:

Revelation means the moment in our history through which we know ourselves to be known from beginning to end, in which we are apprehended by the knower; it means the self-disclosing of that eternal knower. . . . What this means for us cannot be expressed in the impersonal ways of creeds or other propositions but only in responsive acts of a personal character. We acknowledge revelation by no third person proposition, such as that there is a God, but only in the direct confession of the heart, “Thou art my God.” (152–54) Why “responsive acts of a personal character” should exclude “creeds or other propositions,” however, is unclear.

29. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, 279. See also his *Revelation Theology*. It is difficult to understand exactly what Dulles means by invoking “symbols wherein God expresses what he
In another sense, says Dulles, faith has priority because the symbols provided by God yield their meaning only to seekers who possess “a kind of implicit faith.” In my view the category of “symbol” is insufficient when it comes to the cognitive dimension of divine revelation, which includes what Nicholas Wolterstorff terms “divine discourse.” Yet Dulles, as one would expect, provides an excellent account of what the doctrine of revelation is about:

Christian faith and theology, for nearly two thousand years, have been predicated on the conviction that God gave a permanently valid revelation concerning himself in biblical times—a revelation that deepened progressively with the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets, until it reached an unsurpassable climax in Jesus Christ. The Christian Church down through the centuries has been committed to this revelation and has sought to propagate it, defend it, and explain its implications.

Although Dulles’s book remains the best-known Catholic study in English of the doctrine of revelation, two further works deserve our attention. The first is John F. Haught’s *The Revelation of God in History* (1988). Haught’s book...
exemplifies the impact of the antipropositional shift in Catholic theology. He emphasizes that “revelation is not primarily the uncovering of information that is otherwise inaccessible to reason and ordinary experience. Such a ‘gnostic’ idea, tempting though it has been since very early in the history of Christianity, trivializes the idea of revelation, making it appeal more to our sense of curiosity than to our need for transformation and hope.”


34. Ibid. Along the same lines, Haught remarks that revelation is not informative in the sense of adding horizontally to the list of “facts” in the content of our consciousness. Revelation is the unfolding of a relationship between God and the world. . . . Revelation does not give us information that may be placed side by side with scientific knowledge. Instead revelation mediates to us the mystery of God’s boundlessly loving relationship to the universe, society, history and personality. . . . Science and history can provide helpful assistance in understanding the circumstances within which the mystery of God is disclosed. But it would be a misunderstanding of revelation to place its content in the same realm of ideas as those discussed by cosmologists, scientists or historians. Revelation, as the uncovering of God’s relation to the world, offers us a content that is much more pervasive and foundational than what we can receive through ordinary ways of gathering information. It will appear as unrealistic only if we try to transform this content into the relatively trivial mode of competing information about the world or history. (90–91)

But if revelation unfolds a relationship in history between God and humans, it is unclear how such a relationship could unfold without adding to our propositional judgments of truth (including truth about history), given that our mode of knowing is inescapably propositional.

35. Ibid., 93. Here Haught rightly emphasizes that faith in divine revelation enables us to avoid placing our hope and trust in such things as our status among our peers or our human friendships, which cannot bear the weight of our desire for an unconditional and enduring love. As he says, “Instead we can see others’ love and fidelity as symbols or sacraments of an ultimate fidelity to promise. And when the others fail us, their weaknesses need not be taken as a major threat to our own sense of significance” (ibid).

36. Ibid., 68.

37. Ibid., 68–69. Haught prefices these remarks by noting:

In the writings of the New Testament and in Christian tradition we are told, often in so many words, that the fullness of revelation occurs in Jesus the Christ. Can a Christian
Haught does not think that he has thereby devalued the particularity of Christ. He suggests that the role of this particularity, as found in Scripture, is to “provide the liberating images in which our consciousness dwells so that it may break out into an exploration of the inexhaustible mystery that manifests itself everywhere and especially in the world’s religious traditions.” The particularity of Jesus Christ provides “liberating images” that propel us into the “inexhaustible mystery” that is always revealing itself, both in the wonder of the universe and in the profound symbols of all the world’s religions. For Haught, the most important way in which Christ orients us in hope toward transcendent mystery is by his “reference to God as ‘Abba.’” Here Haught himself seems to introduce something of a propositional element into revelation: “The term ‘Abba’ already signifies that each person is cared for in a way that should evoke a child-like sense of trust, as well as an awareness of the futility of our attempts to secure our existence by way of heroics. Jesus’s parables all unfold this central idea.”

In my view, Haught’s critique of propositional revelation makes God’s revelation much less personal, as well as much less rich in its content. Thus Haught can say only that the Church is “founded by the revelatory promise and is itself a sign or ‘sacrament’ of God’s fidelity to the promise of an ultimately fulfilling future for the world and history,” rather than saying that Jesus Christ established his Church out of love for us. Haught provides a sense of the multitude of images that point humans toward the ineffable transcendent, and he underscores God’s unconditional love. But he does not give a real sense of the ways in which God’s revelation transforms not only our hearts but also honestly engage other religions while clinging to this particularity of belief? Avery Dulles quite correctly says: “Without repudiating its own foundations Christianity cannot deny the permanent and universal significance of Jesus Christ as the preeminent ‘real symbol’ of God’s turning to the world in merciful love.” But, as Dulles and other theologians also insist, such a confessional statement does not preclude the possibility of open dialogue and genuine willingness to learn new things about mystery from other positions. The problem here consists in Haught’s description of Christianity as a “pathway to mystery,” and his corresponding reduction of the grace of the Holy Spirit to “the graciousness of mystery” (97). Christianity is much more than this.

38. Ibid., 69.
39. Ibid., 78.
40. Ibid. At the end of his book, Haught approves “the existence of a Church and a teaching tradition” as made necessary “by the intrinsically social, narrative and historical character of revelation” (97), but it is unclear what propositional knowledge could be rightly taught by the Church, within the limits of Haught’s approach (other than the unconditional love that “God” offers us).
41. Ibid., 98.

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our minds through cognitive content (as, for instance, in Paul’s affirmation that “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” [Rom. 10:9]). The result is a reductive vision of the Christian life, a restriction on the divine teaching that pertains to “our abiding within a community founded on hope in God’s promise” and to our “actively shaping history through the practice of justice and liberation.”

Much more fruitful is Gerald O’Collins’s *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* (2011), which builds upon various earlier books by O’Collins, including his *Theology and Revelation* (1968), *Fundamental Theology* (1981), and *Retrieving Fundamental Theology* (1993).43 O’Collins’s *Rethinking Fundamental Theology* takes up a wide range of themes, as befits his understanding of “fundamental theology.” For example, he has chapters on the existence and

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attributes of God, Jesus Christ’s preaching and miracles, Jesus’s paschal mystery, and Jesus’s founding of the hierarchical Church. In each of these chapters he devotes extensive labor to showing the plausibility of central Christian claims, such as God’s existence, the reliability of the Gospels, the truth of Jesus’s resurrection, and Jesus’s preparation for a hierarchical Church that would last for some time (rather than supposing that Jesus expected the eschatological end to come immediately). An apologetic focus also colors his chapters on themes that pertain more explicitly to the doctrine of revelation: for example, his chapters on “general and special revelation,” on faith as the response to revelation, on Tradition, on Scripture’s inspiration and truth, and on the universal presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit and thus the relationship of Christian revelation to other religions.

With respect to the themes that I treat in the present book, O’Collins’s Rethinking Fundamental Theology provides a valuable introduction, marked by clear and accessible synthesis. With Latourelle and Dei Verbum, O’Collins holds that “revelation is primarily a personal encounter with God (who is the Truth) rather than the communication of a body of truths.” Yet he also makes clear that the personal model and the propositional model of revelation need not be in conflict. After all, in human knowing, “experience, thought, and language form a distinguishable but inseparable unity. . . . It is impossible for us as thinking and speaking beings to have non-interpreted experiences.”

Far from excluding the propositional model, the personal model of revelation implies propositional content. As O’Collins says, “The experience of a revealing and redemptive dialogue with God does not remain private, incommunicable, and locked away within an inarticulate subjectivity. . . . In addressing human beings, God says something that they can formulate and pass on.” Nor are these propositions simply a second-order articulation of a primal experience. Within the revelatory experience itself, there is cognitive content.

O’Collins also carefully argues that “at the heart of the biblical history of revelation and salvation lies a set of events which certainly occurred—to be experienced then by believers and non-believers alike and accessible now to common historical investigation.” In these events, God does not act in a way that would force people to believe; instead, God ensures that “we have enough light to make us responsible but not enough to take away our freedom.”

O’Collins speaks of a “foundational” revelation in Israel and Christ Jesus (as
interpreted by his apostles). This foundational revelation gives rise to an ongoing “dependent” revelation, since the foundational revelation “continues and calls people to faith in a living encounter with God.” 49 Both the foundational and the “dependent” revelation are ordered to a future or “eschatological” revelation in which God’s saving work is entirely complete. 50 Lest there be any misunderstanding, O’Collins makes clear that the “dependent” or “ongoing revelation does not add to the essential ‘content’ of what was fully revealed through Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and the sending of the Holy Spirit.” 51

When he turns to the Church’s mediation of divine revelation, O’Collins points out that “the first Christians and their leaders, the original recipients and bearers of the normative revelation in Christ, will play for all time an indispensable role in understanding and interpreting Jesus, his teaching, and all the events in which he was involved.” 52 The Gospels show that Jesus chose twelve disciples from his wider group of followers and “gave them some kind of authoritative office and leadership role.” 53 Even though the New Testament is not entirely clear with respect to the various offices it describes (for example, episcopoi, presbyters, deacons), the New Testament bears witness that the early Christian communities were ordered in a hierarchical rather than egalitarian fashion. If we believe that the Holy Spirit was powerfully at work among the early Christians, then it makes sense “to recognize that the same Spirit guided Christians in the foundational period to develop certain forms of leadership and, later, to collect into a canon the Scriptures which reflect that development (in particular, Acts and the Pastoral Epistles).” 54 The Church is apostolic not least, then, in its ordered episcopal structure.

Regarding Tradition, O’Collins first shows that its practical necessity has been ecumenically accepted, and so the question now is how to distinguish authoritative Tradition. With respect to the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, he points out that “if the community’s tradition, along with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, led to the formation of the Scriptures, one would

49. Ibid., 131. Mistakenly, in my view, O’Collins criticizes John Henry Newman’s position that the development of doctrine does not constitute “new” revelation. O’Collins wants to emphasize the ongoing character of revelation, the living encounter with Christ in the Spirit that is still happening today.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid. O’Collins goes on to say that our “believing in” and ‘believing that’ also involve accepting the foundational witness to the experience of God coming from the Old Testament and the New Testament. When experiencing in faith who God is and what God is like, believers today depend on the prophetic and apostolic witness” (167).
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 277.
54. Ibid., 287.
expect tradition to remain active in interpreting and applying the Scriptures.”

The Bible in this sense cannot be separated from the Church, even though, as Dei Verbum affirms, the Church’s magisterium serves the scriptural word of God rather than the other way around. The Holy Spirit’s guidance of the Church includes working through the bishops (including—uniquely—the bishop of Rome), rather than simply working through “individual believers reading the Scriptures, preachers expounding the Scriptures, and ministers using the Scriptures in administering the sacraments.” It is the Holy Spirit that enables the Church to hand on Tradition—that is, to hand on the entirety of what has been revealed in Jesus Christ. O’Collins discusses eight elements that guide the Church and individual believers in discerning the true content of this Tradition: the magisterium, the Vincentian canon, the “sensus fidei,” continuity with the apostolic Church, the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, apostolicity, Scripture, and the risen Lord. He remarks that the Church of each generation inevitably hands on Tradition in a somewhat different form from that in which it had been received, although “an essential continuity is maintained.”

O’Collins differentiates Scripture from revelation per se, since the written words record the interpersonal events that constitute divine revelation. Scripture also includes much material that God inspired to be present but that does not directly record events or words in which God was explicitly making himself known. O’Collins defines biblical inspiration as “a special impulse from the Holy Spirit to set certain things down in writing,” and thus all who were involved in the writing and editing of scriptural texts were inspired by the Holy Spirit. In this way God is the “author” of Scripture. O’Collins argues that the whole of Scripture was written and edited under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit but that, nonetheless, not all biblical texts possess the same degree of inspiration. The charism of inspiration ended after the last biblical text was written, since it “belonged to the divine activity of establishing the Church.” The entire inspired Bible is inerrant, but only in a certain sense, since the Bible does contain errors that arise from the specific intentions of the biblical authors (for example, they did not intend to write natural science), as well as from their cultural presuppositions and the genres in which they wrote. Rather than being a string of true propositions, Scripture exhibits progress in truth—for example, in its understanding of God. The whole Bible

55. Ibid., 198.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 215.
58. Ibid., 224.
59. Ibid., 232.
is nonetheless inerrant because the Bible, as a canonical whole, is about Christ
and about life in Christ.\textsuperscript{60}

This above brief summary indicates three postconciliar paths in Catholic
theology of divine revelation. The first (Dulles) focuses on the category of
“symbol” so as to express the richness of revelation, with its interplay of event
and word, and to get beyond propositionalist accounts of revelation—without
denying the role of propositions. The second (Haught) leaves propositional
revelation almost entirely behind and argues that “revelation” simply consists
in human images that express God’s love for us and that orient us trustingly
toward transcendent mystery. The third (O’Collins 2011) securely retrieves
propositional revelation, but in a manner that prioritizes the personal dimen-
sion of revelation that the advocates of “symbol” highlighted. For readers
looking for a synthetic introduction, O’Collins’s book is the one to read.\textsuperscript{61}

Recent Protestant Approaches: Paul Ricoeur, Richard Swinburne,
and Colin Gunton

Three recent Protestant approaches to the doctrine of revelation also merit
attention. First, in his short but widely read essay “Toward a Hermeneutic
of the Idea of Revelation” (1977), Paul Ricoeur emphasizes that revelation is not
“the body of doctrines imposed by the magisterium as the rule of orthodoxy.”\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60.} See ibid., 242–43. Earlier, O’Collins states, “The series of collective experiences, in which
God acts and which together make up the history of revelation and salvation, include events that
undoubtedly took place (like the reign of King David, deportation to Babylon, the preaching of
John the Baptist, the ministry of Jesus, and the fall of Jerusalem) and things like the creation
and fall of Adam and Eve that have a mythical rather than an historical character” (80). In his
section on biblical inerrancy, he remarks that the early chapters of Genesis aim to
reflect on the nature of God and human beings, and in no sense give even an incomplete
account of the “pre-historical” origins of the human race. If we ignore that fact, hopeless
puzzles turn up. When, for instance, Cain murdered Abel and was about to be sent away
as “a fugitive and wanderer upon the earth,” God “put a mark on Cain, lest any who
came upon him should kill him.” So Cain left Eden for the land of Nod, “knew his wife,
and she conceived Enoch” (Gen. 4:15–17). We would mistreat the story if we were to start
asking: where did the others come from who might have threatened Cain’s life? For that
matter, where did his wife come from, if Adam and Eve were the parents of all human
beings? Genesis is not a book about human origins that answers such questions. (238–39)
I agree that Genesis does not answer such questions, but it seems that we do need to defend
the unity of the human race and a historical fall. For recent, divergent perspectives on this topic,
see Kemp, “Science, Theology, and Monogenesis”; Enns, Evolution of Adam.

\textsuperscript{61.} Mention should also be made of Grant Kaplan’s Answering the Enlightenment, a historical
study of the nineteenth-century Tübingen theologian Johannes Kuhn. This book has valuable over-
views of the reductive accounts of revelation offered by Gotthold Lessing, Immanuel Kant, and Jo-
hann Gottlieb Fichte. See also Kaplan’s edition of Kuhn’s writings, Faithfully Seeking Understanding.


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Nor should revelation, in his view, be understood as divine speech, let alone as divine authorship of biblical texts or as the making known of the goal of history. Instead, Ricoeur suggests that revelation is rooted in certain founding events marked by “God’s trace,” as refracted in the poetics of narrative/prophecy/law/wisdom/psalm. The resulting “revelation” consists in the manifestation of a new world or new being. Indebted to Jean Nabert’s Désir de Dieu, Ricoeur also highlights the category of “testimony.” The main thing for Ricoeur, advocating a strongly antipropositional view, is that “in none of its modalities may revelation be included in and dominated by knowledge,” because “the God who reveals himself is a hidden God and hidden things belong to him.”

In Richard Swinburne’s Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy (1992), by contrast, we find a strong defense of propositional revelation linked to an emphasis on revelation’s credibility. Swinburne first provides an analysis of terms that have to do with propositional and symbolic communication, including an account of analogy and metaphor rooted in analytic philosophy, as well as a survey of various genres such as typology and allegory. He then offers some preambles to the plausibility of revelation: an all-powerful and all-good God exists, humans have free will and can shape their character in ways that fit them for heaven, humans need instruction about how to live and

63. Ibid., 80–81.
64. Ibid., 93. Nicholas Wolterstorff comments insightfully on Ricoeur’s position: At the end of the discussion, God’s speech has entirely disappeared from view, completely absorbed by manifestation; and it is not even clear that the manifestation brought to speech in biblical discourse is God’s self-manifestation, as opposed to agentless manifestation. . . . A striking feature of Ricoeur’s discussion is his complete neglect of the fact that attributions of speech to God pervade all the discourse-genres of the Bible. . . . To use Ricoeur’s conceptuality: an aspect of the world projected by all these texts is that of God speaking. Ricoeur has resisted the “imprisonment” (76) of revelation within the divine-speech model in such a way as to imprison divine speech within the manifestation model. (Divine Discourse, 62)

Wolterstorff insists upon the importance, in Scripture and theology, of the claim that God speaks (though not through a vocal apparatus, of course), so that revelation is not limited only to “manifestational” revelation but also includes propositional revelation of various kinds. But he also carefully distinguishes between divine speech (deputized and appropriated) and “revelation,” even though, as he says, “divine assertion is one of the media of divine revelation” (35). For Wolterstorff’s helpful account of biblical prophecy and apostolic teaching, see Divine Discourse, 45–51. Rowan Williams too interacts at some length with Ricoeur’s proposal, which provides the building blocks of Williams’s own approach, but Williams’s focus is on how Christians “develop meaningful constructs out of historical process and decision” (“Trinity and Revelation,” 132). Thus, in his view, “revelation” as revolving around Jesus is grounded in Jesus’s power to generate a new community. Williams is trying to grapple, in a nonmetaphysical and community-focused fashion, with how the first followers of Jesus ended up associating him so closely with the “decisive generative quality” (broadly understood) of the Creator God (143). F. Martin engages more fruitfully with Ricoeur’s theory of revelation in “Literary Theory, Philosophy of History, and Exegesis.”
about what God has done to rescue them from sinful alienation and to make them fit for heaven, humans become good by making an effort to learn about God and by helping each other to learn about and obey God. To be plausible, revelation needs to be true, but it does not have to be true in all ways, since God can allow for the presence of some culture-relative concepts. For Swinburne too, “An effective revelation cannot consist solely of original documents or other proclamations; continuing guidance is required, a mechanism which helps translators of the original revelation to get their translation right.”65 This mechanism could be some kind of infallibility, or it could be simply God’s ensuring that the Church will never get the crucial things permanently wrong. A true revelation cannot be something that can be empirically proven to be false. Miracles, and resurrection above all, count as significant evidence in favor of the veracity of a revelation, but these miracles should not be so evident as to undermine the arduous and meritorious striving for God that belongs to the purpose of revelation.66

On the basis of this reflection on the possibility of revelation and on how we might recognize a true revelation, Swinburne turns to God’s actual revelation, which he describes as follows: “The original propositional revelation was the teaching of God to the Israelites of the centuries BC about himself and his dealings with them and other nations, culminating in the teaching of Jesus Christ, including his teaching about the significance of his actions, and the teaching of the first apostles about the significance of those actions.”67 Without downgrading Jesus’s deeds (or other revelatory events), Swinburne focuses on “propositional revelation”—that is, on the communication of truths, including, of course, truths about Jesus’s deeds. He holds that such revelation came definitively to an end at the death of the last apostle, and he notes that this revelation existed prior to canonical Scripture.68 He pays careful attention

65. Swinburne, Revelation, 81.
66. William Abraham, in a study that focuses on how revelation can be said to count as “knowledge,” argues that the believer who recognizes faith as enabling a real knowledge of God’s revelation can justify this knowledge on the basis not of a general theory of epistemology (let alone simply on the basis of entering into the world of the biblical narratives) but on the basis of all the public resources for communal and personal knowing that the canonical heritage provides. See Abraham, Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation. This emphasis on the canonical heritage seems appropriate, but I do not think that realist epistemology needs to be discarded.
68. For a quite different approach, see Thiemann, Revelation and Theology, indebted especially to Barth’s Church Dogmatics, I.1, The Doctrine of the Word of God, and III.2, The Doctrine of Creation, as well as to the work of George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, and Stanley Hauerwas. Thiemann is particularly interested in the possibility and actuality of divine revelation given the structures of human cognition and faith. Thiemann emphasizes, however, that the only basis for answering such questions consists in Scripture’s “narrated promise addressed to the reader” (Revelation
to the genres of New Testament writings and recognizes that sometimes it is
difficult to be certain whether the New Testament authors (or for that matter
the Old Testament authors) intended to be speaking literally or metaphorically.
Three groups of Jesus’s actions strike him as clearly attested by the New
Testament: founding a Church, dying on the cross, and rising from the dead.
The resurrection of Jesus has the preeminent role in historical arguments for
the truthfulness of Christian revelation. In Swinburne’s view, having given a
revelation open to interpretation, God had also to “provide a Church in which
such interpretations have some chance of being correct.”

This means that
today we face the problem of discerning which Christian community is the
Church that Christ founded.

Much depends for Swinburne on this insistence that there needs to be a
(generally) doctrinally faithful Church as a “vehicle of revelation.” Yet he
is well aware of the major differences between Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman
Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Protestantism. He traces out views of doc-
trinal development—which, as he makes clear, long precede Newman—and
of the authority of Scripture and of the Church (including councils and the
pope). On this basis, he concludes that “we need an external criterion for a
development, that is, that it is developed in a Church which is the ‘closest
continuer’ of the Church of the apostles.”

Here he favors the view of dogma
and Church structure that he associates with the Anglican and Eastern Ortho-
dox churches. He also devotes a chapter to creeds, focusing on how the creeds
use words—for instance, the attribution of “omnipotent” to God (Swinburne
accepts a Scotist view of univocity) and the metaphorical description of Jesus
Christ as being at the right hand of the Father.

Swinburne’s final chapter treats the Bible, beginning with some comments on
the various biblical genres. He allows for “false scientific or historical presup-
positions” in Scripture, as well as for broadly historical writings that include

and Theology, 25). For Thiemann, to encounter God’s revelation is to be drawn into the biblical
text and to accept the text’s promise as true. See also the narrative theology of Surin, Turnings
of Darkness and Light. For a critique of such approaches, see Murphy, God Is Not a Story.

69. Swinburne, Revelation, 119. For criticism of this position as a circular argument, see
Ward, Religion and Revelation, 245–47. Ward concludes that “Swinburne is not wrong to think
the Church is important in establishing historical credibility, as are the resurrection and back-
ground belief in God. What is wrong is the attempt to find one independent guarantee of bibili-
credibility. There are in fact many reasons inclining one to accept the New Testament as basically reliable” (246). I think that Swinburne would agree that there are many reasons, while
continued to insist on the necessity of the existence of an authoritative Church. Swinburne and
Ward at least agree that Christian theology cannot do without plausible historical claims about
Jesus Christ; see Ward’s criticisms of the position of Harvey, The Historian and the Believer.

70. Swinburne, Revelation, 124.
71. Ibid., 141.
material that the author did not intend to be taken as literal historical exposition, and he notes that the redaction of biblical books sometimes significantly altered their meaning.\(^\text{72}\) He evaluates issues such as pseudopigraphy with an eye to whether it affects biblical truth. He emphasizes the unity of the Bible, with God as its author, and he explores how this should affect our reading of the various biblical texts. In his view, Scripture cannot simply be interpreted by Scripture but instead requires, if it is to be read as communicating revelation, that it be read through “the Church’s creeds and other tradition of public teaching of items treated as central to the Gospel message.”\(^\text{73}\) In this way, the New Testament governs the reading of the Old and in some cases requires metaphorical reading of Old Testament passages.

In short, Swinburne’s approach is couched as a philosophical study of what would be necessary for a divine revelation (with cognitive content, and thus propositional) to be truly given, and of whether Christian claims to have received divine revelation are plausible and, if so, how. He focuses in particular on the Church and the Bible, which lead him into topics such as the Church’s authority and creeds (doctrinal development) and the Bible’s unity, genres, and truth. He gives significant weight to the resurrection of Jesus as the guarantee of the truthfulness of the gospel. I find his account of the Church, gospel, and Scripture to be nuanced and balanced, even if I occasionally disagree with him. Some will be put off by his evident debt to John Locke and by his efforts to sift the “evidence for the truth of revelation,” given that he does not highlight the role of the Holy Spirit and the eyes of faith (as I think he should do).\(^\text{74}\) But to my mind, he has offered a valuable exposition of the basic issues that are in play in any defense of the doctrine of revelation.\(^\text{75}\)

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 161.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 177.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 217. Swinburne complains about “those writers of the last two centuries whose theological thinking derives from the philosophies of Kant and Kierkegaard and who seem to hold that faith in the Christian Revelation can in some sense be ‘rational’ without there being any evidence for it” (ibid.). For discussion of Locke on the knowledge of God and on revelation, see Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 261–69, 278–79. For evaluation and critique of certain aspects of Swinburne’s project, see, for example, Crisp, “On Believing That the Scriptures Are Divinely Inspired”; Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*. Crisp, like Swinburne, emphasizes the significance of an authoritative Church. See also Lackey, *Learning from Words*.

\(^{75}\) For an alternative to Swinburne’s project, offering sustained attention to other religions’ claims to revelation and consideration of cultural-anthropological factors from a liberal Anglican perspective, see Ward’s *Religion and Revelation*. In Ward’s account, Karl Barth’s (and Emil Brunner’s) account of divine revelation comes in for particularly stern critique:

The difficulty for this view is that once one has characterized all religions, including one’s own, as products of pride and stupidity, how is one ever to attain to truth about God? Barth’s answer is hardly satisfactory. He simply asserts that “Scripture is the only valid testimony to revelation.” But how can anyone know this, if every human judgement
Lastly, Colin Gunton’s *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (1995), a more explicitly theological work than Swinburne’s, opens with a vigorous defense of propositional truth in the mediation of divine revelation. As Gunton frames the question of epistemological realism, “Does our language or does it not refer, or affect to refer, to realities which lie beyond it, however elusively? Does it or does it not affect to describe, albeit partially, obliquely and inadequately, those things which truly are?” He points out that revelation could not be handed down from generation to generation, as is commanded in Deuteronomy 6:4–7, without employing true propositions. While granting is sinful, including this one? Indeed, one can very easily turn the tables on Barth and insist (as it seems very plausible to do) that the belief that everyone else’s revelation is incorrect and only one’s own is true, is a particularly clear example of human pride and self-interest. . . . One may claim that this possession is by the grace of God alone—but this only makes the element of human pride more pronounced, since one is now asserting that grace is only truly possessed by oneself. One can hardly get more proud, more self-righteous, and more short-sighted than that. (17)

Ward agrees with Barth and Brunner against the Enlightenment project of reducing divine revelation to what can be known by human reason alone, but he insists that reason nonetheless has a role, limited but not insignificant, in evaluating purported claims to revelation. I share Ward’s concerns here, but find him to be somewhat overconfident in his effort to transpose Christian categories for divine revelation to revelations present in Buddhism and Hinduism, for example. Further, I differ from Ward’s anthropocentric view of theology’s sources, which strikes me as underestimating (due to his sensitivity to modern research into historical context) the ability of the Holy Spirit to guide the communication of the gospel in Scripture and Tradition. Ward rejects the notion of theology as faith seeking understanding, and he denies that “theology” can take certain cognitive contents of revelation “as a given, as something settled, definitive, and complete” (39).

For a stronger rejection of propositions, Gunton cites Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* Paul Helm likewise criticizes antipropositionalist views, which he describes as the position that “God does not tell us about himself in letters, he reveals himself. The letters are only a token for the man himself” (*Divine Revelation*, 40). In response to such views, Helm observes that if there is no experience of seeing God or of otherwise experiencing him in a direct, proposition-less way, then the contrast between God revealing himself and only revealing propositions about himself is a misleading one. Someone may say that people have experienced God in mystical vision, but if so the point about mystical experience is that in it God is experienced as the inexpressible. In mystical experience no one can give an account of a mystical experience in his own or any other language, not because he does

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that propositional judgments are secondary to God’s revelatory presence, he notes that they are nonetheless “in intrinsic relation to that which they articulate.” Attempting to delimit the particular bounds of the doctrine of revelation, as distinct from the related doctrines of creation, salvation, and so forth, Gunton suggests that the doctrine of revelation specifically depends upon five elements that have been called into question in the modern period: Bible, creed, Church, tradition, and authority. His five chapters therefore explore the creedal confession of faith, the scriptural doctrine of creation as upholding the possibility of universal truth, biblical inspiration and the fixed canon of Scripture, tradition as the doctrine and practices that pertain to a proper handing down of authoritative apostolic teaching, and the eschatological character of the Church’s knowledge and its dependence on the Holy Spirit.

It seems to me that God could indeed inspire the appropriate words, even if no words could be fully adequate. I agree with Helm, however, that we need to be careful not to separate revelation from propositions (especially because Jesus often taught in propositions), even if in my view we should distinguish the two. See also the valuable response of Colman O’Neill, OP, to Lindbeck, “Rule Theory of Doctrine and Propositional Truth.”

78. Gunton, Brief Theology of Revelation, 101. For his part, René Latourelle observes, “If revelation comes to us through the vehicle of human notions and human propositions, how can these notions and propositions give us access to the divine mystery?” (Theology of Revelation, 324). Latourelle argues that the answer consists in the ability of human words to speak analogously about divine realities.

79. Gunton rightly insists that “revelation is a secondary doctrine, in that its function is to preserve and explain the character of that which is revealed. . . . A similar point would be to say that revelation is largely to do with the epistemic, not the soteriological or experiential dimension of the Christian faith”. (Brief Theology of Revelation, 110). By comparison, see Gabriel Fackre’s The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation. For Fackre, divine revelation is “the pattern of God’s decisive actions among us” as found in the whole story of salvation in its canonical shape, from Genesis to Revelation, with the divine “disclosures” that are intrinsic to God’s saving actions (5, 7). Divine revelation cannot be limited to any one element of the whole story, since revelation is an active historical reality whose origin and goal is trinitarian communion. After a first chapter titled “The Trinitarian Source of Disclosure,” Fackre therefore divides his book into three parts, covering “general revelation,” “special revelation,” and “revelation as reception,” respectively. Insightfully responding to Tillich’s treatment of revelation, Fackre asks, “When the ‘medium’ as interpreted by cultural and philosophical frameworks plays such a key role in the formulation of the message itself, what happens to the critical function of the Christian message? How is ‘revelation’ whose content has been described in terms provided by ‘reason’ free to answer the questions posed by reason?” (84). Fackre goes on to offer accurate critiques of the positions of theologians who are largely indebted to Tillich, such as David Tracy, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and John Cobb. For Fackre, the doctrine of revelation can be understood only by narrating the entirety of the creative and redemptive work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I appreciate the strengths of this approach, but like Gunton I think that the doctrine of revelation has a smaller scope. See also Pannenberg et al., Revelation as History.

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Gunton fears that *Dei Verbum*’s affirmation that “Tradition transmits in its entirety the word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit” exaggerates the Church’s capacities.80 After all, the “word of God,” divine revelation, is inexhaustibly rich. As Gunton observes, “Does the tradition—can the tradition—transmit the word of God ‘in its entirety’? There seems to be reason to believe that the content is more elusive than that, and that is why some doubt should be expressed about the Council’s confidence in the Magisterium’s capacity to speak the final word on the interpretation of revelation.”81 But I would point out that the “word of God” to which *Dei Verbum* is here referring is, according to *Dei Verbum*, “the full and living gospel” consisting in “divinely revealed realities.”82 Well aware that such realities cannot be exhausted by the Church, *Dei Verbum* states that “the Church is always advancing toward the plenitude of divine truth”—advancing toward it eschatologically, even while “possessing” it in the revealed realities.83

From Gunton’s perspective, *Dei Verbum*’s ecclesiology (like overconfident liberal theology, a parallel that Gunton draws from Barth) “fails to allow truth to be the daughter of time and rather represents attempts to anticipate too confidently the judgement of God.”84 This overconfidence, in Gunton’s view, leads the Church to place itself and its tradition over the gospel of the risen and exalted Christ. Without denying the role of tradition—indeed, Gunton argues for John Calvin’s broad acceptance of tradition—Gunton thinks that Catholics have fallen into a “premature confidence” in the Church’s authority, which has too often led to the Church embodying “coercive power” rather than love.85 For Gunton, then, “the greater weight one can throw

82. *Dei Verbum*, §§7, 11, 753, 756.
83. Ibid., §8, 754.
84. Gunton, *Brief Theology of Revelation*, 96n19. See also Maartin Wisse’s similar view that the old controversy between Protestants and Roman Catholics over the question of whether the anchor point of orthodoxy should be Scripture alone or Scripture and tradition, from Augustine’s point of view, is a meaningless question. Of course it should be more than Scripture alone, as, for truth to be found, a community of faith and justice is the absolute requirement for a faithful reading practice of this text to take place. But, of course, at the same time, it cannot be that truth consists in some fixed institutional context either, as the community of justice finds its fulfilment in the creative presence of God rather than the fixed pinning down of God’s presence in some earthly phenomenon. (*Trinitarian Theology beyond Participation*, 246–47)

No one, however, is advocating a “fixed pinning down of God’s presence in some earthly phenomenon.” True Scripture and true creeds mediate divine revelation in a manner that is enduringly true, but they do not thereby restrictively fix or pin down the Triune God’s presence to his Church (unless truth pins God down).

upon the faith once for all delivered to the saints, by which is meant the
collection of Jesus and his meaning as the revelation of God, found alike
in the apostolic preaching and the rule of faith, the less we have to trust
in the judgement of offices, whether Holy [i.e., Catholic or Orthodox] or
Protestant administrative.”

While affirming that tradition needed the pruning that the Reformers un-
dertook, Gunton grants that “without certain beliefs, about God, Christ,
salvation, the church and the work of the Spirit, Christianity would not be
recognisably continuous with what it once was.” He argues that attention to
the apostolic preaching and the rule of faith ensures that the Church avoids
rupture of this kind. He urges too that we “give due place and function to the
Holy Spirit.” The Spirit’s revelatory action points to the Son Jesus Christ, who
reveals the Father. In this regard, the Spirit’s work of mediating revelation is
eschatological, always pointing us to the fullness that is to come with Jesus’s
return in glory, but that is not present yet.

Gunton’s insistence on the eschatological character of the Church’s knowl-
dge attempts to hold together three elements. First, there is a core body of
revelation about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Church, and so forth. Gun-
ton does not find any “rupture” in this core body of revelation; in his view,
it has been mediated to us effectively so that we can truly know the realities
of faith today. Second, the apostolic preaching and prophetic testimony that
formed the Bible are unique. Although biblical inspiration does not mean
freedom from all error, it does mean that Scripture inerrantly communicates
to all generations the saving action of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.
Third, believers require the Church’s mediation of the apostolic teaching and
practice (“tradition”). Yet tradition is often erroneous and overreaching, and
it must frequently be pruned of elements that would lead people away from
Jesus Christ.

As I explain more fully in the chapters that follow, I agree with Gunton’s
view that Scripture’s truthfulness does not depend on an absolute lack of
any kind of error, just as I agree with his insistence that there has been no
rupture in the mediation of “certain beliefs, about God, Christ, salvation, the
church and the work of the Spirit.” Given his view that certain beliefs must
be sustained throughout history in order for Christianity to be Christianity,
however, why not suppose that the Church’s truthfulness is, under the direction
of the Church’s exalted Head and by the power of the Spirit, broadly similar

86. Ibid., 103–4.
87. Ibid., 87.
88. Ibid., 119.
to Scripture’s truthfulness? Gunton emphasizes, “Whatever it may mean to say that the church or her representatives are apostolic, it cannot mean that she is in the same relation to revelation as the apostles.”89 This strikes me as right, even if in need of unpacking, not least by the qualification that he immediately adds: “But that need not exclude an intrinsic relationship, too, because without our predecessors in the tradition we should be unable to appropriate that which the prophets and apostles mediate.”90

In my view, we need not claim for the later Church the same “relation to revelation” as the apostles, but we can still argue that the Church, like the prophets and apostles, mediates divine revelation in the process of appropriating it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without placing the Church over revelation, the Spirit can guarantee the Church’s preservation from error in its definitive interpretations of revelation—which differs from guaranteeing the truthfulness of everything the Church says and does. This perspective enables us to give due weight to “the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). In short, we can accept the existence of errors within the Church’s works and teachings over the centuries, so long as we do not suppose that these (reformable) errors produced a rupture, that is to say a false definitive doctrine about faith or morals in the heart of the transmission of revelation.

As we have seen, for Gunton the Church generally tends to become a problem, one that must be constantly monitored and pruned lest it proceed to exclude Jesus Christ. At the same time, in Gunton’s view, the Church manages to keep handing down the basic Christian message, so that Christianity remains Christianity rather than corrupting into something quite different. Gunton grants that Scripture alone cannot ensure this continuity, as the Nicene debates (among many others) show. As he says, “Without our predecessors in the tradition we should be unable to appropriate that which the prophets and apostles mediate.” The Church necessarily has a mediatorial role. If so, then the doctrine of revelation requires an account of the Holy Spirit’s work in the Church (under the headship of the exalted Christ) that ensures, more fully than Gunton seems willing to admit, the Church’s truthful transmission of the realities of faith. Certainly the eschatological consummation far outpaces the Church as we experience it now. Pruning is inevitably necessary, but not the pruning of truths that have been taught definitively by Christ’s Church, for the sake of the salvation of the world, in its communication of divine revelation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

89. Ibid., 101.
90. Ibid.
The Plan of the Work

My book focuses on the mediation of divine revelation, or specifically on how the Triune God, ever present and active, sustains the handing on of revelation by “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), the community that Peter describes as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,” whose mission is to “declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [believers] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). As a final step in this introduction, therefore, let me review the chapters of the book in a bit more detail.

Chapter 1 argues that the intrinsic place of the Church within divine revelation can best be seen through the theology of “mission.” I begin with Thomas Aquinas’s doctrine of the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit. These missions unite Christ Jesus, the Church, and all believers: the visible missions are found in Jesus Christ and at Pentecost, and by grace we receive the invisible missions of the Son and Spirit illuminating our minds and hearts. I extend this insight by means of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s writings on Christ’s mission and our sharing in it. For Balthasar, Christ simply is his mission, and all other persons have a mission by participating in some way in Christ’s mission. The connection between Christ and the Church is made in terms of mission, and this connection shows how the Church’s mission shares intimately in Christ’s revelatory mission of kenotic love. I then take up the more standard meaning of mission—namely, evangelization and God’s plan for the salvation of all nations—via the work of Christopher Wright. The goal of this first chapter is to underscore the intimate connection between divine revelation and the Church, in a manner that does not undermine the Triune God’s priority.

Chapter 2 discusses revelation with a focus on the liturgical context of its actualization: we preeminently share in the revelatory missions of the Son and Holy Spirit in and through the liturgy, which builds up the Church in charity and illumines the Church with the wisdom of the gospel. My approach again involves drawing together significant voices for the purpose of evaluating and further developing their insights. I begin with the Reformed theologian John Webster’s *Holy Scripture*, a book that offers a rich account of divine revelation and biblical inspiration but downplays the liturgical context of scriptural interpretation. Examining Scripture’s testimony regarding itself, I suggest that Scripture conceives of itself as primarily proclaimed and interpreted in a liturgical context. I then argue that Alexander Schmemann’s and Joseph Ratzinger’s portraits of Scripture and the eucharistic liturgy fill the lacuna we find in Webster. Schmemann and Ratzinger rightly identify the
liturgy as the primary place in which divine revelation is received, proclaimed, and interpreted.⁹¹

The third chapter treats revelation and the hierarchical priesthood. Is the priestly mediation of revelation, a mediation that has occurred for millennia, a good thing? The chapter begins with the criticisms of priestly mediation put forward by John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes. These criticisms drew upon Renaissance reconstructions of early Christianity and were located within a context of severe ecclesiastical corruption and strife among Christians. Calvin and Hobbes argue that after an original period of innocence, during which Christians were in harmony with each other, the bishops of Rome seized power and destroyed the Church by departing entirely from the New Testament model of the Christian pastorate. In response, I examine what Jesus and the apostles have to say about “priestly” rivalries. I suggest that Jesus, in establishing a hierarchical order among his followers, was fully aware of such tensions and that he gifted the Church with the Petrine ministry in order to ensure the fruitfulness of such tensions within the mediation of divine revelation. Rather than looking back to an idealized epoch or excoriating the failings of the hierarchical priesthood, we can affirm that Jesus intended a hierarchical priesthood for his Church, founded upon the apostles, as part of the faithful handing on of revelation.

The first three chapters, then, examine the Church’s mediation of divine revelation by reflecting on “mission,” the liturgy, and the hierarchical priesthood. The priority of the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is emphasized throughout. Chapter 4 discusses revelation and the gospel. Its starting point is the biblical scholar Scot McKnight’s recent book *The King Jesus Gospel*. McKnight presents the gospel as the story of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and Son of God who comes to restore and redeem Israel and to bring to fulfillment God’s plan of salvation for the whole world. He contrasts this understanding of the gospel—inclusive of the whole story of salvation—with an understanding

⁹¹. See Pope Benedict XVI’s *Verbum Domini*, § 52: “In considering the Church as ‘the home of the word’, attention must first be given to the sacred liturgy, for the liturgy is the privileged setting in which God speaks to us in the midst of our lives; he speaks today to his people, who hear and respond. Every liturgical action is by its very nature steeped in sacred Scripture. . . . A faith-filled understanding of Scripture must always refer back to the liturgy, in which the word of God is celebrated as a timely and living word.” In the liturgy, Christ speaks to the Church and opens the Scriptures to the Church, and “in the liturgical action the word of God is accompanied by the interior working of the Holy Spirit who makes it effective in the hearts of the faithful” (ibid.). Pope Benedict goes on to underscore “the performative character of the word itself. In salvation history there is no separation between what God says and what he does. His word appears as alive and active (cf. Heb 4:12), as the Hebrew term *dabar* itself makes clear. In the liturgical action, too, we encounter his word which accomplishes what it says” (§ 53).
of the gospel that reduces it to justification by faith. Throughout his book, he calls for a “gospel culture” whose lineaments he finds in 1 Corinthians 15 and in the early creeds of the Church. I suggest that this culture can be enriched today by the insights of Thomas Aquinas in commenting upon Paul’s use of the term “gospel” in Romans and Galatians. For Aquinas, as for McKnight, the gospel is Jesus Christ, and Aquinas helps us to see even more clearly how the creeds and the councils of the Church build up the Church’s “gospel culture” by expositing Christ in his fullness.

Chapter 5 underscores that the transmission of the gospel entails Tradition, by which the Church hands on the whole of divine revelation. Not only Protestants but also some Catholics argue that the Church’s Tradition is marked by errors, accretions, and ruptures. As an example, I engage Terrence Tilley’s *Inventing Catholic Tradition*. His viewpoint strips Tradition of its propositional, doctrinal content and understands its “fidelity” in terms of an ever-changing, amorphous adaptability. By contrast, I find that Scripture presents a quite different understanding of Tradition. Focusing on the New Testament’s references to “tradition” (παράδοσις), I show that the New Testament rejects the kind of tradition that Tilley proposes and instead affirms that divine revelation has a specific cognitive content that must be transmitted. Tradition cannot be less than this.

Chapter 6 examines revelation and development of doctrine. The chapter begins with *Dei Verbum*’s account of doctrinal development, which holds that although divine revelation is complete in Jesus Christ, the Church’s understanding of this revelation grows and progresses over the centuries under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In support of *Dei Verbum*’s position, I explore John Henry Newman’s portrait of true development of doctrine, as distinct from corruption. John T. Noonan’s *A Church That Can and Cannot Change*, however, suggests that Newman’s concern to avoid positing a doctrinal corruption is misplaced because (in Noonan’s view) the history of moral doctrine shows that the Church blatantly contradicts itself. I devote significant space to Noonan’s critique in order to ask whether we can still hold, with Newman, to the contrast between “development” and “corruption” of doctrine. In order to highlight the ability of true doctrinal development to allow for breaks and changes, so long as these breaks or changes do not negate definitive doctrine, I employ Lewis Ayres’s and Khaled Anatolios’s helpful recent studies of doctrinal development in the Nicene period.

Chapter 7 discusses revelation and biblical inspiration, with a focus on the historical reference of inspired Scripture. The claim that Scripture is inspired by God and mediates divine revelation might seem to be undermined if Scripture’s historical narratives communicate some events that did not actually happen.

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Yet it also seems clear that Scripture’s historical narratives are highly diverse in their approaches to the past. Even those narratives that approach the past in a manner closest to modern historiography deviate significantly from the practice of modern historiography. I begin by investigating Scripture’s approach to its own historical reference. On the one hand, at times biblical authors explicitly insist that they are recounting an event that happened—for example, in 1 Corinthians 15 with regard to Christ’s resurrection. On the other hand, sometimes the question of historical reference simply does not come up or is presumed. When the New Testament authors interpret Scripture (the Old Testament), they show little interest in determining questions of historical reference. Turning to the patristic period, I examine Origen’s and Augustine’s ways of answering the question of historical reference. Both Origen and Augustine have a richer view of history than do modern historians, since both Origen and Augustine consider history (and historical texts) to be filled with providentially ordained typological resonances. This richer view of history offers, in my view, a way of handling scriptural texts that describe figures or events that did not exist. Such texts do not thereby lose all historical reference. We can affirm this without undermining the historical actuality of the central elements of the gospel.

Lastly, chapter 8 explores divine revelation and Hellenistic philosophical culture, or more specifically the presence within Scripture of Hellenistic philosophical insights that, in a partial and limited way, succeed in referring to the living God. Can a pagan culture, despite its grave errors about God, formulate some judgments about God that in fact are true? I first present the views of Daniel Kirk and Kavin Rowe, who in different ways emphasize the incommensurability of Hellenistic concepts of divinity with the Creator God of Israel. I then examine the portraits of God offered in Acts 17 and 19 in order to argue that Acts envisions some true pagan insight into God. Along these lines, I investigate the relationship between Wisdom of Solomon and Romans 1, each of which attributes both idolatry and insight to the Hellenistic philosophers. Lastly, inquiring into historical reconstructions of the development of the doctrine of God in Israel, I argue that Hellenistic philosophical insights helped to clarify certain ambiguities in the Old Testament’s expression of revelation. My conclusion is that we should view Hellenistic philosophical culture as providentially providing the scriptural communication of divine revelation with some important and true insights about God.

92. Although most New Testament references to “Scripture” clearly mean the Old Testament, some New Testament texts may show awareness of their status as Scripture; see D. Moody Smith, “When Did the Gospels Become Scripture?”, Moloney, “Gospel of John as Scripture.”
Colin Gunton has pointed out that “the mediateness of revelation” needs to be reclaimed today. As Gunton observes, there are a number of ways of denying the centrality of mediation, including the liberal quest for the “essence of Christianity,” a wooden biblical fundamentalism, and an insistence upon “revelational immediacy.” There are also a number of ways of denying the efficacy of mediation—for example, by denigrating propositional truth, historicizing the gospel, or holding that the Church constantly reinvents rather than transmits revelation. The doctrine of revelation, as distinct from other Christian doctrines, largely has to do with the ecclesial and scriptural mediation of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2), the mediation of “the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13). In Christ Jesus, says Paul to the Ephesians, “you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:13–14). How does this “word of truth”

93. Gunton, Brief Theology of Revelation, 5.
94. Ibid., 3. The phrase “revelational immediacy” is Gunton’s, and he has in mind Karl Barth’s position in this regard. See especially Barth, Church Dogmatics, I.1, The Doctrine of the Word of God; for further critical discussion of Barth’s view, see Wolterstorff, Divine Discourse, 63–74. Wolterstorff notes that Barth considers “revelation” in the strict sense to be solely “God’s speaking by way of the dwelling among us of the person, Jesus Christ” (Divine Discourse, 63). Scripture and proclamation mediate this revelation to us, in such a way that God can make these words his speech for us (though not his speech per se). Wolterstorff explains that for Barth, just as it is only through the witnesses that you and I today have access to God’s revelatory word consisting in Jesus Christ dwelling among us, so also it is only through Scripture that we have access to those witnesses. Revelation is mediated by the witnesses and the witnesses are mediated by Scripture. . . . Though the witnesses’ acts of witnessing-of and witnessing-to revelation occur under the superintendence of the Spirit, the speech of the witness remains purely human speech. So also, though contemporary proclamation concerning revelation is under the guidance of the witnesses, the speech of the preacher remains purely human speech. . . . Nonetheless, Scripture and contemporary proclamation do become the instrument of God’s speaking to particular persons—always to particular persons—on specific occasions. (69–70)

Wolterstorff terms this position “eventism” (71). Along similar lines, see the nuanced engagement with Barth’s position in McCall, “On Understanding Scripture as the Word of God.” For positive views of Barth’s position, see Vanhoozer, “A Person of the Book?”; McCormack, “Being of Holy Scripture”; and T. Hart, “Revelation.” Hart remarks,

Information about Jesus’s life, character, actions, death and resurrection is not knowledge of God in the sense that Barth intends it and in the event of revelation it is precisely God himself who is known. For this to happen, the particular form of Jesus’s humanity is necessary but not sufficient. The veil must become transparent. Faith must be called into being, faith which travels through and transcends the veil of the flesh to a depth of reality to which the created form now points and corresponds, not in and of itself, but as God takes it up into his dynamic revealing activity. (52–53)
come to us today? The answer, rooted in the active presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, includes the canon of Scripture and “the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22–23).

The conviction that “in many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:1–2), and that this gospel has been faithfully received and handed down by the Church even unto us today, is a cause for joy and hope, as well as salutary repentance. Despite our failings, God has ensured the faithful mediation of his revelation within the liturgical community that participates in these revealed realities. With Moses, then, let us beseech the living God, our Creator and Redeemer, “If now I have found favor in thy sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray thee, go in the midst of us . . . and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance” (Exod. 34:9).
ONE

Church

Dei Verbum anchors its treatment of divine revelation in the Father’s sending (missio) of the Son: “For he sent his Son, the eternal Word who enlightens all men, to dwell among men and to tell them about the inner life of God. Hence, Jesus Christ, sent as ‘a man among men,’ ‘speaks the words of God’ (John 3:34), and accomplishes the saving work which the Father gave him to do.”¹ Dei Verbum specifies that the mission of the Son “completed and perfected revelation,” not only by his words and deeds but also by his “sending the Spirit of truth.”² According to Dei Verbum, then, the theology of the divine missions provides the basis for all reflection on divine revelation and its human mediation.³ As a theological term, however, “mission” can mean various things. First, it can signify the Father’s sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world, as in the above passage from Dei Verbum. In this

1. Dei Verbum, §4, 751.
2. Ibid., 752.
3. See Newbigin, Open Secret, which begins with the opening sentence of Lumen Gentium. Newbigin remarks:
   Fundamental to everything else that came forth from the council were the reaffirmation of the missionary character of the church, the recognition of the unfinished task which that implies, the confession that the church is a pilgrim people on its way to the ends of the earth and the end of time, and the acknowledgment of the need for a new openness to the world into which the church is sent. This new readiness to acknowledge the missionary character of the church, to confess that “there is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world,” is not confined to the Roman Catholic church. All the old established churches of the Western world have been brought to a new recognition that mission belongs to the very being of the church. (1)

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sense, “mission” describes the salvific activity of the Son and the Spirit, and includes not only their visible missions in the incarnation and Pentecost but also their invisible missions in human souls at all places and times. Second, “mission” can signify a particular “vocation” in God’s economy of salvation. Jesus Christ preeminently receives a mission, the mission of the Messiah. But the patriarchs, prophets, and leaders of Israel, as well as the whole people of God, also receive a mission, as do the apostles and indeed each and every Christian. All human beings are called to a “mission” inscribed within the salvific mission of Christ.

Third, “mission” can be taken in the sense of the Church’s evangelizing mission, rooted not least in the risen Jesus’s command, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), and embodied by Paul’s remark to the Corinthians, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). It is in this sense that the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, Ad Gentes, proclaims, “The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” As Ad Gentes says, the Church’s missionary task “unfolds the mission of Christ, who was sent to evangelize the poor.”

The task of this chapter is to elucidate these three senses of “mission” and to show how they illumine the Church’s mediation of divine revelation. For each of the three senses of “mission”—the missions of the Son and the Spirit, Christ’s mission and ours, and evangelization—I concentrate upon the work of one theologian for whom the particular sense of “mission” has an especially central role. With respect to the trinitarian missions, I focus upon the theology of Thomas Aquinas. As Gilles Emery observes, the doctrine of the trinitarian missions is “the pivot, indeed a real key, of St. Thomas’s Trinitarian theology: the revelation of the Trinity and the gift of salvation consist in the missions of the divine persons.” Regarding Christ’s mission and ours,
I examine Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology of Christ’s supreme mission-consciousness (kenotic love) and our participation in Christ by embracing our missions of love. I then move on to the biblical scholar Christopher Wright, who emphasizes God’s saving mission of mercy with a particular reference to the evangelizing mission to the nations. He interprets God’s revelation to Israel as already including *in nuce* the Church’s mission as a light to all nations, to proclaim and imitate Christ.

The distinctive perspectives of Aquinas, Balthasar, and Wright agree on this: through the missions of the Son and Spirit, the Church is enabled to share in and make present for the whole world the salvific, revelatory mission of Jesus Christ, both as regards its content and as regards its kenotic form (charity). In this way, divine revelation can be said to include the active participation of the Church, without imagining that the Church gives to itself the revelation that God, in Christ and the Spirit, has given to the Church once and for all.

**Thomas Aquinas: Revelation and the Missions of the Son and Holy Spirit**

Does “mission” name something in God? It might seem that even granting the reality of processions in God, “mission” would be an inappropriate word to denote the salvific activity of the Son and Holy Spirit in the world. “Mission” seems to describe moving from one place/condition to another place/condition, as if the Son and the Holy Spirit, leaving behind their eternal existence with the Father, parachuted into the world. “Mission” also seems to suggest that the Son and Holy Spirit are distinct from the Father and from each other not solely in terms of their eternal relations but also on the basis of distinct missions. If this were so, then the distinction of missions would produce new real “relations” in God, thereby producing new divine Persons. Mission might also seem unreal when applied to the Son and Holy Spirit. If the Triune God had not freely created the world, then there would have been no missions, but there would still have been eternal divine Persons. These eternal divine Persons—the Son and Holy Spirit—are supremely who they are, and they cannot be changed by anything. If the historical missions do not change the Son

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*Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 124–25. For much stronger concerns regarding a supposed separation of “theologia” and “oikonomia” in Aquinas, see LaCugna, *God for Us*. LaCugna’s view has been widely critiqued, including by Emery.

8. On the latter point see the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, §4, 752: “The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord, Jesus Christ” (cf. 1 Tim. 6:14 and Titus 2:13).

Matthew Levering, Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation

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and Spirit, then it appears that the missions are simply metaphorical, naming something that does not really involve the actual divine Persons.

By Thomas Aquinas’s time, of course, the theology of divine missions was part of the Church’s heritage. But he presents this theology in a way that is particularly helpful for understanding the relationship between divine revelation and the Church. He builds his case for the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit on the basis of biblical texts from the Gospels and Paul, with Isaiah and the Wisdom of Solomon in the background. Specifically, in the eight articles of *Summa theologiae* I, question 43, he cites the following passages of Scripture to elucidate the missions:

Matthew 3:16–17: “When Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”

Matthew 17:5: “A bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.’”

John 1:10: “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not.”

John 7:39: “Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

John 8:16: “My judgment is true, for it is not I alone that judge, but I and he who sent me.”

John 14:23: “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

Acts 2:4: “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

Romans 5:5: “Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”

Galatians 4:4–5: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

Hebrews 2:3: “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him.”

Isaiah 48:16: “And now the Lord God has sent me and his Spirit.”

Wisdom 9:10: “Send her forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her, that she may be with me and toil, and that I may learn what is pleasing to you.”

Aquinas presents these biblical texts within an interpretative context shaped by Augustine’s *On the Trinity*. He quotes from books 2, 3, 4, 9, and 15 of *On the Trinity*, with book 4 being the most frequently cited. In book 4 Augustine carefully defends the claim that the Father is not superior to the Son or Holy Spirit even though the Father is not sent. Augustine has in view both the visible missions of the Son and Spirit (the incarnation and Pentecost) and their invisible missions in the souls of believers. Aquinas makes much of Augustine’s statement that the Son is “sent to anyone when he is known and perceived by him, as far as he can be perceived and known according to the capacity of a rational soul either making progress toward God or already made perfect in God.”

Aquinas also quotes more than once Augustine’s assertion that the Father is not sent. Among the texts quoted by Aquinas in question 43, Augustine in book 4 cites John 7:39; Galatians 4:4; and Wisdom 9:10. In the same book, Augustine also cites cognate passages such as Wisdom 7:25–27 and John 14:26; 15:26; and 16:28.

When one canvasses the other books of Augustine’s *On the Trinity* from which Aquinas quotes in question 43, it becomes clear that rather than trying to break new ground in the biblical passages that he cites, Aquinas is selecting certain texts that already enjoy a central place in Augustine and in the theological tradition. In the objections of the first two articles of question 43, Aquinas also quotes Jerome, Hilary of Poitiers, and Gregory the Great, but he quotes these fathers in order to rule out potential misunderstandings, not

10. Bruce Marshall observes that without following Augustine slavishly, “Aquinas, like virtually every scholastic writer on the Trinity in the Middle Ages, is more deeply engaged with Augustine than with any other patristic figure. No text of Augustine gets more attention from Thomas than the De Trinitate, and very many of the topics and formulas that preoccupy Aquinas and other medieval Trinitarian theologians can be traced to their involvement with this work” (“Aquinas the Augustinian?,” 45). See also in the same volume Emery, “Trinitarian Theology as Spiritual Exercise,” 1–40, and Goris, “Theology and Theory,” 62–78.

in order to ground or advance his own arguments. This is a sharp contrast to his use of Augustine in question 43: quotations of Augustine appear in the objections, *sed contra*, *respondeo*, and answers to the objections, and these quotations of Augustine play a major role in determining Aquinas’s own position. This is so especially in four respects: the Father is not sent; the Son and Holy Spirit are invisibly sent when a person is enlightened by faith and is sanctified; the purpose of the Spirit’s mission is our sanctification in charity, a purpose that involves and presumes the Son’s mission, which vivifies our faith; and the visible mission of the incarnate Son differs in kind from the visible mission of the Spirit at Christ’s baptism and at Pentecost.

Rooted in Scripture as interpreted by Augustine, Aquinas’s theology of the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit emphasizes that the revelation of God in the mission of the Son is inseparable from the mission of the Holy Spirit. It is in the visible mission of the incarnate Word that God fully reveals the truth of salvation, the truth about himself and about us. This visible mission is received as revelation through the visible mission of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and through the invisible missions of the Word inspiring faith and of the Holy Spirit healing and sanctifying us in charity.\(^{12}\)

Against misconceptions of these missions, Aquinas observes that the change is in the creature rather than in the divine Person to whom the creature is united. In technical language, Aquinas explains that “mission not only signifies procession from the principle [the Father], but also determines the temporal term of the procession. . . . Hence the procession may be called a twin procession, eternal and temporal, not that there is a double relation to the principle, but a double term, temporal and eternal.”\(^ {13}\) The procession of the Son coming forth from the Father is not combined with a second procession in which the Father sends the Son into the world. Rather, there is only one procession constitutive of the Son, but the Son is nevertheless rightly said to be “sent” into the world because the procession has two terms: the Son’s eternal subsistence and his temporal subsistence as Jesus Christ. The visible mission of the Son is not a

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12. Gilles Emery notes that in the *respondeo* of question 43, article 7, St. Thomas emphasizes two functions of the visible missions: (1) revelation (*demonstrare, manifestare*) and (2) sanctification (*sanctificatio*). Regarding the first aspect (revelation), the visible missions of the Son and Spirit manifest their invisible missions. This means that the visible missions involve a dual disclosure: they manifest the eternal procession of the Son and Spirit (they reveal the persons themselves in their eternal origin), and they manifest the donation of these persons in grace. A similar connection between the visible and the invisible is found in St. Thomas’s teaching on Christ’s miracles. ("*Theologia and Dispensatio*," 529)

change in the Son, but a change that occurs on the side of the creature that is united to the Son in the incarnation.\textsuperscript{14} Likewise, the mission of the Holy Spirit is not a second procession of the Holy Spirit but a temporal “term” whereby creatures are sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Sanctifying grace makes the Holy Spirit present to creatures in this way.

Among the biblical verses quoted by Aquinas in question 43, perhaps the most illuminating are John 7:39 and 14:23 and Galatians 4:4. Especially in John 7:39, one can see how divine revelation requires the unity of the visible mission of the Son and the invisible mission of the Spirit. The context is Jesus’s proclamation at the Feast of Tabernacles, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37–38). The evangelist John explains, “Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:39).\textsuperscript{15} At this time his disciples and the Jewish people did not understand Jesus’s words; he was revealing the mystery of God, but they did not yet understand the revelation in faith. They needed the Spirit in order to fully receive his words and deeds as divine revelation. The visible mission of the Son requires to be united, in the revelatory drama, with the invisible missions of the Son and Holy Spirit illuminating and sanctifying the people of God so that we can perceive and perform revelation.

One can see the same thing in John 14:23, especially when this verse is read in its context. The evangelist notes that in the midst of Jesus’s farewell discourse, the disciple Judas (not Judas Iscariot) asks Jesus, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?” (John 14:22). Jesus has promised to make himself known to the disciples even after his Pasch, and Judas asks how this will be possible. The answer is that the visible mission of the Son in Jesus Christ is manifested to us interiorly by a corresponding invisible mission of the Son and Spirit, an invisible mission that draws the believer into the life of the Father. Thus in John 14:23 Jesus states, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him”—a promise that becomes manifestly trinitarian in verse 26, where Jesus promises, “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” Regarding the invisible missions of the Son and Spirit, Aquinas explains that “the two missions are united in the root, which is grace, but are distinguished

\footnotesize{14. See Weinandy, “Aquinas: God IS Man,” 67–89.}
\footnotesize{15. See Morris, Gospel according to John, 378–79.}
in the effects of grace, which consist in the illumination of the intellect and the kindling of the affection. Thus it is manifest that one mission cannot be without the other, because neither takes place without sanctifying grace, nor is one person separated from the other.”16

To show that mission is temporal rather than eternal, Aquinas quotes Galatians 4:4 in the sed contra of question 43, article 1. Paul teaches that “God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4–5). This adoption, Paul goes on to say, involves the indwelling Spirit: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6).17 The invisible mission of the Holy Spirit belongs to the dynamism of divine revelation, in which God sends into the world both his Son and his Spirit so as to make us adopted children of God, sharers in the divine life. It follows that although divine revelation does not in any way originate with the Church, the Church is not merely an inert receptacle of divine revelation, because revelation always involves the united missions of the Son and Holy Spirit.18 The community is interiorly and not simply exteriorly united by the revelatory missions, visible and invisible, of the Son and Spirit.

The faith and charity of believers, by which we are configured to Christ and by which we are enabled to bear witness to Christ in the world, come from the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit. Aquinas explains that “for a divine person to be sent to anyone by grace, there must be a likening of the soul to the divine person who is sent, by some gift of grace.”19 The invisible mission of the Holy Spirit occurs “by the gift of charity,” because the Holy Spirit proceeds as Love.20 The invisible mission of the Son, who is the Word “who breathes forth Love,” occurs “not in accordance with every and any kind of intellectual perfection, but according to the intellectual illumination, which breaks forth into the affection of love.”21 These invisible missions are inseparable from the revelation of God in the visible mission of the Son and in the visible mission of the Spirit at Christ’s baptism and Pentecost. In short, the Church’s participation in divine revelation comes about through the missions

17. For discussion see Witherington, Grace in Galatia, 287–91.
18. Clarifying John 7:39’s statement that the Holy Spirit had not yet been sent, Aquinas states, “The invisible mission was directed to the Old Testament Fathers, as appears from what Augustine says (De Trin. iv.20), that the invisible mission of the Son ‘is in man and with men. This was done in former times with the Fathers and Prophets’” (Summa theologiae I, q. 43, a. 6, ad 1).
19. Summa theologiae I, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
of the Son and Spirit that enable us to believe, obey, and imitate Christ’s revelatory words and deeds.  

Hans Urs von Balthasar: Revelation and Jesus’s Universal Mission-Consciousness

Hans Urs von Balthasar offers an existential deepening of our theme. I will present his approach and remark upon its strengths, while at the same time indicating where I think it needs adjustment.

In the third volume of his *Theo-Drama*, with reference to Aquinas’s theology of mission, Balthasar depicts Jesus Christ as most perfectly “sent.”

22. Aquinas’s discussion grounds the unity of the “Church” across time and space, a unity that Aquinas also takes as a dogmatic given. Here, therefore, might be the place to note Markus Bockmuehl’s emphasis on the early Christians’ understanding of themselves as “in communion with the church of the great apostolic foundations” (“Doctrine of the Church,” 42). Admittedly, Bockmuehl also points out, “Historically, of course, Christian communities of all denominational and creedal stripes have always tended to claim for their own particular ecclesial order the imprimatur of none other than Christ himself and his apostles. The reality is that there was never a time when diversity was not part of the very fabric of the Jesus movement; even Luke’s harmonic account of the church in Jerusalem makes that clear” (43). Unity-in-diversity (or diversity-in-unity) certainly belongs to the Catholic Church in all ages. Yet the human mediation of divine revelation (including the unique scriptural mediation) relies on the fact that Jesus founded a visible Church and sent the Holy Spirit upon it at Pentecost, and that Jesus governs his Church at the right hand of the Father. This claim does not imply ecclesial triumphalism, which would be absurd, but it does involve a visible and liturgically identifiable Catholic Church through the centuries (just as God formed the people of Israel as a visible and identifiable people). Bockmuehl strongly affirms that Jesus intended to form an eschatological, missional community (Church) in which Israel would be reconfigured around himself:

We can say with some confidence that Jesus’s calling and commissioning of groups such as the Twelve and the Seventy was deliberately symbolic of an eschatological renewal of Sinaitic Israel gathered around twelve tribal princes and seventy elders—what Stephen in Acts 7 calls “the ekklesia in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38). All four Gospels affirm that Jesus singled out twelve men as an inner core of the larger group of disciples, although relatively less is made of this in John. New Testament scholarship generally regards their appointment as authentic, and their symbolism too is not in serious doubt. In its biblical and Jewish setting this eschatological institution of the Twelve conveys a theocentric and specifically messianic reconstitution of the entire biblical Israel under the leadership of tribal judges and their king. This restoration of biblical Israel’s twelve tribes was a message deeply rooted in the Old Testament and of some continuing interest in the early church, even after the demise of the Twelve. (ibid.)

23. Donald MacKinnon insightfully remarks regarding Balthasar’s Christology in the *Theo-Drama*, “The focal point of Balthasar’s whole exposition is found in the concept of Sendung or mission. Like doxa in the fourth Gospel it is a focus of conceptual interpenetration. . . . Certainly kenosis remains profoundly significant for Balthasar; indeed it dominates his imagination in the many passages in which he gives free rein to his mastery of his own language and recaptures the emphases of the earlier monograph on the Paschal mystery. Yet in the present work, mission is a...
points not only to the repeated Johannine testimony to the one “whom God has sent” (John 3:34) but also to such Synoptic texts as Matthew 10:40: “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me” (see also Luke 9:48; Mark 9:37). The question regarding the identity of Jesus must receive the answer that Jesus is supremely and without remainder the one who is sent. The “personhood” of Jesus, therefore, is identical with mission: he is his (relational) mission, to a complete degree that cannot be claimed for any other human being. Balthasar argues that this unity of person and mission in Jesus reveals Jesus’s divinity, since only in the holy Trinity can person and mission be the same. Jesus’s very personhood consists in being sent, just as the Son comes entirely from the Father who begets and sends him. Indeed, Jesus’s whole self-understanding consists in his awareness that he has been sent, and this self-understanding perfectly corresponds with who Jesus is. Jesus has an “absolute sense of mission.”

Jesus’s perfect mission-consciousness ensures that he is utterly abandoned to and indistinguishable from his filial mission. It follows, says Balthasar, that Jesus’s very personhood consists in being sent, just as the Son comes entirely from the Father who begets and sends him. Indeed, Jesus’s whole self-understanding consists in his awareness that he has been sent, and this self-understanding perfectly corresponds with who Jesus is. Jesus has an “absolute sense of mission.”

more inclusive concept than self-emptying and demands in its use a more searching discipline” (MacKinnon, “Some Reflections,” 168).

24. As Balthasar states, “Here, indeed, in the mission of Jesus, where an exact definition of personal uniqueness coincides with its universal significance, we have the irrefutable expression of his divinity” (Dramatis Personae, 207). To conclude that the Gospels’ narration of Jesus’s mission provides us with “the irrefutable expression of his divinity” seems a stretch, but certainly it is true that no merely human person can be absolutely identical with his or her mission. For appropriate cautions see Kilby, Balthasar, 95–98.

25. Balthasar, Dramatis Personae, 160; cf. 224: “Jesus experiences his human consciousness entirely in terms of mission.” As Aidan Nichols, OP, comments:

The idea of mission, of being “sent” or of having (in some heightened solemn sense) “come,” “come out” or “forth,” is not only Johannine but also Synoptic. In the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, moreover, all three Synoptic evangelists agree in distinguishing between the earlier sending of “servants,” and the final sending of the “son.” But it is in John above all that Jesus’s knowledge of himself coincides with his knowledge of being sent. He does not do the Father’s will incidentally but lives from it, for apart from it he can do nothing. The One who sends is seen to be present in the One who is sent. The latter is so dependent on the One who sends him that his entire being is in motion towards him: he is returning to him. (No Bloodless Myth, 101)

Nichols goes on to explain:

Using this concept of mission as a key term, Balthasar can put forward what he calls a Christology of consciousness and, on that basis, a Christology of being, two ways, the second deeper than the first, of looking at the work and person of Christ. The Christology of consciousness explores the coincidence of Jesus’s mission-consciousness with his person. This mission, itself more than human, for to reconcile the whole world with God is not a simply human undertaking, is in no way heteronomous vis-à-vis the person of Jesus. . . . “Who he is” is exhaustively expressed in his being from the One who addresses him as “My beloved Son.” (101–2)

See also N. Healy, Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, 121–22; Waldstein, “Mission”; Schwager, Jesus of Nazareth; Schönborn, God Sent His Son, 187–88.
Jesus must thereby reveal his divine Father “in every situation of his life—even if part of his task, in the long years of his hidden life and ultimately on the Cross, was to manifest God’s hiddenness.”

Revelation of the Father is Jesus’s mission, and Jesus is identical with his mission. Revelation and mission are thus two sides of the same coin, so that as Jesus increased in age he also increased in the depth of his revelatory mission-consciousness. At every stage of his life, guided by the Holy Spirit, he was completely immersed in the revelatory mission-consciousness suitable for precisely that stage. Balthasar emphasizes that “the Son’s missio is the economic form of his eternal processio from the Father. This mission of the Son draws the mission of the Spirit in its wake, in a twofold form: first the Spirit is sent from the Father upon the incarnate Son, and then the Spirit is sent from the Father and the exalted Son upon the Church and the world.”

Although Balthasar’s presentation of the cross as the “economic form” of the Son’s eternal procession mistakenly imports alienation into the relation of Father and Son, Balthasar is right to observe that the theology of the missions of the Son and Spirit “opens up the triune God’s involvement in the whole world drama, which Irenaeus calls God’s ‘becoming accustomed’ to dwelling with man and which Thomas designates as the invisible ‘missions’ of Son and Spirit into the whole of history—before and after Christ.”

For Balthasar, only Jesus is a “person” in a strict sense. It follows that “others can claim to be persons only in virtue of a relationship with him and in dependence on him.” Regarding other “persons,” Balthasar affirms

27. Ibid., 201. In confirmation of the point that “the Son’s missio is the economic form of his eternal processio from the Father,” Balthasar cites Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae I, q. 43, a. 1. See Nichols, No Bloodless Myth, 103; N. Healy, Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, 115–18. See Nichols, No Bloodless Myth, 103; N. Healy, Eschatology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, 115–18. In thinking about this “economic form,” the created humanity of Jesus needs to be kept at the forefront, so that the temporal createdness of the Son’s mission, as distinct from the eternality of the Person of the Son, remains clear. The Person and mission of the Son should neither be separated nor simply equated without further explication.
28. On this topic see chap. 4 of my Scripture and Metaphysics and chap. 5 of my Predestination. For similar concerns, see Kilby, Balthasar, 99–122. See also Schenk, “What Does the Trinity ‘Add’?,”111:

If Balthasar has replaced suffering’s toleration by the Trinity or by the humanity of Christ (voluntas in obliquo, voluntas rationis) with an absolute and antecedent will of it (in recto), if he has heeded the unseparated character of Christ’s natures in the hypostatic union at the price of their unmixed duality, if he has made kenotic suffering normative by deifying it, then it needs to be asked whether the retrieval of the Trinity as beyond suffering—precisely as a gospel of human hope—might not allow us to embrace with the living Jewish community their more genuine understanding of the Old Testament as a covenant of hope for salvation from suffering.
29. Balthasar, Dramatis Personae, 201; he cites Summa theologiae I, q. 43, a. 5, 7.
that “we can say that their conscious subjects are endowed with a part or aspect of his universal mission.” Before specifying how this is so, Balthasar remarks that “the important thing here is to realize that this participation [in Christ’s mission] is what makes conscious subjects into persons in the Christian sense. Accordingly, the greater the participation, the greater the subject’s personal definition will be and the more universal (and ecclesial) his mission.” Since Christ’s mission is kenotic love and obedience to the point of abandonment, those who love more will be more fully “persons” and will share more deeply in Christ’s mission. This way of defining personhood, based on grace and charity, differs from definitions of human personhood that are based upon the incommunicable uniqueness of individuals who share human nature, as well as from definitions of human personhood based upon the “image of God” as a gift of creation rather than of grace. In my view, Balthasar should have retained the rootedness of “personhood” in human nature and emphasized that grace and charity—that is to say, participation in Christ’s mission of supreme charity—perfect, elevate, and fulfill our personhood. In this way, his key point about sharing in Christ’s personhood or mission could be retained without calling into doubt the “personhood” of those who consciously reject Christ.

Regarding our missions (or our participation in Christ’s mission), Balthasar rightly notes that these are not natural to us, let alone identical with us. As he explains, “These missions do not, as in Christ’s case, constitute an a priori synthesis with his person, but are synthesized a posteriori along with the created, chosen persons [Geistpersonen].” Since this is so, we as sinners can fail—or at least try to fail—to be persons. Balthasar comments that “sinners only partially accept and fulfill their missions and can even reject them entirely.” It would seem that those sinners who entirely rejected their missions would cease to be “persons,” although what Balthasar means by this is simply the deprivation of charity, of the graced life that God calls each human

31. Ibid. See Nichols, No Bloodless Myth, 104–5.
32. Balthasar, Dramatis Personae, 207. See McIntosh, “Christology,” 32–35. McIntosh argues: The key for Balthasar is Ignatius’ clarity about opening oneself to the call of Christ and the discovery that this call, while unique for each person, always leads to an inner participation in Jesus’s mission from the Father, and that it is precisely the following of the call and the sharing in this mission that brings about the fulfillment of personal identity. Mission is constitutive of personhood because mission is the concrete form by which God turns to each being, drawing it out from the potentiality of its nature, into relational converse, and so onwards into the risk of free personal existence. (32–33)
33. In short, to be a “person” does not require being a fully fulfilled person. On the imago dei, see my Jewish-Christian Dialogue, chap. 3.
35. Ibid., 208.
to attain. As Balthasar observes, “In the plan of God, each conscious subject
is created for the sake of his mission—a mission that makes him a person.”36
I agree that each human “is created for the sake of his mission”—namely, a
particular work of love—but I do not think that it is solely this graced mission
that makes the human being a “person.”37

Balthasar goes on to make more adequate distinctions, even if he still does
not affirm that “personhood” belongs to all individuals of human nature. For
instance, Balthasar states, “In Christ it has been made possible for a conscious
subject to rise above his natural level to that of the (‘super-natural’) person. In
positive terms, this presupposes that the created spirit, man, can be an image
(imago) of God; negatively, it implies that he is deficient and needs to be per-
fected and given a ‘likeness’ (similitudo) to God; such a likeness can only be
imparted by God, in Christ.”38 At various points in his corpus, Balthasar also
argues that we can hope that the movement to personhood from nonperson-
hood will occur even for unrepentant sinners who have entered (along with
Christ) into “hell” itself. As Balthasar puts it, “In Christo . . . every man can
cherish the hope of not remaining a merely individual conscious subject but
of receiving personhood from God, becoming a person, with a mission that
is likewise defined in Christo.”39

Balthasar’s approach helps us to see clearly where the Church fits into reve-
lation: Christ is revelation (in his mission), and the Church is constituted by
participation in Christ’s revelatory mission through diverse forms of kenotic
love under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Since Christ’s mission is universal,
it “extends to the sphere of all (human) conscious subjects, and so they are
drawn into the ‘area’ of the unique Person of the God-man.”40 The Eucha-
rist has a particularly central role. As Roch Kereszty observes in an essay on
Balthasar’s theology:

36. Ibid.
37. Again, a better way of putting it is that by participating in Christ’s mission through the
grace of the Holy Spirit, we become the persons that God wishes us to be, so that our person-
hood is perfected and elevated.
39. Ibid., 220. See also John Webster’s helpful way of phrasing our mission in Christ:
Human work is the work of beings whose self-definition is not their own project but a
responsible endeavour truthfully and faithfully to live out the calling of the Holy One.
Responsibility does not mean the end of all human mobility or plasticity, for it is char-
acteristic of the kind of creature that we are that we discover our identity by fulfilling
a vocation through time; we become holy. But the becoming is, precisely, discovery, not
invention; it is not our generation of a self-narrative, not life politics or an ascetics (aesthetics)
of the self, but the enactment of an office: “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your
God, am holy.” (Holiness, 104)
40. Balthasar, Dramatis Personae, 231.
Against this background we understand better why the Eucharist so eminently embodies the mission of the Church. As we are drawn into the unfathomable depths of Christ’s love, we become conformed to Him so that we can empty ourselves of our own self-centered existence and learn to love our fellow human beings with the very love of Christ. In this way we share in the life-giving and life-nourishing mission of the Word made flesh. The common mission of the ecclesial Body of Christ includes every member’s unique mission, which participates in the universal redemptive mission of the Son.41

Christ’s mission grounds all other missions in such a way that all revelation, the entire history of God with his people, relates to Christ’s mission.42 The whole of history, then, is a drama of decision—for or against the living God—with Christ at the center. Balthasar points out that Christ’s mission reveals both God’s taking the part of sinners and God’s sorrowful forsakenness vis-à-vis sinners.43

41. Kereszty, “Eucharist and Mission,” 9. The background that Kereszty has in view is Mary’s fiat prayer (“Let it be to me according to your word” [Luke 1:38]). For further discussion see especially Healy and Schindler, “For the Life of the World,” 51–63. As Healy and Schindler remark, “For in the gift of the Eucharist, Christ endows the Church with the ‘real presence’ of his body and blood together with an inner participation in his mission to the world” (51). See also Kimberly Hope Belcher’s reflections on Balthasar in her constructive theology of baptism: “It is the human enacting of Christ’s obediential kenosis (for which liturgy is identity-forming ‘practice’—efficacious engagement) that allows the drama of human existence to retain its theological character. It is by the church’s ethical life in the world that the world continues to be the manifestation of the absolute self-giving of Father and Son in the Spirit” (“Efficacious Engagement,” 132).

42. As Larry Chapp astutely puts it, “For Balthasar, the ‘what’ of revelation is more appropriately referred to as the Who: revelation is given once and for all in a definitive manner in Jesus, but what is given is nothing less than the offer for historical humanity to participate in trinitarian eternity. In the ‘concrete universal’ that is the prototypical hypostatic humanity of Jesus, an ‘opening’ is revealed which can only be entered into by way of engrafted participation” (“Revelation,” 22). Chapp notes that Balthasar is well aware that the Church can render Christ’s mission “opaque through the sinfulness of her members” (23). The point, however, is that “by rendering revelation contemporaneous to all generations,” the Church and Scripture “are themselves to be viewed historically, that is to say, ‘personologically,’ as living manifestations of the Christ-event that call forth a response in the form of a decision” (ibid.). See also Mongrain, Systematic Thought, 109–13.

43. Balthasar embeds this forsakenness in the immanent life of the Son and Father. Too loosely in my view, he argues:
If we are to follow biblical revelation, we must not split the Son of God in the exercise of his mission into the one who carries out his mission on earth and the one who remains unaffected in heaven, looking down at the “sent” Son. For he is One: he is the eternal Son dwelling in time. The event by which he consents to be transferred from the form of God into the “form of a servant” and the “likeness of men” (Phil. 2:6f.) affects him as the eternal Son. . . . This “infinite distance,” which recapitulates the sinner’s mode of alienation from God, will remain forever the highest revelation known to the world.
Does revelation also take place before Christ? Balthasar argues that Jesus “sees himself as the climax, fulfilling and transcending a whole series of (prophetic) missions, fulfilling and surpassing the divine giving of the Law in Moses and, finally, fulfilling a divine world order that existed ‘from the beginning’” (Matt. 19:8). On this view, the relationship of Jesus’s mission to the missions/revelation that we find in Israel’s Scriptures is one of the former fulfilling the latter, which participate in and prepare for the former. Jesus reveals God to us in a way that both fulfills the revelation mediated by the Old Testament and goes beyond it.

In short, the existential concentration of mission in the person of Christ Jesus, and its relation to kenotic obedience, stands out in Balthasar’s portrait. Because Christ invites our participation in his salvific and revelatory mission, divine revelation in Christ intrinsically involves the missions of all who belong to the people of God.

Christopher Wright: Revelation and the Mission to the Gentiles

The broad sweep of God’s mission of mercy in human history, and the call to an evangelizing mission, take center stage in Christopher Wright’s The Mission of God. Wright’s focus on the whole of history and on concrete evangelization adds a significant element to our portrait of the relationship of divine revelation and the Church. Wright seeks “to demonstrate that a strong theology of the mission of God provides a fruitful hermeneutical framework within which to read the whole Bible.”

of the diastasis (within the eternal being of God) between Father and Son in the Holy Spirit. (Dramatis Personae, 228)


44. Balthasar, Dramatis Personae, 250.

45. See also Balthasar’s Theology: The Old Covenant, vol. 6 of The Glory of the Lord. For further discussion see Walatka, “Theological Exegesis,” 300–317; Riches, “Biblical Basis of Glory,” 61–63; Dickens, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics; Dickens, “Balthasar’s Biblical Hermeneutics,” 175–86.

46. Thus Mark McIntosh notes that for Balthasar “a saintly life of sharing in Christ’s mission opens one to the grace of contemporaneity with the gospel . . . The Spirit not only leads the disciples ‘into the truth of what has taken place—but, in the same Spirit, they are given a participation in Jesus’s own existence’ (TDJ, 131)” (“Christology,” 29).

47. C. Wright, Mission of God, 26. For recent evangelical Protestant theologies of mission, see also Köstenberger and O’Brien, Salvation to the Ends of the Earth; Bauckham, Bible and
He first warns against resting Christian mission entirely on Matthew 28:19–20, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Contrary to some interpretations, this text does not provide an eschatological timetable, as though when all nations have heard the gospel then Christ will return. In every generation, after all, the people even of previously evangelized nations need to hear the gospel anew. Those who downplay Matthew 28:19–20, however, can fall into the opposite extreme of neglecting the necessity of mission. Wright also observes that the trinitarian processions and missions are the source of the Church’s mission. Mission in the Church arises in joyful and prayerful response to the missions of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The center of mission is the Triune God, not human actions.

Turning to the story of the Old Testament, Wright summarizes it as being about the identity of YHWH, the identity of human beings, the reasons for our corruption and alienation, and the way in which this situation is going to be restored for all nations through YHWH’s election of Israel. YHWH’s mission of covenantally electing and acting on behalf of Israel establishes Israel’s mission of holiness for the world. For Wright, it is particularly important to perceive that YHWH’s election of Israel always had the blessing of all nations in view (see Gen. 12:3). As the prophesied Messiah, Jesus acts on behalf of YHWH and indeed shares in his identity, and Jesus’s restoration of Israel

48. Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* similarly emphasizes our sharing in the incarnate Son’s mission through the work of evangelization: “The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which he entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion. As the second millennium after Christ’s coming draws to an end, an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service.” See John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, §1, 436; cf. Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Nove Millennio Ineunte*. For an Orthodox treatment of the same themes, see Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Mission in Christ’s Way*, which collects his essays on mission from 1964 to 2003.

49. See the concerns raised by Moerberly, “Genesis 12:1–3,” 141–61. However, as the next chapter of his book makes clear, Moerberly is particularly concerned to challenge the views of Christian Zionists such as Jerry Falwell, whose arguments are quite different from those of Wright. Even if, as Moerberly thinks, “the culminating promise to Abraham is restricted in its concern to Abraham” in its original context, Moerberly also recognizes that “the wider context of scripture and Jewish tradition” (161) leads not only Christian commentators but also Jewish ones to read Genesis 12:1–3 not least as signaling the blessing of all nations: “A construal of Abraham as mediator of divine blessing to the nations is in fact also attested in Jewish interpretation down the ages” (159–60). In the course of a broader argument with Jon D. Levenson (with whom I largely agree), Walter Brueggemann rightly observes that in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament...
encompasses the blessing of all nations. According to Wright, Jesus does not reveal a new divine identity or a new mission but rather confirms and fulfills the identity and mission that the Old Testament story has already led us to expect. The commandment of love fulfills the commandments given to Israel. A “misisonal hermeneutic” is therefore based not simply on the Great Commission or the New Commandment to love one another (John 13:34) but on the entirety of Scripture’s “Great Communication—the revelation of the identity of God, of God’s action in the world and God’s saving purpose for all creation.” This vision of mission includes a wide variety of elements, including preaching the gospel, social justice, Church order, and so forth. It also underscores our participation as Christians in the trinitarian life, a participation engendered by the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit.

To sketch the basic story of Scripture—the mission of God, Israel, Jesus, and the Church—Wright highlights a variety of biblical texts, including Genesis 3–11; Isaiah 42, 43, and 49; Psalm 2; 2 Corinthians 5; Luke 24; and Acts 1 and 13. As he makes clear, the Church’s mission is “the committed participation of God’s people in the purposes of God for the redemption of the whole creation.” Indeed, I would add that if this is the Church’s mission, then it can be seen from another angle that mission is the Church. The Church is the missions that God gives human beings so that we might share in God’s redemptive mission. Wright ensures that the Church’s mission is never viewed in isolation from the whole story. God’s identity too is not known outside of his mission to Israel and ultimately to the whole world in Christ Jesus. Wright cautions that this approach to the Bible’s story does not claim that every detail fits easily into the framework of mission but rather claims simply that the Bible tells a broadly unified story.

Commenting on Deuteronomy 27–32, Wright finds God will reveal his name to the nations even through Israel’s disobedience, in a manner that not only judges Israel but also restores, vindicates, and includes Israel. He observes that “there is a recurring restlessness about a Jewish reading and a push beyond that to a reading as large as the nations and as comprehensive as creation” (Theology of the Old Testament, 95).

50. For exegetical studies supportive of this view, see especially N. T. Wright, New Testament and the People of God; N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God; C. Rowe, Early Narrative Christology; Gathercole, Pre-existent Son; Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ; McDonough, Christ as Creator.

51. C. Wright, Mission of God, 60.

52. Among Protestant works that connect the Church’s mission to the theology of the Trinity, Wright references Vicedom, Mission of God; Newbigin, Trinitarian Doctrine for Today’s Mission. See also Wainwright, Leslie Newbigin.

53. C. Wright, Mission of God, 67.

54. See ibid., 68–69. For accessible presentations of the Bible as a unified whole, see also Dauphinais and Levering, Holy People, Holy Land; Bartholomew and Goheen, Drama of Scripture.
“the history that will see the judgment and restoration of Israel will also see the judgment and blessing of the nations. Each sequence will be intertwined with the other.”

Similarly, he emphasizes the way in which certain psalms and prophetic texts universalize the Davidic kingship by linking it with the kingship of God: God will reveal himself and reign over the entire world through the Davidic king.

Again, tracking the theme of a new covenant through various prophetic texts, Wright shows that “in its Old Testament development, the anticipated new covenant picks up themes from all of the preceding covenants—Noah, Abraham, Sinai and David, and in several places expands them to include the nations within the ultimate scope of God’s saving covenantal mission.”

In the New Testament fulfillment of this covenantal mission, God reveals himself even more fully through the sacrificial love enacted by Jesus at his final Passover meal, when “he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Matt. 26:27–28).

Revelation, then, occurs in the very texture of God’s mission in Israel and in Jesus Christ. As Wright puts it, binding together all the biblical texts “is the grand narrative of God’s mission, ever since Abraham, to bring blessing to the nations through this people whom he has called to be his special possession.”

Paul’s preaching to the gentiles and their entrance into the covenant community, which we see in Paul’s letters and in Acts, confirms a narrative already in place, but does so now on the basis of God’s mission in Jesus. Commenting

55. C. Wright, Mission of God, 342. For discussion of the judgment and restoration of Israel and the blessing of the nations, see, for example, Bryan, Jesus and Israel’s Traditions; Pao, Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus.


58. See C. Wright, Mission of God, 353. For further reflection see McKnight, Jesus and His Death, 259–374; Perrin, Jesus the Temple, 177–79; Koenig, Feast of the World’s Redemption. For the view that “Jesus’s eucharistic words and deeds find a likely context in the multifarious and well-attested ancient Jewish efforts to channel the temple’s sanctity into various other ritual activities,” see Klawans, Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple, 244. Even if more should be said, McKnight seems right to point out that although Jesus does not reject the temple outright, “when, however, we take into consideration the prediction of the temple’s destruction and his anti-establishment words (Mark 11–13), we can safely argue that Jesus’s last supper is a fundamental reorientation of the temple order. The scholars, wide-ranging as they are, who connect these three dots (entry, temple incident, and last supper) have offered a potent hypothesis that helps explain how Jesus understood his death. The temple, standing for the nation, is about to be destroyed; God has appointed Jesus’s death as the means of escape; those who eat his body and drink his blood will be passed over” (Jesus and His Death, 326).

59. C. Wright, Mission of God, 353.
on Matthew 28:20, where the risen Jesus says “I am with you always, to the close of the age,” Wright adds that “the covenant presence of God among his people in the Old Testament becomes the promised presence of Jesus among his disciples as they carry out the mission he lays on them.”

When Wright turns to “the life of God’s missional people,” he focuses first on ethics. The holiness of the people of God has as its ultimate purpose the fostering of God’s mission to bless all nations. In this vein, Wright speaks of “the missional reason for the very existence of the church as the people of God.” By obediently reflecting God’s righteousness and justice in the world, the people of God help to reveal God to the world. The people of God are a “kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:6) that has the goal of “bringing the knowledge and law of God to the nations and bringing the nations to God in covenant inclusion and blessing.” The holiness of God’s people is the way that God intends them to fulfill their mission, the mission for which he has elected them. Wright adds that holiness, for Israel and for the Church, has not only an ethical dimension but also a symbolic/sacramental one. His list of the requirements for Israel’s holiness (rooted in Lev. 19), however,

60. Ibid., 355. For theological discussion of Christ’s ongoing presence to the Church, see Farrow, Ascension and Ecclesia; Farrow, Ascension Theology.
61. C. Wright, Mission of God, 357. On this topic, one might see especially Newbigin, Open Secret, chap. 8, “Mission as Action for God’s Justice.” See also such works as Witherington, Indelible Image, 2:421–748; Matera, New Testament Ethics; Verhey, Remembering Jesus.
63. Ibid., 370. From a different angle, but also with regard to Christ’s kingdom, Archbishop Anastasios reminds us that “the Father’s will is already a reality. Myriads of other beings, the angels and saints, are already in harmony with it. The realization of God’s will is not simply a desire; it is an event that illuminates everything else. The center of reality is God and His Kingdom. On this, the realism of faith is grounded. On this ontology is based every Christian effort on earth” (Yannoulatos, Mission in Christ’s Way, 4). This theocentric understanding of Christ’s kingdom helps to avoid the triumphalism that Lesslie Newbigin fears. Newbigin observes, “The church misunderstands itself if it thinks that it is itself the place where the truth and righteousness of the reign of God are embodied as against the reign of evil in the world. This ancient temptation to identify the church with the kingdom of God seems to be present again in some manifestations of the theology of liberation. The relation of the church to the kingdom is a more complex one and, I am convinced, can be truly grasped only by means of the trinitarian model” (Open Secret, 139). For Newbigin, however, the Holy Spirit’s sovereignty over the Church is such that the Church “cannot impose its own ethical insights at any one time and place upon those whom the Spirit calls into its company” (140). No doubt Newbigin here has in view a certain overreach among missionaries in non-Christian cultures, as well as the human (and thus fallen) dimension of the Church’s life and teaching. Yet Newbigin’s claim goes too far, since Christian faith includes and mandates a way of life whose basic components are taught in Scripture and whose bounds are identifiable by the Church in its formal teaching under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For further theological perspectives on God’s priestly people, see Congar, Lay People in the Church, chap. 4; Leithart, Priesthood of the Plebs; Schnackenburg, God’s Rule and Kingdom, 215–317.

Matthew Levering, Engaging the Doctrine of Revelation
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
strongly privileges the ethical dimension.\textsuperscript{64} The people of God have the mission of “being God’s visible model to the nations,” through their witness (obedience, loyalty) to God’s covenant and through their coming to know the living God.\textsuperscript{65}

The goal of this mission is the full accomplishment of “the redemption of the nations and the restoration of creation.”\textsuperscript{66} Since Israel could not accomplish this mission (given human fallenness), God took flesh as Israel’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, and fulfilled the mission on behalf of Israel, for the reconciliation of the whole world. The Church is the people of God ordered around Jesus Christ, the elect covenantal community of Jews and gentiles, which carries on Israel’s mission to manifest God’s blessing to the world and to bring the nations to glorify the living God. Wright finds this point in various New Testament texts, including Matthew 28:18–20 (quoted above); 1 Peter 2:9, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”; and John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The scope of the Church’s mission, says Wright, is the whole creation, which has an eschatological goal that God is bringing about: the new creation, a transformed world in which evil, sin, and death will be no more. When he discusses our mission to our fellow humans, he grounds his ethical principles in the doctrine that we are all made in the image of God (Gen. 1).\textsuperscript{67} Since we are in God’s image, God gave us the mission of exercising holy dominion over the earth. We are relational creatures, made for marriage, family, and social life. Sin, however, not only delivers us to death and alienates us from...

\textsuperscript{64} For a corrective that integrates worship and ethics from a Protestant perspective, with a focus on the kind of political society the worshiping Church is called to be, see Wannenwetsch, \textit{Political Worship}. Wannenwetsch’s book would have benefited from engaging Catholic and Orthodox theology. The connection that Brian Brock draws between ethics and Augustine’s reading of the Psalms is fruitful in this regard: see Brock, \textit{Singing the Ethos of God}, 132–64. See also Archbishop Anastasios’s reflections on the communion of love—with emphasis on care for the poor and the oppressed, on care for the health of the earth’s ecosystems, and on the need for continual repentance and the eucharistic liturgy—in Yannoulatos, \textit{Mission in Christ’s Way}, 9–22.

\textsuperscript{65} Wright, \textit{Mission of God}, 380.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 382.

\textsuperscript{67} For further ethical reflection (from diverse perspectives) highlighting the image of God, see N. Harrison, \textit{God’s Many-Splendored Image}; Pinckaers, “Ethics and the Image of God”; Middleton, \textit{Liberating Image}. In light of the transformation/deification of the image of God, Archbishop Anastasios is right to say that “mission is not a question of proclaiming some ethical truths or principles, but the beginning of the transfiguration inaugurated by the ‘light of the gospel of the glory of Christ’ (2 Cor. 4:4; cf. 4:6), through which we are called ‘so that [we] may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Thess. 2:14)” (Yannoulatos, \textit{Mission in Christ’s Way}, 50–51).
God but also mars our actions and the societal structures in which we live. Wright deems HIV/AIDS to be the greatest emergency of our time (especially in Africa), and he tests Christian mission by the standard of how Christians have responded to this crisis—keeping in view the centrality of the Christian proclamation of Jesus’s resurrection and ours.

Wright concludes with a chapter on Israel and the nations, examining the complex relationships of God’s justice, mercy, and election. God is consistently concerned not only for Israel but also for the nations. What God does for Israel, therefore, is also a sign to the nations: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for thou dost judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth” (Ps. 67:1–4; cf. Pss. 86; 102; and others). Prophetic texts, especially in Isaiah but in numerous other prophets as well, also look forward to the nations’ joining in the worship of Israel’s God. Consider Isaiah 19:24–25, “In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.’” For his part, Jesus commands that the gospel be preached to the nations, and the book of Acts (and Pauline letters) shows the success of this mission—even if these biblical texts also exhibit controversies that arose regarding what to require of the converted gentiles.

In short, for Wright revelation and the Church are intrinsically connected through the mission of God. Although divine revelation is completed at the end of the apostolic age, divine revelation’s dramatic character means that in a real sense revelation is ongoing until every last human being has determined, by God’s grace, his or her relation to Christ’s mission.

Conclusion: Revelation and the Church

Aquinas, Balthasar, and Wright help us to see why divine revelation and the Church are intrinsically bound together; the Church is no mere receptacle. As Aquinas makes clear, the revelation of God takes place through the visible and invisible missions of the Son and Spirit. Absent the vibrant theology of the trinitarian missions that we find in Aquinas (and in Scripture), the theocentric character of revelation would seem to exclude the active role of...

68. See also Yannoulatos, Mission in Christ’s Way, 42, 44–45.
the Church, lest mere humans be situated in the place of God or lest revelation be imagined as the Church’s work over the centuries rather than as God’s work in Christ and the Spirit. The way to understand the active place of the Church in divine revelation is to reflect upon the missions of the Son and Spirit.

Balthasar identifies Christ’s kenotic love and obedience as the center of revelation, so that revelation is in a certain sense coextensive with Christ’s “person,” Christ’s supreme mission-consciousness. The Church is the community of human subjects who become persons by embracing their missions in Christ. As a community of persons in Christ, built up by the Eucharist, the Church mediates and participates in his salvific mission by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wright envisions this mediation primarily in terms of the ongoing historical extension of God’s mission of mercy to all peoples. By proclaiming and witnessing to the gospel, the Church extends to the nations the good news of divine revelation. The movement envisioned by Wright is one of going out into the world to proclaim the gospel.

These three senses of “mission” are clearly complementary. The horizontal axis—the extension of revelation to the nations over the course of history—and the vertical axis of participation in Christ’s mission require each other. Both the horizontal and the vertical axis depend entirely on the united missions (visible and invisible) of the Son and Holy Spirit. Reflection on mission enables us to see that revelation, while being the action of the Triune God, cannot be understood outside the action of the Church. Preeminent in the eucharistic liturgy, which builds the Church in charity, the Church even now shares in and communicates the revelatory mission of Christ. Anticipating the next chapter, therefore, we may allow Joseph Ratzinger the last word, from his *Spirit of the Liturgy*: “Ultimately, the difference between the *actio Christi* and our own action is done away with. There is only one

69. Again we might quote Archbishop Anastasios:

It is not quite correct to say that “the mission is not ours, but Christ’s.” It is also ours, inasmuch as we are incorporated into Christ: “All things are yours,” St. Paul would say again in this case, “and you are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:22–23). Since the Christian mission is incorporated into God’s mission, the final goal of our mission surely cannot be different from His. . . . Our participation in this glory has already begun with our incorporation into Christ. “The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them” (John 17:22; cf. 1:14)—that is, the glory of the Sonship—and “those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30; cf. 2 Cor. 4:6).” (45–47)

Archbishop Anastasios, like Balthasar, connects “glory” with kenotic love. The phrase “the mission is not ours, but Christ’s,” with which Archbishop Anastasios disagrees, comes from Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World*, 28.
action, which is at the same time his and ours—ours because we have become ‘one body and one spirit’ with him. The uniqueness of the Eucharistic liturgy lies precisely in the fact that God himself is acting and that we are drawn into that action of God.”

70. Ratzinger, Spirit of the Liturgy, 174. Ratzinger prefaces this remark by stating: The real “action” in the liturgy in which we are all supposed to participate is the action of God himself. . . . But how can we participate, have a part, in this action? Are not God and man completely incommensurable? Can man, the finite and sinful one, cooperate with God, the Infinite and Holy One? Yes, he can, precisely because God himself has become man, become body, and here, again and again, he comes through his body to us who live in the body. The whole event of the Incarnation, Cross, Resurrection, and Second Coming is present as the way by which God draws man into cooperation with himself. As we have seen, this is expressed in the liturgy in the fact that the petition for acceptance is part of the oratio. True, the Sacrifice of the Logos is accepted already and forever. But we must still pray for it to become our sacrifice, that we ourselves, as we said, may be transformed into the Logos (logosiert), conformed to the Logos, and so be made the true Body of Christ. (173)