

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Everything You Never Knew You Didn't Know about the Bible
Historical Foundations of the Bible Adult Formation/Spiritual Life Thursday,
May 2, 2002 7:30 p.m. First Presentation Church Hall

Take a moment to breathe deeply. Let us pray. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your presence and the presence of your Son as we gather in his name. He is the Word that you speak to us, and we ask that you help us to listen attentively. We ask that you help us to breathe with the Spirit that you breathe into us. And we ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Well, good evening! You are definitely a larger crowd than I expected. What I thought I would do for three weeks is to discuss various themes that are usually overlooked when people talk about the Bible. The topics I want to deal with are Scripture itself, then inspiration and revelation, and then finally the Old Testament and the relevance of the Old Testament to a Christian believer. What people usually do is they get the Bible and they start reading. And I'm not saying that's not a good approach, but very often they overlook some very basic themes, some very basic principles, that really should be at the back of our minds when we read the Bible.

For one thing, **the Bible is really written to be read out loud**. And many of us will sit silently and read passages with our mind, but the Bible is really not meant to be read by the mind; it is meant to be read by the body and the mind together. So when I read the psalms, for example, I mouth them. First of all, **it slows you down**; but second of all, it allows you to hear the word of God. And that's the whole idea. "**Faith comes from hearing**," St. Paul says. So you can build up your own faith, but you have to hear it, not just read it with your eyes and your mind. There's a reason for this too.

Behind this idea is really the mystery of the incarnation itself: the incarnation is the mystery how God becomes human. God takes on a human vehicle, a human instrument, and manifests himself. Now it is the Word of God that takes on this human instrument, not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not become incarnate. **The Word of God becomes incarnate**. Now in one fundamental, substantial way this is referring to **Jesus Christ**. But in another broader way, it refers to the word of God coming alive within the community of believers, and it goes way back. **The very existence of a believing community that listens to God and speaks God's word is already the beginning of an incarnation**. So I would like us to think about these things and to try to incorporate them into our own minds so that we develop a real theology of the word of God, a theology of Scripture.

When I use the word "Bible" of course I am referring to the entire Bible. Technically, the Bible has **41 books in the Hebrew Bible and 27 in the New Testament**. Now this particular Bible is one of my favorites; it's called the *Oxford Study Bible*. It's written in England, and the idiom is very good idiom; in other words, it's very good English. I won't say that the Bibles written in the United States are bad English, but they're not always good English. But this Bible is really written by a combined ecumenical group:

Protestant and Catholics. Now they single out certain books, which they call “apocrypha.” Those books are not singled out in a normal Catholic Bible. That’s why we count 41 books. Actually we count **46 books** if you want to use the official **Catholic version. The Hebrews have 41, 39 for the Protestant Bible.** Now this will be disputed. I mean, someone will say, “Well, what about this one; what about that one?” We can go into that at some other time if you’re really interested. But that has to do with the **canonicity of books.**

The main point the Catholic Church makes about the Bible is that **the Bible is the inspired word of God as a whole.** And that’s one thing I think we always have to keep in mind: the Bible is inspired as a whole. When people take certain parts of the Bible and they read it independently of everything else, then they are not understanding the Bible. They’re dissecting it! The Bible has to be understood as one complete whole.

The first thing I would like to talk about is **how the Bible is different from other literature.** It is literature, of course; it’s a book. In fact, it’s not a book; it’s many books. In fact, the word “biblia” is a plural. That’s where you get the word “Bible.” It’s a Greek plural. The singular is “biblos.” And “biblia” is plural, so “the books.” **But the Church regards the Bible as a book because of this idea of the unity of all of the Scriptures.** Now the Bible has this tremendous unity that’s remarkable because it spans many centuries, and yet it has something in common, each part with itself different from every other kind of literature.

I would like to talk for a few minutes about the **kinds of literature that we find in the very same period when the Bible began to be written,** or shortly before. What we find in many nations is **myth.** “Mythos” is the Greek word. Now if someone asked you what a myth was, what would you say? Story. What about it? Any kind of story? Fictional. What else? Untrue. What else? Story with a deep truth. Traditional. Tries to capture some of the basic aspects of mankind. Okay. Those are all good observations. But did you notice one thing when you heard these different definitions? One said, “fictional, untrue”; another said, “a deep truth.” These are not necessarily contradictory because **on one level a myth may be fictional telling of a story, but that story may have a deep truth to it,** just like a novel. Have you ever read a novel that had a deep truth to it? So there are different levels of meaning, and we have to keep that in mind; but one thing about myth is a myth is normally a story, true, but it’s usually, and I would have to say it really is always, **about** supernatural or superhuman entities, also called the **“gods.”** And the stories that the myth tells about basically take place **outside of the time and space that we live in.** So very basic to myth is the idea of a sacred time, a primordial time. And in telling the story of a myth, in telling the myth itself, one is going back to a primordial moment before time began. And myth takes place in a sacred space that is different from the place we live now, although the place we live now may actually originate in this sacred space, such as the story, for example, of Tiamat in Babylonian mythology. There is this battle of the gods and one of the goddesses is killed, and that goddess’ body becomes the land of the earth. Okay? So our earth then is the dead body of the goddess. So that’s the thinking behind the myth.

What's important to realize is that **myth is then the origin of also ancient ritual** as people tried to act out the myth and therefore renew their own understanding of how they came to be. So myths really answer such questions as: Who are we? Where did we come from? How did the world get the way it is?—and so on. And it is a **fictional** presentation. **It may or may not tell a deeper truth. Usually it told a political truth.** Myths usually were ways of supporting the status quo, explaining the reigning power at that time as representatives of the victorious divine beings who championed them. So we have all kinds of stories about battles that take place in sacred time, in sacred space, and the results are the present social order, whereby the **rulers of the present society are, in fact, the ambassadors or the representatives of the ruling, victorious gods.**

Now this should be obvious that this leads to a sort of totalitarian mentality, and ancient societies were totalitarian. We're speaking about the ancient Mideast in particular because we're talking about the beginning of civilization; and that took place in the ancient Middle East, which includes Egypt, of course.

Now people naturally abandon all cults, that is, all forms of worship, of defeated gods. So time would always progress, and there would be new battles; there would be new wars, and the reigning rulers could be defeated by somebody else. As you know, that's the way the history of the world goes. Well, the way myth would deal with this, they'd say, "Well, the old victorious gods have now been defeated by these new gods." And then people would abandon the worship of the old gods because obviously they weren't good enough anymore; they weren't strong enough to maintain power. Another way of putting all this is ultimately the **divine power is the state itself**; it is government itself—that's what god is. God is the government. God is the state. God is the pharaoh. God is the king. And that is the **fundamental ethos of Middle Eastern culture.**

Right directly under the chief rulers, whoever they would be, there would be priests, because, of course, this was a sacred organization; and then there would also be the merchants and the craftsmen who would keep the machine of the government working. On the bottom the largest group of people would be the serfs, and some call them "slaves," and some call them "landless peasants." But at any rate the idea is they really had very little freedom. It isn't necessarily chattel slavery, as existed in the South, for example, before the Civil War, where a human being was actually a piece of property. I'm not saying that, but rather it seems that the vast majority of the people simply were slaves of the state and served the state whether the service was planting food or whether the service was building buildings or whatever was needed.

Further, **it is probable or at least likely that most people did not have what we take for granted, a sense of personal identity, a sense of personal, individual awareness.** Probably in the earliest days of civilization, people identified with the whole group, and this is actually a very profound idea. Many psychologists, not necessarily today—I haven't read any contemporary ones talking about this—but 20, 30, 40 years ago psychologists used to write about this: the idea of a consciousness itself developing and growing. And we can see the beginning of a self-awareness comes around the time of the **sixth century** and is promoted by certain prophets: prophets in Israel such as

Jeremiah and Isaiah, prophets also in India by other names like Mahavira and Gautama the Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu in China. And they all lived more or less at the same time, and they brought into human nature, the human experience, a certain sort of **awareness of self**. We might imagine that it didn't exist at all before this time.

Now it is in contrast to this that we find the beginnings of the world of the Bible. And by "world of the Bible" I mean not only the world in which the Bible was actually written down, because it is actually a book, but I'm also speaking of the world that preceded it by quite a long time, by millennia. The only problem is we don't know exactly how to follow the whole procedure, the whole development. But we can see something was happening among a certain people, the people who later became the **people of the Bible**, in which they were **understanding things very differently from all of their neighbors**. Their understanding is this: **Yahweh, the name of God, is one single, asexual spirit. This one single Lord is the creator and ground of all being, and this Lord cannot be identified with any particular place**. Now it was very common that the gods of Egypt were gods of Egypt, and the gods of Mesopotamia were gods of Mesopotamia, and the gods of China were the gods of China, and the gods of India were the gods of India; but the Lord of Israel was not the "god" of any one place. He was not the "god" of Palestine. He was the **Lord of heaven and earth**—the whole shebang! And heaven is more important than earth actually because heaven is the all-encompassing, the all-embracing, reality of the sky. The heaven embraces everything.

The people who produced the Bible eventually did not understand themselves as slaves of any state. In fact, they cried aloud to God for being enslaved. Now the condition that is expressed in the book of Exodus is not really a rare condition. It would be the normal condition of peasants. But they had an awareness that that was not appropriate, that **somehow they were being deprived of something they had a right to, some kind of freedom!** Further, they understood that they were **actors on the stage of history**. Now by "they" I don't necessarily mean every single individual—that they would actually be able to talk about this and articulate this. However, those who formulated the biblical faith had this understanding that human beings were actually the actors on the stage of history. In the myth world that's not true. Human beings have no meaning on the stage of history. History is determined by supernatural or superhuman forces. In some cases, in some ancient worlds, it's all determined by fate. That was very popular in Babylonia and also in India—fate determines everything. Patterns already set in motion determine everything. Not so for the people of the Bible. They understood that human beings are free-willed beings, free-willed creatures, that human beings decide, make choices, **interact with each other and with God!**

And **God is a very peculiar kind of God**, and "peculiar" is a good word because it says, "I am holy." "Holy, qadosh" actually means "peculiar." So when you hear about the holiness of God it's saying God isn't what you think, God isn't what you imagine. "My thoughts are not your thoughts," saith the Lord." God is wholly **different from what you think**. And God is of God's own nature **a communicating being**.

Now if you study, again, myths or even other forms of religious expression, you will not find this either. There is no interest in the gods talking to humans; they would have no interest in doing that. The god's interests are other gods. In the East where mysticism became more prevalent, God, whatever "God" means, the divine, doesn't speak. The divine hides itself in the deepest mystery. It is not communicating reality.

For those people who eventually produce the Bible, God is communicating, speaking; and this is where the very idea of "word" comes from. **The word of God is the communication of God.** Furthermore, God is always inviting, **inviting people to respond to his communication, and drawing people into a relationship.** And the central feature of the Bible is not myth but "berith" or "**covenant.**" Now some say, "Well, the covenant is a myth. It's the way the Hebrew people understood their relationship with God." But that's using myth, in my view, in too general a sense, because the understanding of covenant is very different from an understanding of myth, because in covenant **God and human beings are partners** and they're drawn together in an agreement; and the result of that **agreement are specific obligations**, so that this understanding of humankind is that **humankind is called on to be a moral being.** Now believe it or not, this is absent from the myths of ancient peoples. In fact, as far as I'm concerned it's absent from almost everything. Some would disagree with that or find different ways in which people are called to be moral, but it's not for the same reason or in the same way. For example, a person might be called to be moral, a Confucian, for example, would be called on to be moral because that's the way a citizen lives properly. That's being a good citizen. Or there could be other motivations of a purely human nature, but for the people of the Bible, covenant gives the fundamental motivation that our role in the world, in the creation, is **to respond to God and to reflect God's own nature and ideas in our own lives.** And "our own lives" means also the life of the covenant people, so it's a very social idea; and it is really the very **root of even the Christian idea of social justice.** It goes all the way back to this very fundamental idea without which we would not have a Bible at all.

Now the story of the Bible begins with the beginning of creation, as you know: "In the beginning." And it moves through a prism. There are various stories in the Book of Genesis. They're sort of not well connected, but they move through the prism of the flood, and then into the family of Abraham, and then after a long period of time onto the stage of world history where **Abraham's descendents do battle with the forces of myth.** How else do you understand Egypt as a political power but as the force of myth trying to destroy covenant?

Now the Bible is a secularizing book. This is something often Christian people don't quite understand. The Bible is against the idea of a sacred time and a sacred space. There is no sacred time and a sacred space because God is the author of everything, and the whole earth is sacred, and all space is sacred. **There is no sacred space as opposed to profane space.** The profane is sacred, and should be; the sacred is profane. The same with time. The time before time began is eternity itself, which is God. God is eternity. But once God creates then we have time, we have space, we have a creation. God is the only eternal being. Angels are not eternal. Nothing else is eternal. **Only God is eternal;**

everything else has a beginning and an end. That's another thing Christians have to be very clear about. From the standpoint of the Bible everything has a beginning and an end, and **the invitation to eternal life that is found only in the New Testament, only in connection with faith in Christ, means sharing in God's life, because only God will not have an end.** Everything else will come to an end. All creation will come to an end. So God invites us into God's life rather than allowing us just to proceed to an end. Now in the Old Testament there is a slight, you might say, speculation about resurrection from the dead, but it's muted and it's not really developed.

Now the Bible offers a self-disclosure of God in the creation itself; so in other words, when God created he was really saying something about himself. We're supposed to be able to look around at the earth, at the sky, at the planets, at the stars, at the vastness of the universe, and understand something about God. It's already a speech. **It's already a word.** Furthermore, **God touches human beings at various times and in various ways,** although truthfully the Bible only records some of them, and usually only those that are connected to the very people who wrote the Bible. This is not a way of saying, well, God isn't working elsewhere. But there's absolutely **no way of actually recording how God does everything.** We can't talk about everything God does! You might say the Bible picks on certain significant events and shows how God influences things, and I believe the way to understand that is not to say this is the only time God does anything, but **this is the way God always does things, so if you learn from Scripture how God works, then you can find the same thing going on in your own life, in your own world.** And furthermore, there's a conversation. There's a **conversation going on between God and the people of the covenant, and the Bible is the result. It isn't the conversation! It's the result of the conversation!** That's another important point.

Now if we think the Bible tells history from a modern point of view—the Bible is historical; it talks about historical people; it's not a myth. It's not talking about the gods. It's not talking about people who lived outside of our time and space. **It's talking about people who lived in our time and space, but it doesn't tell history the way we would tell it.** It doesn't have a modern sense of accountability, cause and effect, details, reliability. There's no sense of completion! I mean, when you read most stories of the Bible you say, "Well, what else happened? This isn't the whole story." Of course, it's not the whole story! It's just a little taste. "Well, what about this and what about that?" **It's really trying to elicit questioning and wonder and conversation and participation. It's not giving answers, primarily.**

In fact, many modern people today find reading the Bible unacceptable because of the way in which the authors handle facts. And we will have to admit the authors do not handle facts in a modern way. But we can see that in this way the Bible parallels, basically, the literature of the ancient world. Our idea of facts and how to tell facts and ascertain facts and so on is something that has only developed in the last hundred years or so. **So when we read the Bible we have to be careful of not reading it as a book of facts.** In fact, what we find in the Bible is that reality is romanticized, which is not to say that it's mythic. **It's not mythic, but it is romanticized.** What does it mean to romanticize something? It means to **exaggerate certain elements. It's also**

dramatized. This means that small and arguably **insignificant events are exaggerated or given meaning and importance that no observer would notice.**

So this gets into a very important issue of the **difference between meaning and observation.** What the bible is doing is trying to share with people meaning. **If a person who would not be connected to the covenant and to the community of the covenant and to the faith of the covenant were to observe the very same event, they wouldn't see the meaning at all.** And I'll give you a few examples. One that's obvious is the **crucifixion of Christ.** As believers we believe that the death of Christ had a profound significance for the history of the world and for our history. The God-man had been murdered. The Son of God had offered himself in sacrifice. This is the meaning that we can give to this event of the crucifixion of Christ. But the actual crucifixion of Christ itself was most probably very ordinary—an ordinary crucifixion with nothing special at all about it.

Now doesn't the Bible say that **the sky got darkened?** Well, perhaps it did; perhaps it didn't. But the reason the author says the sky got darkened is that it's indicating the profound significance of this moment, that all sin in the world was being absorbed into the dying Messiah.

It says in Scripture that **in the temple the curtain was rent from top to bottom.** Well, did it actually happen? Well, I don't know. I doubt it. But what does that mean? Well, what is the temple curtain in the first place? The temple curtain, in the first place, is something that divides all people from the holy of holies. But in the death of Jesus something totally new and different is introduced into human life: now direct access through Christ to God. And as the Letter to the Hebrews mentions, Jesus on his death carried to heaven, into the holy of holies of heaven, his own blood that he offered on the cross and poured it forth in front of the mercy seat of God. Now the mercy seat was an empty chair in the temple where they imagined God sat. But in a sense they knew God didn't sit there because they knew God really lived in the heavens, at least he lived beyond their sight. And so the Letter to the Hebrews says, "Now Jesus has gone beyond our sight." He has gone to that inner sanctum of divine presence and he has taken with him this blood, by which means "he has now become our high priest and he now intercedes for us," and so all obstruction between people and God is done away with. Now you can say another way of putting that is "the curtain of the temple is rent from top to bottom." So it's important that we don't think simply of some factual description of something that happened, but try to **go to the meaning of what is the author trying to get at?** If we don't do that, we'll really miss the message!

The Bible is historical in the sense that there really was a Moses, which is really an Egyptian name; there really was a David; there really was a Saul. But the Bible is not historical in the sense that it actually tells us in great detail, in correct detail, the nature of David's empire, for example, or Solomon's temple. In fact, it seems that boasting about, for example, the wealth and power of those who are chosen by God, seems to be an acceptable form of "**parabola.**" You know that Christ used parabola all the time. We talk about the parables. Well, that idea of parabola, that exaggeration was very much at

work in the **Old Testament**, and it has to do with **exaggerating success, wealth, power, of those who are the ancestors.**

Now most biblical scholars—this is something perhaps that will be difficult to get used to—but **most biblical scholars have serious doubts about the story of the Exodus.** You know the story of the Exodus is the story in which the people are enslaved in Egypt; they cry to God; God sends them Moses. Moses tells Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” Pharaoh balks. So Moses then begins to show him the power of God with various signs and wonders. The greatest wonder is why the Egyptians didn’t respond to this! As you recall there were various plagues. Now some of them could be, you might say, natural. But some of them seemed to be very peculiar, for example, darkness. Have you ever heard of darkness descending? That’s the story. And finally the angel of death takes away the first born of all the Egyptians: cattle, human, every firstborn—well, firstborn male. Pharaoh finally relents and tells the people to go. And then, of course, he pursues them and is totally destroyed as he attempts to actually escape from the middle of the Red Sea after things get a little bit sticky.

Now is there any historical parallel to this sort of event? Is there any record of it in the history of Egypt? They did keep records. And the answer is no, there is no historical evidence. Does that mean it didn’t happen? No, it doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. But on the other hand, **it is important that we start to look at the meaning of the story rather than simply telling it as a story.**

The first meaning that this story has is that **God cares about those deprived of justice.** See, this meaning is important. Evidently there was some sort of escape. Whether it was six hundred thousand people, that’s pretty hard to believe! But there was some sort of escape, and God helped the people leave. But it’s a very dramatized story, no doubt dramatized further in the retelling of it over many centuries. For us it’s important we keep in mind that God cares about those deprived of justice, in this case landless peasants, the people at the bottom of the pyramid I spoke of before.

Secondly, **God has ways of influencing human history.** However, **human beings** also are players in the stage of life, and they **can either cooperate or obstruct God’s plan.** And if you follow the story of the Exodus, what do you see. Pharaoh isn’t the only problem. In fact, Pharaoh is a small problem! God actually can deal with Pharaoh quite well, but you know what God can’t deal with? The people! Their lack of faith, their stubbornness, their constant complaining. Eventually God gets to the point where he wants to absolutely destroy all of them. In fact, this doesn’t happen only once. This is actually **a great story of the power that human beings have and in a sense the weakness God has, given the freedom that he has given us.** Moses says to him, “You know, God, if you destroy your people, the Egyptians are going to say you just led them out here to kill them.” Pretty clever thinking! But behind that something even deeper, and we need to think about it.

[Third point] Further, the story of the Exodus is really the time when God reveals himself in the most profound way in the entire Old Testament: when Moses sees the

burning bush! And God says, “Come no further. You are on sacred ground.” And then he tells Moses, you know, he calls him to be his messenger, his prophet. And he says, “Well, whom shall I say sent me?” And God says, “I AM who AM.” Now what does that mean—“I AM who AM”? **“I AM who AM” is a way of saying I am the origin of consciousness.** Now as far as I know, no one up to that point in any part of the world had ever thought about human consciousness. In the stories of myth they project, those writers and storytellers, project onto divine beings very human forms of consciousness. They’re just like us, really. They’re just as petty, just as mean, just as jealous, as any human being, but not here! God says, “I AM who AM,” the very origin of all consciousness. And as yet I don’t think we’ve really understood the importance of this statement. **Some of the most advanced theologians in the world today believe that consciousness is the origin of everything: of all matter, all time, all everything.** It can’t be explained, you know, where matter comes from, where energy comes from, where time and space come from. It really does come from nowhere. But how could it? It comes from “I AM who AM.”

[Fourth point] **And human beings because we have the feeling of “I,” because we are able to be aware of ourselves, we are truly the images of God,** and we’re truly the likenesses of God; and yet we squander this consciousness. We fill our minds up with nonsense, with entertainment, with noise. God’s very nature is to be aware. And if we are to be living as true images of God, we too must be aware! **A merely mechanical way of living, that is, simply reacting to everything around us, an instinctive way of living, is really ungodly.** And this is basic to the very story of the Exodus. And the meaning is much more important than what really happened.

Fifth, **God is the origin of all law.** See, that’s all tied up with the idea of covenant. Well, of course, covenant is tied up with the idea of the Exodus. The Exodus is the preamble to the covenant. God is the origin of all law. Human beings have no business making laws that aren’t rooted in the law of God—another lesson we haven’t learned yet!

[Sixth point] **Human beings have a covenant obligation to follow God’s law,** not to invent their own, and also to follow the order which God has placed in the creation.

Seven, the special relationship that the chosen people have to God is one of being a paradigm of justice. So it’s not really a privilege as much as **it’s a mission and a vocation to build a society that will reflect the very order and justice that is rooted in God.**

I would like to say something about knowledge. The Hebrew word for knowledge is “yadah,” and it refers to something personal. And this is the knowledge that we gain of God. It is not a matter a principles. It is not a matter of concepts or facts, as would knowledge be in science, for example, or philosophy. It is true we can deduce from what Scripture teaches us about God certain principles and even certain philosophical truths, but that isn’t the knowledge of God. **Knowledge is personal,** as used in the term “carnal knowledge.” Carnal knowledge is personal. It’s physical. It’s mental. It’s emotional. **Knowledge of God** is like that, without the physical. **It’s a personal, spiritual, mental**

and emotional relating to God. What we must understand is that in describing knowledge, the knowledge we gain of God, words are inadequate, and yet we continue to depend upon them. This is not a love-hate relationship. It's simply recognizing that as human beings **we have to use words and yet we cannot in any way bring into words the real essence of the knowledge that we receive from God.** But now the human words are not all we have to deal with because God also communicates. And **God's communication is ultimately not words but the Word, the divine Logos.**

And we might reflect now on the mystery of the Trinity, at which I know people often just throw their hands up and say, "Well that's just a mystery!" Very often that's because the words we use for the Trinity are so confusing. The Trinity, of course, is a mystery, but it's not a confusion! Can we see **that the Word of God is God's own desire to communicate?** Furthermore, can we see that God's own desire to communicate is himself. **God doesn't want to talk about himself, but communicate himself.** This is what the Word is. This Word became flesh in Jesus. This is God's knowledge of God that became flesh in Jesus. **This knowledge of God, which became flesh in Jesus, is really behind all the words of the Bible.** The Bible, this Bible, has many words in it. They're not exactly the same words as in another version. And they're definitely different words in a different language, for example, a French Bible or a Latin Bible or a Greek Bible. They'd be very different words, but **the Word that these words reveal, the knowledge that produces the words, is the same; it is the Word of God, the knowledge of God.** That's true for the Old Testament and for the New Testament.

Again, it is problematic, and has been from the beginning, how Christians are to understand the Old Testament, but the Church has always insisted that **the Old Testament is the word of God.** How? It doesn't mean that the understanding of the author—which we should go into a little later at another time—but the understanding of the author is not the primary issue. The word of God "spoke in olden times in various ways," and that led to and produced the Old Testament. **The truth that is always being revealed to us is the truth of the divine person who is Christ.** That's also true in the Old Testament. This is a very essential principle that most people don't get at all: that the **Old Testament reveals Christ.** You'll see it mentioned many times. Jesus explained the Old Testament, and Jesus walked along with the disciples on the road to Emmaus and he explained how all the various prophecies referred to him. This is not a logical process. It doesn't refer to him logically. Rather it is produced by him and speaks of him in a way that **totally transcends human logic,** otherwise we couldn't say the Old Testament is the word of God when we don't even follow the Old Testaments strictures or laws, of which there are over six hundred and thirty-seven; but it's still the word of God.

The purpose of these talks is not simply for you to go home with all kinds of answers in your head, but to have perhaps more questions and to probe more deeply into your own faith, so you might understand better what you're doing when you open a Bible and read it. So **the object of our understanding it are not ideas, much less concepts.** And this is very important because there are people today who think that the object of the Bible, the knowledge we get from the Bible, is conceptual. If that were true, then, of course, there would only be one very rigid way of understanding the Bible; and

since everyone understands the Bible in a slightly different way, then we'd all have to be wrong, or at least maybe only one could be right. However, this mentality is behind a great deal of division and divisiveness in Christianity. The knowledge that is being revealed is the knowledge of Christ, the Logos, the divine Word. Now we use concepts to do this, of course, but I said that's inadequate, they're always inadequate. **Only when we recognize this, that is, the inadequacy of our words, can we really consider what is called inspiration.** Now that is going to be the second part, and I'm only going to begin it tonight, because it's getting late.

So inspiration. Now when you heard the word "inspiration," what do you see? "Spire," what does that mean? "Spiration" is breathing, okay? Inspiration, and the Spirit, because the word "spirit" comes from the word for "breath." "Inspiration" comes from the word for "breathing." It talks about how **somehow God is breathing into words.** The shift is this: up to now I've been talking about Christ and the knowledge which God reveals. Now we're really going to be talking more about the Holy Spirit. **So as we think about how important it is to understand Christ, and it is important, but we have to understand that we also need to understand the Holy Spirit.** And if we've done a rather poor job of understanding the true nature of the Word of God, I'm afraid we're much worse off understanding the Holy Spirit, the inspiration of God.

Now in the past—and the Church has talked about this for a long time—when you go back in the history of the Church, there were many questions. For example, Marcion said, **"Should we keep the Old Testament?** Let's just throw it out. It's just a bunch of Jewish nonsense anyway." And the Church said, "No, you know, **if you throw it out, then the New Testament won't make any sense!**" And that is profoundly true. When Vatican II decreed that from now on at Mass on Sunday we're supposed to read from the Old Testament and the New Testament, not just the New Testament, I remember a lot of people were upset about it, including a certain priest I knew and his sister. And he said, "Well, nobody understands what that's about anyway." Of course, I was very young; I didn't know how to say anything about it, but the truth is if you throw out the Old Testament, pretty soon the New Testament will mean nothing because **it's all knit together one thing reflecting another, one thing explaining another, one thing resolving another.**

But when the Church and churchmen started to ask the question, **what is inspiration;** how does the Holy Spirit work?—in bringing about the Bible that is—the first thought, they had, the first model they used, was **the model of the prophet.** Now what is a prophet? A prophet is a messenger of God. If you read the prophets, they say, "Thus saith the Lord. The Lord said, 'Hear Israel, here is a message. Listen carefully.'" See? So a prophet is a messenger. **So the first understanding of the Bible as a whole was, basically, a message.** See, this whole thing was then thought of as prophetic. But that was rather careless. That's careless generalization! Why? Well, first of all, **most of the Bible does not consist of messages from God.** Now some people still think in this term: God wrote this; it's a message for you. Not really. **By reading this you may get a message, but it's not exactly a message itself,** for example, the psalms. What are the psalms? They're actually hymns to God. Read them. Read them out loud. Sing them.

They're hymns to God; they are not messages to you. **So how can we understand inspiration in a way that includes the psalms as well as the prophets as well as the histories**, which are the stories of hundreds and thousands of communities from ancient times up until the New Testament times. So that's the first problem with that way of looking at Scripture.

The second problem is a question: Is divine communication really in words, anyway? Now the rabbis of the ancient times, asked that question and they said that yes, and it's in Hebrew—and they meant it! But, you know, that's a terrible thought, if you think about it: yes, God speaks in Hebrew. What does that mean? You can laugh, and it's a little bit funny, but it really isn't very funny at all. It's pretty sad if anyone really thinks this way, and people do. **Does God really communicate in words?** That's the question—or rather, **are words our response to something that God communicates to us?**

Thirdly, **there are so many different literary types**, meaning literary forms—sometimes they use the technical word “genre,” which is a French word meaning a literary form, a literary type—that are found in the Old Testament: songs, for example, poems, stories, utterances, laws, prophecies, proverbs, rituals, and many others. Well, how do we understand the Holy Spirit authoring all of this, especially if you actually read the whole Bible and particularly parts of the Old Testament? The Old Testament if you read it in a literal translation—which is pretty hard to find—if you actually read it in a way that you'd really see what it says, it's actually embarrassing in many cases. I mean, sometimes it's violent. Sometimes it's unbelievably primitive. Sometimes it's vulgar. **How do we understand the Holy Spirit working through this?** This is the question. And we're just going to hold that question. We're just going to think about that for, hopefully, a while.

The next problem that arose as the Church tried to understand what is inspiration came about with the study of various texts. Now, for example, we know there are different translations, and probably people imagine that all the translations come from the same original, but the truth is there is no original. **There's no one manuscript that is “the original.” There are various manuscripts, ancient manuscripts of Scripture.** Now, for example, in the Old Testament, people know that was written mostly in Hebrew; but do they know that the Hebrew version of the Old Testament that is the oldest existent version is from the ninth century AD? But we have a Greek version that is complete from the fourth century. So which one is better? Which one is more original? Those are good questions. Well, then we start looking at them and we say, “Well, there's a lot of variety even among Greek versions.” Then we have Aramaic versions, which are almost paraphrases of the Old Testament. So what are we to say about inspiration? **Where was inspiration in all of this?** What is inspiration? What was the Holy Spirit doing producing this, producing this variety, producing this, if you want to say, confusion? Now there is one particular group; they are semi-fundamentalists. They believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the actual words of a copy of the Bible that disappeared. Well, what's the point, I mean believing something like that? So that's another question that we have to start to answer: What about the varieties of texts?

Then furthermore, **when really we look at the Old Testament, we see that it was never written from scratch.** No one book was written from scratch, but rather it was constructed over a long period of time from various materials, added to, edited, corrected. So where was the Holy Spirit in all this? Was the Holy Spirit doing the correcting? Well, if the Holy Spirit did the correcting, then who made the mistake? How did the mistake happen? **What about the issue of inerrancy,** which is an old word—isn't used much any more—but it used to be said that the Bible was inerrant. That kind of went out of style after Pope Leo XIII said that the Bible is inerrant except in matters concerning nature and science. Well, if it's inerrant except in matters of nature and science, and we don't know exactly which of the matters of nature and science, then inerrancy falls as a very inadequate thing. It means that the doctrines that it teaches are valid, but the **Church never bases doctrines solely on Scripture anyway.** As you know, in the Catholic Church **we have Tradition.** The Church believes **the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit in formulating doctrine, teachings, creed, belief,** and it has used Scripture in this process. It never depends totally upon it. So then what's inerrancy? Well, more or less it has passed away as an irrelevant concept. At Vatican II the fathers wrote this: "The books of Scripture teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error, that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." So that's their view of inerrancy. In other words, it has to do with the truth of the gospel. It has to do with the truth that is going to set us free, the truth that is going to bring us salvation, which is another way of saying you cannot use the Bible then to critique scientific theories, although people who write science may have philosophical ideas that are contrary to our faith, **you can't use Scripture to contradict their theories.** The contradiction isn't really taking place out there; the contradiction takes place in here when I do not understand either God's revelation or the evidence of science. When I don't understand one or the other, then I have a problem. So we don't use the Bible to refute science. The Bible gives meaning. Science gives facts.

Now **Father Bennoit** was a very famous Dominican. He talked about **three different kinds of inspiration. And I'm just throwing this out to give you something to think about.** He said, "Well, there's **scriptural inspiration;** that has to do with choosing the right words. Then there's **dramatic inspiration;** that has to do with the way God influences events. And then there's **prophetic, apostolic inspiration;** and that has to do with how the Church preaches." And I think what's important about Bennoit is he was trying to **broaden people's idea of what is meant by the work of the Holy Spirit.** Even today we can find, and especially in certain churches, the idea that the Holy Spirit finished his job a long time ago. We don't really need the Holy Spirit anymore because we have the Bible. I've actually heard that said in churches—not Catholic ones. And that's how they understand inspiration; it's something that happened in the past. But Bennoit is saying that inspiration is much more than that. **The Holy Spirit, yes, inspired writing, but also inspired events and also inspired preaching, and all this is inspiration. Now according to Father Bennoit the human psyche, the soul, is the locus of inspiration, the place of inspiration.**

However, that has also been criticized by another man named Professor Barr. And **Professor Barr has another good point.** If you say that the soul is this locus of

inspiration, you're making inspiration a matter of the individual. But what Professor Barr points out is that the authors of the Bible, **the various authors**, whose names by and large we don't even know, **were all members of a community**, and as such they shared the faith of their community, and they expressed faith to those communities and within those communities; and therefore, he deduced, **the whole community must have shared in inspiration**. And that, to me, seems like a very valid point. **We need to think of the Holy Spirit as inspiring the whole community of faith, not simply picking one individual and using that one individual.**

Ultimately the authors are anonymous. This is true in our Scriptures. We use words like "Matthew, Mark, Luke, John," but we don't know who they were. We know St. Paul wrote Romans, 1 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philippians. We're not sure he wrote Ephesians or Colossians. It's clear he could not have written 1 and 2 Timothy or Titus because their internal evidence shows conditions of the world that existed only after he was dead. We know that the fourth gospel relies on the witness of the beloved disciple, but the beloved disciple is never named. People often assume he was one of the twelve, but that's not ever stated anywhere. Again, the beloved disciple was evidently a very close friend of Jesus, but that doesn't mean he was one of the inner circle of men sent out. It does not follow, just as it wouldn't follow that if you had a very important job to do, you would necessarily pick your best friend to help you. You might not; in fact, you might not want your best friend to help you. You might prefer another group of people that you just simply would trust for various reasons. So the fourth gospel relies in some indirect way on the testimony of the beloved disciple, a very close friend and dear friend, intimate friend, of Jesus, but maybe not one of the inner twelve at all.

We don't know if Mark, the Mark of "Mark's Gospel," that that author is the same as John Mark, who is mentioned as a disciple of Paul, or not. Irenaeus thought so, but Irenaeus lived so late, in the third century, that his testimony is very dubious, and he lived way in the West in France. So we don't know really who wrote a lot of the Bible. First Peter, of course, St. Peter might have had something to say about Peter, but he didn't write. He surely didn't write Greek; he was a fisherman! Perhaps he dictated; that's possible, but he surely didn't write it himself. And Second Peter is very different from First Peter, and so on. And if you look at the internal nature and the grammar and the vocabulary and the style of these various books, you get the idea that someone else wrote this one. We talk about the Johannine Corpus, but is there only one person named "John"?—very possibly more than one. So that's the point here.

Inspiration is not because certain special people wrote certain special things, but it has to do with the whole community of believers being directed by the Holy Spirit. And this is one thing that much modern biblical criticism has forgotten, and this is one of the big problems we have in the Church. The Holy Spirit's role has not been appreciated. Rudolph Bultmann wrote a lot of very intelligent things. He was a great historian, and he was surely very knowledgeable about Greek and so on, but I don't think he ever understood the role of the Holy Spirit in conveying the truth, which is Christ, to the Church. And so what happened is Bultmann and many of his followers simply came to the conclusion that the Church's ideas were just more or less pious malarkey, not rooted

in any real historical truth. Well, it's not rooted in historical truth the way a modern historical book is, but it is rooted in a much more profound sense because **it is the Holy Spirit's conveying Christ to the Church using whatever literary methods were available in the formation of the Church**, including the very fine memories, incidentally, of ancient people whose memories were far better than ours, because they could remember constantly all kinds of narratives; and this was very common. **Inspiration then is a process involving an entire community and continuing in the Church. If God is truly the author of sacred Scripture, and the Church says that God is, then God must be behind the whole impulse to preach, remember, instruct, explain, encourage, interpret, everything, thus creating meaning in human awareness, which is the image of God.**

To understand the need for inspiration we must realize—and this will be the last thought I give for you tonight—our own inadequate grasp of reality. We don't appreciate the role of the Holy Spirit because **we actually imagine that we know what we really don't, or we imagine we can learn through means that we invent.** We imagine, for example, that we can learn about God the way we learn about the material world; this is absolutely false. We have gained a great deal of knowledge about the material world, but this in itself does not lead anyone to knowledge of God. There are mystics who are physicists, and there are physicists who are mystics, but physics doesn't create a mystic. They're two different processes altogether. **And nothing other than God and the Holy Spirit can really elevate our minds to a spiritual awareness.** We'll pick up here next week.

Bibliography

Brown, Raymond E., S.S. *The Critical Meaning of the Bible*. New York: Paulist Press, 1981.

Finkelstein, Israel and Silberman, Neil Asher. *The Bible Unearthed Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*. New York: The Free Press, 2001.