

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

Evolution of the Bible as Part of Tradition Historical Foundations of the Bible
Adult Formation/Spiritual Life Thursday, May 9, 2002 7:30 p.m. Second
Presentation Church Hall

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Heavenly Father, we ask for a continuation of the gift of the Spirit in our hearts and minds that we may ponder your word and appreciate it more personally, and we ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Before beginning tonight with the continuation of my reflections, I'd like to ask for questions from last week or from during the week.

Question: I was absent last week. Can you say what was discussed?

The question is what did we talk about last week? Quite a few things! Basically a little bit of introduction to what is the Bible as literature and what kind of culture it came from, and also we introduced the idea of inspiration. So that's in general. It will be all written out. It's going to be on the web site. Open www.stjosephdg.org, click parish, then click homilies. It will be on later this week, before next Thursday.

Question What you were describing last week was the Catholic view of the Bible—

A Catholic view—there might be others. There is no one single Catholic view, and never has been about the Bible.

The question is what is the basic difference between the way we Catholics view the Bible and other Christian denominations? That's a very good question.

Basically in the Catholic Church, and I'll review this a little bit later, in the Catholic Church we regard the Bible as part of a larger whole, which is called "Tradition." Now the Council of Trent looked at two sources of revelation. They said Scripture and Tradition, but Vatican II said that's really not accurate if you go back to the Tradition of the Church. There is one source of revelation: it's Tradition, in which we find Holy Scripture. So within Tradition, we have Holy Scripture.

Now Tradition itself is a rather vague notion. And there was a wonderful book written in the 50's or late 40's by Yves Congar, called *Tradition and Traditions*.¹ And in that book he tried to show that there are a lot of things that have been hanging around for a long time that really aren't tradition in the sense of a capital "T." And that's when the Vatican Council used the word "Tradition" in the singular, it was referring to the entire body of faith that goes back to the apostles. So the Tradition is the deposit of faith that goes back to the time of the apostles. And the Church's basic teaching is that—of course, we haven't completely understood yet what revelation is. That's what we're talking about today, but that the entire deposit of faith was completed by the time the last apostle died. That's been a constant tradition in the Catholic Church against, for example, the

Gnostics, who said that oh no, there's a secret tradition that you don't know about, and so on.

Now during the Reformation the reformers claimed that it was unnecessary to have any source of knowledge or faith other than the written Scriptures, the Bible. The Bible was the whole thing. So that's the difference between the Catholic outlook and the Protestant outlook.

Now what is meant by the Bible, of course, was also disputed, and I think I might have even misled you last week when I said the number of books. In the Hebrew Bible there are 24 books according to the original Hebrew counting; but later on when Christians counted the same 24, they reached 39. Now this is because they would split books apart, for example, 1 and 2 Samuel. The Christians counted those as two separate books, the Hebrews one. Ezra-Nehemiah were considered one book by the Hebrews, two by the Christians. All the minor prophets were considered one by the Hebrews, but each one was considered independent by the Christians; so that's one of the differences—just how you count.

And then there's a whole body called the "Apocrypha," which, in general, the Hebrew rabbis would not accept because they said that it had a suspect pedigree; in other words, it wasn't written in Palestine or in Hebrew. And so the rabbis then questioned its authenticity, but the Catholics didn't for the most part. They did, but the argument was ultimately solved in favor of keeping all but two of the apocryphal books. The two they did not keep they called "Third and Fourth Esdras"—Third and Fourth Esdras—they are still considered apocryphal by all the Churches. But all the others were considered canonical—that means official and authentic—by the Catholic Church. Part of those are parts of other books, like part of Esther, part of Daniel, and so on; and then others are independent books such as Sirach, Wisdom, and so on. So that's the difference. So actually if you count ours the way we now count them there are 46, although you could count them in a different way and get a different number, but there's 46 in the present division. In the Protestant present division there are 39. The Protestant is the same as the Hebrew.

Now the Catholic Church accepted these extra books because the Church used them; we used them in liturgy; we read from them. They said that, well, we use them; that itself testified to the fact that the Holy Spirit has used them as an instrument of proclaiming the word of God. The Hebrew rabbis rejected them because of their strict idea of what is the holy land. See, the so-called "extra books"—some call them "apocryphal, which is not a very nice word; we call them technically "deuterocanonical," meaning the secondary canon—those books were written outside of Palestine. But the people who lived outside of Palestine were the first Christians. They were very strongly the first Christian Church. And so the Catholic Church considered them to be their books and so accepted them.

Now in regard to how the Catholics determined what is canonical? It was through decisions and discussions, and eventually decisions of those in authority. Now someone as important as St. Jerome, who translated the *Vulgate* did not agree with the pope, Pope

Sixtus, or with the other bishops in insisting on the canonical authenticity of some of the books. And so he had this big argument, and Jerome was an argumentative person. Unlike our Father Jerome, St. Jerome was very argumentative. But the pope said that I am the pope and you're going to do this—you're going to translate all of them. So in his notes Jerome said that he did obey the pope; he translated all of them. But he said that he did all of them in one night because he didn't think they were very important.

Now when we look at Martin Luther and Luther's idea, well, how do you know what is inspiration or how do you know what is authentic, what is canonical work? His idea was very strange. He said that you know what is authentic Bible if it builds up your faith in justification by faith alone. That's a very subjective principle! Besides "alone" wasn't in the Letter to the Romans in the first place, and it didn't mean what Luther took it to mean. But changing meaning is part of our history; we always find new meanings in Scripture.

Question: Sometimes we hear reference made to Oral Tradition. Where does that fit in?

Well, that would be this: this is Oral Tradition. Originally all the preaching in the Church was oral, and then gradually some of it got written down. Now there are other books that were recently discovered in Egypt, which were rejected by the Church. One is called the "Gospel of Philip"; one is called the "Gospel of Thomas." And these books may be in part from the Oral Tradition; I mean, the sayings are very similar to the sayings we find in the canonical books, but they were rejected as a whole for whatever reason. So copies were nonetheless discovered in 1945, I think—in Egypt—Nag Hammadi. So basically you have to think of everything as originally being oral, and then gradually some things got written down. Now during the Reformation, the reformers really stressed the written word as kind of a guarantee that we know what God said. What I was trying to get at last week—and I'll go into it more this week about what the Bible means and what the Bible says are not the same thing in the first place.

Question: Now we also have a lot of reference to the early Church Fathers. How does that fit in with all of this?

Well, because the Fathers were bishops and they were pastors and they were teachers, and so as they taught they were using the word of God and they were teaching it, and their teaching becomes part of Tradition in the sense that it's a reflection of the original, Oral Tradition, "traditio apostolica"—the word "tradition" means "handed down." One of the principle bishops who used to talk about the apostolic tradition was Irenaeus. His whole issue was how do we know what Jesus really said, or how do we know what Christ really taught? And one of his answers was the apostolic tradition. And how do we know what that is? Irenaeus said that we know what that is because the Church of Rome was founded by Peter and Paul, and they were apostles, and so what the people there believe must be in accordance with the apostolic tradition. And this was a kind of tradition in the West so that the Church of Rome itself, that is, all the people of Rome, lay and clergy, what they believed became a standard for faith, especially in the West.

In the East it was a little different. It was more collegial; the bishops did a lot more talking, writing, and gathering and discussing things. But they were always interested in what the people of Rome said, and often it came by letter. And all the Councils were really in the East. And Western bishops didn't go except for a handful, and they went usually as legates of the Church of Rome. And they carried with them letters explaining what the people believed about whatever it was that was being discussed. And that was always very important to them that they agreed with the Roman Church; but on the other hand, they weren't dictated to by the Roman Church.

Question: There appears to be a current movement to place a lot of this original tradition in Egyptian thought for all major faiths, the Islamic Faith, Judaic Faith, and Christian Faith, at least I've heard a lot of talk about that in the last month.

Yeah, the question has to do with finding Egyptian thought at the root of a lot of our Christian tradition and also Muslim tradition. I really am not too familiar with that.

Question: Going back to books in the Old Testament, 24, 39, 46, how does the Septuagint figure into it, and what did the apostles consider Scripture?

Well, the apostles, of course, considered only the Old Testament Scripture. The twelve apostles, if you mean the twelve, the inner circle, probably they would have followed the rabbinic canon. They probably would not have been very well aware of Sirach, for example, or even Wisdom. As far as the Septuagint, well, the Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament, and I'm not exactly sure if that contains the apocrypha or not. I'd have to look that up.

On the internet you can get a printout on the Bible, which is about nine pages long and which is fairly decent, factual information about the origin of the Bible from a Catholic viewpoint. This part was written by Matthew Newsome, he bases it on some of Stravinskias' work. That's something you could go to and just print out for yourself; it's not too bad—Homilies.com, under Father Williams.

Now we are going to be returning to the issue of inspiration, and I think you realize that inspiration has got to be a process that is not to be simplistically thought of as God whispering into the ears of one person who then writes things down, but rather a process by which the community is moved to listen to the conversation that God has initiated between himself and his people and to reflect on this. The Bible then is the result of this conversation; it is not the conversation itself. That's kind of where we ended last week.

And I mentioned—my last remark was we have to understand our own inadequacy. I think this is a major key to realizing why we need the Bible, why we need inspiration even. That's even perhaps more basic: why we need inspiration. We need the inspiration of the Holy Spirit because by ourselves we will not penetrate the whole of reality. Our minds are focused on the world of the senses and our brains will more or less mechanically record the impressions they receive from the world through the senses, the five senses. Through our reasoning we may wonder a great deal about “what else”; we

might speculate a great deal about “what else,” but we will have nothing more than speculation. But it’s through the Holy Spirit that we are brought into a relationship with the source of being, who is God. So the Holy Spirit is the connection between the whole of ourselves and God. And God deals with human beings precisely as we are, which means that in a certain way inspiration is going to be progressive because we are progressive in the sense that we grow and develop. And we grow and develop both personally and collectively.

Now it can be shown, which I’m not going to, but it can be shown that the human mind learns a great deal from the culture in which it exists. Actually that’s rather obvious, isn’t it? Some even say that today, because there is so much that we have learned collectively—for example, about science or about any other topic, medicine, for example—that human beings are simply overwhelmed and are reaching or have reached a point of saturation. It’s almost as if our brains aren’t actually created or devised or built in order to take the enormous information that is available. Part of this, then, leads to what we call “breakdown in the process of education,” whereby often people don’t even try to learn anything. They simply learn where to look it up. They don’t learn how to add; they learn how to use a calculator. They don’t learn how to find logarithms; they learn how to push a button and get an answer. So they have the knowledge, but they don’t know anything about how they got it or what it means. There is a very questionable value in this approach to knowledge. Anyway, people are like this. We can only learn so much, and we learn in relationship to the culture we exist in.

And the culture we exist in for better or for worse provides us with a whole suite of values and viewpoints. And I stress values because a value is not simply an opinion. A value is a belief about the worth of something. So from a culture, human beings naturally absorb values for better or for worse. There has never been a culture which was strictly speaking high-minded, totally spiritual. Cultures tend to have arbitrary evaluations of reality, and this is necessarily so because of the inadequacy of our capacity to judge things. So since we can’t judge things really that objectively, we’re left with a subjective impression, and out of this we make arbitrary evaluations. And an evaluation is not necessarily an intellectual thing either. Ultimately, value is held by the will, and the movement of the will is really powered by the emotions. So our feeling nature is very central to our spirituality or lack of it. A feeling nature can either be a fertile ground for lofty and ideal values or it can be just the opposite. It can be quicksand in which anything of true value gets lost or sunk.

Question: Would you repeat what you just said?

Culture can either be a fertile ground in which lofty or ideal values can be nurtured, nourished, or it can be quicksand in which true, objective values are lost or sunk.

Now we have to play along a little bit with God and use our imagination to realize that God has very little choice once he creates life; once God endows human beings with free will, well, he can’t take it back—nor would God want to, of course. Now once God does this, he has got to work with people as they are. So we see a progression of values in the

sense that God tries to introduce deeper, more profound insights into the nature of creation, the nature of the order that he has established, and so on; and that there are periods of time when people accept this more readily, and there are other periods of time when they accept this less readily. But there has never been a period of saints where everyone was a saint—never. But there have been individuals who have responded much more consistently and thoroughly to the influences of the Spirit, that is, the inspiration within the believing community of God.

Now in Christ, a way of thinking of Christ is Christ is **the** totality of God's gift of self-disclosure. Christ is the totality of God's gift of self-disclosure. Once God becomes incarnate, there is no more to be said. But now the incarnation—which takes place within a particular time and space, approximately two thousand years ago in Palestine—now it has to breathe throughout the world. This is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In one way we could understand the Church—and I don't want to argue about this, and you could disagree with it—but in one way you could say the work of Christ is complete; the work of the Holy Spirit has just begun because it's the work of the Spirit to bring the mission of Christ and the fruit of Christ to the entire world. And again, this will be progressive; and it will be in ways that we ourselves don't quite understand. And from the beginning, if you read the Acts of the Apostles, this is exactly what happened. The apostles originally imagined that the work of God's saving work in the Messiah, the messianic work that they could see was taking place in Christ, they imagined that this would continue within the structure of Judaism as they knew it, within the structure of the law and under the authority of the rabbis, but with the addition of this anointing that came from the Spirit of the Messiah. But things didn't work out that way. Various things started happening that they could not foresee and often couldn't understand. For example, they discovered that Gentiles, who had not been baptized, were demonstrating the gifts of the Spirit. They were speaking in tongues; they were showing other signs that God had alighted on them. They also realized that the people who they considered their brothers in faith were not going to necessarily accept this messianic gift—for many reasons, again. And this became a tremendous problem for them, really, to work with. It's not what they were brought up to expect. And I often think of that when people say, "Well, the Church has changed so much. This isn't the Church I grew up with!" Well, good!

Now Jesus himself tells his disciples that they will do even greater things than he has done. Now you say is this parabola? Is this exaggeration, or is there some literal truth in it? Well, we'll see. I believe that it could literally be true that in the name of Christ and through the power of the Spirit believers could do greater things than Christ did; that is, they could work greater signs of healing. And think about that as really part of imagining what the Spirit is all about. And it might be a good meditation in preparation for Pentecost.

So revelation, that is, God's self-disclosure, as well as sanctification—sanctification is that other word, remember that other word we are using, the "m" word, metanoia? Remember we've used that a couple of times in our various talks? Metanoia means

change of heart, change of mind, conversion. Okay. Well, sanctification is the ongoing conversion, the ongoing metanoia, that the believer must undergo because God, again, is working progressively. In other words, everything can't happen in an instant. And we have to keep this in mind, too, that in our spiritual lives and in our lives of faith we cannot "have it all" all at once. We have to grow step by step. And we do not all grow at the same pace, and we have to learn to account for this. And yet at the same time everything is contained in Christ already, as Christ is God and in God all things are. So revelation, sanctification, inspiration, and knowledge for us is progressive; for Christ it's complete and total. Nothing can be added to Christ, but in principle there's no end to what can be added to us. So we have to keep that in mind, too. Sometimes there is an over-identification between Christ and Church. Vatican II stressed that we are the Church; and as we are the Church, we must constantly grow, we must constantly convert, we must be constantly sanctified. So there is no end to what we can change. That doesn't change Christ. And it doesn't change the truth in itself, but it changes our appreciation of the truth.

Now we could think of actually the work of inspiration as part and parcel with the whole mystery of the incarnation itself. When we think of what it means when we say that God became incarnate, we mean that God somehow enters into human life. And the word used actually in Greek is "tented himself," took up an abode. And this reflects what it says in the Book of Wisdom: "Wisdom has built herself a house." Wisdom has indeed built herself a house; the word of God has tented himself among us. That's the idea of the incarnation within human life.

Now the incarnation itself we call "Jesus." That's the Word of God in the flesh. But the incarnation should not be limited exclusively; that is, the idea of God dwelling among people should not be exclusively limited to the human nature of Jesus. The "tent" is all people potentially, and actually all people who accept the Word. So the believers are the tent. The believers are the house that Wisdom has made.

And the Spirit enters into the house of the believer through various instrumentalities, whatever is available. The house of the believer, of course, is all of us together, not us as individuals. We need to think in a corporate way as St. Paul did when he talks about the body of Christ, or as John does when he talks about the vine and the branches. Okay? Think of ourselves as a vine, think of ourselves as a body. Now the Spirit uses whatever is available. One person can speak well, so the Spirit uses that. Another person writes well, so the Spirit uses that. Others listen well and question and others tell stories, and the Spirit uses that. So everything is used by the Spirit to dwell in the house of the Church. It's the same Spirit anyway teaching, guiding, energizing. And this is what Christ said: "The Spirit will teach you all things."

One of the problems with—and I don't mean to be overly apologetic, but the question was asked about the difference between Protestants and Catholics in terms of the Bible. One of the problems with many Protestants, not all by any means, but many, is that their view of the Bible is the words themselves, which they believe are the frozen result of the Spirit. So now the whole process is over. But that isn't good enough because the word

of God is a living reality and faith is a living reality. And so inspiration must continue even though the deposit of faith is complete with the death of the last apostle. But inspiration continues because the work of inspiration is to spread the word throughout the world and to dwell in the house of the Church. In certain understandings of certain Evangelical types, there is no such movement or need for it. The word of God is identified with the words of the Bible, and they are there on the page, and they don't need to be interpreted by anybody except, well, the reader. Each reader can do it for himself. Of course, that leads to a lot of questions because everyone doesn't read it the same way.

Now as the Spirit uses what's available: he uses our words; he uses our words, but they aren't the revelation. They're just the means the Spirit uses. The Spirit uses our culture. Why? Because that's what's available. The Spirit used the culture of the ancient Hebrews. Why? Because that was what was available. The Spirit cannot use in principle what's not available. This is a process of working with the human race as it is. But the words, the images, the stories, are not the object itself of revelation. They're the means used to get to the object. The object is really the living Christ, the Word who was with God in the beginning and who is God, who is the Light who enlightens everyone, who came into the world in the person of Jesus.

Likewise now the believers listen to and try to understand the word of God, and the Spirit uses who they are in the process. But although the truth conveyed is objective, the understanding we have is personal and never absolute. So no one person, including the pope, ever has a complete understanding of the word of God. The role of the magisterium, positively, is to develop and proclaim the word of God, to develop an understanding in the people so that they can be nurtured and sanctified. Defensively, the role of the magisterium is to prevent novelties and subjective interpretations which are contrary to the objective meaning of the word taking root in the Church. But no one has a complete understanding; otherwise we couldn't continue to grow. In a sense then, the word of God will mean different things to different people, as do symbols.

Sometimes the word is used, "polyvalent." Polyvalent means "having many values," literally. Well, the word of God is polyvalent. And we could actually prove this by taking five people and seating them with a single passage of Scripture—which we do all the time in the staff; we do it all the time in the Pastoral Council. We sit with the Scripture, usually the gospel for the next week; and then we all talk about what it means to us, and it all means something different. But it is always a consistent thread of meaning. There is a remarkable unity that comes through even though everyone is saying it very differently, thinking very different thoughts; but gradually one person's contribution enriches another person's contribution, which is enriched by a third person's contribution, and so on. And this is a small model of what goes on in the greater Church.

Now this is a good break point because we have been discussing the word of God and inspiration and revelation. And are there any questions about this particular part of the topic?

Question: Magisterium?

Teaching office. What is the magisterium? The magisterium is the teaching office of the Church. The Catholic Church believes that Jesus gave to the apostles the authority to preach and to teach in his name; and in particular to Peter the responsibility of leading the others; and that authority is handed down, by ordination to the episcopate, to all the bishops.

Question: Last week you made mention that if we read the Scriptures conceptually, we're not going to get it.

Right. If we stick to the conceptual framework that we have within ourselves because of our upbringing or whatever, we will probably miss it. It's better to read Scriptures with a more—more with imagination. You know, concepts are definitions. They are strict. They are relatively rigid. But when reading Scripture, it is better to read it with imagination and try to picture, picture the very scenes. Even when Jesus is teaching, picture him teaching. And picture the apostles asking questions. Try to get away from thinking that every word has one meaning because it is so frequent that there are even puns in Scripture, where something deliberately has two meanings or more and someone will misunderstand—that is especially true of the fourth gospel—and somebody will misunderstand something and then by explaining what else is meant, a lot of richness is drawn out.

Question: Do we know in history approximately when the last book of the Bible was written?

First of all, do we know approximately in history when the last book of the Bible was written. I believe scholars believe around the middle of the second century.

Question: Which one was that?

It is usually believed it was the Book of Revelation.

Question: At what time in history did they have all the books together so they said that this is it; this is the Bible?

I don't know. I think that is pretty hard to pin down because it was discussed for so long, and then I'm sure that there was a particular council where you could record that they made this statement, but I think that that's—

Question: Just evolved?

Yes.

Question: Was it the fourth century when Jerome really got it together and they defined the Bible?

Right. But Jerome was still arguing with Pope Sixtus about it.

Question: When was the decision that this is the Bible as it is?

That is a decision that was made at least in the Roman Church, and it was pretty well accepted throughout Orthodox and Catholicism, but not among Protestants.

Question: What was St. Jerome's capacity?

He was the translator. He translated the Scriptures from the original Hebrew and the original Greek to Latin, and that became the official book of the Latin Church, the *Vulgate*.

The next section is the meaning and interpretation of Scripture. Now we have already more or less been implying that there is a lot to think about when we talk about meaning, but this is a little bit more direct.

In the early Church there were already divisions, and there is a book over on that table called *The Catholic Commentary on the Bible*. And it's an old one, and the advantage of it is it has what the Fathers said about Scripture. And if you read what the Fathers said, first of all, it's always practical. It's sometimes wrong in the sense of factually they didn't know what they were talking about; but it always has some practical purpose to it. In other words, it's more like—it's more homiletic in nature, you might say, more than scholarly in many cases. But they disagreed themselves about how to interpret Scripture, especially the Old Testament.

In general, the school of Alexandria wanted to think of the Old Testament only in terms of shadow and image or shadow and symbol. In other words, it really doesn't have any meaning in itself except insofar as it reflects on Christ. Now think about that for a minute: it has no meaning in itself except as it reflects on Christ and the Church. Now in one sense this could be a very ignorant and stupid attitude, but in another sense it's actually quite right. And that is so often true in the history of the Church where people have attitudes which are actually half-correct. How's it correct? Well, as we look at the Old Testament do we bind ourselves to the laws? No. Do we? Do we feel ourselves part of the community which wrote the Old Testament? Do we consider ourselves Jewish? We really don't. Well, that's what they were getting at: those books are the books of the Hebrew people; they're not our books! What do we care about them?—to put it in a certain rather extreme way. Then they said that, well, they're important because they already foreshadow Christ. And it is true that if you didn't have the Old Testament, you know, a lot of the New Testament would be a total puzzle. You would say, "Well, what is this about? What's he talking about?" We have to read the Old Testament to get the New Testament.

On the other hand, there was another group of Fathers, especially associated with Antioch, who thought that the Old Testament should be accepted literally as it was. It's not that they didn't value symbol and it's not that they didn't believe in the power of image and so on, but they thought that the Old Testament was literally true, and that believing in its literal truth was important for the Christian. Now do we believe that

today? I'll let you think about that for a week or so—I won't say. Some people do, I think; some people don't, but ought we? That's maybe the better question.

But on a deeper level I think we can see that in these two different points of view we see two different kinds of people: one more intuitive, the other more sensate. Well, some people are intuitive, and some people are more sensate. Is one better than the other? No. But an intuitive person will immediately go to the whole picture and want to see the meaning as such and get the meaning, whereas a sensate person will really want to go step by step, not see the whole picture at once, but to go step by step in learning; and part of that process is taking things as they are, concretely. In other words, some people think more abstractly, and other people think more concretely. Well, maybe people who think concretely have to believe more literally; maybe that's part of their personal need. And that's something we should consider when discussing interpretation. Sometimes differences in interpretation are demanded by our own predilections, our own natures, our own personal preferences, our psychological makeup. And when we see this, I think we're going to be a little more flexible and tolerant. Some people may really need to believe that they are literally a child of Abraham—that's really important. They are actually descendants. They're relatives really and truly. Other people think that's just a symbolic way of talking. So you have got to realize there are different kinds of people, different ways of thinking, different ways of making sense out of reality.

Now each of these ways will have advantages and disadvantages, and you can be sure that all of them are in the history of the Church—everything good and everything bad—it's all in the history of the Church. And what we need to do is to find what we need; and we need to recognize how that might be different from what somebody else needs, and all the time noticing the difference between our own subjectivity, our own way of thinking and perceiving, and something that goes beyond that. It's what goes beyond that, that is the truth. It is what goes beyond that, that is knowledge, as I just described it last week, knowledge of God, something personal, not just my perception, not just my idea, not just my feeling—something beyond that. That's knowledge; that's truth.

So this leads us to a certain conclusion that—not necessarily conclusion, but a certain point of view we have to keep in mind. First of all, that there is a difference, as I mentioned before, between what the Bible says and what the Bible means. That's one thing. And when you talk to certain people they are going to say, "What does the Bible say?" Well, people who ask the question what does the Bible say, have a need for very concrete and specific answers. People who say, "What does the Bible mean?" are really going at it differently. Now in the long history of the Church, the Church has really asked the question more often: "What does the Bible mean?" It has found meaning to be the essential purpose of Scripture.

But even here we have to make a distinction. What does the Bible mean is not the same thing as what did the Bible mean when it was written. What **does** it mean is not what **did** it mean. What does it mean is not what it meant when it was written. This is also essential. The rabbis called this the process of "midrash." Midrash. It means that the Bible is supposed to be a living story and as you tell the stories that are in the Bible,

you are supposed to find the meaning that applies to the present moment. It's not just about what happened when God created on the first day. It's about what God is doing now in creating. How is God now separating light from darkness? How is God making his image now in humanity? That's just one example. Or you could take any of the stories and ask how does this apply today? And so this is interpretation.

Okay, secondly, it's true both for the Old Testament and the New Testament, but doubly true for the Old Testament, to distinguish between what the Bible meant and what it means now because if you think about it, obviously, if we are going to continue to read the Old Testament and have it part of our liturgy, it can't possibly mean the same thing for us that it means for people who don't believe in Christ, which doesn't mean it's going to be something that contradicts what others believe, but it can't really be the same thing. Now I remember having a professor who said that it's hopeless to try to preach from the Old Testament. Well, what he really meant was not that it was hopeless—he didn't really mean that it was hopeless; he said that—but what he meant was—here again is the difference between what people say and what they mean—what he really meant was that if you do preach from the Old Testament, you have to really preach through Christ. For whatever it is you talk about it still has to be through Christ and the meaning that Christ has for the Church, for the faith. You can't stop before Christ and say, well, you finished your homily. You never finished if you haven't brought Christ into it. That's what he meant. And that's important that we think about. Now a perfect example of that—I probably should bring it up later—I will bring it up later. Now again, this could be a wonderful point of dialogue between Christians and Jews. You know, what does this text mean? And as we share what it means to us we would have to hope that it's been influenced by Christ. Perhaps this is the way eventually that the meaning of Christ will be disseminated.

So what we can learn from this is that therefore—and I think you can see the need for this; I don't think anyone would doubt it—but what we can learn from this is that meaning is tied up with faith. If meaning is tied up with faith, it is not available to people who are quote “neutral” observers, or scholars who have no point of view. Scholars who have no point of view can never get at the meaning of the word of God, because the meaning really comes from and is a reflection of faith. And this is one of the problems we have with so many modern biblical studies. They are written by people who seem to have lost faith. And I would say not so much in Christ as in the Holy Spirit. A perfect example is, which I might have brought up before, was Rudolph Bultmann. Bultmann was a great scholar, a great historian, a brilliant thinker. I mean, he had so many qualities that were admirable, but I don't think he really believed in the Holy Spirit at all. And so he realized that the gap between the Oral Tradition and the Bible itself had allowed so much movement that he thought that there was no accurate connection between what Jesus said or did and what the Bible said Jesus said or did. And this really then led to a great skepticism and agnosticism about what the Bible could teach anybody. Well, you know, if there were no Holy Spirit, he would have been right. He more or less thought that the Bible and that the faith of the Church was really a pious sort of fabrication of nice people—nice, ignorant people. But then he didn't take into consideration the Holy Spirit! But I think it's really good to have people like him around because he clarifies precisely

why we need inspiration, and why we need the Holy Spirit, and what it is, and how it works.

Now thirdly, the teaching of the Church. The Church has always interpreted Scripture, however not in any monolithic way—all you have to do is read the Fathers. They have all kinds of different ways of interpreting Scripture. And they considered this to be perfectly natural, just like midrash. It was an extension of that idea. And you read Augustine, and I can't think of all the crazy stuff he said about things; I mean, sometimes it's very peculiar. And it doesn't mean everyone believed him either. They might say that, well, that was, that was just Augustine.

But in spite of what's come and gone in interpretations what remains is the fundamentals of the Catholic faith. And the fundamentals have actually been refined precisely in their being disputed. And you see the disputes have all been contingent. That means they didn't have to happen the way they did. If it hadn't been for the very specific heresies, if you want to use that word, false teachings, that have come up in the history of the Church, then the Creed wouldn't read the way it does, and the councils wouldn't have met for the reasons they did, or when they did; and they wouldn't have dealt with the issues they did. They dealt with them because that is what they had to deal with. So in many ways, and this may sound strange, but the enemies, the opponents, of the gospel have determined precisely what we've emphasized.

Now this actually may be something that we need to look at to correct because maybe we're emphasizing some things too much just because people denied them, although I understand why that should be. For example, recently there was an article about Christology in the *Commonweal* magazine. And the author made a rather strange statement. He said, I will just interpret what he said; it's not at all a direct quote, but the meaning was this: that those theologians who emphasized the humanity of Christ get into trouble with authorities in the Vatican, but theologians who emphasize the divinity of Christ don't ever get into trouble. Isn't that unfair? Well, a very wise writer wrote in a letter and said that, well, here's the problem: even an atheist can believe in the humanity of Christ; that's really not in dispute. Now there were people who did deny the humanity of Christ in the early Church, but they're gone now—they're gone. There are few Gnostics. There are no more Docetists. There are no more Arians—not in the Church today—maybe here and there a tiny little group would hold one of these very bizarre ideas, but they're not at all prevalent in the world today. But what is prevalent in the world today is the idea that Jesus is basically human and a very nice guy and probably should have won the Noble Prize, but it wasn't around at the time. And that's the point that this author of the letter said, and I agree with him. Today it's only the divinity that's challenged, so of course we emphasize it. In an earlier era it was really—believe it or not, it's hard for us to believe because of our culture and our biases—there were actually people who said that, no, Jesus was not really a human being. He was really an angel who looked like a human being or he was something else. Well, we would just kind of shrug that off. At one point it was powerful, almost overwhelming doctrine. It still remains in one place. You know who teaches that? Jehovah's Witnesses.

Now the clearest and most concise summary of what we believe is called the “Creed.” The Creed is not in the Bible. The Creed is produced by the Church. The influence of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the Bible. Now going back to a former question, there were, and there still are probably, many in the Protestant Church who called themselves “Fundamentalists,” who believed—and this is the point of the fundamentals—they believe that there could be no human expression of faith apart from the Bible, so that if you want to summarize what we believe, you’d have to find the summary in the Bible itself; and that’s what the fundamentals were. They would find four or five different statements that they would say that, well, those are fundamental; that defines what we believe. Why? Because they thought that the whole process of getting a Creed was impossible; it would never work because they don’t believe in the Holy Spirit. But what the Church did, the Church formulated a Creed through the power of the Holy Spirit working through argumentation, working through disputes, working through disagreements, working through philosophical questions. Eventually we get to the Creed. It took a while. The first Council that contributed to the formulation of the Creed met in 325, and the beginning of the Creed we have was formulated then, but it wasn’t finished until 450, so it took a while.

Now what the Creed says—and this is really very important for us—what the Creed tells us is that according to the Catholic Faith, we believe in Jesus Christ who was born of the Virgin Mary. What is that? That’s an historical statement. Right? Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate—not anybody, not anytime, not anywhere, but under Pontius Pilate. That says that Jesus suffered at a particular time at a particular place—that’s history. Suffered, died, and was buried—at that time. But everything else in the Creed and everything else in our faith Tradition is all dependent on that event! See? And then he rose from the dead. See? And that’s the Christ event. He was born, he suffered, he died, he rose again. This is an event that takes place at a particular time on this earth. But that’s the only event, historical event, that is tied to our faith. So think about that for a minute. A lot of people don’t get this, but when the Creed defined our faith, it found it necessary to name only that one event—no other events are in the Creed. The creation of the world is not an event, an historical event. It’s the reality that produced everything. So you think about this in terms of historical events. What’s important? That, that one event!

Now I want to read to you from Cardinal Baum, who is deceased. Now before I get into Cardinal Baum, I’m going to read part of Father Brown, and this is: “The role of Church authority in interpreting the Bible has been more properly in the area of what Scripture means than in the area of what Scripture meant.” Father Brown is writing this way: “For me the principle that the teaching office of the Church can authentically interpret the Bible is more important now than ever before, granted the diversity and contrariety among biblical authors uncovered by historical criticism.” Now I didn’t bring up the term “historical criticism,” but it means looking at the Bible as a book, pure and simple. It’s actually very complicated, but we can’t really go into its complicated nature. Father Brown states: “Cardinal Baum has spoken eloquently of the situation:”—and I quote—“The “evidence” of Scripture—both to the scholar and even to the believer . . .— is *of itself* inconclusive in determining the meaning of the most fundamental tenets of the

Christian faith: the identity of Jesus, the meaning of his life and death, the nature of his triumph, the obligations imposed on his followers, the consequences of his life for us, etc.” Father Brown goes on to say, “In that situation Church guidance is supremely important, but it does *not* aid the cause of Church authority if we inflate into unreality the area of its authority. We must be clear as to just where in the search for biblical meaning Church authority plays its role.”²

Another way to put this is that the Church is a guide to our faith and necessarily so, but that doesn’t include telling us much about the Bible itself: who wrote it, for example, and when? And it need not because, again, Catholic teaching does not rest on Scripture alone, but on the apostolic tradition, which begins with Jesus and his commission to the apostles. So the faith of the Church and the meaning of Scripture are all part of this gift and work of the Spirit. The Bible itself as a book is something else again. And there are a lot of questions, which are natural that we will have and continue to have about it and about the historical events it talks about. And very often we will not be able to answer those questions. But this does not take away our faith because our faith is rooted in, again, the word of God, the work of the Spirit, and in terms of history it is focused on the event of Christ himself and not on all the other details that are contained in the Bible. So any questions on what the implications of this are?

Question asked challenging the above statements about the literal truth of the exact words of the Bible and basing our faith on those words.

Well, I think that you’re not seeing the difference between the Bible in terms of what it says and what it means. The meaning of the Bible, the theological meaning, the religious meaning, is not necessarily what it says.

Question challenging this view continuing.

But that’s the problem. I think what we’re trying to get at is that view that you want us to have is not workable. I think the problem is that as Catholics I don’t think we’re supposed to base our faith on the Bible. I think the Bible talks about the Christ event and witnesses to what God does, but our faith isn’t exactly based on the Bible. But the Bible is part of the Tradition that nurtures our faith and helps interpret what it means. But as far as the actual events, as I said, in the New Testament, the New Testament is about Christ. But as far as the rest of the Bible, we cannot hold to necessarily the historical, let’s say, correctness of the events being related. I mean, that’s what I am gaining from what I’m reading. Now I know that other people disagree, so, I mean, I’m not saying that you have to accept this. I’m just saying this is where many people are today, and this seems to be where the Church is today. But hold your questions, I mean, keep thinking about them, and don’t stop asking them.

Question about fundamentals of the faith.

Well, I think that is a good question. I don't think you just accept anything per se. What you do is you read as much as you can, you pray and study as much as you can, and you share your faith with others; and in this process you gain what you need.

Comment: I think we learned that there were many people in the early Church who were high up in the hierarchy and yet eventually became heretics themselves.

That's correct. Tertullian and Origen, in particular. He said that in the early Church there were quite a few people who were high up in the hierarchy who—I don't know if they were high up, but they were pretty prominent scholars and theologians who became heretics, in particular, Tertullian and Origen.

Comment regarding interpretations.

But if the people you're speaking of each interpret it for themselves and they all arrive at a different point of view, it's clear they all can't be correct.

Comment on interpretation.

But what Cardinal Baum was trying to say is what the Church really interprets is the truth in the Bible as opposed to the Bible. In other words, the Church doesn't actually know every answer to every question you can ask about the Bible. For example, who wrote Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Well, who are they? You know, those books were completely anonymous. And Irenaeus put the names: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John down. And then after he did that people said that, well, Matthew, that's the same guy as the tax collector—St. Matthew. And then Mark, well, that's the same guy as John Mark, who was a friend of St. Paul. And they said that, well, Luke, that was the divine physician, you know, the Gentile physician. And then when it came to John they said that, oh, that's the beloved disciple. That's his real name. Well, in fact, the fourth gospel is written—let's put it this way: there is the influence and the authority of the beloved disciple behind the writing of the fourth gospel. But there's no name on it, there's no name but who he was. I mentioned that last week. If you had a job to do, you may not ask your best friend to do it with you. Now the beloved disciple was the beloved friend of Jesus. That doesn't mean he was part of the inner twelve. He may not have been; he is never named. So he may have been or he may not have been. We just don't know. And if people feel better saying, well, yes, he was one of the twelve, I think he was John, son of Zebedee, well, fine, go believe that, but we don't really know that. So what Baum is saying is that a lot about the Bible we just don't know. We don't know it's false; we don't know it's true; we just don't know. We know our faith, but our faith historically is rooted in the event of Christ, not the other events that are told for several thousand years. That's the point there.

Now Clement of Alexandria mentions five different senses of meaning that are found in Scripture. The first is historical. The second doctrinal. I'm just using this as an example of one way in which in the early Church a diversity of meaning was accepted. So first he called one historical, meaning this happened at this point; that's the historical

sense. The second sense is the doctrinal. Third prophetic. Fourth philosophical. And the fifth mystical. Now if you think about those five different meanings, the one that is closest to what I tried to bring out in Scripture is the mystical: how does this meaning or this sense address our present condition in our journey to God? The historical would be quite obviously what happened when. The doctrinal, what does it teach us? The prophetic, how does this alert us to God's will? The philosophical, you can figure that out. It's basically having to do with ideas, principles. And then mystical.

The sixth is an additional one called the "sensus plenior." Now this sense has been disputed by many Catholic authors, but what it means is this, that the original author could not possibly have known it, but the Holy Spirit intended it from the very beginning.

Do we want to break right now?

Endnotes

¹ Yves M.-J. Congar, O.P., *Tradition and Traditions An historical and a theological essay* (New York, 1967).

² Brown, Raymond E., S.S. *The Critical Meaning of the Bible*. Hew York: Paulist Press, 1981, p. 37.