

Scripture and the Church: A Précis for an Alternative Analogy

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Abstract — This article surveys the popular analogy of thinking of Scripture as “incarnational,” that it is both “human” and “divine,” and shows how an alternative model, one framed in terms of the church’s traditional marks of oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, can be more theologically coherent in terms of Scripture’s nature or ontology. Furthermore, we believe that a shift in analogies can render an approach to Scripture that is more attentive to Scripture’s role as a means of grace employed by the triune God to bring about repair and healing among its faithful and God-seeking readers.

Key Words — *marks of the church, analogy, incarnational, salvation*

The tradition of Christian intellectual inquiry has long recognized that language is limited in its capacity to illuminate and elaborate the significance of the holy mysteries. This sensibility has been sustained most elaborately within the domain of God-talk, i.e., the names, images, and actions attributed to God in Christian discursive practices. Linguistically speaking, the extremes of univocal and “purely”¹ equivocal speech are unviable, forcing Christian God-talk to understand itself as an exercise in analogous speech.² Furthermore, what is true of God-talk holds for the holy mystery of Scripture: a coherent and compelling view of Scripture’s nature must consider itself analogous; all ways of negotiating both Scripture’s identity

1. The echo here is of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 5. Although Thomas mentions earlier that equivocation is involved with analogy, he goes on to qualify this by omitting the possibility of “pure” equivocation; in other words, he is trying to maintain what one could term an “analogical interval.”

2. Often, some of the prominent theologians of Christian antiquity have opted to show rather than explain this situation, as David Burrell says is the case for Aquinas (*Analogy and Philosophical Language* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973], 170) and Stanley Hauerwas for Karl Barth (*With the Grain of the Universe* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001], *passim*). In the cases of both Aquinas and Barth, we see that God’s prevenient self-disclosure grants the



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and place within the life of the church are at day's end tentative, revisable, and limited.

We wish to consider one popular analogy for underwriting Scripture's ontology, one that can be labeled the "incarnational" model, in order to expose its limits as a way of introducing an alternative analogy that can more suitably account for both Scripture's ontology and utility in shaping faithful readers. It is our firm belief that, just as in God-talk, a frequent and ongoing rotation of models, metaphors, and images is needed to preserve the "analogical interval" inherent to analogous speech. As Denys Turner has on occasion warned his students, "If you want to do theology well, then, for God's sake get your metaphors as thoroughly mixed as you can."³ Correlatively, we are of the persuasion that, when the questions of Scripture's ontology and utility are posed in a sustained way, the "incarnational analogy" falls short and a need for an alternative analogy presents itself. The alternative we propose in this précis is one modeled after the traditional four marks of the church, namely, the church's unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. We aim to show that this "ecclesial analogy" is more helpful in accounting for the nature of Scripture as a means of grace that serves its readers in directing them to the transforming and life-giving work of the triune God.

THE INCARNATIONAL ANALOGY: GENERAL FEATURES AND LIMITS

One popular strategy for elaborating Scripture's significance is to link it analogously with Christ. This is a natural move for several reasons. Most obviously, both can be elaborated in terms of "word" types: one is the "incarnate Word" and the other is the "inspired Word"; essentially, both have been framed in terms of *logoi*. This framing may take the shape of both proportional and nonproportional analogies, the former assuming that the analogy is reducible to a particular species of relationship that the latter categorically resists. An example of the former would be the move of assuming that the two analogues (Christ and Scripture) are historically particular, intelligible, culturally negotiable, and the like; a possibility for the

possibility for the coherence and truthfulness of Christian speech. For an effort to compare and seek common ground between Thomas and Barth on the question of analogy, see Timothy J. Furry, "Analogous Analogies? Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth," *SJT* 63 (2010): 318–30.

3. Denys Turner, "Aphaticism, Idolatry, and the Claims of Reason," in *Silence and the Word* (ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18. Turner's remark, based on the way of negation of the pseudo-Denys, is to set forth a dialectical tension of prolixity *en via* to silence so that "we talk about God in as many ways as possible, even in as many conflicting ways as possible, that we use up the whole stock-in-trade of imagery and discourse in our possession, so as thereby to discover ultimately the inadequacy of all of it" (p. 17).

latter would be that in one instance the referent is a member of the triune God who went out “into the far country,” whereas the other is a collection of documents written by different people in different contexts that were later brought together and recognized to be salutary for the community of faith; in other words, the two analogues belong to different genera that can be brought into relationship only subsequently.⁴

Also, both have been negotiated along broadly conceived Chalcedonian sensibilities: Christ is proclaimed through conciliar deliberation as human and divine; similarly, Scripture has been said to be both a humanly written set of documents and a divinely inspired set of writings.⁵ The two signifiers, human and divine, are assumed to be intelligible and obvious categories that stand on their own and that can be brought fruitfully together in the case of both Christ and Scripture.

Although formally this sort of parallel is quite obvious, it betrays a number of material differences that make this connection unhelpful, including the all-too-facile assumption that the categories “human” and “divine” are accessible, obvious, and easily applicable to both Christ and Scripture. Not only does this tendency have a penchant for misreading Chalcedon, but it also creates in the process a number of category confusions with regard to Scripture’s ontology and ends.

One scholar who is inclined to see the limits of the incarnational analogy is Stephen Fowl. After surveying a couple of instantiations of this analogy, Fowl moves to relate how it has played a prominent, albeit often tenuous, role in how one interprets Scripture; in some cases, the Christ-Scripture analogy simply establishes this or that feature of Scripture’s authority without prescribing any particular set of reading practices; however, in other cases, the hermeneutical implications are noteworthy.

Fowl mentions the example of Ernst Käsemann and his belief that the admission of Scripture’s particularity (that is, its “human” element) requires historical-critical scrutiny because failure to do so would amount to a capitulation to docetism.⁶ Given its human quality, the Bible should be read with the degree of historical, literary, and cultural scrutiny that other

4. The discussions on this topic are quite complex, and we cannot do justice to them here; for a more thorough treatment, see Philip A. Rolnick, *Analogical Possibilities: How Words Refer to God* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).

5. For a brief survey of uses of this analogy, see Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009). Fowl rightly notes that there is significant diversity in how this analogy is deployed across confessional and ecclesial lines and that the analogy, although existing occasionally in the early literature, is largely a modern phenomenon.

6. A debate has ensued on this point, particularly in relation to just how theological Käsemann was in this methodological orientation and the difficulty of circumscribing the term *docetism*; see A. K. M. Adam, “Docetism, Käsemann, and Christology: Why Historical Criticism Can’t Protect Christological Orthodoxy,” *SJT* 49 (1996): 391–410; and Brent Strawn, “Docetism, Käsemann and Christology: Can Historical Criticism Help Christological

ancient documents require; some have even made axiomatic that the Bible should be read simply as “another book” and be governed by the stringencies and methods associated with the hermeneutical task more generally.⁷

Certain Roman Catholics have followed this line of thinking and have made a similar case, as demonstrated in the 1993 text from the Pontifical Biblical Commission titled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.⁸ The explicit aim of the document is “to indicate the paths most appropriate for arriving at an interpretation of the Bible as faithful as possible to *its character, both human and divine*.”⁹ In response to what they find problematic with *synchronic* and what they term “spiritual” readings of the Bible,¹⁰ the document’s authors believe that “the historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts.”¹¹ They continue to state that this method is critical because “it operates with the help of scientific criteria that seek to be as objective as possible. . . . it aims to make accessible to the modern reader the meaning of biblical texts.”¹² The document concludes with the following mandate: “The eternal Word became incarnate at a precise period of history, within a clearly defined cultural and social environment. Anyone who desires to understand the Word of God should humbly seek it out there where it has made itself visible and accept to this end the necessary help of human knowledge.”¹³ For those sympathetic to the general aims of those like Käsemann and the authors of the *Interpretation* document, the affirmation of Scripture’s human quality or “nature” justifies as indispensable the use of historical-critical methodologies.

Orthodoxy (and Other Theology) After All?” *JTI* 2 (2008): 161–80. Despite their differences, both Adam and Strawn would agree that historical-critical methodologies are inadequate on their own as hermeneutical tools.

7. The phrasing is sometimes associated with Benjamin Jowett; see the historical and critical analysis of R. W. L. Moberly, “Interpret the Bible Like Any Other Book? Requiem for an Axiom,” *JTI* 4 (2010): 91–110.

8. We were directed to this document via Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, “(Mis)reading the Face of God,” *TS* 60 (1999): 513–28. Although we tend to believe that Ayres and Fowl overstate the place of the Christ-Scripture analogy within this document, we generally are in agreement with the direction of their concerns regarding this document in particular and the tendencies that it tends to underwrite and perpetuate.

9. “Pontifical Biblical Commission: Document on the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings* (ed. Dean P. Bécharé; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 248 (emphasis added).

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 249.

12. *Ibid.*, 251. Interestingly enough, the document moves to bring to the fore the Jowett claim: “As an analytical method, [the historical-critical method] studies the biblical text in the same fashion as it would study any other ancient text and comments upon it as an expression of human discourse” (*ibid.*).

13. *Ibid.*, 313.

One of the most strident proponents for this analogy hails from a different ecclesial camp. Peter Enns, an OT scholar within the American evangelical constituency, notes that however the church “*fleshes out* its doctrine of Scripture [it] will always have somewhat of a provisional quality to it,”¹⁴ and one senses that part of his aim is to reconceive how the notion of inspiration is openly negotiated in evangelical circles. In a move bearing a significant resemblance to the sympathies outlined above,¹⁵ Enns believes that an “incarnational analogy” for Scripture, one that acknowledges its divine and human natures, will help evangelicals come to terms with Scripture’s particularity as a historical and cultural phenomenon. In other words, the Christ-Scripture or “incarnational” analogy helps create space for the advancements in historical-critical inquiry that Enns believes have for far too long been selectively considered or neglectfully avoided by many evangelicals. By making the case that he does, Enns continues the pattern of using the “incarnational analogy” in order to justify historical-critical inquiry, all the while neglecting how, if at all, this inclusion affects the reading of Scripture.¹⁶ The contributions he finds historical criticism making to the evangelical community may help with recognizing the “situatedness” or “connectedness” of Scripture within the cultures in which it was composed, but they do little by way of giving us a sense of what are Scripture’s purpose and place within the life of the faithful.¹⁷

If these figures and their works extend the Christ-Scripture analogy in its human dimensions, others have followed in making a case for Scripture’s divine qualities. Fowl notes that one effort has been the “biblical theology movement” of the past in which principles and “timeless truths” were abstracted from the biblical text that in turn could function to underwrite the

14. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 14.

15. Enns does not go as far as other instantiations of this sensibility, but the thrust of *Inspiration and Incarnation* tends to the legitimization of and advocacy for historical-critical inquiry, a move that is worthwhile but inadequate for accounting for what can be termed an “ontology of Scripture.”

16. Enns essentially wants to argue through a number of examples that God’s word is such within human situatedness. Rather than a limiting factor, Scripture’s historical and cultural particularity is a sign of God’s grace, much like Christ’s incarnation is. Unfortunately, the place of Scripture within the doxological life of the church and believer does not play a significant role in how Enns conceives of Scripture; perhaps telling of this lacuna is that Enns never makes the connection between Scripture’s particularity and the work of the Spirit.

17. The closest Enns comes to affirming something akin to our proposals is when he remarks, “The primary purpose of Scripture is for the church to eat and drink its contents in order to understand better who God is, what he has done, and what it means to be his people, redeemed in the crucified and risen Son. Such an understanding of the purpose of Scripture—as a means of grace for the church—actually opens up possibilities of interpretation instead of closing them” (*ibid.*, 170). We could not agree more with this statement; however, we find it unfortunate that these comments function more as an aside rather than as a constitutive feature of Enns’s arguments.

Bible's divine qualities.¹⁸ Fowl is right, however, to note that such endeavoring cannot stand the test of time; eventually, what appear to be "timeless truths" are often exposed as historically construed and conditioned formulations.¹⁹ The broader, more general point is even more significant: As John Webster admits, the use of this analogy "can scarcely avoid divinising the Bible" and pushes toward an "ontological identity" between the God-like propositions of the Bible and Christ who is God.²⁰ At a theological level, this will lead to idolatry; at a practical level, this will lead to the use of Scripture as the "epistemic criterion" by which all truth in every domain is measured and confirmed.

By avoiding these extremes, one could possibly make use of the Christ-Scripture analogy, but it is inherently mired by a number of limitations. As mentioned above, applying the categories of "human" and "divine" to Scripture's ontology beckons interminable category confections, for speaking of Scripture's two "natures" runs the same kind of Nestorian risk that is inherent to the issue in its Christological framing. The move funds a rabid, unending dualism because it assumes two independently determined categories that at the end of the day are irreconcilable and yet tenuously linked by a common referent. As Wolfhart Pannenberg cautions with regard to Christology: "The problem results from speaking of 'two' natures as if they were on the same plane. This poses the pseudotask of relating the two natures to one another in such a way that their synthesis results in a single individual in spite of the hindrances posed by the idea of a 'nature.'"²¹ In the case of Scripture, its "divinity" and "humanity" are pitted against one another when in fact the options are construed in such a way that they are epistemic mirror images of one another when devoid of a broader theological nexus.²²

Furthermore, as Ayres and Fowl note, the simple assertion of the Christ-Scripture analogy does not necessarily promote particular reading strategies of the Bible; it is not clear what hermeneutical consequences

18. Developments in this area have helped overcome the limits sometimes associated with this primarily Continental field; for a survey of recent developments, see C. Kavin Rowe, "New Testament Theology: The Revival of a Discipline," *JBL* 125 (2006): 393–419.

19. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 5. Although we would agree with Fowl's claim that these "timeless truths" often are undermined when their particularity is unearthed through historical investigation, it is also true that the method of abstracting for the purpose of universalizing is itself an expression of a reading strategy overdetermined by its own particularity.

20. John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 23.

21. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 322.

22. See Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 21. The parallel dualism Webster mentions here is "pure naturalism" and "pure supernaturalism."

ensue from affirming Scripture's "divine" and "human" natures. Again, in the case of Christology, this dualistic thinking has led to ongoing delineations as to which attributes belong to Christ's divine and human natures, which ones were kenotically given up or assumed at the incarnation, and so forth, all the while running the risk of eclipsing the theological (specifically soteriological) consequences of beholding "God-in-the-flesh." With Scripture, the tendency to emphasize Scripture's "divinity" (as a way of securing its authority) or "humanity" (so as to make a case for the use of historical-critical methodologies within biblical interpretation) tends to overshadow the function of Scripture within God's economy of grace.

Alternatively, locating the analogues of Christ and Scripture within a broader redemptive history would have important hermeneutical implications. As Ayres and Fowl note from the Christological side of the matter, "The classical formula that Christ had two natures in one person is not made in isolation, but within a complex theological matrix. The theology of Christ's two natures is intimately interwoven with assertions about God's educative economy in and through the person of Christ and with assertions about God's economy of restoration and redemption in Christ."²³ Similarly, identifying how Scripture functions within God's purposes for the world would shift the focus back to a number of themes that would be more helpful for the life of the church. Much of this terrain has been heralded by the contribution of John Webster.

THE MAKINGS OF A TRANSITION: JOHN WEBSTER

With the work of Webster, one finds a turning point from the impasse elaborated above. Rather than continuing the disjunctive approach of speaking of Scripture's "human" and "divine" natures, Webster offers "an account of what Holy Scripture *is* in the saving economy of God's loving and regenerative self-communication."²⁴ The shift is important. Rather than substantiating the categories of "divine" and "human" as they apply to Scripture, Webster is interested in offering a "dogmatic sketch" of Scripture in which the triune God's presence and purposes are first and foremost to the task. The affirmation of Holy Scripture in this sort of way implies at least the following elements: a divine origin, the interplay of functions and ends within God's economy, and an addressee.

For Webster, one begins a treatment of a dogmatics of Scripture by recognizing "its role in God's self-communication, that is, the acts of Father, Son and Spirit which establish and maintain that saving fellowship with humankind in which God makes himself known to us and *by* us."²⁵

23. Ayres and Fowl, "(Mis)reading the Face of God," 523.

24. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2.

25. *Ibid.*, 8 (emphasis added).

This feature of the dogmatic task was often lost on modernity when it tended to emphasize the category of revelation as a mechanism by which to secure its theological purchase epistemologically (in what Webster labels the “hypertrophy of revelation”). This sort of privileging of epistemology and the noetic had a way of deforming and impeding a theological account of revelation,²⁶ a state of affairs presently remediable only through an affirmation of the triune God’s presence, activity, and purposes in the world; in this fashion, revelation generally and the topic of Scripture particularly need not function in some quasi-independent fashion as often narrated within modernity (and as sometimes perpetuated by the pursuit of substantiating how Scripture is both “human” and “divine”).

Speaking of Scripture’s holiness and of Scripture’s role in sanctification creates an important way forward. Webster continues: “In the context of discussing the relation between divine self-revelation and the nature of Holy Scripture, sanctification functions as a middle term, indicating in a general way God’s activity of appointing and ordering the creaturely realities of the biblical texts towards the end of the divine self-manifestation.”²⁷ This “middle term” is important for a number of reasons. Webster intentionally chooses sanctification because it is a term that would allow for creaturely reality: “At its most basic, the notion [of sanctification] states that the biblical texts are creaturely realities set apart by the triune God to serve his self-presence.”²⁸ Creaturely realities are sanctified when they are set apart and used by God, and yet they retain their status as creaturely throughout; in other words, *because of* (and not *despite*) their identity as creaturely can people, places, texts, and other materials be hallowed/sanctified. In this regard, Scripture is holy because it is put to use by God for holy ends.

Those holy ends involve the sanctification and healing of Scripture’s addressee, which is the church. Webster emphasizes repeatedly that the church is a hearing fellowship, one that exists “outside itself” by being called into existence by the triune God. Scripture’s role here is to help dispose the church (which may mean breaking or tearing it down) so that it can attend to God’s acts of self-communication: “Holy Scripture serves the spiritually visible, apostolic church as the instrument through which the Spirit breaks and reforms the community.”²⁹ In this light, Webster argues,

26. Although Webster expresses some reservations with William Abraham’s project in the latter’s *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) they are both at least in agreement on this point. See Webster’s “Canon and Criterion: Some Reflections on a Recent Proposal,” *SJT* 54 (2001): 221–37.

27. *Ibid.*, *Holy Scripture*, 9–10.

28. *Ibid.*, 21.

29. *Ibid.*, 52.

Scripture serves a soteriological function within the church, a role that would constitute it as a means of grace.³⁰

Webster has a tendency to emphasize the asymmetry between Holy Scripture and the church, partly so that God's acts of self-communication (or what Webster simply calls "the Word") will not be eclipsed in his dogmatic reasoning; therefore, his strategy in emphasizing this asymmetry is justified on a number of scores. We, however, would like to stress a certain species of symmetry between them so as to create what we believe is a more helpful alternative to the Christ-Scripture analogy elaborated above.

THE ROLE OF SCRIPTURE IN THE
FORMATION OF A FAITHFUL CHURCH:
A CONSTRUCTIVE PROPOSAL

To summarize and build on the major points above: a proper theology of Holy Scripture attaches both its production and performance—that is, its material existence as a literary text—to God's providential care for creation and in particular God's deep desire to repair all things broken according to God's redemptive purposes. The Bible's authority at its ecclesial address is not predicated on the identity and intentions of its inspired authors, on the divine nature of its inerrant propositions, or on the artfulness of the biblical text understood in its original historical setting. Rather, the Bible's authority as God's word for the church is predicated on God's persistent use of the Bible to bring to realization God's purposes for the world. In this sense, the Bible's authority is defended here by a long history of evident usefulness as an auxiliary of God's Spirit in reordering its faithful readers according to the Creator's good intentions for them—what Paul names in 2 Tim 3:15–17 as wisdom for salvation and maturity for good works.³¹

Rather than the Christ-Scripture analogy, Scripture must be attached to a belief in the Son's incarnation of God's truth and mediation of God's redemptive purposes. The Son, and not Scripture, is the definitive medium

30. Webster has some reservations with the language of mediation (see *ibid.*, 24–25), but it seems that he would not mind it as long as what mediates does not eclipse what is said to be mediated.

31. It is one of the principal theses of William J. Abraham's "canonical theism" that the church's epistemic criterion is divine revelation, most especially in the Son, and not Scripture. Scripture and all other auxiliaries of the Spirit function first and foremost soteriologically. These earthen vessels are transformed under the Spirit's direction into a "complex means of grace that restores the image of God in human beings and brings them into communion with God and with each other in the church" ("Canonical Theism: Thirty Theses," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* [ed. William J. Abraham et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 3). Although we think Abraham needs to develop a more adequate description of the overlapping relationship between Scripture's role in revealing God's word and its role within the life of a congregation to cultivate a maturity that enables it to perform good works, we agree with his essential "thesis."

of God's self-presentation by whom we come to know the truth about God and experience God's redemptive purpose for all of life. It is critical to an incarnational Christology that this absolute claim for truth is *particular*; that is, truth resides within history in the body of a single creature, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:4–5) who is the Son of God bodily or “creaturely” (so Col 2:9). The Bible can lay no claim to absolute truth; its claim to truth is predicated on the trustworthiness of its witness to the truth incarnate in the Son.

This is not a judgment that the church makes about its Scripture; but it is a judgment made on behalf of all believers by the Holy Spirit whose activity sanctifies texts, making them holy, and gathers them together into a biblical canon—a material “creature” that is “hallowed”—set apart—in order to facilitate God's redemptive purposes. The role of the Holy Spirit, in absence of the incarnate One, is to find substitutes or material “auxiliaries” that are sanctified to continue to present the way, the truth, and the life to the community of disciples in which it indwells. Scripture is sanctified by the Spirit for its use as a holy instrument of God's self-presentation by which the way of God is known and life with God is made possible.

Given the difficulties with Scripture's analogy to Christ, even if used modestly for illustrative purposes, we are inclined toward another analogy, namely, Scripture's analogy to the church. This analogy avoids the ontological difficulty mentioned above. Further, it makes theological sense. That is, assuming that God's redemptive purposes are embodied in the covenant-keeping community and that the Spirit hallows the material or textual properties of Scripture—a “treasure in an earthen vessel” (see 2 Cor 4:7)—in order to redeem and reorder the community according to the ways of God, then it follows that the nature of this reordered community is of a piece with the nature of the sanctified text.

If the church confesses that its creaturely existence is marked out as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”—these are the material properties of God's redemptive purposes when embodied in the mature church—then it follows logically that the material properties of Scripture when Scripture is being properly used/read as Scripture “to teach, correct, reprove and train in justice” in bringing believers to maturity as the people of God (2 Tim 3:16–17) are of a piece with the church. That is, Scripture is similarly marked out by the same Spirit that calls the church into existence by its oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. What is true of the church is also true of its Scripture. What is left to do, then, is to define each marker as a material property of Scripture being Scripture as analogous to their ecclesial framing.

The Oneness of Scripture

The confession of faith in “one church” marks out the material uniqueness of a particular community's public life in the world. The uncommon

presence of the church has to do with its vocation as the body of Christ; that is, its public practices intend to distinguish the church as God's servant.

In a roughly analogous way, the church's Scripture is unique in this material sense: there is but one canon of sacred texts. Its singularity is not the exercise of an exclusive authority; our principal concern is to reject even a hint of bibliolatry that also prevents the church's core belief in Scripture's authority from migrating up the creedal food-chain as though every other theological agreement is predicated on it.

The practical effect of a claim for Scripture's uniqueness is to facilitate its canonical role in establishing the working limits of the church's theological agreements and moral practices. In this sense, the ascetic excellence of Scripture's final literary shape is elevated in practical importance as roughly the shape of the church's testimony to God's gospel, which is realized and revealed more fully in Jesus.

When Christians confess their faith in "one church," they also do so to indicate their theological and moral agreements with other Christians. Clearly, this is not evinced by a uniform faith, as though there are no differences between Christian communions in ecclesial practice or theological grammar. This sort of reductionism is quickly rejected on observing the frustrations (and perhaps important gains) of the regular attempts at ecumenical dialog between Christian groups.

Likewise, Scripture's simultaneity is accepted only with critical awareness of Scripture's considerable diversity of literary expression, historical circumstance, and theological belief. Scripture's material unity is articulated only when aimed at its transcendent referent, which is neither literary nor historical but the triune God. In the manner of the ancient church, the material predicate of this transcendent referent is the apostolic witness of the Incarnate One, compressed by the episcopate into a portable form known as the apostolic Rule of Faith.³² On this reading, the simultaneity of (and intertextuality between) every Scripture, no matter how diverse from the other, is regulated and may also be expressed by appeal to this common Rule.

The Holiness of Scripture

If the holiness of the church is characterized by the unfolding sanctification of its membership as the concrete effect of its calling and empowerment by the triune God but also its purity practices (religious and moral,

32. Although one might allow that the ultimate source of the Rule's theological grammar is Christ, because it captures the apostolic witness of his incarnation, its content is fully Trinitarian and not Christological: Scripture's referent is the triune God; cf. Robert W. Wall, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The Rule of Faith in Theological Hermeneutics," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 88–107.

individual and corporate) with the effect of its being set apart for worship of and witness to a holy God, so too is the holiness of Scripture characterized by the effects its surrounding practices have in purifying and making its readers holy. This analogy is also hard to sustain, especially in the face of what L. T. Johnson calls a “scandal of appearances.”³³ The church is more hypocritical than it is holy, and the reading of the Bible is easily corrupted to serve self-centered ambition. For Scripture to have its holy effect on readers, its interpretation and practice must be orderly—that is, ordered by aiming our reading and use at God’s redemptive purposes for all of creation.

In the face of the church’s routine capitulation to profane existence, its subversive confession of holiness must be deeply rooted in its belief that a holy God has unconditionally elected and declared it so because of Christ’s faithfulness. Christians confess not their own holiness but their recognition of the indwelling Holy Spirit who bears witness to them that they are children of a holy God who has called them to live holy lives and whose grace leads and enables them toward this end.

This same “scandal of appearances” attends to the sacred text, which is routinely abused to serve self-interested ends that subvert the redemptive mission of God in the world. This cursory observation is made independently of a biblical criticism that long ago exposed biblical texts as ordinary human productions, hardly perfect in fact and subjected out of necessity to human interpretation. The church’s consideration of Scripture as a holy text is hardly a conclusion based on what it is but rather a confession based on a postbiblical decision God made when selecting and sanctifying these ordinary texts for holy ends. The church has come to treasure its Scripture not because it consists of inerrant propositions that are as holy as God is holy; rather, the church “has this treasure in earthen vessels” so that its holy effect in making people wise for salvation and mature for every good work belongs to God and not to Scripture or its interpreters.

The Catholicity of Scripture

If the character of the church’s catholicity (its universalism) reflects the observation of its global reach and also the inclusiveness of its network of redeemed-but-diverse members (cf. Rev 5:9–10), so too is it in the very nature of Scripture to be read by all Christians of every shape and size as their common book. Michael Gorman puts Scripture’s catholicity this way: “all Scripture is written for all God’s people in all ages and all places.”³⁴ A catholic approach to Scripture, then, does not find what there is not to like

33. Luke T. Johnson, *The Creed* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 254.

34. Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (rev. ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 150.

but recognizes what is true in all that is written and so what to embrace as God's vision for all of life. It is also the case that the catholicity of Scripture insists that no right interpretation is a private matter but is for the body of Christ shaped by the apostolic witness to him.

Not only does the catholicity of Scripture attend to the usefulness of its every part, but it also suggests that its every part is useful for all the church. This marker became pivotal during the canonical process when the canonicity of certain sacred texts was disputed precisely because of the limited geographical scope of its usefulness. Again, the late arrival of the Pastoral Epistles to the Pauline corpus was not due to their questionable authorship or content. The mistake often made by modern criticism is to equate the terms of a text's compositional history—who wrote it and when—with its canonical authority. Although a text's apostolicity, however this is finally defined, is also required for its reception as canonical, so also is the catholic scope of its reception and religious utility.

The Apostolicity of Scripture

The church is of and by the apostles; it is their witness of the incarnate Word of life that is the plumb-line of Christian proclamation and the criterion of the community's *koinonia* with God and God's Son (1 John 1:1–5). As Irenaeus put it, the fourfold Gospel of Jesus congregates “the Gospels of the apostles.”³⁵ Their teaching and their exemplary life define Christian discipleship (2 Tim 1:12–14). As Brevard Childs remarked, “apostolicity became a dynamic term to encompass historical, substantive, functional, and personal qualities of the most basic core of the faith.”³⁶ In this sense, to confess itself as apostolic is to admit a community's canonization of the Gospels of Christ's apostles as the principal carrier of his divine truth. By analogy and in absence of the apostles, Scripture's apostolicity assumes it is the medium of the present witness to the apostolic witness of the incarnation.

The decisive interest of the second- and third-century apologists in grounding the “true” church and the canonization of its sacred texts in the traditions of Christ's apostolate was occasioned during a time of theological controversy. Whether as a matter of the apostolic succession of its episcopacy or the apostolic tenor of its Rule of Faith, the church's early interest in apostolicity was largely an epistemic matter: to settle conflicts between competing theological grammars and differing portraits of the Lord's apostles and the relationship between them. By appeal to the canonical “Gospels of the apostles” and examples of their ministry narrated

35. *Adversus Haereses* 3.11.

36. Brevard Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 21.

in Scripture, the analogy of Scripture adapts this same criterion to later Christian movements and traditions to test whether the truth of their content continues from what the apostles observed in Christ and even to anticipate whether the Spirit can effectively use them in forming *koinonia* with God and God's Son.³⁷

CONCLUSION

In summary, we wish to consider Webster's central point again. If our proper understanding of a theology of Scripture is shaped in relationship with the triune God and our beliefs about a God who is at work within history in putting to rights a broken, fragmented world, then our readings of Scripture and our uses of Scripture must seek this same result. The perpetuation of the "incarnational analogy" often falls short in this regard as it attempts to frame Scripture in terms of correspondences between "divine" and "human" categories that are drawn from Christological sensibilities. In proceeding in this fashion, proponents of the "incarnational analogy" miss the point when they use it for justifying historical-critical methodologies, underwriting a doctrine of inspiration, or whatever else may be seen as a viable agenda.

Sharply put, biblical interpretation and instruction must serve the interests of the Holy Trinity whose chief purpose is putting the world to rights. In this way, an analogy that brings into relationship Scripture and the church is more fitting than the Christ-Scripture analogy that has been predominant for some time. Moreover, it suggests an interpretive approach that is ordered by theological rather than hermeneutical commitments. Although a rigorous appraisal of the text's plain sense, which is the result of careful exegetical analysis, is the necessary first step of any faithful interpretation, applications that are formative of the church's moral practices and theological understanding must be of a piece with what the church is. That is, Scripture's interpretation is best protected from abusive, self-promoting interpreters not only by wrapping it in its various contexts (historical, linguistic, literary, rhetorical, compositional and canonical) but in a way that bears the marks of the Christian church—one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Accordingly, the practices of faithful interpretation must pay attention to the interpenetrating relationships of one text to other canonical texts (one), to the effect an interpretation has on its recipients (holy), to the global scope of its influence in a diversity of social settings (catholic), and to the trustworthiness of its witness to God's truth (apostolic).

37. For an elaboration of this point, see Douglas M. Koskela, "But Who Laid Hands on Him?": Reflections on Apostolicity and Methodist Ecclesiology," *Pro Ecclesia* 20 (2011): 28–42, which considers the real differences by which Protestants and Roman Catholics understand apostolicity.