

Word Upon Words:

The Sacramentality of Scripture As Expressed in Augustine and Speech Act Theory

by

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Abbreviations

BCP = Book of Common Prayer

DDC = De Doctrina Christiana

DV = Dei Verbum

RSV = Revised Standard Version

NRSV = New Revised Standard Version

Introduction

For about a year I led Morning Prayer once a week at the parish where I was baptized. One day an old and beloved priest of my diocese hobbled into the sanctuary, where our group took him by surprise. He was a warm and personable therapist by trade, blind in one eye, a cancer survivor, who now walked on a cane due to a hip surgery. He could not read the prayer book with the naked eye and followed along by memory, piece by piece. When we rose to leave he thanked me and said, “You lead morning prayer as if you were giving the eucharist.”

I was deeply touched by this statement. But beyond how I personally felt, this story illustrates a pertinent principle for the Christian life. There was a sense to this priest in which the words of the Morning Office, its psalmody, the scripture, the canticles, and the prayers came together and had a *given* quality to them. I ultimately was not giving the Office to anyone. We had realized together that God was giving the Office to us. This givenness had a sacramental quality to it. It was a sacramental quality because God had become present in the givenness of language. I believe the divine inspiration of Scripture is responsible for this givenness. It is not enough to claim that Scripture is inspired if Scripture’s readers cannot receive this inspiration. A veil must be lifted so that Scripture can be received sacramentally, as a presence as real and as cherished as the morsel of bread in one’s hands and the sting of wine in one’s mouth.

Is the language of Scripture abstract, compared to the presence of Christ in the eucharist? Does divine presence and self-disclosure become more abstract just because it occurs in the realm of language rather than in physical things? My thesis came about because I wanted to push back against the subtle notion I sense that the inspiration of Scripture is somehow less “real” and

less divinely “present” than the eucharistic real presence. My way of criticizing this notion is to articulate the Bible’s inspiration, its capacity to bear the Word of God, *sacramentally*. To make such a claim, I am compelled to examine how language itself functions to articulate that the Bible, a kind of Christian language, functions sacramentally. My framework to discuss how language theologically functions in such a way that it can bear divine presence concretely is to use Augustine, who expressed the presence of God in Scripture and the sacraments with a rich theology of signs, and speech act theory, a philosophy used by some theologians stating that words can enact what they perform. Together with the heritage of modern Christian theologies of Scripture, I can argue that the language of Scripture bears the divine Word in a way that bears a real presence. God is present in Scripture the way God is present in baptism and the eucharist: as a living Word that joins to the human, creaturely elements of speech and text and genre, as breath makes bone join to sinew.

Section I: Augustine's Sacramental Theology and Doctrine of Scripture

The basic dynamic that convinces me of the sacramentality of Scripture is in how sacraments work in the first place. What is a sacrament? What makes a sacrament? The classic textbook definition preserved by the Prayer Book, “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace,”¹ remains a useful starting point. However, this definition has Augustinian roots.

In a tractate on John 15, Augustine writes:

“Now you are clean by reason of the word that I have spoken to you” [John 15:3]. Why does he not say, “you are clean by reason of the baptism by which you were washed,” but says, “by reason of the word that I have spoken to you,” except that in the water also the word cleansed? Take away the word, and what is the water except water? The word is added to the elemental substance, and it becomes a sacrament, also itself, as it were, a visible word.²

The two components of a sacrament that thus capture Augustine's attention are the element and the word. Augustine then moves through a chain of Scriptural citations to emphasize the priority of the speech of God in effecting spiritual transformation: John 13:10, Rom 10:8-10, Acts 15:9, 1 Pet 3:21, before landing lastly on Eph 5:25-26. “Whence is this power of water of such magnitude that it touches the body and yet washes clean the heart, except from the word's effecting it, not because it is said, but because it is believed?”³ Moreover, his last citation, Eph 5:25-26 reads, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by *the washing of water with the word*” (RSV). These verses perhaps come last as a sort of climax, since the textual elements of

¹ “Catechism: The Sacraments,” in *Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 857.

² Augustine, “Tractate 80,” in *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, vol. 4, 55-111 (5 vols.), trans. John W. Rettig, The Fathers of the Church vol. 90 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 117.

³ Augustine, “Tractate 80,” 117.

the water and the word so clearly parallel the point Augustine is making about the priority of the speech of God in giving the disciples faith and nourishing their love for God and each other.

I.1 An Exegetical Expansion of Augustine's *Tractate 80*

It is reasonable to imagine the context of the entirety of Ephesians 5 and the Gospel of John's farewell discourse as Augustine reflected upon those few verses of John 15:1-3. Jesus has washed his disciples' feet (13:5), announced his betrayal by Judas and Peter (13:26, 38), given the New Commandment (13:34), reiterated the importance of obedience in a relationship of love to God (14:15), and promised his followers the Paraclete (14:16-17). Jn 15 introduces the rich language of abiding: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me... As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love" (vv. 4, 9 RSV). The disparate elements of Israel's life are all present: life in a created world (water and washing), the words and acts of God that interpret and gave this world anew in service (the foot-washing and the commandment and the promise), the callous weakness of those who claim to cling to God (Judas and Peter). All these elements and these struggles are summed up in the one word *abide*, because to live as a disciple is to be pushed and pulled like a wave of water between dwelling in God and to resist that indwelling.

The notion of abiding in John 15 also informs Augustine's quotation of Eph 5:25-26. It is not a stretch to imagine the context of the entire chapter informing Augustine's parallel between the word of Jesus in the footwashing and the vocabulary of water and the word in Eph 5:26. The Pauline author has just finished a discussion of marriage and will use Christ's relationship to the

Church as the core analogy. The notion that the love between husband and wife as they are joined together (5:31, quoting Gen 2:24) images the “great mystery... in reference to Christ and the church” (5:32) is deeply compatible with Johannine vocabulary of abiding in love. As husband and wife co-abide in their love in mutual subjection (5:21), so too does Christ desire that the Church abide in him, as the leafy branches shoot from the living vine swollen with the water of the Word.

Moreover, the first half of Eph 5 opens with a theme of co-abiding: “be imitators of God, as beloved children... walk in love, as Christ loved us... once you were in darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)” (vv. 1, 2, 8-9). Here the core images are walking, birth, and light. These relate to Johannine themes of abiding because of the notion of derivative participation. Christ is the vine, and the Church is the branches, and “[t]hose who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit” (15:5 NRSV). The Church’s identity depends on the act and salvific initiative of God. This is why both Eph and the evangelist rely on the word *fruit*, which is situated in agricultural metaphor for John and images of luminosity and nuptial union for the Pauline author.

Together, these three worlds—light, agriculture, marriage—mutually reinforce one another in a more complete picture of abiding and participation. The image of luminosity is perhaps the most mystical: through the initiative of God’s speech, we are given Light (Eph 5:14) and inhabit that Light who came into the world. The mystical image of light represents the absolute priority of God. Human beings in the ancient world did not produce, but only harnessed, light. Agriculture and animal and plant life could not exist without the light of the sun. Society could not exist without harnessing fire and agriculture. All depends on light being bestowed from

above. But to the naked eyes of the biblical authors, light was not physical, not visible in the same way matter was visible, yet was absolutely necessary for the flourishing of visible, physical life. The agricultural images of vines, branches, and fruit concretely plant listeners in the created order to emphasize cultivation. Salvation is as much an arc of progress and growth as it is a moment of illumination, and this arc reaches the end when “all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13 NRSV). Nuptial union, finally, is a social image, because human beings live not only among animals and plants, but with other people. The patriarchy of the first century also implicitly enfolds Eph 5’s mention of “beloved children” into the nuptial image. Christ is both the eternal Son, given by the Father in Spirit to birth a new creation, but also it is in union with Christ that disciples and believers are given power to become children of God (John 1:12).

Augustine says as he concludes his treatise, “For also in the word itself the passing sound is one thing, the abiding power another.”⁴ Thus the threefold images of abiding in Eph 5 and John 15 of luminosity, agriculture, and marriage are modes of how the word produces an abiding power for disciples to abide in the character and works of God. The three modes of abiding in the texts that inhabited Augustine’s imagination in this treatise support the sacramentality of Scripture. Sacraments are social and nuptial because they happen in the context of the worshipping assembly and help to bind together the Christian community. Sacraments are agricultural because their elements come from the created order. And sacraments finally are luminous because they are received in faith, and clarify the recipient with the knowledge and love of God. These modes apply to Scripture as much as the sacraments due to Augustine’s and

⁴ Augustine, “Tractate 80,” 118.

Eph 5:25's articulation of the priority of the word of God. As with the sacraments, so with Scripture, because Scripture functions in a similar manner, socially uniting the worshipping assembly around a common word, relying on a created order, and being received in faith to clarify knowledge and love.

I.2 Garments and Charity in *Sermon 95* and *De Doctrina Christiana*

In another sermon on the feeding miracle of Mark 8 Augustine develops the relationship between food and speech by presenting an analogy between clothing and love. First, he presents the basic analogy previously discussed. “When I expound the holy scriptures to you, it’s as though I were breaking bread to you. For your part, receive it hungrily, and belch out a fat praise from your hearts... What you eat, I eat; what you live on, I live on. We share a common larder in heaven; that, you see, is where the word of God comes from.”⁵

Augustine then turns to the wedding parable of Matthew 22, focusing on the man without a wedding garment who is cast out. He allegorizes the parable so that the man represents many people — and as he allegorizes, he returns to his opening analogy between food and speech: “I won’t go on long, I’ll explain it straightaway, I’ll break the bread right now and set it before you to eat.”⁶ It is important that he mentions this analogy one more time before venturing forth with his allegory. “What is the wedding garment?... *If I do not have charity, [Paul] says, I am nothing, it is no use to me at all* (1 Cor 13:1-3). There’s the wedding garment for you. Clothe

⁵ Augustine, “Sermon 95,” in *Sermons 94A-147A on the New Testament*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle, Works of St Augustine III/4 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1992), 24.

⁶ Augustine, “Sermon 95,” 27.

yourselves with it, my fellow guests, companions at the feast, so you may take your seats at the table without a shred of anxiety.”⁷ For Augustine, the connection between love and the wedding garment is like the connection between speech and food, and this likeness is organically scriptural because the guests who wear the garments are sitting down at a *feast*. The fact that he explains that he will feed the congregation right before expounding this allegory demonstrates the organic link between speech and love, food and clothing, in the sacramentality of Scripture.

Augustine’s articulation of the sacraments in these brief but tantalizing homiletic gestures is the tip of an imposing iceberg: a theological vision of words and signs. In his major treatise *De Doctrina Christiana*, which Augustine decides that the best way to teach Christians how to interpret the Bible is to provide a philosophical scaffolding on how language itself works. Augustine begins by dividing all intelligible phenomena into things and signs. This is a fundamental distinction for the rest of the work.

He then makes a second distinction between use and enjoyment with regard to things. Use is instrumental—one uses a thing for a certain end. But enjoyment is its own end, and one enjoys something by virtue of it being that thing. The theological fulcrum now turns here: “The things therefore that are to be enjoyed are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”⁸ And what a mighty fulcrum this is! This enjoyment relates to Augustine’s deep conviction in the rule of charity when interpreting the Scriptures. Like the sacraments, the Scriptures are given by God through the Church in love that Christians may love God and neighbor and grow closer to mystical and eschatological union.

⁷ Augustine, “Sermon 95,” 27.

⁸ St. Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle, Works of Saint Augustine I/11 (1996; repr., Hyde Park: New City Press, 2019), I.5, 111.

So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them. If on the other hand you have made judgements about them that are helpful for building up this love, but for all that have not said what the author you have been reading actually meant in that place, then your mistake is not pernicious, and you certainly cannot be accused of lying.⁹

The bold statements on love as the goal of hermeneutics give an ethical concreteness to Augustine's rigorous reasoning. But Augustine is not done. He continues to proceed with the implications of this rule of charity:

And so people supported by faith, hope and charity, and retaining a firm grip on them, have no need of the scriptures except for instructing others. And so there are many who live by these three even in the desert without books. This leads me to think that the text has already been fulfilled in them, *As for prophecies they shall be done away with, as for tongues, they shall cease, as for knowledge, it shall be done away with* (1 Cor 13:8). But with them as a kind of scaffolding, such an impressive structure of faith and hope and charity has arisen, that these people, holding on to something perfect, do not seek that which is in part—perfect, of course, insofar as that it is possible in this life; because compared with the future life not even the lives of holy and just people here below are perfect. That is why there abide he says, faith, hope, charity; but the greatest of these is charity (1 Cor 13:13), because when anyone attains to the things of eternity, while the first two fade away, charity will abide, more vigorous and certain than ever.¹⁰

However, not all can live in the desert. So how does one put on the clothing of love which binds all together in perfect harmony (Col 3:14), and how does one put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 13:14) to sanctify and direct desires toward the enjoyment of the One and Triune God? Scripture becomes Augustine's answer. Scripture is a garment lovingly sewed by God to put on the human mind and soul and human life itself to become like Jesus Christ, who loved God and neighbor perfectly even to death on a cross. The garment of the word drapes the elements of human being and human living, and behold, there is a sacrament. The human being

⁹ Augustine, *DDC* I.36, 129.

¹⁰ Augustine, *DDC*, I.39, 130.

through Scripture is now a living sacrifice and a living oath dedicated to God, joined to the *totus Christus* and manifesting God to world and neighbor.

Section II: Modern Doctrines of Scripture in Relation to Scripture's Sacramentality

II.1 The Organic Unity of Word and Sacrament

One would not do much better to begin with the remarkable document *Dei Verbum* in modern doctrines of Scripture. Like other documents of Vatican II that sought a tone of *aggiornamento*, *DV* avoided the format of a list of anathemas and sought instead the dialogic model of a theological essay, though still “following in the footsteps” of Trent and Vatican I.¹¹ It is a tightly packed essay seeped in the mysteries of Scripture that seeks the fundamental Christian principle behind divine revelation. It found this principle, this *logos*, where all Christian seeking and hoping should arrive: in Christ. There is no compartmentalization of Scripture and Tradition, the words of Sacred Scripture being separated from the deeds of Sacred Tradition in the name of anathematizing Protestantism, creating a new Roman myth of Romulus and Remus. There is instead the seeking and panting after the unity of word and deed in the name of the Son who is of a single substance with the Father and the Spirit: “revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.”¹²

There is an abiding Augustinian influence in *DV*. Augustine is cited six times, the most of any father, and slightly over one-seventh of the total citations of the document. The language of

¹¹ “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: *Dei Verbum*,” solemnly promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965, Documents of Vatican II (Boston: Pauline Books & Media), no. 1.

¹² *DV*, no. 2.

“realities signified by the words” is Augustinian language. Such vocabulary of signification reveals the sacramental juxtaposition between element and Word, word and Word, that lies behind the spiritual workings of Scripture and the sacraments, and thus their fundamental unity. The categories of Scripture and sacrament are practical distinctions that will continue in the life of the Church, but the distinction is not a division. The distinction is not so primordially nor so ultimately absolute that Scripture and sacraments must be spoken of as fundamentally different things.

DV does not abolish the distinction between Scripture and Tradition, but reframes their relationship in light of the deeper principle who is Jesus Christ, who “perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself.”¹³ Instead of pillars that stand, they are now streams that move: “For *both* of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a *unity* and tend toward the *same* end... Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form *one* sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church”¹⁴ (emphasis mine). This unity, both-ness, sameness, and oneness is the Word manifesting in modes. “For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors.”¹⁵

A companion to *Dei Verbum* is the *ressourcement* theologian Henri de Lubac. In *Scripture in the Tradition*, Henri de Lubac develops and articulates a theology of Scripture complementary

¹³ *DV*, no. 4.

¹⁴ *DV*, nos. 9, 10.

¹⁵ *DV*, no. 9.

to *Dei Verbum* that aids in how one can affirm the sacramentality of Scripture. De Lubac focuses on how the patristic tradition of allegorical and typological exegesis developed. He believes this tradition develops from a crucial question of “whether the beginning of revelation played a role, and perhaps a significant one, in the final formulation of revelation itself,” or in other words, how the Old Covenant must somehow constitute and be necessary for the intelligibility of the New.¹⁶ He concludes that this must be true: the way the New Testament spiritually utilizes the Old “must not be compared to some tacked-on embroidery; it lies within the very texture of the fabric.”¹⁷

Henri De Lubac also utilizes this relationship between garment and body in *Scripture in the Tradition*: “Were we to view Christianity as a body of doctrine, the interpretation would not be a garment thrown over it after the event but a part of the body itself, whose unifying spirit is the present reality of the Saviour.”¹⁸ In this metaphor de Lubac is commenting on the New Testament’s allegorical and typological use of the Old, but emphasizes the constitutive nature of this spiritual interpretation.

II.2 Sacramentality in a Canonical Shape

The shape of the Christian biblical canon reflects the sacramental dynamics that make Scripture a means of sanctification. These dynamics are reflected in the fourfold shape of the canon. Instead of a Tanakh—Law, Prophets, and Writings—the Christian Old Testament

¹⁶ Henri De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O’Neill, Milestones in Catholic Theology (1968; repr., New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000), 8.

¹⁷ de Lubac, *Scripture*, 11.

¹⁸ de Lubac, *Scripture*, 11.

has a fourfold shape: Pentateuch, History, Wisdom, and Prophecy. And this shape is paralleled in the New Testament with the Gospels, Acts, the Epistles, and the Apocalypse. This fourfold shape is appropriately evangelical (of the Gospels), appropriately cruciform (of the cross), and appropriately eschatological (of the beasts in Ezekiel and the Apocalypse). Or to borrow Irenaeus' analogy of the cardinal directions, the fourfold shape of the Christian canon is appropriately catholic and cosmic and dynamic, evoking the divine and human missions and proclamations that move with the Spirit's blowing from the Lord's dwelling place in Jerusalem outward to the ends of the earth.

The canonical genres are thematically and typologically related to one another. In the Law and the Gospels, God elects a people and establishes a covenant of salvation with them. There is a direct textual encounter with the Lord both in the gift of the Law spoken from God's mouth and in the life, ministry, words, and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. The Histories and Acts record how the people of God expand the election and steward the covenant with great contestation and stumbling. The Epistles and the Wisdom literature, often fashioned as poetry or forms of advice, lacks the more explicit historical-narrative framework of other canonical genres and thus is positioned as a deposit of imagery and counsel, "a kind of timeless space reserved for prayer and meditation."¹⁹ Finally, the apocalyptic genre of Revelation is nothing other than an enhanced version of prophecy—in both cases a seer receives a vision and word and commission from the Lord. These relationships give the Christian Bible a perpetual typological heartbeat, as events and images, characters and speeches, signs and words, constantly resonate and talk

¹⁹ Stephen Prickett, "The Hebrew and Christian Bibles," in Introduction to *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, eds. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, Oxford World's Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xiv.

between one another. The old maxim that the best commentary on the Bible is another section of the Bible gains a new dimension when inter-canonical relationships are considered. It is not simply words and images and events within the texts that interpret each other, but the canonical genres themselves. It could be said, then, that there are two basic levels of typology in the Christian biblical canon: the outward form of the canonical genres that sit side-by-side like pages of a codex, and the inward forms of the words and deeds and symbols throughout the texts that are in dialogue and communion with one another. This duality imitates the dynamics of outward sign and inward grace of the sacraments.

The dynamic of word and element in the sacramental understanding of Scripture is sometimes superimposed upon the relationship between the Testaments. The Old is seen as a mere preamble, a mere preparation, for the New. The “element” of the Old only gains value in light of how the divine “word” of the New penetrates the Old and makes it come alive with Christian life. Hans Boersma believes this is how the fathers made the intertestamental relationship sacramental, in a framework of prophecy and fulfillment: “The New Testament truth or reality... nestled within the Old Testament shadow or sacrament.... This means that for [the fathers] the most important connection between prophecy and fulfillment was not historical or horizontal but participatory or vertical.”²⁰ By implication, the Old has no integrity of its own. But this is a dangerous path and must be done carefully so that the New Testament does not swallow up the Old in a monophysite fashion. The relationship between the two Testaments can be an moving example of how Scripture is sacramental, but this relationship must be articulated with great care. De Lubac stumbles into some supersessionism—“The Church takes over from the

²⁰Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 230.

Synagogue, which, now blind and sterile, is no longer anything but her librarian”²¹—in his attempt to describe the mutual and symbiotic relationship of the Testaments, but still manages to give insight on how to avoid the notion of the Old as inferior preamble.

But at the very moment that the gift of the New Testament creates the contrast, it suppresses it. The distance is at once filled in. We find that the Old Testament itself has been unified, and the two Testaments together speak with a single voice. Once the Gospel has been proclaimed, Prophets and Apostles make up a single choir, and the believer contemplates them in their wondrous conjunction.²²

A crude understanding of the intertestamental relationship would emphasize the contrast between Old and New to demonstrate how the New is superior to the Old. But de Lubac insists that even when there is a gap, the gap is bridged with immediacy and zeal. The Word that comes to the “elements” of the Testaments to sacramentalize them and make them interdependent vehicles of God’s presence is not the New Testament. It is simply the salvific act of God, one spanning the whole arc of Israel and the Gentiles. that is proclaimed and that goes forth.

De Lubac’s use of “Prophets and Apostles” praising God as one evokes the unitive vocabulary of Ephesians 2:11-22.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow

²¹ de Lubac, *Scripture*, 113.

²² de Lubac, *Scripture*, 116-17.

citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (RSV)

The entire sequence is majestic. Notice the uncomfortable nearness of this unitative act, of how the Lord's "coming near" to achieve peace. This is key because unity and peace is achieved by personal presence rather than a program.

The harmony between the Testaments therefore witnesses to a deep fact in the sacramentality of Scripture. The fact that the Word is what gives divine life to sacramentalize the element does not mean that the very substance of the element is superseded, as if swallowing up the fact of matter was equivalent to the Lord's promise to swallow up death (Isa 25:8). John Webster elucidates this fact well: Sanctification is thus not the extraction of creaturely reality from its creatureliness, but the annexing and ordering of its course so that it may fittingly assist in that work which is proper to God."²³ And de Lubac, in the opening of *Scripture and Tradition*, reiterates the fundamental co-constitutive unity of the Testaments:

Baptism, Eucharist, Church, and so forth, were first thought of, at least when they were seriously reflected upon, only as 'functions of' Melchisedech, the Pasch under the Law, the passage through the Red Sea, the mana, the Assembly in the desert, the Temple at Jerusalem. All the basic biblical themes: Covenant, Election, People of God, Word, Messiah, Kingdom, Day of the Lord, and so forth, enter into the Christian idea of salvation.²⁴

The sacramental dynamic manifests in the harmony between word and element. God has accommodated the elements, descending upon them that they may help hearts be lifted up to ascend. Harmony represents a form of divine accommodation. *Dei Verbum* understood well this

²³ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26-7.

²⁴ De Lubac, *Scripture*, 9.

phenomenon and gift to human life by using an incarnational metaphor for the Word's refusal to dominate the elements of human text and language: "the marvelous 'condescension' of eternal wisdom is clearly shown... For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men."²⁵

II.3 Sacramentality in Biblical Translation

Paul Griffiths' insightful essay "Which are the Words of Scripture?" implicitly demonstrates the sacramentality of scripture by zero-ing in on the issues of how the Word of God is present in translations. While I would disagree with Griffiths' overly ecclesio-centric approach that only translations "approved by a local episcopal synod for public liturgical reading"²⁶ are suitable for the Liturgy of the Word, he has focused on one of the most fundamental facts about Christian worship everywhere. It is almost taken for granted in the life of the Church that translations are the primary means of exposure to Scripture in worship. A worshipper could spend their entire life, as my mother's family in Mao's China and countless others in history have, treasuring translations as indisputable *verbum Domini*.

This taken-for-granted-ness has theological significance. It shows that the capacity of the Holy Spirit to inspire and indwell and to mediate the Word through words is not limited by the original language or manuscripts of Scripture. Griffiths picks up on the lector's concluding

²⁵ *DV*, no. 13.

²⁶ Paul J. Griffiths, "Which are the Words of Scripture?" *Theological Studies* 72 (2011), 703, accessed Dec. 4, 2019, ATLASerials.

formula, “The word of the Lord,” and this formula’s character of “complete straightforwardness and lack of ambiguity” indicating that “in an English-language mass... the very English words that constitute the scriptural lections are themselves the Lord’s words and thus themselves the bearers of the property indicated by the lector’s concluding formula.”²⁷ Unlike the reasonable caution assumed by students and scholars of biblical studies, where translations can only see through a glass darkly to the authenticity of the original text, the use of translations is not a sign of a problem for Griffiths. He appeals to a notion of divine accommodation for the Lord’s blessing of the fact of translations:

That we speak, read, and write mutually incomprehensible languages is an instance of the damage produced by the Fall.. Translation is salve to this wound, a move toward heavenly existence... Pentecost shows the grammar of the Catholic position: those who hear the preaching of the apostles do not gain the ability to understand it in the language in which it was spoken; rather, each hears it and understands it in her own language. Babel is recapitulated and proleptically overcome by Pentecost, and this is fundamental to the Catholic translation charter. We do not need to hear Jesus in Aramaic. We need to hear him in our multitude of mother tongues.²⁸

The reference to Pentecost is significant because it places the continuing use of Scripture in translation in conversation with the economy of salvation. The defense of the use of translations is not meant to affirm an absolute inerrancy of infallibility of language (especially in this sinful world full of liars, where language is constantly tortured and stretched and spun to mislead the innocent), but rather to affirm that the Lord *chooses anyway* to sum up these cracked vessels of ours and make them vessels of presence. Webster concurs when he says Scripture’s character is defined “by the fact that it is *this* text—sanctified, that is, Spirit-generated and preserved—in *this*

²⁷ Griffiths, “Which?”, 709, 710.

²⁸ Griffiths, “Which?”, 712.

field of action—the communicative economy of God’s merciful friendship with his lost creatures.”²⁹

In two notable instances, Griffiths describes the Catholic treatment of Scripture in translation as a display of a character of *promiscuity*.³⁰ Such erotic language is no mere rhetorical flourish. Paul Griffiths understands the erotic dimension of salvation and the Christian life: he opens his discussion of Scripture’s role in worship with an appeal to the Song of Songs: “The Lord’s kiss is, in worship, returned lip to lip and tongue to tongue, passionately, as it is given.”³¹ “Following the Song of Songs, I take the Lord’s kiss to be something both given to and appropriately sought by his people... The kiss is an especially appropriate image for considering the gift of Scripture: reading it aloud... requires an opening of the mouth, as does the kiss of passion.”³²

Promiscuity and eroticism indicate a character of boldness and freedom that is proper to the Lord. The freedom of Word and Spirit to sanctify and inspire the lections indicates that Scriptural translations participate in the very acts that constitute the Triune Life. The Word can choose to be “begotten” out of the act of reading Scripture, so that the words of Scripture are also now participants in the speech of God. The Spirit can choose to Pentecostally “proceed” out of this Scripture in its liturgical reading and listening, so that the words of Scripture are a means of sanctification for the people of God. Such salvific freedom God chooses to exercise!

²⁹ Webster, *Scripture*, 29.

³⁰ “Catholics have, since the beginning, shown a promiscuous proclivity for translation... the features of Catholic practice with respect to the translation and exegesis of the canon of Scripture [includes] a promiscuous urge to translate...” in Griffiths, “Which?”, 711, 721.

³¹ Griffiths, “Which?”, 707.

³² Griffiths, note 6 in “Which?”, 707.

This freedom is key to understanding how God makes Scripture sacramental. There is no doubt that translations can be opaque and misleading and dominated by the scholarly biases and bargains of committees and party interests. But yet, their continued use in liturgical assembly and private reading, and the demonstration of transformed lives from the reading and listening and explication of these texts, indicates that God comes to these elements of text to make a sacrament. The objection that Scripture's character and capacity to bear the Word is compromised in translation would be like saying that the bread and wine for communion must be impeccable in taste and craft.

II.4 Scripture As Visible Word

Robert Jenson's 1978 work *Visible Words* is directly inspired by Augustine's pregnant phrase from his tractate. It is quoted on the very first page.³³ Jenson interprets this phrase in loyalty to post-Reformation Lutheran orthodoxy with John Gerhard's distinction of the sacramental word into the modes of mandate and promise: the mandate is God's command "to use the [elemental] object in a communal action that speaks promise in Jesus' name."³⁴ This promise is none other than the Gospel that Jesus Christ is alive and reigns forever, "that our act will be God's own 'visible' self-communication," and hence the visible word.³⁵ For Jenson, the Gospel itself is sacramental because the Gospel requires visibility by definition. The Gospel is

³³ Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (1978; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 3.

³⁴ Jenson, *Visible Words*, 7.

³⁵ Jenson, *Visible Words*, 8.

Jesus Christ risen from the dead, God's embodied and free self-revelation to creatures. "The gospel wants to be as visible as possible."³⁶

Jenson's exploration of the sacraments thus is really an explication of how the speech of the Gospel works in human beings to unite what is visible to what is invisible. He focuses on the Gospel as embodied because he believes the Gospel is a personal address, "a second-person intrusion into [human] self-containment," and believes the phenomenon of personal address is inextricably bound to the phenomenon of personal bodily presence.³⁷ For this reason "the gospel must be Jesus' *embodied* presence... the body is the identifiability of personal presence... body is the object-presence of a person to other persons."³⁸ And it is in this way that the Gospel can break the "self-containment" of humans who have wandered the shadow of death straining to justify themselves, so that a new possibility for human being and human life is existentially opened as the unconditional promise of salvation and eternal life. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor 1:20). Jenson explains: "If you make a promise to me, you yourself take responsibility for the new achievement in my life; just so, you enter my life to stay."³⁹ God in Christ by Spirit is that very One who carries all the reigning strength, the power, and the glory, to enter and stay and take this responsibility, because the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. "If there is a spirit that will not fail, we call such spirit *God*... if there is body that does not fail, we call such body *God*."⁴⁰

The second-person address of the Gospel is also effective and unconditional for Jenson because it promises its listeners they will participate in the eternal self-address of God. If body a

³⁶ Jenson, *Visible Words*, 32.

³⁷ Jenson, *Visible Words*, 18.

³⁸ Jenson, *Visible Words*, 44, 45.

³⁹ Jenson, *Visible Words*, 21.

⁴⁰ Jenson, *Visible Words*, 24, 25.

necessary means of presence, then for Jenson God must always embrace “the great offense of Christian discourse” that God’s body is Jesus Christ the crucified and risen Israelite, who is not shut up in himself but always mediating the past of Israel into a future of hope for all humanity in God, who “has all the future there is, so that his community can never fail.”⁴¹ God must know divine selfhood as Jesus Christ. Thus:

The Father knows himself in Jesus’ body that walked to the cross, and in the objects that are used and used up in the gospel-communication. That is, he knows them as visible *words*: he knows the future they open, the possibility the promise. We know God in that these very same objects are given to our faithful intention, to all our listening and looking for the hope God is for us... God *identifies* himself by Jesus. This is the deepest yet most quickly made statement of God’s embodiment. In that God is a self-transcendent person, the question “Who am I?” is his question as it is ours... in the inner converse of his life, he answers, “I am the one who raised the man Jesus from the dead.” That this is so, is the saving fact. That it has come to be so, is the saving work. This inner self-identification is God’s very being.⁴²

“And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isa 40:5). “‘And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die” (John 12:32-33). The death Jesus dies, his personal history in body and presence to Israel and as Israel, is the glory revealed, the life by which humanity and the cosmos lives in God. The second-person address of the Gospel draws its listeners into the eternal self-address of God.

This variation of *imago Dei*, where the second-person economic address of the Gospel to creatures images God’s immanent first-person self-address in Christ, is relevant for the sacramentality of Scripture because it correlates to how Scripture is an open text in its reading, listening, and explication. A scroll is opened. The pages of a codex sit together. The Gospel book is raised towards which the congregation lifts up their eyes. Scripture is a fundamentally open

⁴¹ Jenson, *Visible Words*, 25, 40.

⁴² Jenson, *Visible Words*, 36, 37.

text because it is a vehicle of this Jensonian notion of the sacramental and visible Gospel. and taking Jenson's framing of the Gospel into account, Scripture is more than a set of abstract disembodied texts, language without signs. Scripture is a constellation of visible words that draw listeners into the people of Israel and the person of Christ. In other words, Scripture opens up the promise of God's future as it heard and read and interpreted in community: "the sacramental presence of the gospel's particular God is not separable from the community it creates."⁴³ We could apply *Enriching Our Worship I*'s post-communion prayer to Scripture: "you have united us with Christ and one another,"⁴⁴ or in Rite I's post-communion prayer, that God "dost assure us thereby of thy favor... that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son."⁴⁵

⁴³ Jenson, *Visible Words*, 38.

⁴⁴ *Enriching Our Worship*, Vol. 1, *Morning and Evening Prayer, The Great Litany, The Holy Eucharist*, Supplemental Liturgical Materials prepared by The Standing Liturgical Commission 1997 (New York: Church Publishing, 1998), 69.

⁴⁵ *BCP* (1979), 339.

Section III: Speech Acts in the Doctrine of Scripture and Sacramentality

III.1 J.L. Austin and the Basic Parameters of Speech Acts

Is language abstract, with “language on one side and the world on the other”⁴⁶? Linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin directly challenged this assumption with his provisional project in the mid-20th century, which he eventually deemed the theory of speech acts. Austin’s project began as a series of lectures in which he rejected from the outset the notion that language’s only function is an abstract one to describe and label things, what he called the “descriptive” or “constative” fallacy.⁴⁷ Austin thinks the descriptive fallacy does not exhaust or even normatively capture how language works. He seeks an alternative.

As he runs into problems with his analysis of performatives, Austin shifts his discourse into a more general theory of how language works, emerging as his Theory of Speech Acts, and “its central thesis was that all utterances—whether performative or constative—involved the doing of an action.”⁴⁸ Austin categorizes all language into *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* aspects. The locutionary act is simply what *is* said. The second reports what is said *by* saying something. The third reports what is said *in* saying something. An easy example from Austin is how one says “You can’t do that.” A locutionary act would simply be the statement, “You can’t do that”; a illocutionary act would be “He protested against my doing it,”

⁴⁶ Claude Mangion, “J.L. Austin and Speech Act Theory,” in *Philosophical Approaches to Communication* (Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2011), 204, accessed Sept. 30, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴⁷ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, edited by J.O. Urmson (1962; repr., Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2018), 3.

⁴⁸ Mangion, “Austin,” 209.

now establishing a sort of distance between speaker and what is said; and a perlocutionary act would be something like “He pulled me up, checked me” or “He stopped me, he brought me to my senses, &c. He annoyed me.”⁴⁹ The perlocutionary act demonstrates the importance of what is *in* a statement; a set of acts is implied and not explicit; the locution is hidden.

Richard Briggs writes, “Speech-act theory insists that language does not exist idly to make certain sounds, but is always language in action, and usually communicative action.”⁵⁰ This notion is complementary to the notion of the sacramentality of Scripture. I am most interested in what Briggs calls “the text itself as a communicative act between the author and the reader.”⁵¹

III.2 A Theological Appropriation of Speech Acts

Theologians like Kevin Vanhoozer have appropriated speech act theory for the purpose of creating a newly resonant doctrine of Scripture. While this appropriation leaves open the charge that theologians are again arbitrarily plundering whatever philosophical trends and schools are available to bolster existing dogmatic claims, Bridget Upton notes that speech act theory was never intended to be “a comprehensive philosophy of language,” but rather “a polyvalent approach based on the Austinian basic claim: that language is performative in nature.”⁵² The

⁴⁹ Austin, *Words*, 102.

⁵⁰ Richard S. Briggs, “Speech-Act Theory,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig C. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N.T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 764.

⁵¹ Briggs, “Speech-Act Theory,” 764.

⁵² Bridget Gilfillan Upton, “Speech-Act Theory,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* (2 vols.), ed. Stephen L. McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), accessed Nov. 30, 2018, Oxford Biblical Studies Online.

polyvalent nature of speech act theory means that its broad claims and frameworks are ideal raw material to re-conceptualize or reformulate the doctrine of Scripture.

In *Faith Speaking Understanding*, Kevin Vanhoozer takes up his concern that modern Christians do not know how to translate their faith to others—to take up the theological task to “translate the meaning of the gospel into various forms of language, logic, and life.”⁵³ And this translation is nothing more than a speech-act: “Witnesses must therefore not only speak but also *do* ‘Christian’... Doctrine is thus something *dramatic*: something to be not only heard and believed but also demonstrated, done, and *acted out*.”⁵⁴ He then makes the speech act connection more explicit by stating that “the logic of first-person confessional utterances” are “inherently ‘performatory.’”⁵⁵ “At the heart of Christianity is not merely an *idea* of God but rather God’s self-communicating *words* and *acts*.”⁵⁶ Briggs agrees when citing “I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth” as an example of an illocutionary act, since the act is “performed instantaneously in the uttering of the words, by virtue of what the words are taken to mean in context.”⁵⁷

Thus for Vanhoozer, doctrine is “*theatrical direction for understanding discipleship*.”⁵⁸ Scripture relates to discipleship as a sort of speech act: “Scripture itself is part of the dramatic action,” both transcribing the salvific acts and oracles of God in the election of Israel and the person of Christ, and prescribing a way of life that is nothing less than holiness and

⁵³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 17, accessed Mar. 12, 2020, EBSCOhost.

⁵⁴ Vanhoozer, *Speaking*, 19.

⁵⁵ Vanhoozer, *Speaking*, 19.

⁵⁶ Vanhoozer, *Speaking*, 20.

⁵⁷ Briggs, “Speech-Act Theory,” 763.

⁵⁸ Vanhoozer, *Speaking*, 21.

righteousness.⁵⁹ “In short: the Bible not only reports the word of God but is itself a form of the divine address. There is theodrama wherever there is divine address awaiting human response. What the church ultimately has to perform is not a holy script but rather the theodrama that Scripture describes, transcribes, and prescribes.”⁶⁰ Vanhoozer is careful to resist the temptation to describe the Bible as mere script to the drama of doctrine because that would reduce the grammar and words of Scripture to the very framework Austin wanted to avoid: the descriptive fallacy. The sufficiency of the written Word does not lie in perfect descriptions, but in sacramentally bearing the Word to address hearers, compelling them to live for God.

⁵⁹ Vanhoozer, *Speaking*, 24.

⁶⁰ Vanhoozer, *Speaking*, 24.

Section IV: Scripture's Real Presence in Times of Sacramental Crisis

The sufficiency of the written Word takes on a special resonance in light of times of distress and tribulation when the Church cannot freely and widely offer the sacraments. This sufficiency refutes the assumption that a service without communion somehow lacks the fullness of Christ's presence. A case study is the recent cancellation of corporate worship among many denominations, including Episcopal, due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19. Many Christians now cannot attend church for several weeks or even months. Many buildings will be empty on Easter morning. A recent Facebook thread of seminarians in this institution that invited some controversy makes clear the dilemmas of these times. A priest had consecrated several hosts to distribute to members of the seminary who were in isolation and yearned for the sacrament's taste.⁶¹ But objections arose: is it appropriate to distribute the eucharist outside of a physical corporate gathering? Consecrating communion solely for the purpose of individuals in private to receive seemed to do violence to the bodily character of the eucharistic assembly. The specter of a sort of ecclesial docetism hovered around these objections: a Body that is not physical would not be a body. Counter-objections arose that the pandemic represented a pastoral emergency and that flexibility is needed to maintain fidelity in the Church's sacramental distribution.

⁶¹ Vijayathan Daniel, 2020, "The Episcopal Church of the Resurrection Rector: Rev Jo Belser Consecrated wafers and gluten free are available for distribution. Please let me know if anyone wants! Thanks", *Facebook*, Mar. 18, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/vtsaha/permalink/2901028786621483/>.

I noticed an assumption in the counter-objections: the eucharist must be distributed no matter what. If Episcopalians are not exerting supererogatory effort to distribute communion in spite of threats to public health, then this tradition perhaps does not truly hold the eucharist at the center of its spirituality and worship. Two students on the Facebook thread cited the centrality of the eucharist as the reason they journeyed to this Communion from other traditions; the implication was that not distributing communion threatened this centrality and may threaten the integrity of their personal testimony. I am no pastor and cannot claim authority on how to move forward on such matters, but I find such comments troubling because they seem to place the centrality of the eucharist and the centrality of Scripture in competition for victory in the spirituality of Episcopalians.

To place Scripture and the eucharist in implicit or explicit competition, where the eucharist is the victor, impoverishes a rich theological understanding of the power of language and reduces Christ's presence to a mere matter of quantity, as if more eucharist meant more Christ in a crude sense. But the feeding miracles of the Gospels demonstrate that the size of the morsel matters not in the capacities of God's economy, and God does not shun dwelling in small things and weak vessels, whether it be un-voweled words of Hebrew or an embryo in the womb of a colonized virgin. It is true that words are perhaps some of the most fragile vessels of all. Texts are misunderstood and misused and abused across historical and cultural distances. Translation always risks betrayal in the name of loyalty to the text. People speaking on the phone perceive one message with the voice and do not realize the other line's body language conveys a different message. Stunned silences have often been the most effective communication of what is

on a person's mind. Texts do not properly convey tone of voice. Even the existence of puns demonstrates a certain weakness and lack of definitiveness in a word's capacity to bear meaning.

Yet the God who was and is and is to come lives as an Eternal Word, and came down from heaven as this Word. Is it possible for Episcopalians, in their listening and inward digesting of Scripture, to discern the still small invitation that the liturgy gives to worshippers at communion—"the gifts of God for the people of God"? Can Scripture be taken in remembrance that Christ died for us, that we may feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving, to drink in remembrance that Christ shed his blood, and be thankful?⁶² The analogy between language and food runs deep in the veins of the Scriptures and the economy of salvation. It was this very analogy and relationship of communion that rebuked Satan when he tempted the Lord in the wilderness. It can be this very analogy that will defend Christians from the mistake of making the eucharist a crude zenith of divine presence.

⁶² *BCP* (1979), 364-65, 338.

Conclusion

I have concluded that language is not abstract but that language is one of the most concrete tools available to Christians for communicating the real presence of God to one another and to the world. The presence of God does not exist in a hierarchy with the the concrete sacramental presence at the top and the murky language of Scripture at the bottom. Rather, the presence of God is always sacramental because God communicates through mediums. The communication of God is known as God's Word. The mediums of communication are the sacramental elements. God is free to communicate in any medium that the Word chooses, or, in other words, the Word of God comes to an element and sanctifies that element and makes the element a medium of real presence. The words, narratives, and characters of Scripture are the elements that the Word comes to, dwells in, and emerges from in order to make God present to Scripture's readers and hearers. This is why Augustine is so obsessed with signs in *De Doctrina*: for Augustine everything in the created cosmos is capable of being a sign of God that can be used to enjoy the presence of God. And for Augustine Scripture is perhaps the most supreme sign. Scripture is a text dripping with signs that both point to God and that God dwells in to be encountered by Christians who read with faith. There is no ultimate distinction between the Bible and the sacraments for Augustine because both are signs in the Christian's pilgrimage to the heart of God's triune life. Likewise, theologians who appropriate speech-act theory understand that when language is used a bundle of actions are associated with that use. The language of Scripture compels its readers to enact a new life: the triune life of God, really present in the created realm as Jesus Christ's body the Church. In both Augustine and in theological speech-act theory, the

emphasis is on how God is truly present in language. Whether one receives God in Scripture or the eucharist, we become what those elements are: the presence of God.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul commends the hearer, “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God” (3:2-4). This would appear to be a full-throated endorsement of human language’s provisionality, a moving anticipation of his statement that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” in 3:6. But the apostle seems to acknowledge with his statement that while the inward heart is a more ready tablet than outward stone, a life must be written nonetheless. How is a life written down in the eyes of God? How will God write the story? Does human language pose a barrier or a triumph for the glorious and gracious workings of revelation? The answer cannot be a flat “No,” if Scripture is to be a library and the story by which humanity enters into salvation.

To express the principle another way, biblical language is weak but also strong. It cannot be described simply as “strong,” that is, as straightforwardly and uniformly and universally clear communication from God’s mouth to our ears. The landscape of Scripture is full of caverns and dark valleys, “habitations of violence” (Ps 74:20) that reveal more about human culture or human sin rather than the ways of God. But this does not mean Scripture, then, is merely “weak,” lacking any capacity to bear God’s presence. God has chosen Scripture. God has chosen these elements. Many kinds of bread, small and crumbling, have borne the presence of Christ’s body and blood; and Christ did not shun or despise these vessels. If the limitations of Scripture and human language in general in relation to the speech of God are anything, they are the

weakness in which the apostle Paul boasted and God commended, a providential thorn in the side that is transfigured: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (12:9-10). Paul writes in the same letter that Christians are “always carrying in our body the death of Jesus” (2 Cor 4:10). And as with our bodies, so too with the body of human lives that is the marrow in the bones of Holy Writ. The texts of Scripture are weak in that they carry death. But they are strong because the death it carries is the death of Jesus Christ, who will never die again.

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