

# Self-Denial or Self-Affirmation? Freedom or Slavery? A Lenten Sermon

I preached this sermon a few years ago, and it was on my old website. With Lent upon us, I thought people might find it helpful again.



Lent is a time of the Church year that is dedicated to repentance, to dying to self. During these six weeks, we enter a period of self-examination, of humility, of repentance, of “acknowledg[ing] and bewail[ing] our manifold sins and wickedness.” Rather than affirming our choices, Lent seems to be about denying our choices. You do not have to be a genius to realize that this message of self-denial is out of touch with the values of our society. The message of the beer commercials and of most of the television shows on my television set is not one of self-denial, but of self-affirmation. The “swimsuit” edition of *Sports Illustrated*, which I did not notice in the grocery aisle last week, was not telling me to hold back. Even within the Christian churches, the message of self-affirmation has (broadly speaking) replaced the message of self-denial. More than ten years after Jim Baker and Jimmy Swaggart, there are still some TV evangelists who preach that God wants you to be rich or healthy or successful. If you’re not, it must be because you

don't have enough faith. On a less crass level, there are theologians, bishops and pastors within the Episcopal Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the mainline Protestant churches who affirm that the self should be valued, not denied.

At any rate, self-denial is a message that doesn't preach well in contemporary society. But perhaps we'll come to a better understanding of what Christian tradition means by self-denial if we examine the problem of the self from a different angle. While self-denial does not speak to contemporary culture, the apostle Paul sets up a contrast in this morning's epistle reading that is very much in tune with our contemporary concerns: the contrast between freedom and bondage.

If there is a single value that lies at the heart of contemporary American culture, it is freedom. After the horror of September 11, we were told that what was under attack was our American love of liberty. Yet our society is conflicted about what freedom means. In current political controversy, opponents always present themselves as defending the values of freedom. In the abortion debate, one side presents itself as defending a woman's right to choose—freedom! On the other side of the political spectrum, the National Rifle Association presents itself as preserving the “right to bear arms”—freedom! Defenders of unrestrained capitalism talk about “free markets.” Those who represent the opposite side of the economic spectrum talk about “liberation” and “freedom from economic exploitation.” The Libertarian political party speaks of freedom from *all* government intervention or restraint, whether in the Market Place or the bedroom or perhaps sharing a little hashish among friends.

These various disagreements reflect just how confused and conflicted our society is about this very notion of freedom. For another common theme in contemporary society is the problem of addiction, and the corresponding need to *restrain*

freedom. Since the nineteen seventies, a common cultural symbol is the Rehabilitation Center. It seems almost impossible to attain real celebrity status unless one has dried out at the Betty Ford Center at least once. The actor Robert Downey Jr. and the baseball player Daryl Strawberry go back over and over. In a recently popular movie, Sandra Bullock plays an alcoholic who is so out of control, she ruins her own sister's wedding by showing up drunk. The title of the movie, *Twenty-Eight Days*, refers to the number of days it takes to get sober in such a clinic. And exactly what happens at the clinic? Bullock's freedoms are denied. She cannot have alcohol or drugs. She is not free to come and go when she wants. She has to live by a strict schedule, more Spartan than a Benedictine monastery.

Our culture's confusion and conflictedness about freedom lies in the fact that we have turned freedom, the "right to choose," into a value in itself. Yet there is no such thing as freedom to choose—simple and of itself. Freedom is always the ability to choose *something*. If you were, without explanation, to command me to—"Choose!" "Make your choice now!"—I could only respond with, "Choose what?" To choose is to choose one thing rather than another. On the old television program, *Let's Make a Deal!*, Monty Hall's contestants had to choose between Door No. 1, Door No. 2, and Door No. 3. There is no freedom without an object of choice.

Whether freedom is a good thing or a bad thing depends wholly on the worthwhileness of the thing one chooses. Monty Hall's contestants wanted to choose the door behind which was hidden the Hawaiian vacation, not the goat eating the bail of hay. The Medieval theologians understood there was no freedom without objects. They said that freedom was rooted not simply in choice, but in Love. One chose something because one was attracted to it as an object of love, because one loved it. Some things are worthy of our love, and some are not. So the question of whether freedom is a good thing lies in the nature

of what it is one loves. The “right to sexual expression” or the “right to bear arms” or “free markets” are good things only if the objects we choose to love when we embrace these political slogans are inherently worth loving. The paradoxical nature of freedom is that some of the things we choose to love are not worth loving, and to exercise our freedom to love them leads us not into freedom, but into a kind of slavery, as we over and over love the kinds of things that are not very good for us, or for those around us. So the alcoholic or the drug addict chooses to love something that will in the end destroy him or her and destroy his or her relationships to others and to things that he or she should prefer to love.

This is the point that the apostle Paul expresses in today’s epistle: “Do you not know,” says Paul, “that if you yield yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are the slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” For Paul, there is no such thing as freedom as such. One is a slave to whatever one loves. If one loves sin, then one is a slave to sin. If one loves God, then one becomes a “slave of righteousness.” Having been set free from sin, says Paul, we have become slaves of righteousness.

It is this notion that freedom is determined by the objects we love, whether sin or righteousness, and that we become slaves of that which we embrace in love, that helps us to understand what the Christian tradition means by self-denial, and under what circumstances self-denial might be a good thing. I think we have to admit that some in the Christian tradition have not got it right. It is a false understanding of self-denial which assumes that God wishes to destroy our self simply as self. On this mistaken view, to esteem yourself to be nothing, to suffer pointlessly, to do without the things you need, to be a doormat, these things are good for you, and God will like you better because you do them. The *Rule of St. Benedict*, for example, says that “we are forbidden to do our own will” and

“humility is attained when a man not only confesses that he is an inferior and common wretch but believes it in the depths of his heart.” Thomas A Kempis says in *The Imitation of Christ* that “a man who truly knows himself realizes his own worthlessness, and takes no pleasure in the praises of others.” I cannot believe that this kind of spirituality is terribly healthy.

Over against this mistaken view, I think it must be affirmed first that the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ is not an egotist. God has not created us because he needs miserable sinners to grovel before him. God does not need our praises to feed his ego as if he were an insecure and self-obsessed cosmic bureaucrat who wants constantly to be reassured that he is the best and the wisest in his field. God is not petty. He does not need for us to suffer so that he can feel better.

I think the meaning of self-denial can better be understood in light of what the Medievals said about the connection between freedom and love. Both scripture and the Christian tradition tell us that from eternity, God is love. The “Love which,” in Dante’s words, “moves the sun and the stars,” has neither need nor desire to destroy our small selves to exalt his own. The blessed Trinity simply is God sharing the love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit forever. This triune love created us in his image and likeness so that this love might overflow and be shared with someone besides himself. The divine goal for creation is that we might be united to our Creator and in this way share in this love which he is. Thomas Aquinas believed that the happiness which we would realize when we finally saw God was the ultimate reason for God’s creation of us. God has created the good things of this life for us to enjoy and use, and in all our seeking for joy, for contentment, for happiness, we are in fact seeking to know our Creator, whether we realize it or not. This seeking will never end in this life, because final and complete happiness eludes us until we finally see God. In the words of St. Augustine: “you have

created us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

At the same time, it needs to be pointed out that the images of self-death and self-denial in Scripture are always connected with following Christ. “Take up your cross and follow me,” Jesus says. “We are baptized into Christ’s death,” says Paul. Now the orthodox dogma states that the incarnate Jesus Christ is “true God of true God.” When the Love of God entered our world, its final end was crucifixion. When God entered our world, he entered not as a conquering despot, not as a self-important Wall Street tycoon, but as a Galilean peasant who associated with those who were lacking in self-esteem, the uneducated blue collar workers of his day, the prostitutes, the “poor of the land.” Jesus’ message for them was that his Father’s kingdom was given to them, not in spite of the fact that they were sinners, but because they were sinners—that God loves sinners. But Jesus so upset the self-important good and powerful people of his day that they had him done away with. Those who did Jesus in were not in fact evil men, but good men, good men who could not bear to be forgiven because this would expose their goodness as evil. It is the nature of our good societies to not be able to tolerate those who expose their hypocrisy.

But these tensions are also in our very selves. We are torn between different loves. We value different objects. On the one hand, if we are members of the Church, we have chosen to follow the way of Jesus. On the other, we live in a world which does not embrace the values of Jesus, but the values of self-affirmation. And we are torn between following the way of Christ, the way of forgiveness, and of loving to the point of suffering, even death, if necessary, and the way of our society, which says that we must do what we can to get ahead, to look out for number one. So the way of following Christ can be painful, a kind of death as it conflicts with the values of our culture. But the values of the culture itself, because

they are about affirming the self, inevitably lead to conflict with others, who are affirming their own selves, and to the slavery of various forms of addiction.

Each one of us also suffers from the problem of the "false self." The self we are is not the self that God has intended us to be. Although God has created us to share in his love, we are in fact born into this world self-centered. Theologians call this original sin. Martin Luther referred to it as the "self which is turned in on itself." It is this self which we want to love not as our neighbor, but in preference to our neighbor. When we are driving down a road, all telephone poles are the same size, but the one which is closest appears bigger. It is the same with ourselves. The self which is closest to me, my own, appears bigger and more important to me than the others. If I am to love these others for whom Jesus also has died, it is this self-love to which I must die, the self-love which prefers my own good to yours, or even to God's. To die to self means to die to the self-love which says to my neighbor "me and my goods but not yours," and to God, "the good of my self, rather than the true good for which you have created me."

As the Anglican priest (and spiritual writer) Thomas Traherne pointed out, the problem is not that we love too much, but that we love too little. God alone is worthy of our love because God alone is identical with love. God has given us this world and its goods and has given us one another to be enjoyed, but also to be offered back to him as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The same is true of our own self. God has made us for himself. He has created us out of love that he might love us and that we might love him in return. We are called to the unimaginable compliment of friendship with our Creator. God's goal for us is neither self-affirmation, nor self-renunciation, but our self in an eternal loving relation with his self. This is the way to true freedom.

But the love out of which God has created us we may hoard as

misers hoard gold. We may choose to live as if our selves were our own good rather than the God who alone can be the good of our selves. And the irony is that this choice, which we think of as the freedom to "be ourselves," is a kind of slavery, a narcissistic self-addiction, which turns us in on ourselves, rather than returning in Love to the Love which created us. God's will is for our good and can only be for our good, but in order to know our true good, it may be necessary to die to the slavery of false goods.

This realization can lead us to despair. For how can we escape the prison of our own selves? If God is truly love, and wishes us to love him in return, how can we learn to live in the exchange of divine and human love, especially if we are inextricably entangled in the web of a false self-centered love? This question is the first stage in the awareness of sin. And this awareness leads to a new goodness, the awareness of mercy. It is not that the God who has created us out of love is not concerned with our sins. Rather, by dealing with our sins in the mercy of the cross, God has shown that he is really concerned that we be reconciled with him, and sin is our refusal of that reconciliation. The problem is not that he is estranged from us, but that we continually push him away in pursuit of some other good. During this time of Lent, the Church provides each one of us with an opportunity to return to the God of compassion, the God who has made us out of love to be united to him in love. The question of how to return is the question of grace, and grace is just the shorthand word for how we come to share in the love and life of God the Father through the crucifixion and resurrection of his Son, and the presence of his Spirit who draws us back to him. In returning to Him, we return to the One who has made us for himself, and to our true self, to the transformation of that self so that we can return the Love of the One who created us in Love, to be the true self which our Creator has always intended us to be. And that is perfect freedom.



*O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto they people that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*

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## Kevin Vanhoozer on the Priority of Scripture

Two interesting quotes from Kevin J. Vanhoozer's very helpful book *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville: John Knox Westminster Press, 2005:

*"We affirm that those who say that Scriptures have no authority save that which they have received from the kirk are blasphemous against God and injurious to the true kirk, which always hears and obeys the voice of her own spouse and pastor, but takes not upon her to be mistress over the same."*  
*The Scots Confession 1560*

*The real theological issue at stake in the debate over the relative authority of Scripture and tradition (not that one has to take sides, only prioritize) is actually Christology. Are there postcanonical, Spirit-inspired or -illuminated insights into the way of Jesus Christ that do not have the canonical testimony to Christ as their ultimate source and norm? (189)*

This is one of the more important and thoughtful theological books I have read lately. More on Vanhoozer later. Meanwhile, I recommend that Evangelicals, Catholics (Anglican or otherwise), and Liberal Protestants (not likely) make reading this book a priority.

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## Thomas Aquinas on the Formal Sufficiency of Scripture



Dr. Michael Liccione has responded to my post on the distinction between formal and informal sufficiency of Scripture, and specifically objects to my reading that Thomas Aquinas subscribes to a “formal sufficiency” of Scripture. By a formal sufficiency I had meant that Scripture has an inherent intelligibility that does not derive from some source outside itself. To the contrary, I had stated that a merely material sufficiency would not have an inherent intelligibility, but would rather derive its intelligibility from an outside source. Dr. Liccione specifically quarrels with my reading of Aquinas, and insists to the contrary, that Aquinas affirmed the “material sufficiency” of Scripture

*in the sense explained by WW, in no way affirmed the formal sufficiency of Scripture in the sense explained by WW. That is partly why Aquinas, like Newman and even Vatican II after*

*him, most certainly did see a magisterium as necessary for interpreting Scripture reliably.*

I find this a startling admission, and shows at least that I have not misunderstood the kind of argument being put forward by current disciples of John Henry Newman. Dr. Liccione's defense for his interpretation of Aquinas is a quotation from S.T. 2.2.5.3:

*Now the formal object of faith is the First Truth, as manifested in Holy Writ and the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth. Consequently whoever does not adhere, as to an infallible and Divine rule, to the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth manifested in Holy Writ, has not the habit of faith, but holds that which is of faith otherwise than by faith.*

Unfortunately, the passage does not mean what Dr. Liccione claims that it means, as one can discern from its immediate context. Thomas is not concerned here with epistemological questions such as Dr. Liccione's distinction between "opinion" and the infallible teaching of the "magisterium." Indeed, the authority of the magisterium is not the point of discussion at all. Aquinas mentions the "teaching of the Church," but he nowhere mentions the pope, for example. To know what he means we have to know which specific teaching of the Church he is talking about, and why he considers it infallible.

The answer to this question is not difficult to find. Aquinas is asking a very specific question in 2.2. art. 5: "Whether a man who disbelieves one article of faith, can have lifeless faith in the other articles?" Thomas's answer is that "Neither living nor lifeless faith remains in a heretic who disbelieves one article of faith," the reason being that anyone who doubts an article of faith cannot have the virtue of faith. So, the specific question is not about the authority of the magisterium, but about a person who refuses to believe a

specific article of faith. The question is not about epistemology, or even the authority of the church, but about the specific content of belief or unbelief. What particular false belief deprives one of the virtue of faith? To answer this we have to know what Thomas means by an “article of faith.”

What does Thomas mean by an “article of faith”? The answer can be found in Question 1 of the very same section. Here Thomas identifies the “First Truth”—the “formal object of faith” referred to in q. 5—with Deity itself (art. 1). However, the material things to which faith assents includes not only God, but things related to God, specifically those divine operations that aid the human being on the way to salvation. Specifically, they are “Things concerning Christ’s human nature, and the sacraments of the Church, or any creatures whatever, come under faith, in so far as by them we are directed to God, and in as much as we assent to them on account of the Divine Truth.”

Aquinas is quite clear what he means by the expression “article of faith.” When using the expression, he is referring quite specifically to the “Rule of Faith” (my expression) summarized in the creeds. He makes this clear in q. 1, art. 8, when objection 5 complains that the “articles of faith” are unsatisfactory because the Eucharist is not mentioned. Aquinas summarizes the articles as follows:

*Now with regard to the majesty of the Godhead, three things are proposed to our belief: first, the unity of the Godhead, to which the first article refers; secondly, the trinity of the Persons, to which three articles refer, corresponding to the three Persons; and thirdly, the works proper to the Godhead, the first of which refers to the order of nature, in relation to which the article about the creation is proposed to us; the second refers to the order of grace, in relation to which all matters concerning the sanctification of man are included in one article; while the third refers to the order*

*of glory, and in relation to this another article is proposed to us concerning the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting. Thus there are seven articles referring to the Godhead.*

*In like manner, with regard to Christ's human nature, there are seven articles, the first of which refers to Christ's incarnation or conception; the second, to His virginal birth; the third, to His Passion, death and burial; the fourth, to His descent into hell; the fifth, to His resurrection; the sixth, to His ascension; the seventh, to His coming for the judgment, so that in all there are fourteen articles."*

The "articles of faith" are simply identified with the subject matter of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. How do these truths of salvation that are summarized in the Creeds become known? How do the articles of faith become objects of faith? The answer is clear: They are "all things contained in Holy Writ." 1.1. rep. obj. 3.

So Thomas states specifically in q. 1. Art 9 why the Church needs a summary formulation of its faith:

*The truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ, diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice, which are unattainable by all those who require to know the truth of faith, many of whom have no time for study, being busy with other affairs. And so it was necessary to gather together a clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ, to be proposed to the belief of all. This indeed was no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.*

Note that Aquinas says (in essence) that the Scripture contains all things "sufficient" for salvation, that the "truth of faith" can be gathered from Scripture, but that one

needs study and practice to know this truth. Many do not have this capacity, not because Scripture is not inherently intelligible, but because they do not have the time for study or are too busy. Moreover, the creedal formulations of faith are “no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.”

One could hardly come up with a better way of saying that Scripture is “formally sufficient.” Although not everything in Scripture is clear—it contains some things obscurely—its essential subject matter is evident to those who have the time, study, and practice to read it properly, and its essential content—its intelligible subject matter—can be found in the Creeds, which provide a “clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ . . .” not an addition, but “something taken from it.”

Of course, as a Medieval Catholic, Aquinas certainly did believe that the “universal church cannot err”—Vincent of Lerins would agree ; he affirms in the very next article that the pope can draw up a creedal symbol, and he bases his argument for papal authority on a classic Petrine passages (Lk 22:32). But, again, this argument in no way departs from his affirmation of the formal sufficiency of Scripture. Thomas states in 2.10. rep.obj. 1:

*The truth of faith is sufficiently explicit in the teaching of Christ and the apostles. But since, according to 2 Pet. 3:16, some men are so evil-minded as to pervert the apostolic teaching and other doctrines and Scriptures to their own destruction, it was necessary as time went on to express the faith more explicitly against the errors which arose.*

Aquinas does not regard the pope as providing to Scripture an intelligibility it does not already have, or that of bringing out a truth that was not already evident in Scripture. To the contrary, “the truth of faith is *sufficiently explicit* (my emphasis) in the teaching of Christ and the apostles,” that

is, Scripture. Rather, papal authority is needed not because Scripture is not clear on the essential matters of salvation, but because “evil-minded” people deliberately “pervert the apostolic teaching,” and so it is necessary to “express the faith more explicitly” against error. No Reformation Christian who would affirm the necessity of confessions, synods, or councils would disagree. Certainly the church needs an authority to correct those who willfully disregard the “truth of faith,” which is “sufficiently explicit” in Scripture.

Moreover, not only does Thomas affirm the inherent intelligibility (and therefore formal sufficiency) of Scripture, he explicitly addresses the question of development in 1.7, when he asks “Whether the Articles of Faith have increased in course of time.” Thomas responds:

*The articles of faith stand in the same relation to the doctrine of faith, as self-evident principles to a teaching based on natural reason. Among these principles there is a certain order, so that some are contained implicitly in others; thus all principles are reduced, as to their first principle, to this one: “The same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time,” as the Philosopher states (Metaph. iv, text. 9). In like manner all the articles are contained implicitly in certain primary matters of faith, such as God’s existence, and His providence over the salvation of man, according to Heb. 11: “He that cometh to God, must believe that He is, and is a rewarder to them that seek Him.” For the existence of God includes all that we believe to exist in God eternally, and in these our happiness consists; while belief in His providence includes all those things which God dispenses in time, for man’s salvation, and which are the way to that happiness: and in this way, again, some of those articles which follow from these are contained in others: thus faith in the Redemption of mankind includes belief in the Incarnation of Christ, His Passion and so forth.*

Aquinas makes clear then what he means by an “increase” in the articles of faith. The Old Testament prophets had implicit faith in Christ who was to come; the apostles actually knew the “mystery of Christ.” This is hardly a “development” in Newman’s sense.

What finally is the point of Thomas’s statement in 2.2.5.3 quoted by Dr. Liccione? The meaning is clear. A heretic who rejects one of the articles of faith, specifically stated in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, which are “clear summaries” of the “sufficiently explicit” subject matter of revelation found in Scripture (God’s creation and salvation of humanity in Christ), does not have the faith of the Church, and the Church does not err when it affirms this creedal summary of the teaching about God’s salvation of humanity (the “articles of faith”) which finds its origin in the clear sufficient explicit teaching of Scripture. Moreover, the magisterial authority of the church has the right and obligation to explicitly endorse and teach clearly this creedal doctrine that summarizes teaching found in Scripture when it is rejected by willful heretics.

This is an understanding that would certainly be affirmed by Anglican theologians in my own tradition like John Jewel or Richard Hooker. In fact, Jewel’s “Apology of the Church of England” is a defense of the catholicity of the C of E built around an outline that follows the Creed, which he argues is a summary of the clear teaching of Scripture, and the heart of Catholic faith. Jewel argues further that the authority of the keys means that the Church has the authority to forgive or retain sins based on the promises of Scripture:

*We say also, that the minister doth execute the authority of binding and shutting, as often as he shutteth up the gate of the kingdom of heaven against the unbelieving and stubborn persons, denouncing unto them God’s vengeance, and everlasting punishment: or else, when he doth quite shut them out from the bosom of the Church by open excommunication. Out*



*of doubt, what sentence soever the minister of God shall give in this sort, God Himself doth so well allow of it, that whatsoever here in earth by their means is loosed and bound, God Himself will loose and bind, and confirm the same in heaven. And touching the keys, wherewith they may either shut or open the kingdom of heaven, we with Chrysostom say, "They be the knowledge of the Scriptures:" with Tertullian we say, "They be the interpretation of the law:" and with Eusebius, we call them "The Word of God." The Apology of the Church of England*

Jewel's summary of the purpose of the keys is virtually identical to what Aquinas says in *ST* 2.2.5.3. The current controversy that is dividing the Anglican Communion of which I am a member has occurred because leaders of the Church have repudiated not only the plain teaching of Scripture about sexuality, but also the explicit teaching of the creeds concerning the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ for salvation. It is because the teaching office of the Church (as represented by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Consultative Council) has refused to exercise their responsibilities as holders of the power of the keys that the Communion is in danger of splitting, and that many Anglican Churches in the Global South have broken communion with the Episcopal Church USA, and have instead endorsed the new North American Anglican Province as the faithful, orthodox and catholic representative of Anglicanism in North America.

I conclude then that Dr. Liccione has misinterpreted Aquinas here. His distinction between an interpretation of Scripture that is mere "opinion" rather than the indubitable certainty that comes from the magisterium reflects rather the concern about epistemic certainty that first appears with a vengeance in the post-Reformation Tridentine controversies, and which reappears in the epistemological anxieties that one finds in Newman's critique of "private judgment." But it is not Aquinas.

The key passage for understanding Thomas Aquinas's own views on the role of Scripture is actually found in ST 1.1-10, where Thomas discusses *sacra doctrina* in a perichoretic or symbiotic relationship with *sacra scriptura*, as well as his exegetical writings. Thomas's understanding is similar to what Heiko Oberman has called Tradition I, as opposed to the late Medieval understanding of Tradition II which is echoed by Tridentine theologians. Thomas's understanding of Scripture is certainly not the understanding of Tridentine apologists like Bellarmine and (definitely) not that of Newman.

Two of the most helpful recent discussions of Aquinas's understanding of Scripture can be found in:

Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum, eds. *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (T & T Clark, 2004).

Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum, eds. *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries* (T & T Clark, 2005).

I recommend them. Nicholas Healy suggests in the latter volume that Aquinas's understanding of the relation between revelation, Scripture and preaching has affinities to Karl Barth's notion of the threefold Word of God.

Addendum: After posting the above, I decided to add this rather lengthy but telling quote from Nicholas Healy's "Introduction" to the above *Aquinas on Scripture*, pp 18-19.

*[For Thomas,] Sacra doctrina is in some important respects identifiable with Scripture. . . . But sacra doctrina is not normative, or not in anything like the way Scripture is. The teaching of the Creeds is fundamental, not because it is a product of the Church but because the credal statements are drawn from Scripture. The teachings of the Fathers have authority, but only of a probable kind. While Thomas treats the 'holy doctors' with immense respect, he does not hesitate to correct their imperfections, 'loyally explaining' or*

*'reverently expounding' (exponere reverenter) their remarks so that they better conform to Scripture. He insists that 'faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors.'* Thus Thomas does not anticipate the later Roman Catholic doctrine of two sources of revelation, Scripture and Church tradition. Though he admits an oral apostolic tradition, this has no authority with regard to doctrine, but applies only to specific practices. Scripture alone is the basis of our faith, and of itself it gives us knowledge sufficient for our salvation, to which nothing new can be or need be added (my emphasis).

*In sum, the exegesis of Scripture can never be dispensed with. We cannot rely upon intermediary work, whether theological systems or conciliar documents or papal teachings. Such intermediaries are vital and constitute the ongoing disputatio that informs the Church's quest for more truthful preaching and witness. But for that quest to be successful, teachers and preachers must return ever anew to Scripture. . . .*

*. . . Thomas engages in conversation with everyone he can possibly think of, irrespective of their methods or even their religious beliefs. A glance at his commentaries will find him referring to Aristotle and other philosophers and their commentators (including mediaeval Muslims), Church doctrines, papal definitions, ancient heresies, the exegesis of the Fathers, and contemporary proposals, together with a cloud of references to other parts of the Bible. All potential sources of truth are brought into the discussion in order that Scripture may be the more deeply probed and understood. Yet none of the non-biblical sources are permitted to govern the interpretation, which lies with the *sensus litteralis vel historicus* alone. Instead, it is they who are brought within Scripture's orbit and made to serve*

*its divine author's communicative intention.*

By the way, I love the above picture of Thomas. Mary (representing the Church) points Thomas to the Father, who hands him the Scriptures. Thomas receives the Scriptures directly from the Father, and looks through them (as it were) to God. Mary (the Church) does not point to herself; neither does she hand Thomas the Scriptures, or interpret them to him. Nor does she stand between Thomas and the Scriptures or between the Scriptures and God. Theologically, this is correct.

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## **Wrestling With the Symbols: A Sermon on Reading Scripture**

The following is a sermon that appeared on my website, and never made it to my blog. Sometimes an example is better than an argument. Perhaps what I write below shows something of what I mean when I say that Scripture is “formally sufficient” and has an “inherent intelligibility.” Other helpful examples can be found in my article on George Herbert in my “Pages” section in the sidebar and my sermon on “Christological Subversion.” . . . Or you could just read all of my sermons.



One of the prerogatives of the preacher is that, since he or she is the one in the pulpit, he or she can also break the rules on occasion. This morning, I'd like to break the rules a little bit. Rather than preaching on the Scriptural readings, I'm going to talk *about* them. In a few minutes, you'll realize what I mean by that.

What I would like to do this morning is talk a little bit about the use of metaphorical and symbolic language in Scripture. Metaphor and symbol are the primary ways in which the language of the Scripture speaks of God. This happens so frequently that often we don't even think about it. A good example is the number of images that cluster around Jesus in the NT. In the NT, Jesus is called a King, a Lamb, a Priest, a Shepherd, a Judge—the list goes on and on.

The readings in today's lectionary provide a prime example of the prevalence of metaphor in Scripture. What we see in the passages is something that happens frequently in the Bible. A single image or cluster of images is used and developed by several authors to develop a common theme. Identifying the central themes of the metaphors in today's readings is fairly straightforward. The predominant metaphor is that of a farmer who owns a vineyard. In all three passages, the owner of the vineyard is clearly God. The vineyard represents the people of God, more specifically God's covenant people, the nation of Israel. Finally, the prevailing theme is that of judgment. The owner of the vineyard is—to put it mildly—disappointed with

something about his vineyard.

In the Isaiah passage, the vineyard owner is disappointed because the vineyard has not produced its expected crops—instead of producing grapes from which good wine could be made, it has produced “wild grapes.”

In the parable told by Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, the approach is slightly different. In this variation on the theme, it is not the vineyard that disappoints the owner, but the tenants—who refuse to turn over to the vineyard owner his share of the grapes. When the vineyard owner sends his servants, and finally his Son, to collect what is due to him, they are beaten and the Son is killed.

Finally, the Psalm looks at things from a rather different perspective. In the Psalm, the point of view is that of the tenant, or perhaps the vineyard itself, who asks the vineyard owner why he has neglected his vineyard and allowed it to be trampled and destroyed by strangers and wild beasts.

The key question for the reader of these passages is: what are we to make of this metaphor of the vineyard owner and the vineyard? To answer this question, we have to ask how we deal with metaphor in the Scriptures in general.

The first point to which we must attend is that metaphorical language is not literal. This should be so obvious as not to need pointing out. There is probably no one among us who would be so oblivious as to interpret today’s passages literally—to presume that the Bible was teaching us that God is a literal vineyard owner who plants grapes and harvests them. Why would God need to plant grapes? God is the Creator of all the grapes in the world. If God planted grapes, would he eat them or make wine with them? Would he drink his own wine, or would he sell it on the open market? Would it be fair competition if you could buy wine in the local liquor store that had the “God” label on it?

Oddly, many otherwise intelligent people seem to forget this point when it comes to interpreting Scripture. Literalism is a problem both for those in the church who call themselves progressives and those who call themselves conservatives. Every once in awhile a prominent bishop suddenly notices that this metaphorical language does not make much sense if taken literally. Four decades ago, Bishop John A.T. Robinson came to the realization that God does not really live in the sky, and decided that "our image of God must go." We could not talk about "our Father in heaven" anymore. These days, the retired Bishop John Spong of the diocese of Newark has written best-selling book after book in which he often seems to confuse the metaphorical and symbolic language of Scripture with the language of mythology, and assumes that the key to understanding the Scripture is to discard the "myth" and keep whatever we find left that is palatable. Interestingly, the palatable parts just happen to correspond to the good Bishop's political causes.

At the opposite extreme from Bishop Spong are groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh Day Adventists, and fundamentalist Protestants who take the strange and sometimes bizarre symbolism found in Scripture texts like the Book of Revelation and try to find in this symbolism a one to one correspondence with events in the modern world. The popular *Left Behind* novels are the latest example. Where Spong literalizes what is intended to be symbolic and mythologizes what is intended to be literal, the Fundamentalists find literal meanings in symbolic passages that are just not there. Although some in the last election might have found it disappointing, the Book of Revelation does not teach that John Kerry [or now Barak Obama] was the anti-Christ. In this respect, Handel's Messiah is a better interpretation of the book of Revelation than the one's found in any Fundamentalist commentary on the end of the world.

If metaphorical language is so easily subject to

misinterpretation, why is it so prominent in the Scriptures? Why should Scripture not speak in clear, unmistakable literal language, something like the instructions for programming a VCR or a computer software manual? (Well, perhaps that wasn't quite the best illustration!) An ancient Christian writer who was known by the name of Dionysius the Areopagite long ago asked himself the same question. Why does Scripture sometimes use such inappropriate and even irreverent images to describe God? God is described in the Bible as a rock, a lion, a thief in the night, even a chicken! Dionysius suggested that such outrageous images are used because they help us avoid the dangers of confusing our own limited conceptions of God with the reality itself. When sophisticated theologians speak of God as being all-powerful, or all-perfect, or Necessary Being, they sometimes give the impression that they know what they're talking about. But of course we have no conception of what it means to be all-powerful or totally perfect, or self-existing Being. These notions are totally outside our experience as finite creatures. But we do know what a farmer is, or a rock, or a lion, and hopefully we're not apt to confuse them with the literal reality. We know that God does not plant grapes, or stub your toe, or have a bushy mane. Because the images cannot be taken literally, they point beyond themselves to the God who is hidden in mystery.

Another characteristic of metaphor is that it is open-ended and evocative. A metaphor can be used in different ways in different contexts. No one use of the metaphor is necessarily the single correct one. Different uses and different metaphors have to balance each other. We see that in today's readings. A central concern of the readings is God's judgment of the covenant people of Israel. An overly literal and one-sided reading of the parable in Mt's gospel could lead to the conclusion that God has finally given up on the people of Israel. The vineyard has now been turned over to the Church. Israel is no longer God's people. But the reading in the Psalm will not allow us to take that approach. In the Psalm, the



tenants (or the actual vineyard) dare to ask the vineyard owner if he hasn't been too hasty, and beg for a second chance. The tenants ask: "Why have you broken down [the] wall [of your vineyard], so that all who pass by pluck off its grapes? . . . Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted."

The apostle Paul uses imagery similar to that of today's passages in Romans 11 in a manner that also calls into question simple attempts to define God's judgment. Paul says that we Gentile Christians are like a wild branch that has been grafted into the cultivated olive tree of Israel. If we fail to be faithful to that which we have been called, God can remove our wild branch from the original tree. In another development of the same theme, John's gospel applies the vineyard imagery to the Church rather than to Israel. Jesus says to his followers on the night before his crucifixion: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you abide in me, you will bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:4) But Jesus goes on to say: "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers." (John 15:5) If we who are the Church do not abide in Christ, then, like Israel, we also will face judgment. God's judgment is not then a rejection of the nation of Israel as such, but a warning to the people of God, whether those of the old covenant or the new.

Similarly, the open-endedness of metaphor in Scripture means that we should not jump too quickly to the conclusion that we know necessarily what a given metaphor means. The metaphor of the owner of the vineyard is a good example. A careless reading of the metaphor seems to present us with a rather harsh, even unmerciful image of God. If a vineyard doesn't produce what you want, then you dig it up and start over. But, of course, God's people aren't branches and dirt, simply to be discarded if they do not produce. As the Psalmist pleads:

“Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.” At the beginning of the Isaiah passage we read this morning, we discover that the planter of the vineyard is not only a farmer, but also a lover, a lover who grieves over his vineyard. He pleads: “What more was there to do for my vineyard than I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?” At the end of the reading, we find that God truly cares for his vineyard: “[T]he people of Judah are his pleasant planting.” But when God expected justice from his people, he found bloodshed; when he looked for justice, he heard the cry of oppression. So the casual reading just won’t do. God is not simply a capricious vineyard owner. His judgment is always rooted in his care for his people and our just dealings with one another.

In unveiling the metaphors of Scripture, we often find that a willingness to be teased, to wrestle with an image, and to sit lightly with a given interpretation is more helpful than simply to dismiss the images we don’t like, and to keep the ones we do. A sanctified imagination is sometimes more helpful in understanding Scripture than a Ph.D. in ancient languages or a bishop’s mitre. The Scriptures like to play with our imagination. If a given metaphor is somewhat limited, the writers do not hesitate to build on it, to pile metaphor on metaphor. Sometimes the metaphors seem impenetrable, sometimes they just don’t seem to make sense. In other cases, they speak to us immediately. Whether they speak directly to our hearts, or we “just don’t get it,” we should remind ourselves that we need to be patient with the metaphors, to realize that sometimes their very strangeness and outrageousness is needed to get our attention, to awake us from our insulated cocoons and to learn not only how to understand in new ways the unknowable God to whom they point, but to relearn the meaning of old symbols that we think we understand, but may not have understood at all.

At the end of the day, the metaphors are pointers. They are not the thing in itself. God is a lover, and a lover who sometimes plays hard to get. God has spoken to us in metaphors, not because they are adequate, but because we have no way to speak of him that is quite adequate. The metaphors shatter our illusions, but the Shepherd, the Rock, the Vineyard Owner, to whom they point, is the real thing itself, and not a metaphor.

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## **A Little More on the Development of Doctrine**

A reader with the *nom de plume* of kepha asks me to respond to a piece by Michael Liccione, which I haven't read yet.

I will look at Prof. Liccione's piece. The two of us have a history together and this sometimes produces more heat than light in our conversations. Perhaps this is because we do indeed have much in common. I think both of us view Thomas Aquinas as our primary mentor. Both of us have a friend in the Pontificator, who helped keep me in Anglicanism back when he was an Episcopalian, and who became Roman Catholic largely through discussions with Michael Liccione and others.

Part of our disagreement has to do with a different understanding of the trajectory of Thomas's theology. Prof. Liccione sees a trajectory from Aquinas through Trent to Newman. I rather see Trent as a rather unfortunate sidetrack in the train of late Medieval Scholasticism, where the kind of Thomism that flourished at that time was a kind of mongrelized version of Suarez or Cajetan, and Newman as rather too much reflecting the epistemological unclarity that followed

Descartes. (To put this way too summarily, Newman echoes Descartes when he views the problem of interpreting Scripture as an issue of the certainty of the knower rather than a question of the intelligibility of the extra-mental object. The solution here goes back to both Aquinas and Aristotle, both of whom were realists in insisting on an inherent intelligible correlation between known object, knowing subject, and language as an "intelligible word," and the crucial role of the judgment in affirming truth or falsity.)

I think the real issue of disagreement has to do with the question of the inherent intelligibility of Scripture. Followers of Newman often speak of the sufficiency of Scripture in terms of a "material" sufficiency. On the page on my blog titled "Who Are Those Guys?" I speak of how, as I read Aquinas, Arminius and Barth, they do theology as a penetration into the mystery of the inherent intelligibility of revelation as witnessed to in Scripture. I see the same kind of approach in Eastern theologians like Athanasius or Cyril of Alexandria.

Such an understanding of Scripture's inherent intelligibility presupposes that the sufficiency of Scripture is not material, but formal. The difference here is between a blueprint to make a building, and the bricks of which the building is made. A merely materially sufficient Scripture is like a pile of bricks that can build anything from a cathedral to a tool shed, but the bricks themselves possess no inherent intelligibility (formal sufficiency) in one direction for another. The intelligibility derives from outside the bricks. Conversely, a blueprint is inherently intelligible, and thus has not material but formal sufficiency to create a specific building, whether cathedral or tool shed.

In terms of development, the claim that Scripture is materially sufficient presumes that the intelligibility of revelation derives from elsewhere than Scripture itself. A definitive magisterium (or external tradition) is necessary to decide what to do with the bricks. Without the magisterium it

is impossible to know whether the bricks were intended to be a cathedral or a tool shed.

Conversely, if Scripture is formally sufficient, it is comparable to an architect's blueprint, not a pile of indeterminate bricks. The divine Author of revelation has made himself known, has spoken and acted in such a way that what he says can be understood, and the inspired apostolic witness to that revelation (Scripture) itself possesses an inherent intelligibility—it is also knowable and understandable. Of course, just as there is an architectural tradition in which blueprints make sense, and in which builders interpret blueprints, so the community of the church is the tradition in which Scripture is properly read. The church's job in this situation is not to act as architect, but to act as contractor—to be faithful in following the architect's plan. On this reading, development adds nothing new to that which is already in the blueprint. Yet without development, the physical building never exists. The architect's plan must be enacted. At the same time, it is always possible to check the building against the original blueprint. It is not the contractor who specifies whether he has been faithful to the original blueprint, but the blueprint (the text) itself. If the contractor includes a bowling alley in the transept of the cathedral, one can always check against the blueprint to see if a bowling alley was part of the original plan. The contractor cannot justify the bowling alley as a legitimate development on the grounds that in architecture, both blueprints (Scripture) and builders (tradition) are equally necessary.

As for Aquinas, we differ on the final trajectory. I don't see the clear trajectory between Aquinas, Trent, and Newman. Rather, I think that Hooker's approach in the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, or the kind of Thomism I find echoed in Arminius or (more recently) Eric Mascall or Austin Farrer more faithfully reflects Aquinas's own understanding that Scripture

is inherently intelligible.

Or, as I say when talking about Barth in my "Who Are Those Guys?" page, the reason why Barth began his *Church Dogmatics* with the doctrine of the Trinity was his realization that God must be in himself who he is in his revelation. In the *ordo cognoscendi* the starting point of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity (*ordo essendi*) has to be God's revelation as economic Trinity in the history of salvation—a history of which Scripture as God's Word written is the intelligible and formally sufficient witness. Barth's realization was the impetus for the twentieth century revival of Trinitarian theology that has produced tremendous fruit. If God's revelation is to be a true revelation of his character—God is in himself who he is for us—then theology must find its primary task in listening to God's word as echoed in the apostolic witness of Scripture.

Bernard Lonergan and Thomas F. Torrance understand Nicea and Chalcedon in this way. The councils are not a move from one kind of intelligibility to another kind, but a move from one kind of intelligibility to another kind of intelligibility of the same kind. The development that takes place at Nicea and Chalcedon is the move from the "common sense" realism that we find in Scripture—the narrative and symbolic account of God's revelation *propter nos* in the history of revelation—to a critical realism that speaks about God in himself (*in se*) as the necessary implication and presupposition of that revelation. The move from Scripture to Nicea and Chalcedon is a "development," but it is not a development in the sense of adding something new, something that was not in the text all along. Rather, there was an intelligible inevitability to the doctrine of the Trinity. If God is in himself who he has revealed himself to be in the history of his revelation in Israel, in his incarnation in Jesus Christ, in his pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Church, then God must really be triune *in himself*.

This, I would argue, is very different from the kind of development we see in the rise of the papal office or the later Marian dogmas. That Mary is *theotokos* (the mother of God) follows necessarily from the personal identity of Jesus. If the answer to the question "Who is Jesus?" is "Jesus is God from God, light from light, true God from true God," then his mother is truly the "bearer of God." This is primarily not a statement about Mary, but a statement about Jesus. Papal primacy and the assumption and immaculate conception do not follow in this way.