

HPRS4903 - INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

2 – Revelation and Scripture

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?

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At the heart of Christian faith lies a pretty bold claim: God speaks.

Christianity is not simply a set of ethical principles or spiritual practices; it is grounded in the conviction that God has made himself known. This self-disclosure is called *revelation*.

Christians believe that God is not hidden in permanent silence but chooses to communicate—through creation, history, persons, and through the example of Jesus Christ.

HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?

Yet this raises immediate questions:

If God speaks, how does that speech reach us?

Is it found in nature, in human conscience, in sacred texts, or in personal experience?

What makes the Bible authoritative?

How can a collection of ancient writings function as God's word today?

And how should these texts be read in a modern world shaped by science, historical criticism, and religious pluralism?

This lecture explores how Christian theology understands revelation and Scripture and tries to answer these questions. It examines the place of the Bible in Christian life, distinguishes between general and special revelation, addresses issues of canon, inspiration, and interpretation.

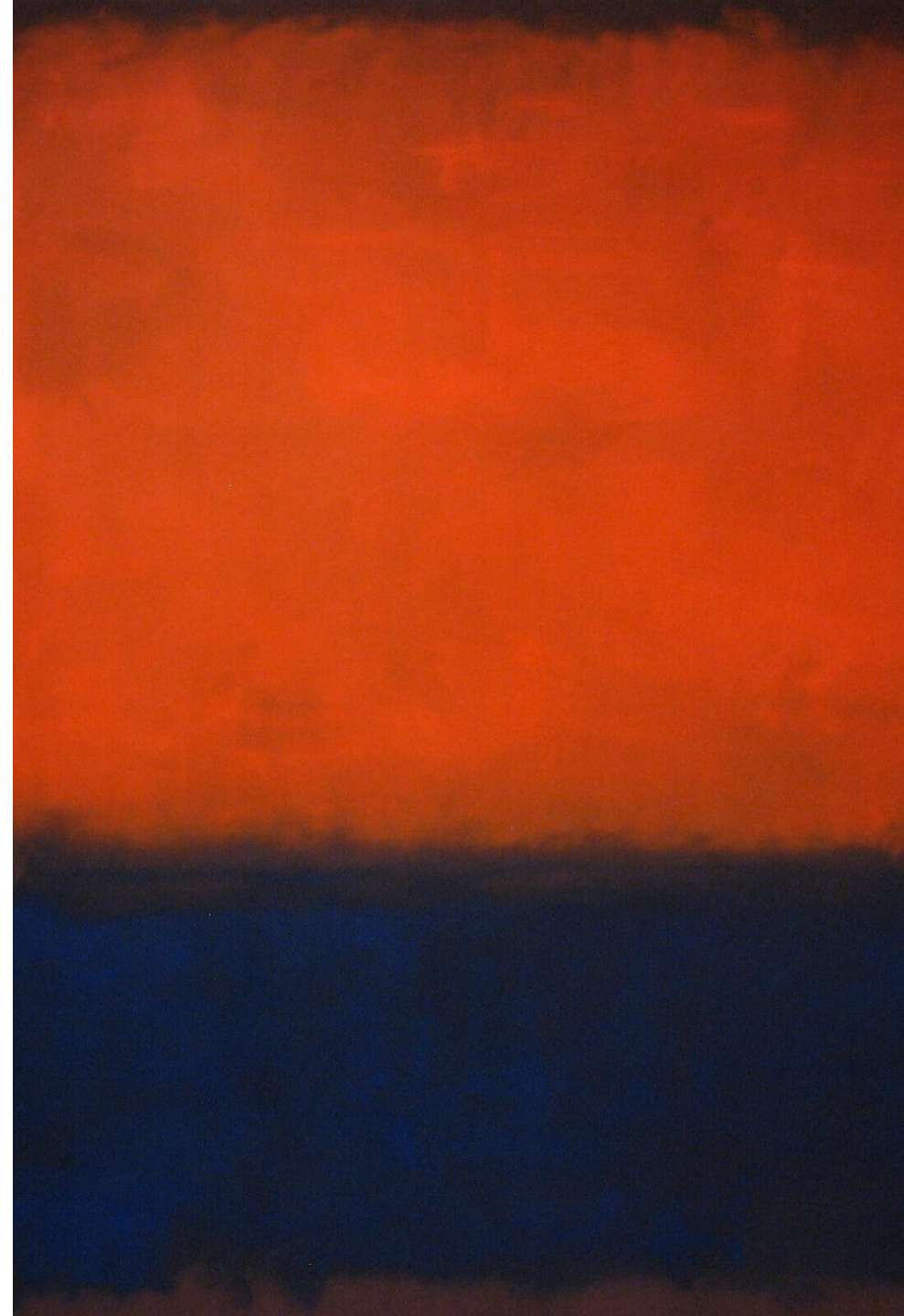
HOW DOES GOD SPEAK?

We will begin by looking at “scripture”.

For Christians, Scripture is not simply a religious classic or a historical artifact. It is the normative text of the community of faith.

From the earliest centuries, Christians have gathered around these writings to worship, to teach, and to discern God’s will.

In the synagogue and later in the church, Scripture is read aloud as a living word and is seen as having an everlasting relevance to our lives.



“The Word of God is living and active”.

Hebrews 4:12

THE PLACE OF SCRIPTURE

The Bible occupies this central place because it bears authoritative witness to God's saving acts: the call of Israel, the covenant, the life and teaching of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and the birth of the Church.

Christians do not worship the Bible as an object, but they treat it with reverence because it mediates knowledge of God.



"Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ."

St Jerome, 342-420AD

THE PLACE OF SCRIPTURE

Yet Scripture's authority is not self-evident to us.

The Bible does not float above history, instead it emerges from it. Its authority is bound to the faith of a community that recognised these texts as bearing unique witness to God. The Bible is therefore inseparable from the Church. It is both the foundation of Christian faith and the product of a believing community.

This dual character already points to a tension: Scripture is sacred, yet historical; divine in purpose, yet human in form.

Understanding revelation requires holding both dimensions together.

REVELATION AND SCRIPTURE

GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

General Revelation

- Knowledge of God available through his works, such as creation, reason, and human experience.

Special Revelation

- Knowledge of God only available through God's self-disclosure, such as Christ, miracles, or history.



GENERAL REVELATION

General revelation refers to knowledge of God available through creation, reason, and human experience.

As the psalmist declares, “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1). Paul writes that God’s “eternal power and divine nature” can be perceived in what has been made (Rom. 1:20).

Nature, beauty, conscience, and the order of the world can all point beyond themselves to a creator.



GENERAL REVELATION

General revelation affirms that God is not wholly unknown to humanity. It undergirds dialogue with philosophy and other religions, suggesting that truth is not confined to a single tradition. It also explains why questions about God arise universally.

Yet, general revelation is by its nature, ambiguous.

Nature can inspire awe, but it also includes suffering and disaster. Human reason can glimpse order, but it can also justify injustice. Creation alone does not reveal God's character as merciful, covenantal, and redemptive.

For that, Christianity looks to *special revelation*.



SPECIAL REVELATION

Special revelation refers to God's self-disclosure in particular historical events and persons, above all in Jesus Christ.

As the Gospel of John declares, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

Christians believe that God's definitive self-revelation takes place in the person and actions of Jesus Christ — a person, of which the Gospels tell us.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

THE BIBLICAL CANON

The Bible is not a single book but is instead a library of writings: law, history, poetry, prophecy, gospel, and letter. These texts were composed over more than a thousand years in different cultural contexts. The question therefore arises: why these books and not others?

The answer lies in the formation of what we call the *canon*. “Canon” means “rule” or “measure.” The canon is the set of writings the Church recognized as authoritative Scripture. This process was gradual and communal.

Israel preserved certain texts as sacred. Early Christians inherited these and added writings associated with the apostles.

Poetry

1

Let him kiss me
with the kisses of
his mouth - for
your love is
more delightful
than wine.

Pleasing is the
fragrance of
your perfumes;
your name is like
perfume poured
out.

History

2

In the days when
the judges ruled,
there was a
famine in the
land.

So a man from
Bethlehem in
Judah, together
with his wife and
two sons, went to
live for a
while in the
country of
Moab.

Prophecy

3

Whoever has ears,
let them
hear what the
Spirit says to the
churches.

To the one who
is victorious, I
will give the
right to eat from
the tree of
life, which is in
the paradise of
God.

Law

4

If anyone sins
because they do
not speak up
when they hear
a public charge
to
testify regarding
something they
have seen or
learned about,
they will be held
responsible.

THE BIBLICAL CANON

The Church did not create Scripture ex nihilo; it discerned which texts bore reliable witness to God's saving work. Criteria included apostolic origin, consistency with the rule of faith, and widespread liturgical use. By the fourth century, the core of the New Testament canon was widely agreed upon.

The existence of a canon highlights that Scripture is not self-authenticating. Its authority is bound to communal recognition and agreement.

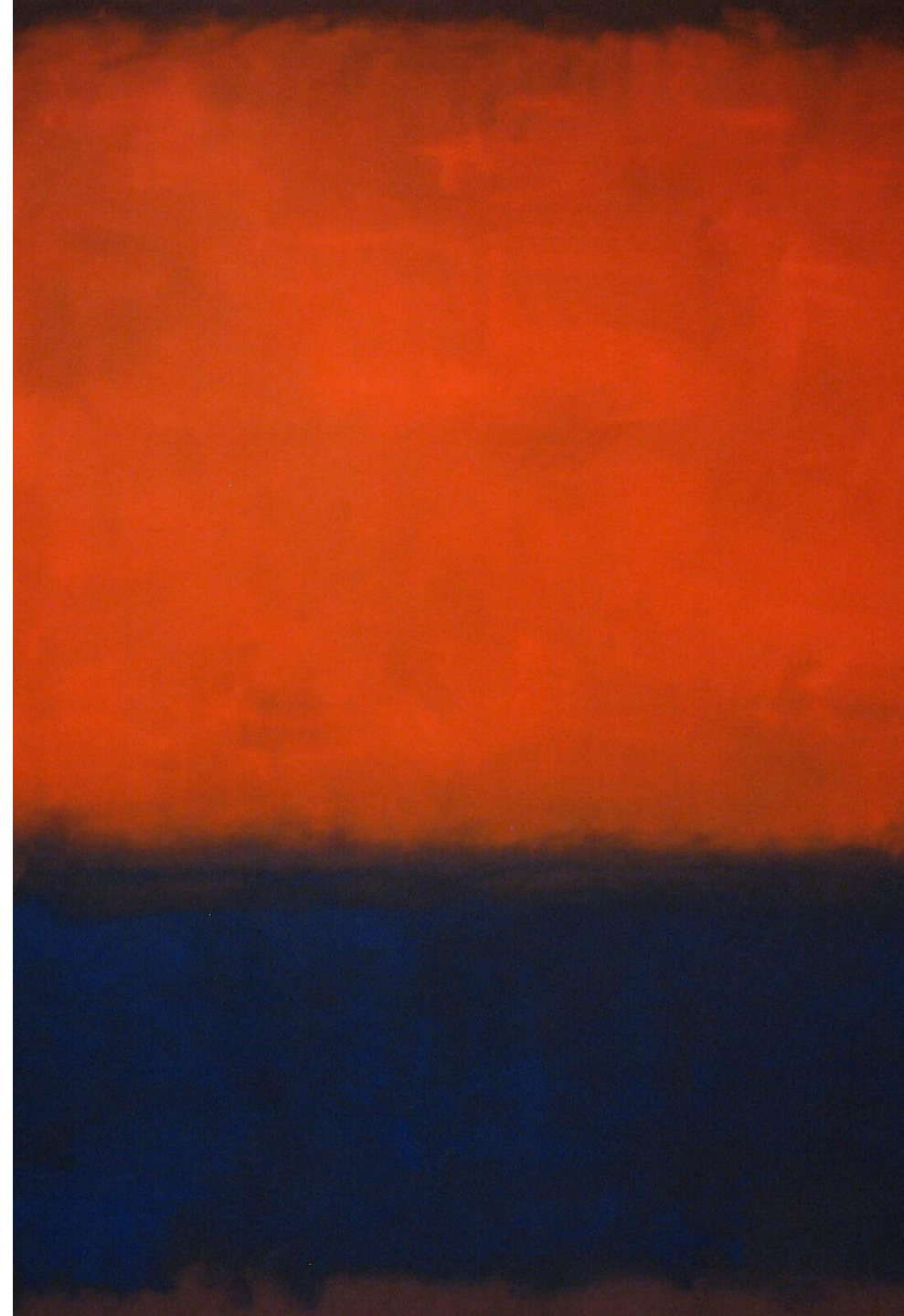
The Bible is the Church's book, and the Church is a community formed by this book.

INSPIRATION

Christians speak of Scripture as “inspired.” Paul writes that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). But what does inspiration mean?

One extreme imagines mechanical dictation, as though God bypassed human authors entirely. Another reduces inspiration to religious genius. Classical Christian theology rejects both. Inspiration affirms that God works through human authors in such a way that their writings faithfully serve God’s purposes.

The biblical texts bear clear marks of human authorship: differing styles, perspectives, and even tensions. Given that the Gospels are attempting to tell a story about God, these differences do not negate inspiration, but rather encapsulate the difficulty of expressing it.

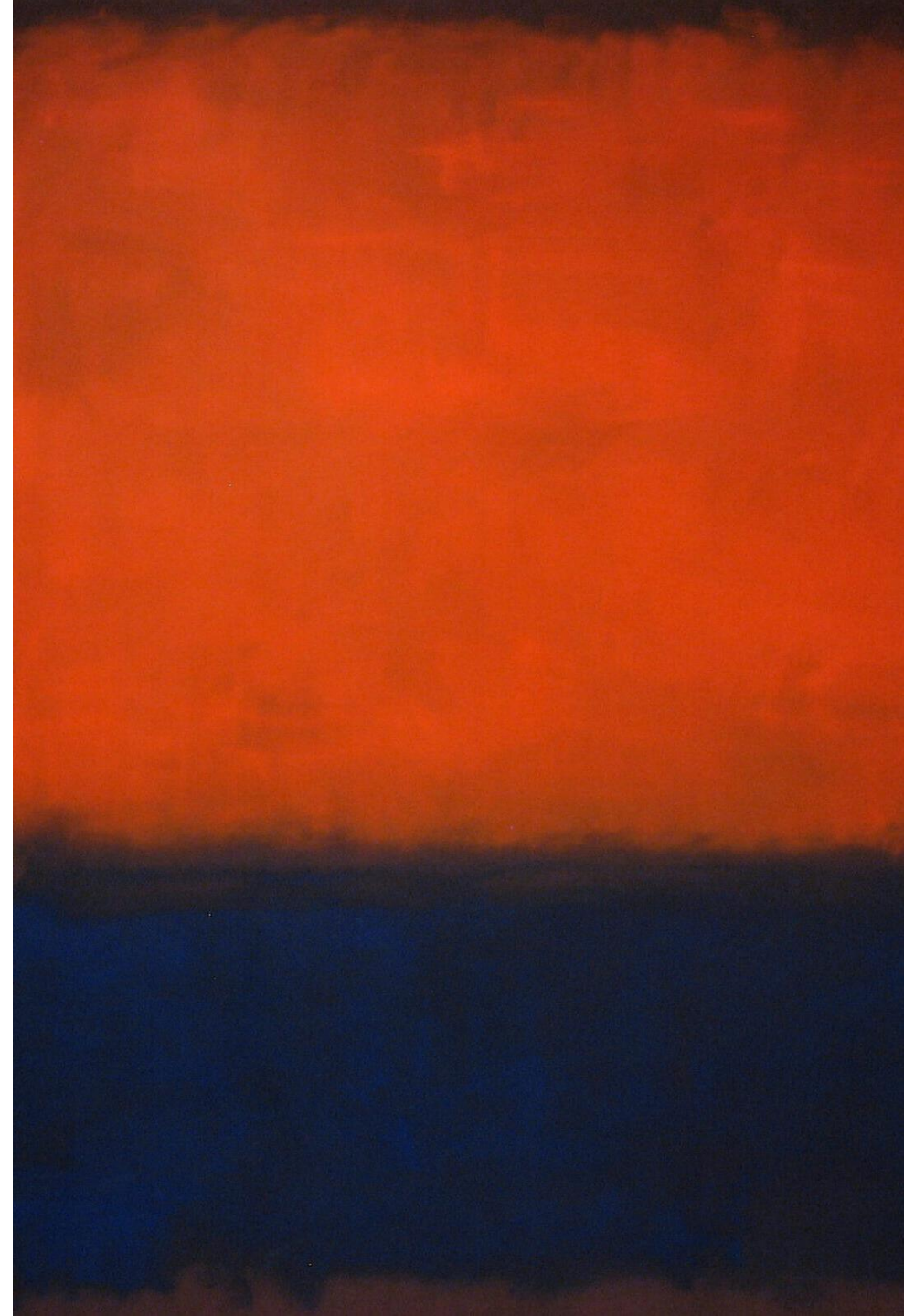


INSPIRATION

This understanding preserves both divine authority and historical particularity. Scripture is trustworthy because God is faithful; it is complex because humans are. Inspiration refers not to a scientific precision but instead to theological purpose. The Bible teaches “for salvation,” not as a modern textbook.

This raises some more important questions:
Can Scripture contain error?
What kind of truth does it convey?

Many contemporary theologians argue that biblical truth is not always literal or factual in modern terms, but it is reliably oriented toward God’s saving will. The authority of Scripture lies in its capacity to draw readers into the reality of God.



BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Because Scripture is a text, it must be interpreted.
The Bible does not speak without readers to read it!

Interpretation is unavoidable. Even the decision to read a passage “literally” is an interpretive choice.

Throughout Christian history, multiple methods of interpretation have emerged.

Early theologians such as Origen and Augustine distinguished between literal and spiritual senses. Medieval interpreters spoke of allegorical, moral, and anagogical meanings. The Reformers emphasized the plain sense of Scripture, accessible to ordinary believers.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Modern readers face new challenges. The Bible was written in ancient languages and cultures vastly different from our own. Commands about slavery, warfare, or gender roles cannot be applied without reflection and interpretation must attend to genre, historical context, and literary form.

This raises questions of authority and reliability like: Who decides what Scripture means?

Individuals?

Churches?

Scholars?

Different traditions answer these differently, yet they all must wrestle with the fact that Scripture does not just interpret itself.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The modern period has also introduced powerful tools for studying the Bible. Historical-critical methods ask how texts were composed, what sources they used, and what they meant in their original contexts, what the authorship, redaction, and historical setting were etc.

For some believers, this has been threatening:

If Moses did not write the Pentateuch, or if the Gospels differ in detail, does that undermine Scripture's authority?

If biblical authors were shaped by ancient worldviews, can their writings still be God's word?

Others see historical criticism as a gift by preventing anachronism and fundamentalism and by deepening our understanding of the context.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The key theological question is whether critical scholarship is compatible with faith. Many theologians answer yes.

If God truly speaks through history, then understanding that history deepens faith.

At the same time, historical criticism has limits - it cannot determine the theological truth of the text.

It can tell us what a text meant in the first century, but not whether God speaks through it today.

Theology therefore integrates critical methods without surrendering its distinctive claim: that God addresses the Church through these texts.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Modernity has also brought about the onset of religious pluralism. Christians encounter other sacred texts and religious traditions. This raises questions about the exclusivity of scripture:

Is the Bible uniquely authoritative?

How does its authority relate to the Qur'an or the Vedas?

Christian theology responds by affirming both particularity and openness. The Bible is authoritative for the Church because it witnesses to Christ. This does not deny that God may speak elsewhere, generally. But it does maintain that Christian faith is shaped normatively by these texts.

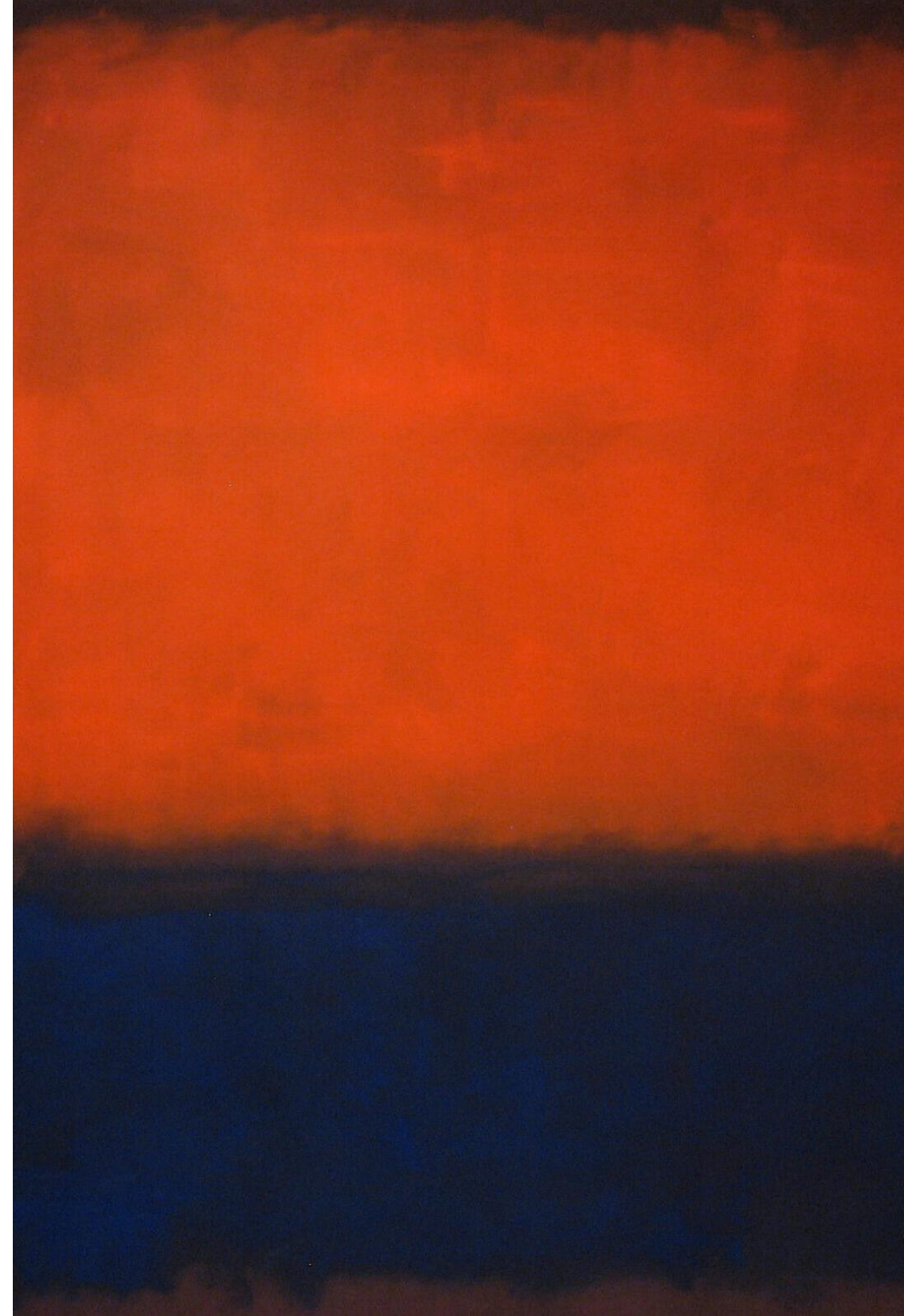
REVELATION AND SCRIPTURE

A final clarification is crucial:

Christians do not believe that God is identical with the Bible and nor is Revelation reducible to only a book.

The Bible is a witness to God's self-revelation; it is not itself the ultimate object of faith. The ultimate "Word of God" is Jesus Christ – e.g. the Gospel of John.

In reading it, believers encounter not merely ancient words but the living God who speaks through them.

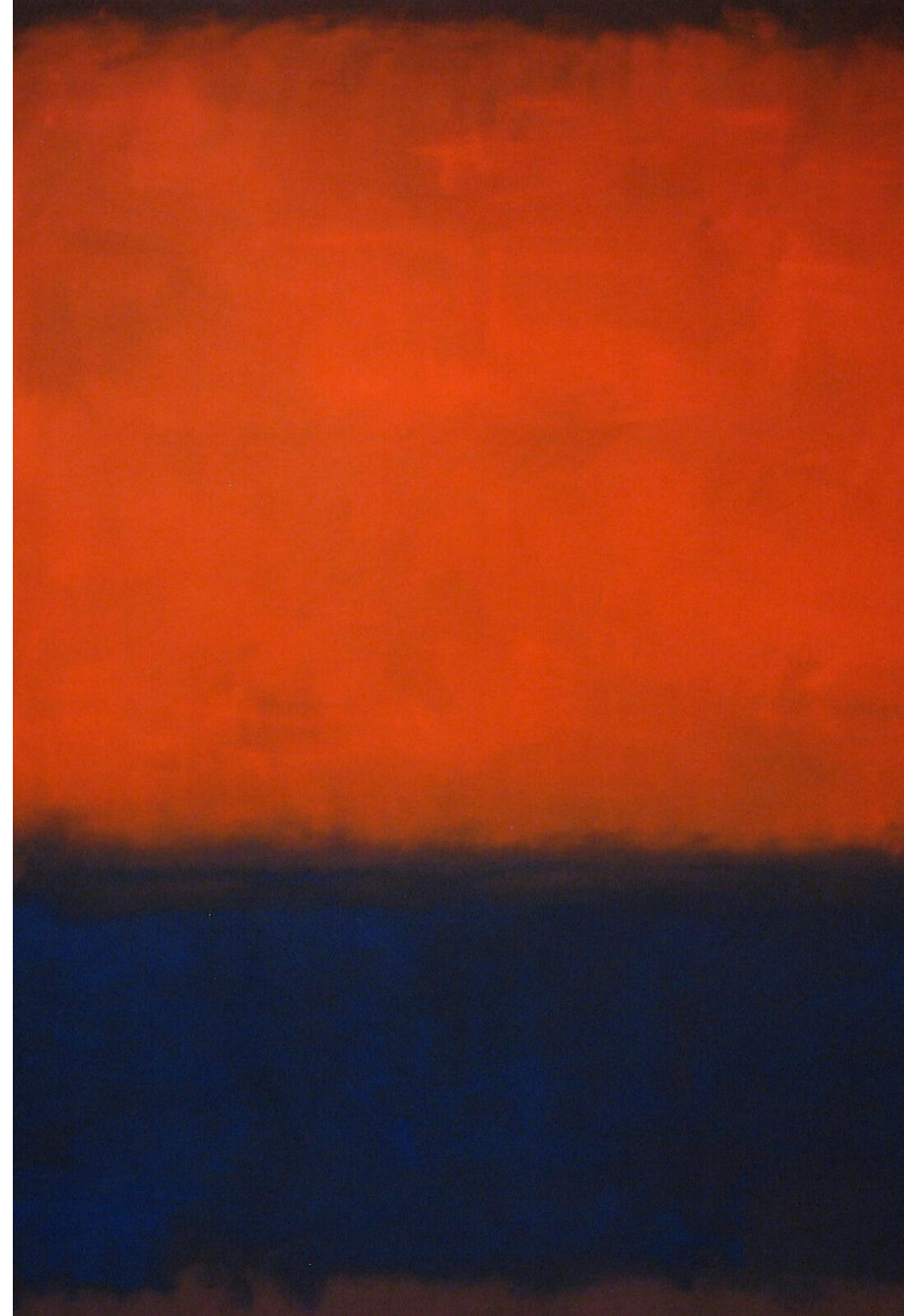


REVELATION AND SCRIPTURE

This also means that revelation is ongoing in a certain sense. Not in the form of new doctrines replacing the Gospel, but in the ever-renewed address of God to new contexts.

The Spirit who inspired the texts also illuminates readers. As Jesus promises in John's Gospel, "The Spirit of truth will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

Theology therefore holds together three elements: the historical text, the living community, and the active presence of God. Scripture is read in the Church, through the Spirit, in light of Christ.

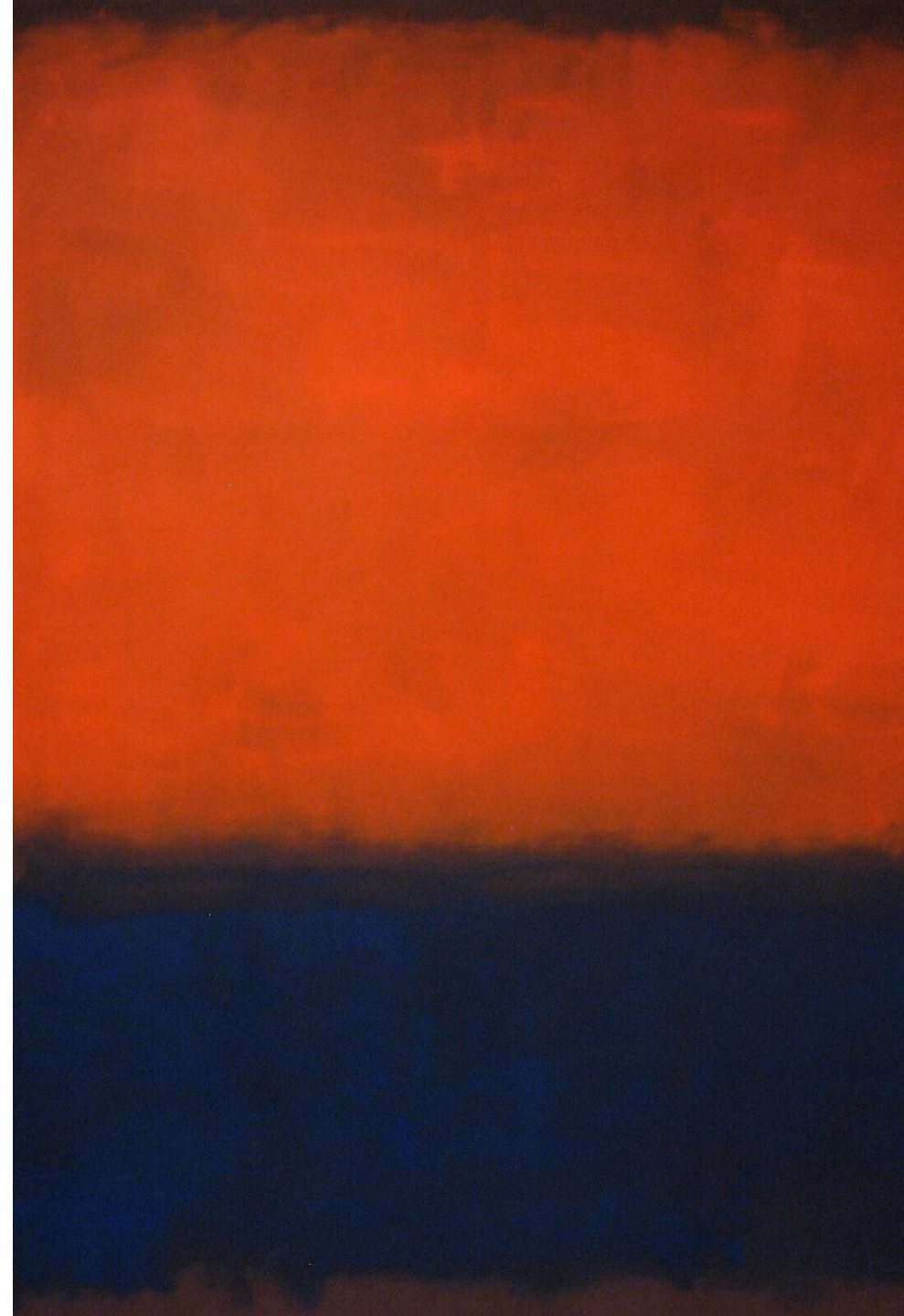


REVELATION AND SCRIPTURE

In asking “How does God speak?” Christian theology therefore answers: through creation and conscience, through history and community, through a person named Jesus, and through the texts that bear witness to him.

Scripture is not the end of revelation, but it is its privileged vehicle.

Through it, the Church continues to hear the voice that calls it into faith, understanding, and life.





2 Timothy 3:14–17

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*
I/1, §1 (excerpt)

READINGS