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The Expression "Word of God" in Scripture

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THE habit of referring to the Bible as the Word of God has disguised the fact that the expression has a multiplicity of uses in Scripture. The purpose of this article, which can only be summary in its treatment, is to identify and analyse these uses.

1. THE WORD OF GOD IS GOD HIMSELF

The Word was God. John 1:1

There are not many places in Scripture where this affirmation is made, for the Bible is concerned more with God's relation to his creatures than with what he is in himself. The great self-announcement of Wisdom in Proverbs, which lies behind the Johannine saying, comes near it.¹ Other references to the pre-existent Word, while not irrelevant at this point, belong rather to our next one.

This Word, isolated as pure divine spirit, is incapable of being heard by man. The obstacle to be first considered is not sin, but fleshliness or materiality, which excludes us in this life from purely spiritual relations with God. "No man hath seen God at any time" (John 1:18). Since God has not a physical body and man's knowledge is conditioned by the senses, God cannot be seen by the human eye. The same truth applies to the ear. God no more has a voice to be heard than he has a face to be seen. "Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape" (John 5:37). This saying is in St. John alone, and yet is basic to the whole Biblical doctrine of God. We gravely misunderstand Scripture if we interpret any of its passages as recounting revelation apart from creaturely, indeed fleshly, mediating factors, actual or visionary. An excellent illustration of this principle, despite accompanying problems, is in the thirty-third chapter of Exodus. "Thou canst not see my face; for there shall no man see me, and live" (v.20. Cp.v.23). There is no contradiction here of what is said shortly before: "And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (v.11). The earlier verse emphasises the directness of the revelation; the latter, like the last few words of the chapter, emphasises its mediacy. Both truths are finally held together in the affirmation that what Moses actually saw was God's back.

The mystery of communication even on the human level is that at one and the same time we know one another directly, as spirit meeting spirit, yet only by means of bodily relations. Our "spiritual" relations are not

1. Prov. 8:22. Cp. Col.1; 17; I John 1:1; 2:13.

arrived at by means of inferences or deductions from bodily relations, even though there be inferential elements present. Spiritual relations belong to the stuff of experience, as do our bodily perceptions. Yet we never have purely spiritual experience of one another or of ourselves. Knowledge of persons is always mediated knowledge. Experience of God is analogous. But it has to be strongly borne in mind that the mediating factors in divine revelation are never themselves divine. A double conclusion follows. The fundamental form of the Word of God is God himself in his unmixed being. But this is a Word that no mortal has heard or can hear.

2. THE WORD OF GOD IS THE VOICE OF CREATION

*All things were made by him . . . and
the life was the light of men. John 1:3ff.*

The act of creation is also an act of revelation. The term *Logos* might well mean that revelation is the prior thought. It has been well said that the early chapters of Genesis, to which John is alluding, are as much the story of revelation as the story of creation (Cp. Rom. 1:20). Fleshliness or creatureliness is not simply obstructive to revelation but a vehicle of it. Again we can find a simple human analogy. Machines are artefacts that reveal their maker. The old-fashioned attempt to "explain" man as a machine is an absurd failure to realise that there cannot be machines without an accompanying superior being whose marks are upon them. Similarly, while the creation endures, God is perpetually united with something non-divine by which in principle he stands revealed to lesser spirits.² The first hearing of the Word is the hearing of God's "voice" in creation, and the first unveiling of his person is his covering himself with light as with a garment.³ The very principle of sin in one aspect is that it is the vitiation of revelation. "If the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!"⁴ If, then, God is to reveal himself to us as we now are, two barriers have to be crossed, viz. fleshiness and sin. Too often the latter barrier is confusedly made to explain everything, but it now becomes relevant. To reach the sinner truly, the Word must come in a form additional to the revelation in creation.

3. THE WORD OF GOD AS EVENT IN HISTORY

*For the law was given by Moses, but grace
and truth came by Jesus Christ. John 1:17*

A new revelation cannot be given as a merely natural event. It must enter the human world, the historical order, in a way that can lay hold of sinful men as personal minds and wills. The great message of the Bible, apart from which any study of it misses the point, is that God has taken revealing and redeeming action upon the stage of history. The Johannine text at the head

2. See Augustine's famous passage: *Confessions* 10:6.

3. Pss. 19; 104:2; Heb. 11:3; 2 Pet. 3:5.

4. Matt. 6:23. Cp. Rom. 1: 21ff.

of this section is a summary of the Biblical message that the Word has entered history in two related ways, by Israel and in Jesus Christ.

(i) *The Word as Old Testament Event*

For reasons already discussed, the transcendent, invisible God can act within the human world only in a mediate way. The Exodus is the most striking Old Testament example of God “showing his hand” by an historical event. “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exod. 20:2). In the event, he “gave them his name,” or revealed himself. That is to say, he gave his Word. The special events of Israel’s history were signs by which God spoke to those who had ears to hear. There are many kinds of events, on a large scale or a small, in which God is represented in the Old Testament as revealing himself, whether it be in Amos’s plumb-line, Jeremiah’s almond-branch, or national events.⁵ Revelation is always accompanied by a sign of some sort, even though ultimately it be the quite down-to-earth one of the moral and spiritual state of the people.

(ii) *The Word as New Testament Event: the Incarnation*

The Word was made flesh. John 1:4

Christ is at once both Word and event. He is in a special manner the Word of God, because the mind and will of God can be embodied in a person as in no other kind of creaturely manifestation. The Son is the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person (Heb. 1:3). In his person and action he is the Word of God before ever he speaks a word. What has already been said about revelation by events will help us to understand what is meant by the Incarnation. We shall also recognise that this doctrine of the divine embodying itself in the creaturely is already in principle in the Synoptic Gospels, and therefore the notion of incarnation gave no embarrassment to men like the Apostles who were reared in a strict monotheism. If a sign is an event by which God directly yet mediately participates in the human scene, there is no particular difficulty—though necessarily there is much mystery—in Christ’s being Immanuel, “God with us.”⁶ We have here the foundation of a truly Biblical Christology.

4. THE WORD OF HUMAN TESTIMONY

The three forms of the Word of God that we have considered so far belong entirely to God in himself and his own action. But the salvation-story becomes fully historical only by means of human testimony in which it is articulated and made the basis for human action. In the Old Testament, the interpreters are the prophets, and in the New Testament the Apostles, the prophets, their companions, and their successors.

5. Amos 7:2ff.; Jer. 1:11; 21:2.

6. Matt. 1:23; Cp. Luke 2:12.

(i) *The Word of the Prophets is the Word of God⁷*

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. John 1:6

In terms of the principles with which we are working, the place of the prophets is not hard to understand. Inspiration means that the will of God embodied in events becomes so clear to a prophet that he utters it in human words with all the authority of God. In so far as men shape their conduct upon this revealed Word, there emerges a new, divinely guided and sustained community on earth. It is true not only of the Christian Church but also of Israel that it is founded upon prophecy. It is for this reason that the figure of Moses, the paragon of prophecy (Deut. 18:15), looms so large in the Old Testament and that even the historical books in the Old Testament were known as "the Former and the Latter Prophets." The Exodus could not have taken place apart from Moses, who was under God its agent and interpreter. The effort still being made by some to defend the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is a perverted expression of the fundamental truth that there could have been no Bible without the inspiration of Moses and his successors.

(ii) *The Self-Testimony of Jesus*

Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. John 1:17

If the words of the prophets were Word of God, the words of the Word Incarnate were Word of God *par excellence*. One does not intend by this assertion to suspend the human limits imposed by the Incarnation upon the words of Jesus, but to rescue the centrality of his testimony to himself from the tendency to merge it in that of the Apostles, or, even worse, in that of the Old Testament prophets. The idea that St. Paul created the Gospel out of the events of the life of Jesus is an absurd idea. The inspiration of the Apostles was derivative from the inspiration of Jesus, whose mind and will gave to the events of his life the shape that they took.⁸ Christ would not have gone to Calvary without first instituting the sacrament which is the prophetic sign of what was really occurring on the Cross. Moses interpreted an event, the deliverance from Egypt, in which he was involved but which went beyond his person. With Jesus, there was no event to point to, save what he himself was and did. In him, prophet and event, Word and sign, coalesce. To separate the words of Jesus from the testimony of the Apostles, or to try to get behind the "Christ of faith" to the "Jesus of history," or to seek a "simple" Gospel regarded as something different from the "dogmas of the Church," are all examples of the single error of failing to see that Christ's own words are the prophetic source of all later articulations of the Word. The Puritan scorning of "pistling and gospelling" arose from ignorant reforming zeal, for the age-old emphasis upon the reading of the Gospel rests upon the theological primacy of the words and life of Jesus.⁹ Apostolic

7. Exod. 4:22; Num. 24:13; Amos 3:8; *et passim*.

8. John 3:34; Acts 10:38.

9. H. Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, p. 67.

words, it is true, are Christ's words, but they are his words in the mouth of another, whereas his words during his earthly visibility, both before the Resurrection and during the forty days before the Ascension, are his words in his own mouth, and therefore Word of God in an unparalleled sense.

(iii) *The Testimony of the Apostles is Word of God*

He first findeth his own brother, Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias. John 1:41

As the Exodus could not have been effectual revelation apart from the interpretative agency of Moses, so also the revelation in Christ would have been ineffectual without the inspired participation of the Apostles. The joy with which Jesus hailed the confession of Peter was joy in Peter's dawning prophetic consciousness (Matt. 16:16 ff.). We have here no ordinary confession of faith, by reason of which Peter is to be reduced to the level of all Christians. Protestant exegesis, out of a fear of Rome's use of this text and out of an untheological fear of human mediation in divine things, endeavours to minimise Peter's significance. But what was given to him, standing—as we never can—in the fleshly presence of the Revealing Event, was a prophetic discernment that made him, like Moses, the rock upon which the Church was built (Cp. Eph. 2:20). For this reason, Jesus took pains, beyond any that he took with the general public, to instruct the Twelve in the mysteries of the Kingdom (St. Mark 4:10 ff.). Most of all, an Apostle had to be an eye-witness of the Resurrection (Acts 1:21 ff.), for this event supplied the divine key to the meaning of the person and work of Jesus. When these men preached the Gospel, their word was prophetic Word of God.¹⁰

5. THE WRITTEN WORD IS WORD OF GOD

... the scripture cannot be broken. John 10:35

It is a revealing fact that the expression *Word of God* is not used in the Bible with reference to writings. Orthodox emphasis upon the Book has reversed the Biblical emphasis upon the living forms of the Word. But wrong conclusions must not be drawn from this fact, for undoubtedly the prophetic word was not thought of as less inspired for being written down. It received rather an enhanced authority thereby. All references to “the Scriptures” imply their divine source and authority.¹¹ The fact that the more living forms of the Word figure more prominently in the Bible arises from the forward-looking character of revelation. Under both dispensations, the people of God lived in a tradition that was moving to a consummation. The letter kills only when it binds a people to ancient loyalties and nothing more. The Word that they had recorded was full of promise. Its divine sanction became all the more indubitable as the holy community “canonized” it. We can see in the New Testament the emergence of the Christian Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16).

10. I Thess. 2:13 *et passim* in NT.

11. II Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20, 3:16.

6. THE WORD OF THE APOSTLES' SUCCESSORS IS WORD OF GOD¹²

How shall they hear without a preacher? Romans 10:14

All the sayings in which the preaching of the Apostles is called Word of God apply in a secondary and dependent way to those who have received the Gospel from them. Christ's promise to his Apostles was surely for their successors also (Matt. 28:19f.). The first ordination by the Apostles brings out this point very well, for the immediate result, we are told, was that "the word of God increased" (Acts 6:7). "Now I," said Luther, "and any man who speaketh Christ's Word may freely boast that his mouth is Christ's mouth. I am certain that my word is not mine but Christ's Word, therefore my mouth must also be His whose Word it speaketh."¹³

7. THE INDWELLING WORD

The idea is used in the New Testament of the Word dwelling in or among Christians and becoming a means of revelation. In Colossians the reference appears to be to prophecy and teaching, accompanied by hymns, and belongs properly to our preceding section (3:16). In Corinthians Christians are regarded as an epistle that can be read by all men (2 Cor. 3:1-3). Jesus summoned his followers to be the light of the world (Matt. 5:13 ff.). Christians are nowhere themselves called the Word of God. The term is naturally restricted to what they say or to the person of the Lord himself. The word *sign* would be the better one to use in this instance. The idea is worth noting, in opposition to those who wish to restrict the notion of witnessing to what Christians say.

Important considerations arise from this analysis, of which we must mention a few.

1. The Scriptural use of the expression *Word of God* and its allied terms is highly complex. We have enumerated above no fewer than nine of them (counting separately the sub-divisions in the second and third sections and ignoring the seventh section). Yet this complexity is by no means arbitrary. Each form is related in an orderly way to the others, according to dogmatic principles that should be clear from the discussion. In the order taken, each form involves or implies preceding forms but not those that come after. In other words, the element of mediation, that is, of accompanying creaturely or non-divine factors, increases with each successive form. A proper doctrine of the Word must give full acknowledgment to the presence of mediation in revelation and also to its entirely creaturely character. "There is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 2:5) is a truth that should not blind us to the other factors in which his mediation is set. The analysis should help us to see how his unique mediatorial office is related to the other media.

12. The question of the sacraments must be omitted on the grounds that our immediate concern is with *Word*, not *sign*, or rather, with the spoken sign.

13. K. Barth, *Doctrine of the Word of God* (E.T.), p. 107.

The falsity of fundamentalism (by which we mean the belief in the verbal inerrancy of Scripture) is in great part its avoidance of the complexity noted. Men want to have a simple notion of the Word and think they can achieve it by a simple identification of the Word with the Bible. The basic error is the tendency to confuse the first form of the Word with the fifth above (the written Word). Few are quite so naive or theologically perverted as to fail to admit the humanity of the Biblical writers, but all the theorizing of fundamentalists—for example, the assumption of an original uncorrupt manuscript—is to enable them to *ignore* the creaturely character of the Bible and to regard it as the voice of God without qualification. In short, they desire, as much as possible, to regard the fifth form as the equivalent of the first. The writer has found this analysis a potent help in delivering “conservative” students from the bondage of literalism.

2. While the Word of God comes to us mediately, and only mediately—how far mysticism is genuinely Christian mysticism depends upon how far it reckons with this fact—it nevertheless comes to us *directly*.¹⁴ Mediacy does not in this connection mean remoteness. In communication among men the body and the senses are not a barrier to personal relations but a vehicle of them. A great part of the effectualness of preaching is due to the fact that the directness with which the preacher addresses us is an analogue as well as a vehicle of God’s own direct address to us. The preacher is a sign that God is speaking by him. Mediacy in revelation must never be thought of in a temporal or spatial way, as if God were at one end and we at the other of a series of objects interposed between us. Every form of the Word is the first and ultimate form, God himself, standing forth directly by his chosen means as the present Living God. There is bad theology in the popular children’s hymn, which says:

*Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.*

The Bible can tell us that Jesus loved Peter, or Zacchaeus, or others of his circle. But it cannot tell me that he loves me. Only the Holy Spirit can do that, taking the things of Christ and revealing them to me.

3. Word and medium must always be distinguished. Grace and the means of grace are not the same thing. The distinction is the primary one between the ultimate Word of God himself and all the creaturely factors by which that Word is revealed. The creaturely factors must never be regarded as themselves divine. Piety can hardly restrain itself from this idolatry, but idolatry it is. St. Paul, one of the greatest writers of Holy Scripture, described himself as an earthen vessel, “that the excellency of the

14. There is much need to regularise terminology at this point. The best word here is *directly*, not *immediately*, which would mean without mediation. Cp. J. Baillie’s awkward expression *mediated immediacy* (*Our Knowledge of God*, pp. 178ff.), and the use of *indirect* in Barth’s *Doctrine of the Word of God* (p. 191). We must start from the fixed usage that Christ is *Mediator*. It follows that for the Christian there can be no *immediate* or *unmediated* knowledge of God. The “I-Thou” relation with God should then be described as *direct*. The term *indirect* might be reserved for inferential knowledge.

power may be of God and not of us" (II Cor. 4:7). But a hymn-writer could not abide this low view of Scripture: "It is the golden casket, where gems of truth are stored."¹⁵

The distinction between Word and means is not a modern one. Paul's saying shows his awareness of it. It shows clearly in expressions used by the Westminster divines. Circumstances did not compel them, as they have compelled us, to explore the implications of the distinction, but it peeps out unmistakeably in their arbitrary use of small and capital "W's" in spelling *word* and *Word*. Their contemporary, Richard Baxter, draws explicit spiritual lessons, though not dogmatic ones, from the distinction: "To have creatures and means without God is an aggravation of our misery. If God should say, 'Take my creatures, my word, my servants, my ordinances, but not myself'; would you take this for happiness? If you had the word of God, and not the Word, which is God; or the bread of the Lord, and not the Lord, Who is the true bread; or could cry with the Jews, 'The temple of the Lord', and had not the Lord of the temple;—this were a poor happiness."¹⁶

Power to make the distinction between grace and means enables us to avoid the sin of idolatry in our theology, to avoid wrong defences of inspiration, and to avoid misunderstanding of the authority on which faith rests. Our certainty of the God who speaks to us in Scripture or by other means must not be turned into a quality of certainty or infallibility in the means. No doubt God can, if he cares, make men infallible. To deny, however, that he made the Scripture-writers infallible is not to restrict his power but to magnify it, according to Paul's principle that the excellence of his power is shown by his using vessels not worthy of their function. It is high time to see that Biblical criticism is not an obstacle to faith but a requirement of it. Lastly, the distinction enables us to say truly where the authority of our faith lies. When asked on what his faith rests, the Protestant is apt to say, "The Bible," and the Roman Catholic is required to say, "The Church." Both answers are examples of looking for something creaturely as a basis for faith, as if that were a more certain basis than God himself. Faith in God is not a human certainty. It is a superhuman one—and all the more certain for that. It cannot be had apart from the creaturely means: outside the Church there is ordinarily no salvation. But the means are not our rest. In other words, the ground of our faith must not be over simply stated. It rests on God himself, by mediation. But the injunction of Baxter must always be kept in mind: "Above all the plagues on this side hell, see that you watch and pray against settling anywhere short of heaven, or reposing your souls on any thing below God."¹⁷

15. W. W. How, *O Word of God incarnate*.

16. *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, 10:2:6. The whole section is valuable on the subject.

17. *Ibid.*, 10:2:7.