



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 9 • Number 4 • Fall 2000

Christ promised his disciples the Holy Spirit, to reveal to them the full truth concerning himself and to enable them to bear witness of it (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13ff.). Thus, in effect, he designated them for a properly prophetic ministry.

JAMES I. PACKER

A glory gilds the sacred page,
Majestic like the sun;
It gives a light to every age,
It gives, but borrows none.

WILLIAM COWPER

Any part of the human body can only be properly explained in reference to the whole body. And any part of the Bible can only be properly explained in reference to the whole Bible.

F. F. BRUCE

I do not venture to make any assertion where Scripture is silent.

JOHN CALVIN

The Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of his holy Word.

JOHN ROBINSON

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "THE WORD OF GOD?"

Tom Wells

The question at the head of this article may seem a little basic for readers of *Reformation & Revival Journal*, but it is of such central importance that we need to be clear about it before tackling other issues. There are a number of things that can be called "the Word of God," so let us see if we can sort them out.

First, I will simply note in passing that God the Son is called in Scripture, "the Word" and "The Word of God" (John 1:1, 14; Revelation 19:13). This title meets English readers as something of a mystery when they first come to the Bible. As a title it had affinities with similar words related to God (or the gods) in middle-eastern culture and among Greek speakers as well. It was the kind of word or phrase that alerted the reader that something "divine" was in the air when it was used.¹ Each religion or culture filled it with its own ideas, and that was true of Christianity also. To find out what it meant, then, we must see how John uses it. When we do that we may say the following: the "Word" refers to God's self-expression in his Son in such a way that the Son is both God and yet does not exhaust God. He has the very nature of God, but the Word can be distinguished from both Father and Spirit.

Second, in its usual sense as speech or writing, the Word of God would include everything that God has ever said at any time and at any place in heaven or in earth. Of most of this we are totally ignorant. Assuming that he

speaks to the elect angels, we know almost nothing of what he has said. The same is true of what he says to Satan and his forces. Yet in both cases what God said/says could certainly be called the Word of God.²

Third, this leads to the important point that for us the Word of God must be limited to what he has revealed to us in the Bible. This is not to deny that God works through our minds and judgments to convey his will. Nor do we deny that we receive impulses that are, in fact, from him. There is, however, an enormously important distinction to be made when we compare his activity within us to his written revelation. *We are sure that his Word is inerrant; we have no such assurance concerning our minds, our judgments, or our impulses.* Only the Bible, properly interpreted, provides certainty.

With these facts as a backdrop for our discussion let us sharpen our focus a bit with a question: What is it about the Bible that can be properly called the Word of God?

THE BIBLE AND ITS WORDS

For many the answer to this question is easy. The Word of God and the words of the Bible are the same thing. But that answer simply moves us to ask, "Which words?" There are a multitude of Bible translations and their words do not agree. Which translation, then, contains the right words? Is it the New International Version, the New King James Version, the New Revised Standard Version, or some other? You see the problem: If the words and the Word are identical, then which set of words must we choose?

A frequent answer to this question and, in one sense a profoundly true answer, is this: The original Hebrew and Greek words make up the Word of God. The difficulty with this answer is obvious to most of us. The typical Christian does not read Greek and Hebrew. What about him or her? Even if he did, how could he convey the Word of God to others who had not learned the languages? Must a man or

a woman become a linguist in order to be saved—salvation by academic achievement? That might be a gospel for a handful of scholars, but not for the rest of us! Clearly we are on the wrong track here.

I said above, however, that there is a profoundly true sense in which the Hebrew and Greek words make up the Word of God. What I meant was this. Those words (along with some Aramaic in the Old Testament) are the words inspired by God. That is tremendously important, yet even that is subject to easy misunderstanding. To see what I mean, step back from the words for a moment and think instead of the *content* of those words, the points they convey. Suppose that is the focus of the doctrine of inspiration—what then?

Let me tell you a story that will illustrate what I mean. Some years ago a man visited the church where I am a pastor. He told me that he had previously visited a nearby church and asked what they knew about our church. The pastor said that he didn't know a whole lot about us, but he knew that we didn't preach the Word of God! (Talk about an awesome indictment! It tempts me to turn aside and tell you not to ask one church about another. But I refrain!)

You may have guessed by now that the other pastor was not happy with our choice of translations. It appears that he thought the words of the King James Version were inspired and the words of other translations were not. Perhaps he was right and I was wrong. At least some people think this is worth arguing about. The fact is, however, I might have turned his own argument against him. We could not have settled the question of which translation was the inspired Word of God. That would have been too tough for fellows like us. But I could have pointed out that if we must use inspired words in our preaching, the only way he could meet his own criterion would be for him to recite the King James Version and add absolutely no words

of his own when he preached. Otherwise he would have been just like me—preaching something other than the Word of God! If the words and the Word of God are the same things, then recitation is the only way to “preach” the Word of God. Is that what he did? I suspect not.

The answer to our problem lies in this fact: we are not primarily interested in the words themselves but in their *content*, the truth they contain. Notice the word “primarily” in the previous sentence. Let me tell you why it is important. The words in the original languages were there to convey content or truth. If you and I know and embrace that truth, then we know and embrace God’s Word. It makes no difference whatsoever what words were used to convey it to us and it makes no difference what words we use to convey it to others. If the words we use accurately convey the content of Scripture, that is all that is necessary. *The content is the Word of God.* That is why the phrase “the Word of God” is sometimes replaced by the word “truth.”³ The focus in both cases is on content and not words.

What about the original words, then? They act as a standard against which everything that claims to be the Word of God must be measured. It is not necessary that you and I be able to apply that standard ourselves, that is, to read the original languages. I feel confident in saying that any of the committee versions (if you ignore their footnotes!) adequately convey the Word of God, that is, the truths contained in the original manuscripts.⁴ Our conclusion for this section is as follows: those who use the committee versions of the Bible have little to worry about in following their lead. They have in their hands the Word of God.

THE RELATION OF WORDS AND MEANINGS

But we are not yet done.

The other basic point that you must grasp is this: generally speaking individual words have no meanings, or rather,

they have so many meanings that you cannot glance at them and know what they mean. Take the word “cut,” for example. What does it mean? The dictionary at my desk—by no means an exhaustive dictionary—gives 92 definitions for the word “cut.”⁵ What conclusion shall we draw from this? Communication is impossible? Not at all! (If it were, you would have stopped reading this article long before now.)

The proper conclusion is this: Words in groups have meanings. Context (phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, books)—context determines what a word means. We understand this instinctively. I listed in the previous sentence some things that constitute context, but I could easily add to that list. For example, social context is very important. “Murder the bums!” means one thing at a baseball game and something entirely different in gang warfare. Is all this overwhelming? Not really. We do not often think about it, but subconsciously we sort out these kinds of things every day. And we usually get them right.

As Bible students, however, we need to pursue this matter of meaning and context further. For some years we have insisted upon what is called “verbal inspiration,” a phrase that is accurate enough in a way but is often both ridiculed and misunderstood. Those who have ridiculed it have often said something like this: the thoughts of the Bible were inspired but not the words. For years this passed as a plausible criticism of verbal inspiration in some circles, but of course it was nothing of the kind. If we speak of the inspiration of the Bible at all, we have to be speaking of its words. A typical Bible is made up of ink and paper combined in such a way as to give us words and sentences. Can we speak of the inspiration of the ink or paper? Not if we want anyone to take us seriously! What is left? The words (and the sentences they form). If the Bible is inspired it is the words that are inspired. The only access we have to the thoughts of the writers and of God are the words. Inspira-

tion, if it exists at all, is bound to be *verbal*.

This, I think, is universally recognized these days. No one could accuse the liberal theologian, James Barr, of conservative bias, so we will let him make the point for us:

[The Bible's] linguistic form, far from being something anti-thetical to its "real meaning," is the means by which the meaning is conveyed; it is the criterion by which we test all interpretations which claim to state the meaning. The basic principle of interpretation is: why was it said in this way, and not in some other way? The linguistic form of the text is not a jumble of dead symbols from which by some process of decipherment meaning has to be extracted; it is the expression of meaning. . . . This being so . . . we no longer have any good reason to be shy about including a reference to the verbal form of the Bible in any assertions we make about its status as a whole. . . . What we know about the authors, the ideas, the inner theology and so on is known ultimately from the verbal form of the Bible.⁶

This truth, however, has led to distortion and misunderstanding in another way. It has led Bible-believers to put undue stress on its words individually rather than as parts of sentences and the larger context. Many a Bible study and sermon has been made up primarily of word studies. Of course we who preach and teach must know the meanings of the words in the Bible, but we must also recognize that when we have looked up those words in a dictionary we have simply learned what they *may mean* in their context, not what they *do mean*. If they are to be experienced as the Word of God and not simply as words, we must understand them as sentences and paragraphs, etc. To put it another way, the Word of God is found in the combinations of words the Bible contains. The Word of God is the content and the truth conveyed by those combinations. Concentrating on individual words distorts the meaning of

Scripture and keeps us from understanding it. On the other hand, recognition of this fact works for the good of all of us who read the text. Let me show you how.

In Luke 20:10 the word "produce" appears. (Humor me here and pronounce the word "produce" to yourself right now.) If we consult our dictionary it will, in effect, ask us whether we want to know the meaning of the noun or the verb. Without the verse in front of you, however, you probably don't know which it is. But if you said it to yourself a moment ago when I asked you to, you made up your mind without any evidence! If you pronounced it with emphasis on the first syllable ("pro-") you unconsciously opted for the noun which often means something like "farm products." If you pronounced it with emphasis on the second syllable ("-duce") you unconsciously opted for the verb that often means "to manufacture" or "to make." See how helpless you are without a context? That is the way we all are if we treat words as isolated entities. In that case we need an enormous amount of help.

But the situation changes dramatically when we add the surrounding words. Even a single sentence makes an enormous difference. Here is the sentence that the word "produce" appears in. "When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed." That's much better! Depending on how familiar you are with the Bible a great deal more context may flood your mind. In fact, a whole parable and much of its meaning may already have come to mind as you read this.

Let me try to show you the significance of this little exercise that you have just gone through. It has often worried me that there seem to be so many layers of "experts" or scholars that fall between me and the meaning of the text. After all, wasn't the Bible written for ordinary people in

ordinary jobs faced with the ordinary difficulties of life? Surely the answer is yes; that was exactly God's intention in giving it to us, to make it accessible to all kinds of people. And here is the point: contextual reading of the Scripture makes its major points accessible—humanly speaking—to all kinds of men, women, and children once they have it in their own language. The more you read, the more you will learn.

Does that mean we do not need the "experts" at all? Not quite. Language groups without the Scriptures are still at an immense handicap; they need linguists and preachers very badly indeed. This ought to remind us, however, that ultimately the understanding and embracing of Scripture depends on the work of God. Do you remember the words of the Lord Jesus when he spoke of the "harvest," that is, the progress of Christian work, as having a Lord who controls it for his purposes (Matthew 9:38)? That means that whether any person hears it or not depends on God. It also means that once a man or woman has heard it, whether they understand it or not also depends on the work of God. We need him to send us his Word through his agents, but for most of us in the western world he has already done that. We also need his Spirit to make us to understand what we read, but believers have the Spirit of God (Romans 8:9). Beyond that our scholars and pastors can help us greatly. None of us is self-sufficient. God has made us, however, capable of learning the Scriptures for ourselves if we will concentrate primarily on portions much larger than single words.

SUMMING UP

I have tried in this article to bring home to you two major points. First, the phrase "the Word of God" is used in two distinct ways in Scripture. In a few cases it is a name or title given to the second person of the Trinity, God the Son.

Its major use, however, is as a description of the Bible itself. We may say with full conviction, "the Bible is the Word of God." When the Lord Jesus met Satan in the wilderness, Jesus said, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). We see what he meant by this when we note that he was quoting Scripture when he said this (Deuteronomy 8:3). Beyond that, he followed each of Satan's temptations by quoting more Scripture that applied to himself. "The Word" and the Scripture proved to be the same thing in this case.

Second, we learned that the Word of God is the truth or the content contained in Scripture. That does not mean that the words are unimportant, not at all! It does mean, however, that if we focus on larger units like sentences and paragraphs we will learn what Scripture means more rapidly and with less likelihood of distortion. It is the context and the combinations of words that convey the truths that God wants us to take in. Occasionally we will run across a word that needs attention on its own because it is unfamiliar to us or because it is used in some technical sense. But that is unusual because the Scriptures were written for ordinary people and because excellent translations in our own language are available to us.

Christians, then, must take heart as they face the text of Scripture. Every once in a while we become discouraged when we listen to a pastor or scholar explain one word or a small phrase from "the original." It seems we have to be linguists after all to grasp God's Word! But keep this in mind: however true the scholar's explanation of that small part is, the great themes of Scripture are open to all. That means, assuming you are a believer with the Spirit of God, they are open to you. You must not despise the learning of others. Listen to them and learn. But do not be intimidated. Scripture belongs to all of God's people. If you are one of those, it is yours to read and to know.

Author

Tom Wells is one of the pastors of The King's Chapel, West Chester, Ohio. He is the author of numerous books, including *Come to Me, Come Home Forever, God is King, Christian: Take Heart, A Price for a People, A Vision for Missions*, and *Faith: The Gift of God*. He is a regular contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. For discussions of the origin of the phrase see the standard commentaries, especially, George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987), 6-11, and D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991), 114-17.
2. We are not even certain how God conveys his will to spirit beings, but it seems likely that the idea contained in the word "speech" is suitable here, much as it was in Genesis 1:3: "Then God said, 'Let there be light.'"
3. See for example John 8:32, 45 where Jesus speaks the Word of God and describes it as truth. See also John 17:7, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."
4. This statement, of course, begs another set of questions about textual and translation theory that we simply cannot pursue in a short article. Most scholars, I think, would agree about most of our committee translations, though some might question the orthodoxy of the producers of a few of them.
5. For the statistically minded, here is the breakdown: (1) Thirty-two meanings simply as a verb; (2) twenty-three in idioms that contain the verb; (3) eighteen meanings as a noun; (4) one meaning in an idiom that contains the noun; (5) sixteen meanings as an adjective, and (6) two meanings in idioms that contain the adjective. (No, I do not guarantee that I counted perfectly!)
6. James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 178. From the same page scholars will enjoy Barr's equally forthright defense of the importance of the Hebrew vowel points. Barr rejects anything like inspiration in any sense that would appeal to conservatives, but he recognizes that *if* the subject is to be discussed, the discussion must center on the words and letters, including the vowel points.

Hold one single sentence out of God's Word to be of more certainty and of more power than all the discoveries of all the learned men of all the ages.

CHARLES H. SPURGEON

The written revelation of [Holy Scripture] is very much a matter of past history. Does this mean that for nineteen centuries now God has not been speaking to man at all? No, it does not mean that. It is true that since the apostolic age God has said nothing new to men, for he has in fact no more to say to us than he said then. But it is also true that God has not ceased to speak to man all that he said then. Mr. Gladstone is not still saying what he said to the nation a hundred years ago, for Mr. Gladstone is dead: but the living God is still saying to mankind what he said in and through his Son nineteen centuries ago. Which means that when we read, or hear read or expounded, the biblical record of what God said in Old or New Testament times, we are as truly confronted by a word of revelation addressed by God to us, and demanding a response from us, as were the Jewish congregations who listened to Jeremiah or Ezekiel, or Peter, or Christ, or the Gentile congregations who listened to the sermons of the apostle Paul.

JAMES I. PACKER