

THE THREEFOLD WORD OF GOD

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PETER ENSOR UNPACKS SOME USES OF THE PHRASE 'THE WORD OF GOD' IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

I remember a visit John Stott made many years ago to the Theological College at which I was teaching in Kenya. In his address to the student community he said that he would begin by making a scientific experiment. This immediately aroused the students' interest, of course, because they were expecting a sermon rather than a scientific experiment, but then Stott went on to explain what he was going to do. He was going to ask everyone to remain silent for a minute while he was thinking about something, and then, when the minute ended, he would ask them to tell him what he had been thinking. So we had the minute's silence, but when he asked the students to tell him what he had been thinking during that minute, unsurprisingly they were not able to do so.

The whole point of the scientific experiment was to show that we cannot know what another person is thinking unless they tell us. Stott then applied that point to God: we cannot know what God is thinking unless he chooses to tell us and, by extension, we cannot know God himself as a person unless he chooses to reveal himself to us. The point was well made.

One of the characteristics of our faith as evangelical Christians is that we believe that God has in fact revealed himself. He has made himself known to his human

creation. He has spoken to us by means of his 'words' and in the process has told us what he thinks about a whole range of matters. Moreover we believe that he has done so, and is continuing to do so, in at least three main ways:

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH JESUS

John's Gospel begins with the words: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God' (1:1). What or who was this 'Word'? The answer is clear from the context, where we read that 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father ... who has made him known' (John 1.14, 18). The 'Word' is the self-revelation of God which was embodied in Jesus. John is telling us that it is by considering Jesus, his life, teaching, and example, that we may gain an understanding of what God is like. Jesus is God's incarnate 'Word'.

This understanding of Jesus is echoed throughout the New Testament as a whole. When Philip says 'Show us the Father' in John 14:8, Jesus replies by saying 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). To the Jews in John 7:16 he says 'my teaching is not mine but his who sent me'. Paul says that Jesus 'is the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:16), and that God has 'shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6), while the writer to the Hebrews writes that Jesus 'reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature' (Hebrews 1.3). This consistent

understanding of the person of Jesus held by the early Christians is well expressed in the modern description of Jesus as 'the human face of God'.

In evangelical belief, therefore, someone who wants to know God should look first at Jesus, whose divine claims were supremely vindicated by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4). But how can we 'look at' one who left this earthly scene almost 2000 years ago? The answer to this question brings us to the second form of God's self-revelation: Scripture.

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH SCRIPTURE

Evangelical Christians believe that God has spoken not only through Jesus, but also through Scripture, which bears a reliable witness to him as well as to the religious world of the Old Testament which gives meaning to his recorded ministry. Scripture is God's written 'word'.

In relation to the Old Testament, belief in its status as God's written 'word' rests primarily in the fact that both Jesus and the early Christians accepted it as such (see, for example, Mark 12:24, 28-31, 36, 14:27, 49, Luke 22:37, 24:27, John 5:46, Acts 1:16, 4:25, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Hebrews 3:7-11, 2 Peter 1:20-21). Moreover, references to God's 'word' in Psalm 119 and Mark 7:13 provide examples of the word 'word' being used of God's written revelation in the Old Testament, as distinct from other forms of revelation.

The New Testament's status as God's written word obviously cannot be

supported in the same way since the New Testament canon as we have it today was not formed until well after the apostolic period and none of its writers were aware of the fact that what they or others were writing would become part of what we now call the New Testament. Nevertheless, the early church's decision to put the New Testament alongside the Old Testament as the second half of the canon of Scripture may be justified in the light of the following five considerations:

(i) If God inspired the Old Testament, as Jesus clearly believed he did, and if the Old Testament is a record of God's unfolding plan of salvation in the period prior to Jesus' coming, as Jesus again clearly believed to be the case, then it is antecedently likely that God would have similarly inspired a body of literature which would bear witness to the continuation and climax of his plan of salvation in Jesus himself.

(ii) Jesus himself taught and trained his disciples carefully for three years, and commissioned them to preach his message to others. They were called to be his personal agents, charged with authority to share the good news with others. 'He who hears you hears me,' he said, 'and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me' (Luke 10:16). According to the witness of all the Gospels, Jesus, after his resurrection, also sent his disciples into the whole world for the same purpose (Matthew 28:19ff, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, John 20:21, Acts 1:8).

(iii) When the apostles spoke in Jesus' name, they spoke with authority, as the book of Acts abundantly testifies (Acts 2:14-36, 3:12-26, 4:8-13, 31, 33, 5:29-32, 9:20-22, 28, 10:34-43, 13:16-47, 14:15-17, 17:22-31), and when they (or their associates) wrote, they wrote with confidence that what they were writing was true and/or God-given (cf. Luke 1:1-4, John 21:24, 1 Corinthians 2:13-16, 14:37ff, 2 Corinthians 13:3, Galatians 1:9, 12, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 4:2, Revelation 1:3, 2:1-3.22, 22:18ff).

(iv) The early church acknowledged the writings of the New Testament as bearing apostolic authority, whether written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle. Even within the New Testament itself there is evidence that Matthew's Gospel and Paul's writings were already being considered as 'Scripture' on the same level as the Old Testament (compare 1 Timothy 5.18 with Matthew 10.10, and see 2 Peter 3.16), and some writings were clearly intended to be

read in the context of Christian worship (Colossians 4.16, Revelation 1.3). By the end of the 4th century, the Early Church was virtually unanimous concerning which books should be included in the New Testament, and its decision has since stood the test of time.

(v) Finally, theologians appeal to the experience of what is called the 'internal witness of the Holy Spirit' in the hearts of believers. The Bible has a way of speaking to people like no other book. It possesses a supernatural quality, which is capable of convicting people of their sins, and leading them to put their trust in Jesus as Saviour. Countless numbers of people have been converted simply through reading the Bible, and countless others, have found God speaking to them through the Bible to guide, encourage, and strengthen them in their daily walk with him.

Taken cumulatively these arguments present a good case for affirming the traditional view that the canon of Scripture as a whole is God's inspired and authoritative 'word'. This is, of course, a position of faith, but it is also a reasonable one to adopt in the light of the above considerations, and it is the position which the universal Church has held for most of its history.

There are many texts in the New Testament which refer to Christian preaching as 'the word of God' or 'the word of the Lord' (e.g. Acts 4:31, 6:2, 8:25, 11:1, 13:5, 7, 44, 46, 49, 15:35f, 16:32, 18:11, 19:10, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 2 Thessalonians 3:1, Hebrews 4:12, 13.7). This brings us to a third way in which God reveals himself. Preaching is God's spoken 'word', or, to put it more fully in the words of Bernard Manning, it is 'the manifestation of the incarnate word from the written word through the spoken word'.

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH CHRISTIAN PREACHING

We may compare this mode of revelation with the phenomenon of prophecy, which is prominent in both testaments, whereby chosen individuals are given a special ability to communicate God's message to his people under the inspiration of his Spirit. 'Preaching the Word of God' probably refers primarily to prepared messages with a strong didactic element, whereas 'Prophesying' probably refers primarily to utterances of encouragement or warning delivered to a specific audience under the immediate inspiration of the Spirit, but both refer to God-given communication of one kind or another.

Whatever its mode, content, or audience, it needs to be stressed that any purported message from God delivered by a believer should not be received as such without due scrutiny. Thus Luke implicitly commends the Bereans for 'examining the Scriptures' to see whether what Paul was saying (presumably about the Old Testament) was true (Acts 17:11). Paul says that any 'prophecies' uttered in a church meeting should be 'weighed', i.e. evaluated (1 Corinthians 14:29) by those present, and exhorts Timothy to guard the gospel which had been entrusted to him (1 Timothy 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:13f), as though it was possible for him to deviate from it. More generally, he tells the Thessalonians to 'test everything' and 'hold fast to what is good' (1 Thessalonians 5.21). The New Testament recognizes the presence of false teachers in the Church who pervert the true gospel, which is why Jude urges his readers to 'contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (i.e. to God's people, Jude 4). This warning is just as relevant now as it was in the 1st century.

The message is clear: our preaching today is a channel of divine communication only insofar as it coheres with the message of the Bible, and in particular the teaching of Jesus and his apostles, which for us today is accessed most reliably in the writings of the New Testament. Anything which contradicts these sources should be guarded against if we are to remain faithful to God's self-revelation.

In summary, we are called to know God primarily by attending to his self-revelation, in Jesus, Scripture, and the faithful preaching of the gospel, and having thus come to know him, we are called to make him known to others.

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