Chapter 2

The Word of God

What are the different forms of the Word of God?

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

What is meant by the phrase "the Word of God"? Actually, there are several different meanings taken by this phrase in the Bible. It is helpful to distinguish these different senses clearly at the beginning of this study.

A. "The Word of God" as a Person: Jesus Christ

Sometimes the Bible refers to the Son of God as "the Word of God." In Revelation 19:13, John sees the risen Lord Jesus in heaven and says, "The name by which he is called is The Word of God." Similarly, in the beginning of John's gospel we read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). It is clear that John is speaking of the Son of God here, because in verse 14 he says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." These verses (and perhaps 1 John 1:1) are the only instances where the Bible refers to God the Son as "the Word" or "the Word of God," so this usage is not common. But it does indicate that among the members of the Trinity it is especially God the Son who in his person as well as in his words has the role of communicating the character of God to us and of expressing the will of God for us.

B. "The Word of God" as Speech by God

1. God's Decrees. Sometimes God's words take the form of powerful decrees that cause events to happen or even cause things to come into being. "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). God even created the animal world by speaking his powerful word: "And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.' And it was so" (Gen. 1:24). Thus, the psalmist can say, "*By the word of the Lord* the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Ps. 33:6).

These powerful, creative words from God are often called God's decrees. A *decree* of God is a word of God that causes something to happen. These decrees of

God include not only the events of the original creation but also the continuing existence of all things, for Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Christ is continually "upholding the universe by his word of power."

2. God's Words of Personal Address. God sometimes communicates with people on earth by speaking directly to them. These can be called instances of God's Word of *personal address*. Examples are found throughout Scripture. At the very beginning of creation God speaks to Adam: "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die'" (Gen. 2:16–17). After the sin of Adam and Eve, God still comes and speaks directly and personally to them in the words of the curse (Gen. 3:16–19). Another prominent example of God's direct personal address to people on earth is found in the giving of the Ten Commandments: "And *God spoke all these words,* saying, 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me . . .'" (Ex. 20:1–3). In the New Testament, at Jesus' baptism, God the Father spoke with a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17).

In these and several other instances where God spoke words of personal address to individual people it was clear to the hearers that these were the actual words of God: they were hearing God's very voice, and they were therefore hearing words that had absolute divine authority and that were absolutely trustworthy. To disbelieve or disobey any of these words would have been to disbelieve or disobey God and therefore would have been sin.

Though the words of God's personal address are always seen in Scripture to be the actual words of God, they are *also "human" words* in that they are spoken in ordinary human language that is immediately understandable. The fact that these words are spoken in human language does not limit their divine character or authority in any way: they are still entirely the words of God, spoken by the voice of God himself.

Some theologians have argued that since human language is always in some sense "imperfect," any message that God addresses to us in human language must also be limited in its authority or truthfulness. But these passages and many others that record instances of God's words of personal address to individuals give no indication of any limitation of the authority or truthfulness of God's words when they are spoken in human language. Quite the contrary is true, for the words always place an absolute obligation upon the hearers to believe them and to obey them fully. To disbelieve or disobey any part of them is to disbelieve or disobey God himself.

3. God's Words as Speech Through Human Lips. Frequently in Scripture God raises up prophets through whom he speaks. Once again, it is evident that although these are human words, spoken in ordinary human language by ordinary human beings, the authority and truthfulness of these words is in no way diminished: they are still completely God's words as well.

In Deuteronomy 18, God says to Moses:

> I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and *I will put my words in his mouth,* and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die. (Deut. 18:18–20)

God made a similar statement to Jeremiah: "Then the LORD put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, 'Behold, *I have put my words in your mouth*'" (Jer. 1:9). God tells Jeremiah, "Whatever I command you you shall speak" (Jer. 1:7; see also Ex. 4:12; Num. 22:38; 1 Sam. 15:3, 18, 23; 1 Kings 20:36; 2 Chron. 20:20; 25:15–16; Isa. 30:12–14; Jer. 6:10–12; 36:29–31; et al.). Anyone who claimed to be speaking for the Lord but who had not received a message from him was severely punished (Ezek. 13:1–7; Deut. 18:20–22).

Thus God's words spoken through human lips were considered to be just as authoritative and just as true as God's words of personal address. There was no diminishing of the authority of these words when they were spoken through human lips. To disbelieve or disobey any of them was to disbelieve or disobey God himself.

4. God's Words in Written Form (the Bible). In addition to God's words of decree, God's words of personal address, and God's words spoken through the lips of human beings, we also find in Scripture several instances where God's words were put in *written form.* The first of these is found in the narrative of the giving of the two tablets of stone on which were written the Ten Commandments: "And he gave to Moses, when he had made an end of speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone, *written with the finger of God*" (Ex. 31:18). "And the tables were the work of God, and *the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables*" (Ex. 32:16; 34:1, 28).

Further writing was done by Moses:

> *And Moses wrote this law,* and gave it to the priests the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, "At the end of every seven years . . . you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing . . . that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God. . . ." (Deut. 31:9–13)

This book which Moses wrote was then deposited by the side of the ark of the covenant: "When Moses had finished *writing the words of this law in a book,* to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, 'Take this book of the law, and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, that it may be there for a witness against you'" (Deut. 31:24–26).

Further additions were made to this book of God's words. "And *Joshua wrote these words* in the book of the law of God" (Josh. 24:26). God commanded Isaiah, "And now, go, *write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book,* that it may be for the time to come as a witness for ever" (Isa. 30:8). Once again, God said to Jeremiah, "*Write in a book* all the words that I have spoken to you" (Jer. 30:2; cf.

Jer. 36:2–4, 27–31; 51:60). In the New Testament, Jesus promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance the words which he, Jesus, had spoken (John 14:26; cf. 16:12–13). Paul can say that the very words he writes to the Corinthians are "a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37; cf. 2 Peter 3:2).

Once again it must be noted that these words are still considered to be God's own words, even though they are written down mostly by human beings and always in human language. Still, they are absolutely authoritative and absolutely true: to disobey them or disbelieve them is a serious sin and brings judgment from God (1 Cor. 14:37; Jer. 36:29–31).

Several benefits come from the writing down of God's words. First, there is a much *more accurate preservation* of God's words for subsequent generations. To depend on memory and the repeating of oral tradition is a less reliable method of preserving these words throughout history than is their recording in writing (cf. Deut. 31:12–13). Second, the *opportunity for repeated inspection* of words that are written down permits careful study and discussion, which leads to better understanding and more complete obedience. Third, God's words in writing are *accessible to many more people* than they are when preserved merely through memory and oral repetition. They can be inspected at any time by any person and are not limited in accessibility to those who have memorized them or those who are able to be present when they are recited orally. Thus, the reliability, permanence, and accessibility of the form in which God's words are preserved are all greatly enhanced when they are written down. Yet there is no indication that their authority or truthfulness is diminished.

C. The Focus of Our Study

Of all the forms of the Word of God,[1] the focus of our study in systematic theology is God's Word in written form, that is, the Bible. This is the form of God's Word that is available for study, for public inspection, for repeated examination, and as a basis for mutual discussion. It tells us about and points us to the Word of God as a person, namely Jesus Christ, whom we do not now have present in bodily form on earth. Thus, we are no longer able to observe and imitate his life and teachings firsthand.

The other forms of the Word of God are not suitable as the primary basis for the study of theology. We do not hear God's words of decree and thus cannot study them directly but only through observation of their effects. God's words of personal address are uncommon, even in Scripture. Furthermore, even if we did hear some words of personal address from God to ourselves today, we would not have certainty that our understanding of it, our memory of it, and our subsequent report of it was wholly accurate. Nor would we be readily able to convey to others

[1]In addition to the forms of God's Word mentioned above, God communicates to people through different types of "general revelation"—that is, revelation that is given not just to certain people but to all people generally. General revelation includes both the revelation of God that comes through nature (see Ps. 19:1–6; Acts 14:17) and the revelation of God that comes through the inner sense of right and wrong in every person's heart (Rom. 2:15). These kinds of revelation are nonverbal in form, and I have not included them in the list of various forms of the Word of God discussed in this chapter. (See chapter 7, pp. 122–24, for further discussion of general revelation.)

the certainty that the communication was from God, even if it was. God's words as spoken through human lips ceased to be given when the New Testament canon was completed.[2] Thus, these other forms of God's words are inadequate as a primary basis for study in theology.

It is most profitable for us to study God's words as written in the Bible. It is God's written Word that he commands us to study. The man is "blessed" who "meditates" on God's law "day and night" (Ps. 1:1–2). God's words to Joshua are also applicable to us: "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but *you shall meditate on it day and night,* that you may be careful to do all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success" (Josh. 1:8). It is the Word of God in the form of written Scripture that is "God-breathed" and "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16 NIV).

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Do you think you would pay more attention if God spoke to you from heaven or through the voice of a living prophet than if he spoke to you from the written words of Scripture? Would you believe or obey such words more readily than you do Scripture? Do you think your present level of response to the written words of Scripture is an appropriate one? What positive steps can you take to make your attitude toward Scripture more like the kind of attitude God wants you to have?
2. When you think about the many ways in which God speaks and the frequency with which God communicates with his creatures through these means, what conclusions might you draw concerning the nature of God and the things that bring delight to him?

SPECIAL TERMS

decree
personal address
Word of God

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(For an explanation of this bibliography see the note on the bibliography to chapter 1, p. 38. Complete bibliographical data may be found on pp. 1223–29.) The subject of this chapter has not been treated explicitly in many systematic theologies, but similar material is often covered in the section on the authority of the Word of God: see the bibliography at the end of chapter 4 for that subject.

Sections in Evangelical Systematic Theologies

1. Anglican (Episcopalian)
   1882–92 Litton, 9–10

[2]See chapter 3, pp. 54–72, on the canon of Scripture, and, for a discussion of the nature of contemporary Christian prophecy, see chapter 53, pp. 1049–61.

2. Arminian (Wesleyan or Methodist)
   1940 Wiley, 1:124–65
3. Baptist
   1917 Mullins, 137–53
6. Reformed (or Presbyterian)
   1861 Heppe, 12–21
   1889 Shedd, 1:61–70

Sections in Representative Roman Catholic Systematic Theologies

No explicit treatment.

Other Works

Kline, Meredith. *The Structure of Biblical Authority*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972.
Kuyper, Abraham. *Principles of Sacred Theology*. Trans. by J. H. de Vries. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968, pp. 405–12 (originally published as *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* in 1898).
McDonald, H. D. *Theories of Revelation: An Historical Study, 1860–1960*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979.
_____. "Word, Word of God, Word of the Lord." In *EDT*, pp. 1185–88.
Packer, J. I. "Scripture." In *NDT*, pp. 585–87.
Pinnock, C. H. "Revelation." In *NDT*, pp. 585–87.
Vos, Geerhardus. *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948, pp. 28–55; 321–27.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY PASSAGE

Ps. 1:1–2: *Blessed is the man*
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

HYMN

"Break Thou the Bread of Life"

This hymn is a prayer asking the Lord to give us not physical bread but spiritual nourishment from the "bread of life," a metaphor referring both to the written Word of God ("the sacred page," v. 1) and to Christ himself, the "Living Word" (see vv. 1, 3).

Break thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,
As thou didst break the loaves beside the sea;
Throughout the sacred page I seek thee, Lord,
My spirit pants for thee, O Living Word.

Bless thou the truth, dear Lord, to me, to me,
As thou didst bless the bread by Galilee;
Then shall all bondage cease, all fetters fall;
And I shall find my peace, my all in all.

Thou art the bread of life, O Lord, to me,
Thy holy Word the truth that saveth me;
Give me to eat and live with thee above;
Teach me to love thy truth, for thou art love.

O send thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me,
That he may touch mine eyes, and make me see:
Show me the truth concealed within thy Word,
And in thy Book revealed I see the Lord.

AUTHOR: MARY A. LATHBURY, 1877