

The Doctrine of the Word of God

(Preliminary Draft, 1st Edition)

Part One: Orientation The Personal Word Model

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In Memory of
Edmund P. Clowney
(1917-2005)

Table of Contents

Preface
Abbreviations of Frequently Cited Titles

Part One: Orientation

1. The Personal Word Model
2. Lordship and the Word

Part Two: God's Word in Modern Theology

3. Modern Views of Revelation
4. Revelation and Reason
5. Revelation and History
6. Revelation and Human Subjectivity
7. Revelation and God Himself

Part Three: The Nature of God's Word

8. What is the Word of God?
9. God's Word as His Controlling Power
10. God's Word as His Meaningful Authority
11. God's Word as His Personal Presence

Part Four: The Media of God's Word

12. The Media of God's Word
13. God's Revelation Through Events

14. God's Revelation Through Words: the Divine Voice
15. God's Revelation Through Words: Prophets and Apostles
16. The Permanence of God's Written Word
17. God's Written Words in the Old Testament
18. Respect for God's Written Words in the Old Testament
19. Jesus' View of the Old Testament
20. The Apostles' View of the Old Testament
21. The New Testament as God's Written Words
22. The Canon of Scripture
23. The Inspiration of Scripture
24. The Content of Scripture
25. Scripture's Authority, its Content and its Purpose
26. The Inerrancy of Scripture
27. The Phenomena of Scripture
28. Bible Problems
29. The Clarity of Scripture
30. The Necessity of Scripture
31. The Comprehensiveness of Scripture
32. The Sufficiency of Scripture
33. The Transmission of Scripture
34. Translations and Editions of Scripture
35. Teaching and Preaching
36. The Sacraments
37. Theology
38. Confessions, Creeds, Traditions
39. The Human Reception of Scripture
40. The Interpretation of Scripture
41. Assurance
42. Person-revelation: The Divine Witness
43. Human Beings as Revelation
44. Writing on the Heart
45. Summary and Organizational Reflections
46. Epilogue

Part One: Orientation

1. The Personal Word Model

The main contention of this volume is that God's speech to man is realistic. It is very much like one person speaking to another. He speaks so that we can understand him and respond appropriately. Appropriate responses are of many kinds: belief, obedience, affection, repentance, laughter, pain, sadness, and so on. God's speech is often propositional: God conveying information to us. But it is far more than that. It includes all the features, functions, beauty and richness of language that we see in human communication, and more. So the concept I wish to defend is more than the "propositional revelation" we argued so ardently forty years ago, though propositional revelation is part of it. My thesis is that God's word, in all its qualities and aspects, is a personal communication from him to us.

Now imagine God speaking to you right now, as realistically as you can imagine, perhaps standing at the foot of your bed at night. He speaks to you like your best friend, your parents, or your spouse. There is no question in your mind as to who he is: he is God. In the Bible, God often spoke to people in this way: to Adam and Eve in the Garden; to Noah; to Abraham; to Moses. For some reason, these were all fully persuaded that the speaker was God, even when the speaker told them to do things they didn't understand. Had God asked me to take my son up a mountain to burn him as a sacrifice, as Abraham in Gen. 22, I would have decided it wasn't God and could not be God, because God could never command such a thing. But somehow Abraham didn't raise that question. He knew, somehow, that God had spoken to him, and he knew what God expected him to do. We question Abraham at this point, as did Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*.¹ But if God is God, if God is who he claims to be, isn't it likely that he is able to persuade Abraham that the speaker is really he? Isn't he able unambiguously to identify himself to Abraham's mind?

Now imagine that when God speaks to you personally he gives you some information, or commands you to do something. Will you then be inclined to argue with him? Will you criticize what he says? Will you find something inadequate in his knowledge or in the rightness of his commands? I hope not. For that is the path to disaster. When God speaks, our role is to believe, obey, delight, repent, mourn—whatever he wants us to do. Our response should be without reservation, from the heart. Once we understand, we must not hesitate. We may at times find occasion to criticize one another's words; but God's words are not the subject of criticism.

¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; The Sickness Unto Death* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1941, 1955).

God's personal speech is not an unusual occurrence in Scripture. In fact, it is the main engine propelling the biblical narrative forward. The thing at issue in the biblical story is always the word of God. God speaks to Adam and Eve in the Garden to define their fundamental task (Gen. 1:28). All of human history is our response to that word of God. God speaks to Adam again, forbidding him to eat the forbidden fruit (2:17). That word is the issue before the first couple. If they obey, God will continue to bless. If they don't, he will curse. The narrative permits no question as to whether the couple knew it was God who spoke. Nor does it allow the possibility that they did not know what he was saying. God had given them a personal word, pure and simple. Their responsibility was clear.

This is what we mean when we say that God's word is "authoritative." The "authority" of God's word varies broadly according to the many functions I have listed. When God communicates information, we are obligated to believe it. When he tells us to do something, we are obligated to obey. When he tells us a parable, we are obligated to place ourselves in the narrative and meditate on the implications of that. When he expresses affection, we are obligated to appreciate and reciprocate. When he gives us a promise, we are obligated to trust. Let's define the *authority* of language as its capacity to create an obligation in the hearer. So the speech of an absolute authority creates absolute obligation. Obligation is not the only content of language, as we have seen. But it is the result of the *authority* of language.

As we know, Adam and Eve disobeyed. Many questions arise here. How did people whom God declared "good," along with the rest of creation (Gen. 1:31) disobey his word? The narrative doesn't tell us. Another question is why they would have wanted to disobey God. They knew who God was. They understood the authority of his word and his power to curse or bless. Why would they make a decision that they knew would bring curse on themselves? The question is complicated a bit by the presence of Satan in the form of a snake. Satan presumed to interpose a word rivaling God's, a word contradicting God's. But why would Adam and Eve have given Satan any credence at all? The most profound answer, I think, is that Adam and Eve wanted to be their own gods. Impulsively, arrogantly, and certainly irrationally, they exchanged God's truth for a lie (compare Rom. 1:25). So they brought God's curse upon themselves (Gen. 3:16-19). Clearly they should have known better. The word of God was clear and true. They should have obeyed it.

Noah too heard God's personal speech, telling him to build an ark. Unlike Adam, he obeyed God. He might have thought, like his neighbors, and like Adam, that God couldn't have been right about this. Why build a gigantic boat in a desert? But he obeyed God, and God vindicated his faith. Similarly with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David. All of these narratives and others begin with God's personal speech, often saying something hard to believe, or commanding something hard to do. The course of the narrative depends on the

character's response, in faith or unbelief. Hebrews 11 summarizes the faithful ones. Faith, even in the New Testament, is hearing the word of God and doing it.

That's the biblical story: a story of God speaking to people personally, and people responding appropriately or inappropriately.

Scripture is plain that this is the very nature of the Christian life: having God's word and doing it. Jesus said, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (John 14:21). Everything we know about God, we know because he has told us, through his personal speech. All our duties to God are from his commands. All the promises of salvation through the grace of Christ are God's promises, from his own mouth. What other source could there possibly be, for a salvation message that so contradicts our own feelings of self-worth, our own ideas of how to earn God's favor?

Now to be sure there are questions about where we can find God's personal words today, for he does not normally speak to us now as he did to Abraham. (These are questions of "canon.") And there are questions about how we can come to understand God's words, given our distance from the culture in which they were given. (These are questions of "hermeneutics.") I shall address these questions in due course. But the answer *cannot* be that God's personal words are unavailable to us, or unintelligible to us. If we say either of those things, then we lose all touch with the biblical gospel. The idea that God communicates with human beings in personal words pervades all of Scripture, and it is central to every doctrine of Scripture. If God has, in fact, not spoken to us personally, then we lose any basis for believing in salvation by grace, in judgment, in Christ's atonement, indeed for believing in the biblical God at all. Indeed, if God has not spoken to us personally, then everything important in Christianity is human speculation and fantasy.

Yet it should be evident to anyone who has studied the recent history of theology that the mainstream liberal and neo-orthodox traditions have in fact denied that such personal words have occurred, even that they can occur. Others have said that although God's personal words may have occurred in the past, they are no longer available to us as personal words, because of the problems of hermeneutics and canon. If those theologies are true, all is lost.

The present book is simply an exposition and defense of the biblical personal word model of divine communication. As such it will be different from many books on the theology of revelation and Scripture. Of course this book will differ from the liberal and neo-orthodox positions, but it will not take a great deal of time analyzing those. Nor will it resemble the many recent books from more conservative authors which have the purpose of showing how much we can learn from Bible critics and how the concept of inerrancy needs to be redefined,

circumscribed, or eliminated.² I don't doubt that we can learn some things from Bible critics, but that is not my burden here. As for inerrancy, I think it is a perfectly good idea when understood in its dictionary definition and according to the intentions of its original users; but it is only an element of a larger picture. The term actually says much *less* than we need to say in commending the authority of Scripture. I shall argue that Scripture, together with all of God's other communications to us, should be treated as nothing less than God's personal word.

To make that case, I don't think it's necessary to follow the usual theological practice today, setting forth the history of doctrine and the contemporary options and then choosing among the viable options. I have summarized my view of the liberal tradition here in Chapters 3-7, and I do hope that in later editions of this book and in other writings I will find time to interact more with those writings. But although we can learn from the history of doctrine and from contemporary theologians, the final answers to our questions must come from the word of God itself. And I don't think you need to look hard to find those answers. You don't need to engage in abstruse, complicated exegesis. You need only to look at the obvious things and be guided by them, rather than by enlightenment skepticism. This book will attempt to set forth those obvious teachings and explore some of their implications.

The main difference between this book and other books on the doctrines of revelation and Scripture is that I am trying here, above all else, to be ruthlessly consistent with Scripture's own view of itself. In that regard, I'm not only interested to defend what Scripture says about Scripture, but to defend it by means of the Bible's own worldview, its own epistemology³ and its own values.⁴ That there is a circularity here I do not doubt. I am defending the Bible by the Bible. Circularity of a kind is unavoidable when one seeks to defend an ultimate standard of truth; for one's defense must itself be accountable to that standard.⁵ Of course I will not hesitate to bring extra-biblical considerations to bear on the argument when such considerations are acceptable within a biblical epistemology. But ultimately I trust the Holy Spirit to bring persuasion to the readers of this book. God's communication with human beings, we shall see, is supernatural all the way through.

² For examples of how I respond to such arguments, see my reviews of recent books by N. T. Wright, Peter Enns, and Andrew McGowan, Appendices to this volume.

³ I have formulated what I think a biblical epistemology looks like in DKG.

⁴ DCL focuses on biblical values. DKG makes the case that biblical epistemology can be understood as a subdivision of biblical ethics.

⁵ See DKG, 130-133.

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