

# **The Doctrine of the Word of God**

(Preliminary Draft, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition)

## **Part One: Orientation Lordship and the Word**

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

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## Lordship and the Word

If we are to understand the nature of the word of God, we must certainly understand something about the God who speaks. In my other writings (see especially the first seven chapters of DG) I have listed some important ways in which the God of Scripture differs from all the gods of other religions and the principles of philosophers.

a. The biblical God is the supreme being of the universe: eternal, unchangeable, infinite. He is self-existent, self-authenticating, and self-justifying. He depends on no other reality for his existence, or to meet his needs. In these senses he is absolute. But he is not only absolute. He is also personal, an *absolute personality*.

Further, the biblical God is not only personal, but tri-personal. His self-love, for example, in Scripture is not based on the model of a narcissist, an individual admiring himself (though God would not be wrong to love himself in that way). Rather, his self-love is fully interpersonal: the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, and the love of both embracing the Holy Spirit and his own love for them. God is for us the supreme model, not only of personal virtues, but of interpersonal ones as well.

Other religions and philosophies honor absolute beings, such as the Hindu Brahman, the Greek Fate, Aristotle's Prime Mover, Hegel's Absolute. But none of these beings are personal. They do not know or love us, make decisions, make plans for history. Significantly in our present context, they do not *speak* to us.

Other religions and philosophies do honor personal gods, as with the polytheisms of Canaan, Greece, Egypt, Babylon, India, and modern paganism. Yet none of these personal gods are absolute. Only in biblical religion is the supreme being an absolute personality. Only in biblical religion does the supreme being *speak*. And only in biblical religion is the speaking God absolute, a being who, significantly, needs nobody or nothing outside himself to validate his speech.

Consider the immense significance of the fact that the creator of heaven and earth, who sovereignly governs all the affairs of the universe, actually knows, loves, befriends human beings—that he *speaks* to us.

There are, of course, other religions that approach the biblical idea of an absolute personal God. These include Islam, Judaism, the Jehovah Witnesses, Mormonism, and so on. These present themselves as believing that the supreme being is an absolute person. I believe this claim is inconsistent with other things in these religions. Certainly none of these religions embraces the absolute *tripersonality* of biblical theism. But my present point is that even in these religions the claim to believe in an absolute-personal God arises from the Bible.

For all of these religions are deeply influenced by the Bible, though they have often departed from it.

b. God the absolute tripersonality is related to the world in terms of the *creator-creature distinction*. He is absolute, and we are not. Van Til expressed this distinction in a diagram with a large circle (God) and a small one under it (the creation). God and the world are distinct from one another. The world may never become God, nor can God become a creature. Even in the person of Christ, in which there is the most intimate possible union between God and human nature, there is (according to the formulation of Chalcedon) no mixing or confusion of the two natures. In the incarnation, God does not abandon or compromise his deity, but takes on humanity. In salvation, we do not become God; rather we learn to serve him as faithful creatures.

At the same time, the creator and creature are not distant from one another. This too is evident from the person of Christ, in which deity and humanity are inseparable, though distinct. Indeed, the creator is always present to his creatures. The most important thing about any creature is its relation to the creator. The creature's life, in every respect, at every moment, is possible and meaningful only because of that relationship. In him we live, and move, and have our being (Acts 17:28).

c. The creator is related to the creature as its *covenant lord*. *Lord* represents the Hebrew *Yahweh* (Ex. 3:15), the name by which he wants his people forever to remember him. So the chief confessions of faith in the Bible are confessions of God's lordship (Deut. 6:4-5, Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 12:3, Phil. 2:11). God performs all his mighty works so that people will "know that I am the Lord" (Ex. 6:7, 7:5, 17, 8:22, 10:2, 14:4, etc.) So the chief message of the Old Testament is "God is the Lord." The chief message of the New Testament is "Jesus Christ is Lord."

To say that God is Lord is to say that everything else is his servant. The relationship between lord and servant is called *covenant*. As in (b) above, there is to be no confusion between lord and servant.

In Scripture, God's covenant lordship has three major connotations: (i) God, by his almighty power, is fully in *control* of the creation. (ii) What God says is ultimately *authoritative*, in the sense we have discussed previously. (iii) As covenant lord, he takes the creation (and parts of the creation, like Israel, or the church) into special relationships with him, relationships that lead to blessing or cursing. So he is always *present with* them. He is literally present with Israel in the tabernacle and the temple. He became definitively present to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. And his Spirit indwells New Testament believers, making them his temple. Truly God is "God with us," Immanuel.

I describe God's control, authority, and presence as the three "lordship attributes." I think there is some relationship between these and the three persons of the Trinity: in general, the Father formulates the eternal divine plan of nature and history (authority); the Son carries that plan out (control), and the Spirit applies it to every person and thing (presence). This triad is echoed in many areas of the teaching of Scripture, and, as we shall see, it is reflected throughout the biblical doctrine of the word of God.

As in previous Lordship books, I will also distinguish three "perspectives" by which we can look at all of reality, corresponding to the three lordship attributes: in the *situational* perspective, we examine nature and history as they take place under the controlling power of God. In the *normative* perspective, we shall look at the world as God's authoritative revelation to us. And in the *existential* perspective, we shall focus on our own inwardness, our personal experience, in which God has chosen to be near to us. These are perspectives, for we cannot fully understand one perspective without considering the other two.

If God is to communicate with his creatures, clearly he must communicate as the Lord, for that is what he is. He cannot abandon his lordship while speaking to us. So his word must come to us with absolute power (able to accomplish its purposes, Isa. 55:11), authority (beyond question, Rom. 4:20, as we earlier described the authority of language to create obligation), and presence (the word as God's personal dwelling place, John 1:1, Heb. 4:12-13). The word of God is the word of the Lord. So it can be nothing other than the personal word we discussed earlier.

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