

The Doctrine of the Word of God

(Preliminary Draft, 1st Edition)

Part Three: The Nature of God's Word What is the Word of God?

John M. Frame

Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy
Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL

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

8. What Is God's Word?

In Part Two I summarized and evaluated approaches of representative modern theologians in dealing with revelation and the word of God. That is the theological situation in which we live, and in which we are called to rethink these doctrines. But the determining voice in our deliberations must be that of God himself. His

voice in Scripture must be our norm, our rule for determining what we should say today. So I describe the modern theological discussion as our “situational perspective,” Scripture’s self-witness as the “normative perspective.” The Bible itself will show us how to apply its teaching to the situation we are in.

Some may think this approach is circular, for in determining the Bible’s own view of revelation I will be assuming at the outset some of my conclusions. For example, since I maintain that God is the author of Scripture, I will assume that Scripture is consistent with itself, that it presents (across its 66 books) a single view of its own authority.

I defended this circularity in Chapter 4, above, and elsewhere.¹ Circularity is necessary when any system of thought seeks to defend its first principle, its supreme authority. A rationalist must defend his rationalism by appealing to reason. A Muslim must ultimately defend his religion by appealing to the Qur’an. And one who believes in the supreme authority of Scripture must appeal to Scripture.

Nevertheless, those who are not committed in advance to the authority of Scripture should at least take an interest in what it says. Certainly if Scripture were to deny its own authority, Christians (and everybody else) should deny it too. But if it affirms its own authority, and gives sufficient reasons for believing in that authority, then Christians (and everybody else) should accept its claim.

8. What is the Word of God?

The WLC asks in Question 3,

Q. What is the Word of God?

And it answers,

A. The holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the word of God, the only rule of faith and practice.

Many Christians would give this answer almost instinctively: the word of God is the Bible. It is true, as I shall argue, that the Bible is God’s word, supremely authoritative. And certainly (and I think this is the main point the Catechism wishes to make) Scripture is God’s sufficient revelation to us today, for all of life. But it would not be right to say that the Bible is the *only* word of God there has ever been spoken. The Bible itself tells us that Paul, as an inspired apostle, wrote two letters to the Corinthians that never became part of the Bible (1 Cor. 5:9, 2

¹ DKG, 130-33; *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995) 9-14.

Cor. 2:4). Further, it is evident that the prophets, apostles, and Jesus all uttered inspired spoken words that did not end up as part of the canon of Scripture. And God speaks also to angels (Ps. 103:20) and to the natural world (Ps. 147:15-18, 148:8), words which we do not have in written form. Such words are the means by which God created all things (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, etc., Ps. 33:6, 9). And, as we have seen, Christ himself is the divine Word (John 1:1, 14).

So the word of God is more than just the Bible, although the Bible is the word of God. The Bible is one utterance, or a series of utterances, of God's word. But it does not exhaust the word of God. We should not be embarrassed about this fact. To acknowledge the broader dimensions of the word of God is not to disparage the written word in any way. Indeed, we can get a clearer and stronger view of the importance of Scripture when we understand its relationship to the other utterances of God. Ps. 19 shows us that God's written word ("the law of the Lord," verse 7) is as powerful and reliable as the words of God that govern the natural world (verses 1-6). A similar argument is implicit in Ps. 147:15-20.

How, then, should we define "word of God?" God's word is, certainly, the sum total of his communications, everything he has said, is saying, and will say. But it is even more than that, for as we saw in Chapter 7, there is a sense in which God's word is God himself. God eternally communicates his love and purposes within the Trinity, Father to Son, Son to Father, both to the Spirit and the Spirit to both. This communication is essential to God's nature. He is, among all his other attributes, a *speaking* God.² This is part of what I meant in Chapter 2 by saying that God is absolute personality. For speaking is a quality unique to personal beings. As with the broader concept of absolute personality, the concept of a speaking God is unique to biblical religion.

We can say, then, that God's eternal intertrinitarian speech is a necessary divine attribute, an attribute without which God would not be God. As such, speech, like all other necessary attributes, designates the essence of God, what God really and truly is.³ Ultimately, God's word is God, and God is his word.

And, given the teaching of John 1:1-14 (see again Chapter 7) the term "Word" also designates specifically the second person of the Trinity. There is no contradiction between thinking of the word as a divine attribute and thinking of it as the name of the eternal Son of God. Fatherhood is a divine attribute, but it is also the name of the first person of the Trinity. Similarly spirituality.

So God's word is God himself, understood as a speaking God, one who eternally communicates. His intertrinitarian communications are essential and necessary to who he is. But by his grace and free decision⁴ he also speaks to his creatures.

² See DG, 470-75.

³ Ibid., 225-237, 387-394.

⁴ DG, 230-236.

These communications do not exhaust his word, but they are truly his utterances, his expressions.

I therefore define the word of God as (1) God himself, understood as communicator, and (2) the sum total of his free communications with his creatures. Usually in this book I will be using definition (2), but of course we will need to explore (1) as well and understand the relation between the two.⁵

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).

⁵ The Greek word *logos* which is usually translated “word” in the English Bible has various meanings, such as thought, reason, account, discourse, teaching, intellectual content. In Heraclitus, Philo, and other ancient writers, the term refers, even more broadly, to some kind of cosmic principle of rationality. I see this as a dim memory of the truth that the supreme reality is an absolute personal communicator.