

The Doctrine of the Word of God

(Preliminary Draft, 1st Edition)

Part Three: The Nature of God's Word God's Word as His Controlling Power

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In Memory of
Edmund P. Clowney
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9. God's Word as His Controlling Power

When God speaks to us, he speaks as lord, for that is his relation to us. We should, therefore, expect that his speech, like all his actions, will express his lordship attributes: his control, authority, and presence. Indeed it does.

We look first at the controlling power of his word. It is important that we understand God's word, not only as a communication of linguistic content to our minds, though it is that, but as a great power that makes things happen.

When God first utters his word in the first chapter of Genesis, he speaks, not to rational beings, but to inanimate objects. And in the first instance, he addresses that object before it exists. He says "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), and light comes into existence. Such is the power of his word that he is able to "[call] into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17).

So, Scripture often extols the power of God's word. Summarizing Gen. 1, Ps. 33:6 and 9 say, "by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host... For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood fast." Compare Ps. 148:5, John 1:3, 10, Heb. 1:2, 11:3, 2 Pet. 3:5-7.

After God makes the world, he continues to govern it by the word of his power. Note what is ascribed to the "voice of the Lord" in Ps. 29 and to the words and commands of God in Ps. 147:15-18 and 148:7-8. God's word governs providence as well as creation. Compare Gen. 1:9, 11, 22, 8:21-22, Job 37:12, Ps. 18:15, 33:11, 119:89-91, Matt. 8:27, Heb. 1:3, II Pet. 3.

When God speaks to rational creatures, the word continues to be powerful. God's word brings judgment on sinful people, and often the power of that judgment-word is palpable (Ps. 46:6, Isa. 30:30-31, 66:6, Hos. 6:5, Joel 2:11, Amos 1:2). In 2 Pet. 3:5-7, the apostle compares the judgment of Noah's flood with the original creation by the word of God. Just as God's word was powerful enough to bring the world into being, so it will destroy all the works of wickedness. The fire of judgment is one that comes out of God's mouth (Ps. 18:7-8, 13-14, Job 41:19-21, Jer. 5:14, 20:9, 23:29). Fire is God's "answer" to unbelief (1 Kings 18:24). He answers with fire upon the sacrifice that stands in place of the sinner (1 Chron. 21:26). To change the metaphor, God's word is the mighty sword (Isa. 49:2) or hammer (Jer. 23:29) that brings defeat to his enemies (Hos. 6:5). Compare Paul's reference to the word of God as the "sword of the Spirit" in Eph. 6:17.

But God's word is also powerful to save, powerful in grace. In Gen. 18:14, after God has promised a miraculous child to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, he ascribes the miraculous power to his word. He asks, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" literally, "Is any word too wonderful for the Lord?" In Luke 1:37, the angel Gabriel, having announced to the virgin Mary that she would bear the Messiah,

echoes Gen. 18:14: “nothing shall be impossible with God,” literally, “no word (*rhema*)¹ will be impossible for God.”²

When a centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant, he tells Jesus not to come personally to his home, but only to “say the word” (Luke 7:7). He adds,

For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, “Go,” and he goes; and to another, “Come,” and he comes; and to my servant, “Do this,” and he does it. (verse 8)

Indeed, Jesus does heal the servant from afar. And he comments, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (verse 9). What is remarkable about the centurion’s faith? Perhaps his request to “say the word” gives the answer. In Greek, this phrase is redundant, “speak with a word” (*eipe logo*). The unusual emphasis on the *verbal* nature of this healing indicates the centurion’s belief in the power of Jesus *word* to heal the servant.

And when the apostles bring the Gospel of Christ to the world, they rejoice that it is not only a content, but also a power (Rom. 1:16, 1 Thess. 1:5, 2:13). Not only is it accompanied by signs of God’s power (Rom. 15:19), but the word itself changes hearts and strengthens believers (Rom. 16:25). It is the “word of life” (Phil. 2:16, John 1:1), the gospel that brings death and immortality to light (2 Tim. 1:10).

So, the word of God is powerful both in judgment and in blessing. These are the twin covenant sanctions. In the covenant, the Lord promises blessing to the obedient, judgments to the disobedient (Deut. 27-28). So the commandments of God have a double edge; they can be blessing (Ex. 20:12) or curse (verse 7). Obedience to God’s commands is the path of life (Deut 8:3, Lev. 18:5, Ps. 19, 119:25, 50), but the commandments themselves can give opportunity for sin (Rom. 7:7-25). God tells Isaiah that his message will be mostly one of hardening and curse: “Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” (Isa 6:10). God sends Isaiah to people who doubtless have already hardened their hearts against the Lord. But in this context it is Isaiah’s words, the words of God, that bring the hardening. Jesus and the apostles invoke the words of Isaiah 6 to characterize their own preaching (Matt. 13:14-15, Mark 4:11-12, Luke 8: 10, John 12:37-40, Acts 28:26-28, Rom. 11 :8; compare John 15:22).

¹ In Greek, *logos* is a broader term than *rhema*, though both can be translated “word.” *Logos* can refer to an individual saying, as does *rhema*, but *logos* can also refer to a discourse, rationale, rational account, principle of rationality, etc.

² Compare also Jer. 32:17, 27.

The power of the word brings wonderful blessings to those who hear in faith, with a disposition to obey. But it hardens those who hear it with indifference, resistance, rebellion. In considering this biblical teaching, I often warn my seminary students to pay heed to what God is telling us here. For seminarians typically spend two or more years intensively studying Scripture. It is so important that they hear in faith, lest the word actually harden their hearts and become a fire of judgment to them. God's word never leaves us the same. We hear it for better or worse. So we should never hear or read God's word merely as an academic exercise. We must ask God to open our hearts that the word may be written on them as well as in our heads.

So, God accomplishes all his works by his powerful word: creation, providence, judgment, grace.³

The power of the word is the power of God's Spirit 1 Thess. 1:5, though the Spirit is not always mentioned in contexts that speak of the word's power (as 1 Thess. 2:13). That is to say that the power of the word is personal, not impersonal. So when the word of the gospel leads one hearer to faith and hardens another, that is God's sovereign decision. The difference is not that some hearers are better able to resist God's word than others, as some Lutherans have claimed. That would mean that the word, like an impersonal force of electricity or gravity, works uniformly on everyone, and that the only differences in response come from those who hear. Scripture, however, teaches that God himself determines who will respond favorably to his word. That is Paul's argument in Rom. 9:1-28.

To say this is not to say that the word is powerful only when the Spirit accompanies it and is powerless otherwise. The word is never powerless, as we have seen from Gen. 18:14 and Isa. 55:11. But sometimes that power effects a blessing, sometimes a curse, depending on God's sovereign intent.

How powerful is the power of the word? The power of God's word is nothing less than his own omnipotence. As we saw earlier, *no* word of God is too hard for him to accomplish. In Isa. 55:11, we read, "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." What God says with his mouth he fulfills with his hand (II Chron. 6:15, compare Ezek. 1:3, 3:22).

³ If we add God's eternal plan to this list, we have a good summary of all the works of God reported in Scripture. God's eternal plan is also an exercise of his word. It is the agreement between Father, Son, and Spirit, to carry out their program for creation, fall, and redemption. See Ps. 2:7-9, 110, Matt. 11:25-27, John 4:34, 5:19-30, 6:38, 17:1-26.

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