

The Doctrine of the Word of God

(Preliminary Draft, 1st Edition)

Part Three: The Nature of God's Word God's Word as His Meaningful Authority

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

10. God's Word as His Meaningful Authority

The second of the lordship attributes is divine authority. As I indicated in Chapters 1 and 2, God's word expresses that authority that is unique to God, his *ultimate* authority. As we saw earlier, the authority of language is its capacity to create obligations in the hearer. God's language is authoritative, not only in telling us what to believe and do, but in directing our emotions, our

preoccupations, our priorities, our joys and sorrows. That is to say, God's words are authoritative in all the ways that language can be authoritative.

Authority is a function of the *meaning* of language. Here it is important to observe that God's word is not only powerful, but also meaningful. The power of language is what it does; meaning is what it says. Of course, saying is one kind of doing, so meaning is one of the powers of language.¹ But it plays such an important role among the powers of language that it deserves special attention.

In the history of liberal theology, we may observe that the "older liberalism" (Ritschl, Harnack, Herrmann) saw the words of Scripture as meaningful, but without divine power. They were merely words of men, to be examined and evaluated like any other words of men. In neo-orthodoxy (Barth, Brunner—even Bultmann) there was a greater understanding of the word as a divine power, but a denial that the word was meaningful language. The same power-centered view of God's word can be found among some disciples of the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd.²

In traditional theology, and in Scripture itself, God's word is both powerful and meaningful. We have seen Bible references to its power. But Scripture also regards God's word as having meaningful content. The word is never a blind force.³ When God creates the world by the word of his power, he not only makes things happen. He commands them to happen by intelligible speech, giving names to things that interpret their function. In Gen. 1:5, 8, and 10, God "calls" (*qara*) things by names: day, night, Heaven, Earth, seas. (Compare Ps. 147:4 and Isa. 40:26.) In the remaining verses of Gen. 1, he determines, in other

¹ And in the case of God, the power of his language is an aspect of its meaning. For the power of God's word comes from his authority to command things to happen. Thus in God's word, power and meaning are perspectives on one another.

² See my *The Amsterdam Philosophy*, available at www.frame-poythress.org and in *The Collected Works of John M. Frame* CD and DVD collection (Phillipsburg: P&R; Whitefish, MT.: Bits and Bytes, 2008) (henceforth CW), volume one.

³ Preachers and others sometimes point out the relationship between the Greek word for power, *dynamis*, and the English word *dynamite*. In some contexts, the power of God's word can profitably be compared to that of dynamite, but there is a major difference. Dynamite only destroys, sending debris every which way. But the power of God's word builds up God's kingdom, rather than merely tearing things down. It creates an order, not a chaos: a rational structure. So does the power of God's word create the universe, turning what is "without form and void" (Gen. 1:2) into a beautiful orderly universe. In the first three days of creation, God produces locations (heaven and earth, seas and land, growing fields). In the last three, he produces beings to dwell in those locations (heavenly bodies, sea creatures and birds, animals and men). In God's creative work we find the very definition of order: a place for everything and everything in its place.

language, the nature and function of each created thing, and by the word “good” he evaluates the work of his hands. In verses 27-28 he defines by his word the nature and task of mankind.⁴

Note also that in 2:19 God gives an analogous task to Adam, to give names to the animals, as God has already given names to the things in creation. In the ancient world, a name was not merely an arbitrary label. God asked Adam is to create a system of meaningful words that would indicate the nature and characteristics of the animals.

In Chapter 9, we saw how the powerful word of God accomplishes all of God’s actions. They not only accompany what he does; they empower everything he does. Whatever God does, he does by his word; whatever God does, the word does. Now we should note that all these words constitute meaningful communication. Everything God does is informed by his wisdom (Ps. 104:24). So the world as a whole is meaningful, its meaning determined by God’s plan.

Similarly, when God speaks to rational beings (himself, angels, humans), his word conveys meaning. In his word, he expresses his wisdom, knowledge, desires, intentions, love, grace. That meaning is authoritative. When God shares his love with us, we have the obligation to treasure it. When he questions us, we should answer. When he expresses his grace, we are obligated to trust it. When he tells us his desires, we should conform our lives to them. When he shares with us his knowledge and intentions, we ought to believe that they are true.

In Chapter 1, I showed how the whole course of the biblical narrative is structured as a dialogue: God speaks, man responds. The course of subsequent history is the result of man’s response to God’s word. When man disobeys, there is curse. When he obeys, there is blessing. So biblical history is covenantal. The covenant Lord sets forth his will, and history describes the covenantal sanctions.

Adam and Eve

So every page of the Bible teaches or illustrates the authority of God’s word. Everything human beings do or say is a response to God’s word and/or a consequence of their response. In Gen. 1:28, the first recorded experience of the first human beings was that of listening to God’s word. In that experience, they learned their fundamental task as human beings, the task of filling and subduing the whole earth. In Gen. 2:16-17, God supplies food for Adam, authorizing him to

⁴ Note the analogue in the realm of redemption. As God gave names to all the creation in Gen. 1, so in redemption he calls us by name (Isa. 43:1) and gives us a new name (Isa. 62:2, 65:15), God’s name (Isa. 43:7, Jer. 7:10, Amos 9:12).

eat of every tree in the Garden. But he adds a negative command, that Adam is not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The narrative in chapter 3 of Genesis underscores the centrality of the word of God. A talking serpent enters a dialogue with the woman. Aesop's fables, of course, are full of talking animals, but these are rare in Scripture.⁵ God had told Eve, along with Adam, to have dominion over the lower creation (1:28), not to listen to the word of an animal as if it were God's. Satan, speaking through the serpent⁶ (Rev. 12:9) here sought precisely to overturn the system of authority God had instituted. Instead of God having the supreme authority, then man, then wife, then the animal creation,⁷ Satan the talking animal wanted to rule over the wife, who would rule her husband, who would seek to overturn the authority of God. We see this in the aftermath (3:8-13) in which Eve blames the serpent, Adam blames the woman, and both implicitly blame the providence of God.

The contest is precisely between two words claiming supreme authority: God's and Satan's. Satan's attack is precisely on the word God had spoken. He questions whether God had uttered such a word (3:1), and then, assuming that God had spoken it, Satan contradicted it (3:4-5).

Adam and Eve had no third authority to arbitrate the dispute. They had no means, scientific, philosophical, or religious, to test whether God or Satan was telling the truth. In effect, what happened was that they trusted their own word, their own judgment, as if it were divine. This is the origin of the "autonomous rationality" we discussed in chapters 3-7. But clearly the text condemns such autonomy. What Adam and Eve should have done was to accept the naked word of God—without verification from any other source-- even though it was contradicted by another source claiming expertise.

In the narrative, God's word prevails, for human disobedience brings death on the first couple and upon the whole creation (verses 14-19). God imposes the wages of sin. But amazingly he also proclaims his grace, for he says that a descendant of Eve will one day crush the head of the serpent (verse 15). This is the first intimation in Scripture of Messiah's coming, and it also implies that the physical death that the first couple deserves will not be immediate. They will live to reproduce and enjoy the fruits of their labors, albeit with pain and suffering.

⁵ I think that Balaam's ass in Num. 22:27-30 is the only other exception.

⁶ Scripture often identifies Satan in verbal terms. He is a liar, a deceiver, an accuser. The serpent figure well illustrates the negative power of Satan's tongue, for a poisonous serpent attracts by his fluttering tongue and kills through the bite of his mouth.

⁷ I realize that this notion of authority is not politically correct these days. For my general view of the relations between the sexes, see 622-647 of DCL.

Adam and Eve have no reason to expect such grace, except by the word of God. As with the original prohibition, there was no verification. In their own wisdom, Adam and Eve could not possibly have determined that God would show grace to them; in fact they had every reason to doubt that. Nor could they possibly have guessed that the Messiah would come many centuries later to redeem them.

But this time, they believed—without verifying, without testing, without trying to evaluate God’s word by their autonomous judgment. Adam named his wife “Eve,” life (verse 20). He might have named her “Death,” given her role in the narrative to this point. But he believed God, whose word said she would bring forth life, children to till the earth and to bring forth the Messianic line. When Eve bore the first child, she named him Cain, saying :”I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord” (4:1). In the birth of Cain, she believed, according to God’s word of promise, that God was fulfilling his plan to redeem the earth through a seed of the woman.

Noah

The story of Noah, too, begins with God’s favor (6:8) and with God’s word (6:13-22). The science of meteorology being what it was at the time, Noah had no way of confirming the unlikely possibility that God would send a flood to destroy humanity. Still, against the objections of unbelief, “Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him” (verse 22; compare 7:5, 9). The word of God was enough.

The New Testament teaches that the last days of our present age will be like the days of Noah. People will be carrying on their daily work and recreations without any attention to God’s warnings (Matt. 24:37-39). These will be “swept away.” But those who hear and obey Jesus’ warnings will be ready for the new deluge (verses 43-44).⁸

Heb. 11:7 commends Noah’s faith as a model of Christian faith: he was “warned by God concerning events as yet unseen” and responded to God’s word in reverent fear.” Indeed, he not only obeyed God’s word, he proclaimed it to others (2 Pet. 2:5).

⁸ 2 Pet. 3:5-7 finds the word of God in still another dimension of the flood story: “the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God.” It was nothing else than God’s word that held the water up in the sky. And the word not only warned Noah that the water was to fall; it *caused* the water to fall. (Recall the discussion of the last chapter: the word governs all the events of nature.) Similarly, says verse 7, “by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire...” Surely, then, the word gives the best testimony concerning its own actions.

Abraham

Of all characters in the Old Testament, Abraham is the chief New Testament model of saving faith (Rom. 4:1-25, Gal. 3:6-8, Heb. 11:8-19, James 2:21-24). What was the object of his faith? The word of God. The narrative begins with God telling him to leave Ur his home city and go to another land (Gen. 12:1). God promises blessing to him (verses 2-3), but as with Adam and Noah Abraham has no independent means to test whether God is telling the truth. He must simply accept God's word for God's word's sake.

Later, God tells him that he and his wife Sarah will have a son (Gen. 17:15-21), but that promise is unfulfilled until Abraham is over 100 years old and his wife is well past the age of childbearing. In this case, not only is there no independent means of verification, but all the evidence points in the opposite direction. Everybody knows that old men and women don't have babies. Sarah laughed at the very thought (18:12-15).⁹

Abraham's record of trusting God was not spotless; note the episodes in 12:10-20 and 16:1-16. But Paul presents the broader picture in Rom. 4:16-25:

That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring--not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be."¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.²⁰ No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.²² That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness."²³ But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone,²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

⁹ Recall my discussion in Chapter 9 of Gen. 18:14, "is anything too hard for the Lord?" which can be translated "is any word too wonderful for the Lord?"

Abraham believed the word of God, even though in doing so he had to believe that God could raise the dead. So should our faith be, says Paul, a faith in God's promise, regardless of those who say that Jesus' resurrection is impossible.

In fact, God did give a son to Abraham and Sarah, and his name Isaac ("laughter") mocked Sarah's mockery. But later, God again spoke to Abraham, telling him to take this very son, the son of the promise, to a mountain in the land of Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice (Gen. 22). In this case, too, Abraham had no independent way of verifying whether he should do this, and indeed he may well have seen it as violating God's own moral law.¹⁰ Even more seriously, if Isaac were to die, it would seem, God could not fulfill his promise of blessing the world through Isaac's descendants. So Abraham might have seen this commandment as contradicting God's own previous words.

Yet, somehow God identified himself to Abraham as the one who was speaking (compare my discussion in Chapter 1), and so Abraham had no choice but to do what God told him, whatever might be the result. As we know, it was a test, and Isaac did not die. God provided a substitute, foreshadowing the work of Christ (Gen. 22:11-14). James says that Abraham's obedience in this test completed his faith (James 2:22). The letter to the Hebrews says, "He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (11:19): another example of Abraham's resurrection faith.

So God tested Abraham's faith in regard to both the promises of the covenant, land and seed. He trusted God's promise of land, even though he owned no part of the land of promise. He trusted God's promise of seed, though God himself appeared to threaten that promise.

Jesus

I shall discuss Moses with the prophets and apostles at a later point. Of course they too received a word from God that required absolute obedience. But we need to look at Jesus here and now, for he is not only a recipient of the word, but he is the lord who speaks.

As Jesus is both perfect God and perfect man, he is both the most authoritative speaker and the most faithful hearer of the word of God. As a human hearer, he speaks just what his father teaches him (John 8:28, 10:18, 12:49-50, 14:10, 15:15). He does not question, contradict, or hesitate.

But he is also the Word of God incarnate (John 1:1, 14). As I argued in Chapter 7, the fact that Jesus is the Word does not detract at all from the authority of

¹⁰ God later prohibited human sacrifice explicitly in Deut. 18:10, but one would think that even people living long before would have seen this as wickedness.

God's personal words to human beings. In fact, Jesus himself, as the Word of God, brings verbal testimony to the truth (John 18:37). He presents this testimony as the reason why he came into the world. His mission was revelatory: to follow Moses' revelation of the law with a revelation of grace and truth (John 1:17). He has made the Father known to us (verse 18; cf. Matt. 11:27). His mission is not *merely* revelatory. He came to accomplish redemption, not just to tell us about it. But his redemptive act reveals his grace, and the revelation of his grace interprets the redemptive act. Revelation and redemption are two aspects of, two perspectives on, his ministry to us.

Jesus' personal words are of utmost importance to the message of the New Testament message. There is no trace of any development from a word-centered revelation in the Old Testament to a nonverbal revelation in the New. Quite to the contrary. Jesus' personal words are crucial to his ministry. In the community of his disciples, his word is the supreme criterion of discipleship. Jesus teaches that calling him Lord is meaningless unless we do the will of his Father (Matt. 7:21-23). The will of his Father is to be found in the law of Moses (Matt. 5:17-20), and also in Jesus' own words (7:24-29). Those who hear Jesus' words and do them will be like the wise man who built his house on the rock. Those who do not hear and obey, will be like the fool who built his house on sand.

When he returns in glory, Jesus will be ashamed of those who have been ashamed of him—notably those who have been ashamed of his words (Mark 8:38, Luke 9:26). His mother and brothers are those who "hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21).

The Gospel of John, which begins by identifying Jesus with the Word of God, is, of the four, the most preoccupied with the importance of the words of Jesus. In John 6:63, Jesus says, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." Five verses later, Peter asks, "'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

In John 8:47, Jesus identifies his own teaching with the "words of God" and insists that anyone who is "of God" will hear and obey them.

John 12:47-50 is remarkable:

If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.⁴⁸

The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.⁴⁹

For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment--what to say and what to speak.⁵⁰ And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me."

Note here (1) the equation between rejecting Jesus and rejecting his words (verse 48), (2) the word of Jesus (particularly in contrast with his personal presence during his earthly ministry) as the judge of men (verse 48), (3) the determination of Jesus' words by the Father, both in content ("what to say") and in form ("what to speak") (verse 49),¹¹ (4) the commandment of the Father (both his commands in general and his commands given to Jesus specifically) as the means and substance of eternal life (verse 50).

Some lessons from John 12: (1) If we are critical of Jesus' words, we may not appeal beyond them (neo-orthodox fashion!) to Jesus himself (48-49). (2) We may not appeal to the substance or content of Jesus' words, beyond the forms in which they are presented (verse 49). (3) We may not claim eternal life while rejecting the demand of Jesus' words upon us (verse 50).

It is also the Johannine literature that identifies most clearly our love for Christ as his disciples with our obedience to his commands. See John 14:15, 21, 23, 15:7, 10, 14, 17:6, 17, I John 2:3-5, 3:22, 5:2-3, II John 6. John's visions of Revelation identify God's people as those who "keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17, 14:12).

Paul refers less often to the words Jesus spoke in his earthly ministry, more often, understandably, to his own apostolic revelation. But note Luke's account of his message to the Ephesian elders at Acts 20:35. And in 1 Tim. 6:3, Paul follows Jesus himself in making agreement with Jesus' words a test of fellowship: "If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness,⁴ he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing."

To hear the words of Jesus, then, is the same as hearing the words of the Father. We are to hear the words of Jesus as Abraham heard the words of Yahweh, as words of supreme authority. We are not in any position to find fault with the words of Jesus. They rather create obligations on our part—to hear, believe, obey, meditate, rejoice, mourn, whatever the words may demand of us.

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](#).

¹¹ This seems to be the best way to render in English the Greek distinction between *ti eipo* and *ti laleso*. The first is from the verb *lego*, the second from *laleo*. These are often interchangeable and translated "to speak." But the former tends to emphasize content, the second manner—the sounds that come out of the mouth.

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](#).