

The Doctrine of the Word of God

(Preliminary Draft, 1st Edition)

Part Four: The Media of God's Word The Media of God's Word

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In Memory of
Edmund P. Clowney
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Part Four: How Does the Word Come to Us?

Part One of this book was Orientation. Part Two (representing my "situational perspective") dealt with the theological environment in which we investigate the word of God. Part Three (representing my normative perspective) attempted to define the word of God, based on Scripture. Now Part Four will attempt to show how the word gets from God's mind to our hearts, the existential perspective. Of

course Part Four will be highly normative as well, since I will be mainly concerned to set forth what Scripture says about how God's word reaches our inner being.

12. The Media of God's Word

In Chapters 8-11, we have been thinking about the fundamental nature of God's word. It is an eternal, necessary, defining attribute of God, his capacity for communication, together with the sum-total of God's actual communications, within the Trinity and with creatures. God's communication with creatures expresses his lordship, his controlling power, meaningful authority, and personal presence. Now we must look at the media God employs to bring his word to creatures.

Media refers to the means by which a speaker's words are connected with the hearer's mind and heart. We are familiar today with the term being used for radio, television, films, newspapers, magazines, and we often express some trepidation about the effects of the media on our culture. The problem, of course, is not with the media themselves, but with fallen man's use of them. That there are pure and righteous ways to employ media becomes evident when we consider that God himself makes use of media to communicate his word.

We are concerned here with *created* media. Certainly God's intertrinitarian communication does not require created media, so in terms of the present discussion, we should refer to the intertrinitarian communication as *unmediated*. But I'm inclined to think that when God speaks with human beings, he almost always uses one medium or other. We sometimes speak of God revealing himself "directly," as when he spoke on Mt. Sinai to all Israel, or when he spoke to a prophet like Moses "mouth to mouth" (Num. 12:8). But even in those situations, God evidently uses created media. God's voice on these occasions used the atmosphere to carry sound waves to the ears of his audience and thence to their brains. He uses the Hebrew language, or some ancestor of it: a language of creatures, certainly not the divine language by which the persons of the Trinity communicate with each other. So even when God's revelation is "direct," it employs created media.

Perhaps there might be an exception when and if God determines to place a message immediately into a person's mind, without any seeing, hearing, or reasoning. God certainly has the power to do this. Perhaps the Holy Spirit acts in such an immediate way to persuade us that some other revelation of God is true. But if unmediated revelation occurs in this world, that would be hard to prove from Scripture. The forms of revelation theology describes must be limited to those described in Scripture. So we must confine ourselves to considering

mediated revelation. And therefore it is necessary to make some effort to understand the media.

I distinguish three categories of revelation media: events, words, and persons. These categories correspond roughly to the lordship attributes: events are brought about by God's controlling power; words bear God's meaningful authority; and persons embody the personal presence of the Lord. But we should not press the parallel too far. It would be wrong, for example, to say that event-revelation embodies God's control, but not his authority or presence. Rather, through all the media of revelation, God expresses all the aspects of his lordship. In event-revelation, God reveals himself not only as the supremely powerful controller, but also as the supremely meaningful authority and the supremely personal presence. Similarly for word-revelation and person-revelation. Scripture treats all revelation as mediated, and it treats all God's revelation, as we've seen, as supremely powerful, authoritative, and personal.

Indeed, the three kinds of media are inseparable from one another and perspectively related. We gain our knowledge of event-revelation by means of word-revelation, words narrating and explaining the events. But the words have no value to us except as they convey to us the events of creation, fall, and redemption. Further, the narrative of events expressed in words is a narrative about persons, divine, angelic, and human. So the events, words, and persons are all necessary to one another; indeed, they constitute one another.

These three forms of revelation also explain and interpret one another. One cannot fully understand revelation in events without the commentary of God's verbal revelation. On the other hand, one cannot fully understand the verbal revelation of the Bible without understanding something of biblical languages, ancient history and culture, which requires a study of extra-biblical event-revelation. Similarly, event- and word- revelation cannot be understood without an understanding of revelatory persons, and vice versa.

So, all of these media are essential to the revelation God has chosen to give us. It is not our place to pick and choose among them what we would prefer to hear, to believe, or to obey. To question the words is to question the events described in the words and the persons who participated in those events. Similarly for the other media.

So, it would be wrong to say that the media of revelation somehow detract from the power, authority, and divine presence of the revelation. The media are inseparable from the revelation; if they are defective, there is no way for us to reclaim an uncorrupted version of God's truth. If we are to accept God's revelation, we must accept what we hear and see through his media.

So, we must never regard the media as barriers to God's communication. God is never prevented by the limitations of creation, or the finitude of people, from

saying what he wants to say to them. Rather, the media are God's chosen instruments for bringing his absolute power, authority, and presence to the attention of finite hearers.

This is the fundamental answer to the question of whether the "humanity" of revelation detracts from its divine character. It is often pointed out that God's revelation through prophets, apostles, and biblical writers is human as well as divine.¹ But human beings do make mistakes. So, the argument goes, we should expect mistakes in the revelation, not because of God, but because of the human instruments. But note:

(1) Human beings do not *necessarily* err. Even unregenerate people sometimes speak the truth. So we should not think it impossible that God could reveal himself through human agents, keeping them from error, without violating their humanity.

(2) If humanity necessarily entails error, then *all* of God's revelation in Scripture is erroneous, for all of it comes through human mediation. Nobody has ever argued such an extreme position.

(3) Christ was fully human, but he did not speak error.

(4) Most all the biblical statements we noted in chapters 8-11, about the power, authority, and presence of God in revelation pertain to revelation through the mediation of human beings. There is no suggestion in any of these passages that human media somehow detract from or compromise the divine quality of the message; indeed, these passages exclude that possibility.

(5) On the argument that human *language* is somehow incapable of truly referring to God, see my article "God and Biblical Language."²

(6) In general, the humanity of God's word is not a liability, but a perfection. God's intent in revelation is to communicate with people. To do that, he must speak their language so that they may understand it. This language, therefore, must be a fully human language. Scripture shows that God has indeed succeeded in putting his word into human words, words that human prophets, apostles, and biblical writers utter as their own. For that, he deserves praise.

¹ Indeed, even the most direct revelation of God, such as his speaking from Mt. Sinai in the presence of Israel, there is a human element; for on such occasions he speaks a human language.

² In John W. Montgomery, ed., *God's Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis, Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 159-177. See Appendix _____ and http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1974BiblicalLanguage.html.

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