

What is the Word of God?

Written by Calvin Fox

Monday, 22 September 2008 15:16 - Last Updated Thursday, 02 October 2008 10:23

WHAT IS THE WORD OF GOD? Jeremiah said, 20:7 O LORD, You induced [persuaded] me, and I was persuaded; You are stronger than I and have prevailed. I am in derision daily; Everyone mocks me. 8 For when I spoke, I cried out; I shouted, "Violence and plunder!" Because the word of the LORD was made to me a reproach and a derision daily. 9 Then I said, "I will not make mention of Him, nor speak anymore in His name." But His word was in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back and I could not . NKJV

Jeremiah warned Judah that its enemies would soon subdue the Nation. This message, this knowledge, came to Jeremiah from God. It was "the word of the Lord" to him and to them. When he preached this Word- "Violence and destruction are coming"- he was derided; indeed he was arrested for being a danger to Israel, an enemy. He wished he could stop preaching this Word, but God made him continue. When he suppressed this Word (the Message, this prophecy, this knowledge) within his heart, not speaking it, it burned within him and would not be denied.

The Word of God in this passage was not the Bible or any part of it. It was a message from God given directly to the prophet to be preached to Israel. It was within the man, to be preached by him, out loud. It would not be suppressed. It was knowledge of what was going to happen and he was driven to tell it to everyone, using verbal, propositional statements. Those statements were not the Word, the Message was. However, can the Message be separated from the method or messenger? Jeremiah had a revelation from God. He expressed it in human, personal, historically conditioned, Hebrew terms. The former, the knowledge (revelation) was infallible, i.e.-reliable, dependable and true. The latter, the method was not, unless the Spirit of God was in control of that method, inspiring the very words ultimately used by Jeremiah to orally deliver the Message. In that case, those words would be inerrant, i.e.- without error or mistakes. How could erroneous words deliver an infallible Message without corrupting it, making it unreliable or fallible? [This requires that the original written copies of the inerrant words of the infallible Message, that was delivered orally, be themselves inerrant and the translations we use be, at least, trustworthy copies of them.] In this way, conservative Christians argue that the written and inerrant words conveying the infallible oral Message are themselves infallible.

The Revelation and the record of it become one and the same. Both are the Word of God. Now we have gone from the Word as "a message from God given directly to the prophet to be preached" to the Word as a paragraph or section of a Book, the Bible. Eventually, the entire contents of the Book (all human words) came to be considered to be the inerrant, infallible Word of God, cover to cover. "All Scripture is out breathed (inspired) by God..." 2 Tim 3:16) The original reference in this verse is to what we call the Old Testament, even though it is popularly taken to mean all 66 canonical Books of our Bible. These and these alone, are now commonly considered to be the Revelation of God. We have come a long way from the original and Scriptural meaning of the "Word of God" and that has been detrimental. I am convinced that we are missing much that God has to say by our limitation and constriction of His living Word to what we can read in Scripture. We have reified Revelation. We have accepted the doctrine that infallible Revelation from God comes to us through a fallible human medium. It must not be identified with that medium. The Bible as such is not itself Revelation. For it to be literally the Word of God would make it God Himself or, at least, sacred and an object for worship. That would be Bibliolatry.

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An Analogy is made between the Bible and Jesus. The Book is both human and divine. Jesus is both human and divine and yet is still all God and Perfect. Therefore, the Bible can be also. Not so. Jesus was a perfect human, unlike any other (one of a kind) The human part of the Bible is not perfect, as it reflects the humans who wrote it and those humans were sinners with limitations, not like Jesus as all. [This same argument also applies to Translations]

The Two Books of God.

Many Christians believe they have solved the problem of an alleged conflict between Faith and Science by positing that there are two Books of God. One, the Scripture, is about spiritual and moral matters. It is a book of salvation, not about Science (or any other “secular” subject). The second Book is Nature. Using the scientific method and reason we learn what can be learned about Science and all the other “secular” subjects, not about Salvation and spiritual matters. Simple. We have two Books, two kinds of Knowledge and no conflict between them. These Christians are misled. Their epistemological paradigm is wrong; but they are onto something which is right: there are two Books of God! God has a mind, will and character He expresses them and we call that expression His Word. His Word, by definition, is His revelation, i.e. - His expression of His presence, power and especially, His mind, will and character. Whatever does that is His Revelation, His Word. Human beings are totally dependent on Revelation to know God. This Revelation, the Word of God, comes in two volumes: non-verbal and verbal.

The “Word of God” - Nonverbal or Verbal

Isaiah 55:10 "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 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.

For generations, it has been assumed that “my word” in this text is the Bible. Certainly, that is the common use of this passage. In fact, Isaiah uses “word” to mean a “word”, such as I am using in this sentence. “Word” sometimes means the Law and yet, other times, it means a message (a revelation) given by God to Isaiah to preach, “Thus saith the Lord...”. It never means our Christian Bible (except by extended argument). There is another possibility. In the beginning, God spoke and the time-space world came into existence. Genesis 1 and 2 is not simply an argument for divine creation out of nothing (ex nihilo) against various kinds of evolutionary theories. It is primarily an argument for creation by divine fiat: God spoke: Let there be light. And it was so! No actual words proceeded from God’s mouth, rather God thought to Himself: Let there be light. His thought produced the light. Genesis 1 and 2 is an account of the creative Word of God in action. This is what Isaiah 55:10-11 may be about. Compare this with-

Psalm 148:3 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! 4 Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! 5 Let them praise the name of the LORD! For he commanded and they were created. 6 And he established them forever and ever; he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.[7 Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, 8 fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word!

Psalm 147:12-18 Worship the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise your God, O Zion... he satisfies you

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with the finest wheat. He sends out his command to the earth, and his word runs very swiftly. He gives snow like wool; he scatters hoarfrost like ashes. He scatters his hail like bread crumbs; who can stand against his cold? He sends forth his word and melts them; ...

Again, no actual word was spoken; the wheat and snow did not literally hear God speak to them. This is figurative language. The act of bringing the natural order into existence, as well as the infinite actions of God to preserve it through the ages, is all a demonstration of God's Mind in action, His Word (Greek- Logos cf. John 1:1-3) Psalm 147 goes on, not skipping a beat, to use the same word to mean the Law- vv. 19-20
He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and his judgments to Israel. He has not done so to any other nation, to them he has not revealed his judgments.

These are just two of many texts illustrating that the "Word of God" can be verbal or non-verbal. In neither case is the phrase a reference to the Christian Bible as such. However, in both cases, the reference is to Revelation. The Bible itself tells us that "Revelation" is dynamic. It refers to the living, active God actively making Himself known. "Revelation" refers to God's acts of self-disclosure. Revelation is not the same as information or doctrine as such. The content of Revelation, as we shall see, is not a systematic body of absolute, propositional Truth; all that is included, but the primary purpose of Revelation is not to give knowledge of such Truth. The primary purpose of Revelation (both Books) is to enable us to know the living God Himself.

The Two Books: General and Special

I. General Revelation (non-verbal): God reveals himself, His mind and will, directly in and through His works-

In Creation- its origins and preservation. Nature is not God and not to be worshipped; rather Nature reveals qualities of God: power, beauty, design, the "laws" of science. All these witness to God. In Human Beings- they image God. They reveal characteristics of Him: Rationality, Creativity, Morality, Communalism, Spirituality. In History- we can see evidence of God's providence and sovereignty in the affairs of individuals, groups and nations . All of the above is General Revelation. All of it reveals the mind, will and character of God- therefore, all of it is rightfully called His Word. However, this revelation is incomplete!

II. Special Revelation (verbal): God reveals himself, His mind, will and character, directly through actual words. Written down and recorded, they became Holy Scripture, in six categories-

- The Five Books of Moses (Torah)
- The Decalogue (section of the Torah)
- The Prophets
- The Books of Wisdom, including the Psalms
- The Apostolic Writings [The "New Testament"]
- The Person of Jesus (known through the Apostolic Writings, primarily the sections called "Gospels")

All of the above is Special Revelation. All of it reveals the mind, will and character of God- all of

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it is also rightly called His Word.