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THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF THE WORD

Forms of the Word

John Reumann

The term “word” is obviously central in the New Testament. This is true, even statistically. The Greek terms which are translated “word” - *logos* and *rhema* occur 331 and 67 times respectively in the canonical New Testament books. (Of course, not all these examples are theologically significant.)

We deal therefore with a term of Greek background, with so many meanings that it is “symbolic of the Greek understanding of the world and existence.”¹ Yet it has prime Semitic roots; the “word of Yahweh” is mentioned 241 times in the Old Testament.

We are dealing also with a linchpin in Reformation and other theologies - a concept at the centre of the wheel, holding all in place. Lutherans resonate to the word of God, yet we are often unclear about it (even whether we should capitalize the word or not). Austin Farrer once described how a German theologian waxes rhapsodic when he speaks of “das Wort Gottes” - the veins in his neck stand out, eyeballs glazed - and poor Anglicans never know what exactly he means.

Clarity therefore is demanded of us, lest it sound like a “Wort-Mystik.” We may know among ourselves how we intend each reference to “the word of God,” but we need to express better what we mean. We need to do it internally, for the sake of Lutheran self-understanding and unity, and ecumenically, for dialogue with others. We need also to do it for the world, lest our emphasis sound like an ideology (like Nazi rhetoric with

1. H. Kleinknecht, “*lego, logos,*” etc., in G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IV (German, 1942), Eng. trans. by G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 77.

words), or just “openness to verbal communication,” or like a mystical entity.

In explicating “the word of God,” we want to avoid any notion of a paper pope, yet we want the Bible, treasured, in its proper place. While avoiding mysticism, we want to preserve the proper awe and majesty the word demands. We seek clarity, but the picture must be sketched so as to allow whatever puzzling ambiguities the evidence demands. While treating the “New Testament concept,” we shall also draw on the Old Testament and at least glance toward subsequent centuries.

What is “the word (of God)” in the New Testament Scriptures?

Jesus Christ

Because the passage springs so readily to mind, we begin with John 1:1-18. This is not without some risk to the total New Testament picture, because John 1 is quite singular.

- 1 In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
- 2 He was in the beginning with God.
- 3 All things were made through him,
and without him was not anything made that was made.
- 4 In him was life,
and the life was the light of men.
- 5 The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.
- 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.
- 7 He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might
believe through him.
- 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.
- 9 The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the
world.
- 10 He was in the world,
and the world was made through him,
yet the world did not know him.
- 11 He came to his own home,
and his own people received him not.
- 12 But to all who received him,
who believed in his name,
he gave power to become children of God;
- 13 who are born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh
nor of the will of man, but of God.
- 14 And the Word became flesh
and dwelt among us,

full of grace and truth;
 we have beheld his glory,
 glory as of the only Son from the Father.

15 (John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'")

16 And from his fulness
 have we all received,
 grace upon grace.

17 For the law was given through Moses;
 grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
 No one has ever seen God.

18 The only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father,
 he has made him known. (John 1:1-18, RSV adapted)

The term "word" (conventionally capitalized) occurs in verse 1 (thrice), in verse 14, and in verse 17 is identified with Jesus Christ, who is mentioned there for the first time (though John the Baptist has been referred to in verses 6 and 15). We have here the beginning, at least, of the vast "parabola of salvation" which characterizes the Fourth Gospel: one who is preexistent with the Father comes down to earth, in the flesh, and there are already pointers toward his cross and subsequent exaltation (chapters 19-20). Many translators feel that at least verses 6-8 and 15 are prose, in contrast to the other more hymnic verses, and some like RSV put verse 15 (on John the Baptist) in parentheses.

The exact background of the *logos*-theme in John 1 has been variously assessed. We need not solve whether it draws most on Greek philosophy and Philo: on the Old Testament, especially Genesis 1; on Jewish wisdom speculation (cf. Proverbs 8:22 ff. and the Wisdom of Solomon): on the Aramaic targums; or on Gnosis, though I think Old Testament and late Jewish roots are most likely and suspect that different readers of John heard it in different ways.

More important is the "plot line" of content. When does "the word" enter history? What does he do?

The usual answer is that the incarnation occurs at verse 14. If so, what is described in verses 1-13 is all prior to this decisive "point of transition."

But there are other possibilities. When verses 10 and 11 say the *logos* was "in the world" and "came to his own" (people), is that not a reference to a presence in Israel and the world prior to verse 14? The reference to John the Baptist so early in the passage in verses 6-8) suggests an appearance of the word at least in verses 10 and 11, which verse 14 reiterates. Verse 5 can be translated "continues to shine," i.e. ever since he came.

At issue, of course, are such questions as, Was the word which was once

with God an ever-present *logos*, since creation (vs. 5), enlightening all persons (vs. 9)? In that case we have “natural revelation.” Was the *logos*, which had been with God, present in Israel’s history? The answer is yes, if “his own home” (vs. 11) means the land of Israel and “his own people” the Israelites. Or, more daringly, is “his own home” or turf the entire world he made, and “his own people” a reference to humankind? In that case these verses are about a universal, cosmological revelation.

If such references in verses 5-11 refer at all to the *logos*-light in the world and in Israel, then we must call these divine incursions fruitless efforts-“the light that failed,” though at least the darkness never quite put out the light of God (vs. 5*b*). Such a reading enhances the significance of the saving effects of the incarnational incursion in verse 14. Yet verses 12-13 state some did receive the *logos*-light and believe. Were they the “faithful remnant” of Jews before Christ? Or, is this talking about the reception of Jesus Christ? Theories abound, and some see the solution in a source which originally told of the coming of Christ in verses 11-13; then verse 14, which was added, would repeat the point more emphatically from the standpoint of the Christian community - “we-us” who have believed.

As John 1:1-18 stands, it must be read as portraying the sweep of salvation history. Verses 1-3 or 4 deal with the preexistence of the *logos* and with creation through him. Verses 5-9 take up the *logos* as revealer within history, including John the Baptist as the climax of the forerunners to the word-made-flesh. Then, in more detail: verse 10, from Adam to Moses; verse 11, Sinai (“the Torah settled in Israel”), and Israel’s infidelity; verse 12, the faithful remnant in Israel, born of God (vs. 13); Verse 14*a*, the incarnation; verse 14*b*, the transfiguration, perhaps; verse 15, the reiterated witness of John the Baptist; verses 16-18, the witness of the Christian community, “graced” supremely through Christ.

Such a reading lays strong emphasis on continuity, all through history, in Israel and in Christ. Lutherans in particular need to note that verse 17*a* and 17*b* need not be read as a law-gospel antithesis (there is no “but” in the Greek in 17*b*). There may be “step-parallelism” “grace...more grace”; Moses then is part of “*logos* history.”

How one decides to read John 1:1-18 reflects one’s view of revelation, our understanding of continuity and contrast, and what we make of the possibility of an underlying source (a hymn, most likely) to which there have been added (prose) comments.

In summary, the passage as it stands, sees the word as God’s revelation-message in the world, among his people, enfleshed in Jesus Christ. Verses 14 and 17 specifically identify that word as Jesus Christ.

Two observations need to be added. First of all, community of Christians is here speaking (as seen from the use of the first person plural) experientially (vs. 14 *de*). Secondly, for all the prominence of the *logos* here, the term does not occur anywhere else in the Fourth Gospel as a title for Jesus. Is that because John got it from a source and elected to make no further use of it? Has it done its work, by providing at the outset

a contact point for Jew and Greek, gnostic, and syncretist? Or is it a title for “the preexistent Christ,” so that its use must end at the incarnation? In any case, the *logos* title of 1:1-18 is singular even for John’s Gospel.

Indeed, we must ask: Are there any other examples of Jesus Christ as the word elsewhere in the New Testament? Revelation 19:13 presents a victorious warrior on a white horse (his robe dipped in his own blood) as “The Word of God”. A far cry from John 1, the verse suggests the word also appears at the end time and thus, preexistent and finally triumphant, brackets and encompasses history.

1 John 1:1-4 announces the theme of that epistle as “concerning the word of life.” Verses 2 and 3 suggest “the word” here is a message being proclaimed; by the verbs employed, verse 1 suggests “the word” is a person, Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:25-27 deserves careful study. The minister’s office, “to make the word of God fully known,” sounds like a proclamatory task, but verse 27 specifies the content as Christ, a future hope.

“Our word to you” in 2 Corinthians 1:19 again deals with proclamation - God’s Yes to us, and promises fulfilled - but the content of the word is Jesus Christ.

Finally in Hebrews the other Greek term *rhema* may be used in a personal way with reference to creation (“the world was created by the word of God,” 11:3; cf. John 1:3), provided we view this *rhema* in light of Hebrews 1:2-3. There the Son created, sustains, made atonement, and sits at God’s right hand.

Such are some passages the Lutheran tradition has had, or might have, in mind when it speaks about “the Word - that is, the Son of God.” ²

Scripture

We commonly say, “Scripture is the word of God.” Where can this usage of *logos-rhema* be documented in the New Testament? The most likely contender for this meaning of *logos* is 2 Timothy 2:15; Timothy is to be a workman “rightly handling the word of truth.”

To provide the context for this expression I quote from Monsignor Jerome Quinn:

“The Pastoral Epistles speak of the truth when they seek to highlight the content of belief which issues in the actual lives of those who accept the truth. That truth also comes through the oral proclamation-teaching of the Pauline apostolate and (once) in the apostle’s writing. It has its source in *ho apseudes theos* who is Father (Titus 1: 2,4 (God, who never lies) and its content is Jesus Christ, incarnate, risen, proclaimed and believed in as saving. The death and resurrection are the principal events proclaimed. The apostolic minister and-or the church is to Christ, the truth, as the pillar of fire was to Yahweh, guiding his people to freedom. The ministry and-or

2. Augsburg Confession, Article III, Latin. However, there is no reference to creation or Israel here, so prominent in John 1.

church uphold(s) the truth, which is in turn both the ground of good actions and stands in contrast to error-lies-myths that are the source of vice Because action stands in the function of truth, both Christ and his apostolic ministers give directions and commands for living to those who listen to their word.”³

What is “*the word of truth*” at 2:15? The likely immediate antecedent in 2 Timothy 2 is “the gospel” (vs. 9), which is spelled out in a little creed at 2:8.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead,
 descended from David (as preached in my gospel),
 and perhaps also in a poetic, almost hymnic fragment at 2:11,
 If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;
 if we endure, we shall also reign with him;
 if we deny him, he will also deny us,
 if we are faithless, he remains faithful.

In 2:8 and 11 we have Christology (“son of David,” “Christ”); the resurrection; baptism and the Christian hope (11a); the coming kingdom (11b); judgment (11c); and the faithfulness of Christ (11d), which justifies. Such analysis bears out Quinn’s emphasis on “the content of belief” and the Pauline proclamation-teaching.

Does 2:15 also refer to “scriptures”? Although the paragraph urges that, when he hears disputes about words, Timothy should remind the disputants of such gospel affirmations, Lutherans have frequently taken verse 15 as a reference to proper handling of the Bible. We have even (under the impact of renderings like that in the King James Version, “rightly *dividing* the word of truth”) taken them to mean, properly distinguishing law and gospel. If a reference is to be seen here to writings, then the reference in a document by Paul must be chiefly to the Old Testament. The gospels were not written as yet (on almost all theories of dating) and indeed, by the mid-sixties of the first century, little which was to make up the New Testament except Paul’s letters had been written. Of course, if the Pastorals are deutero-Pauline and later, then a written “word of truth” could include much of what we know as the New Testament.

An analogy to 2 Timothy 2:15 occurs in Romans 10:8, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart ...” When Paul thus quotes from Deuteronomy (30:11-14), what does he mean by “the word”? The answer is “the word of faith which we preach” (8b), to which he then gives contents by quoting a creed or two in verse 9, “Jesus is lord,” “God raised him from the dead.” Thus, the “word of faith,” which the Pastorals see in “truth”-terms especially, is mostly gospel-creed content. But this clue points us back to the Pastorals where a recurring phrase about “the

3. J.D. Quinn, precis of his paper, “Notes on the Terminology for Faith, Truth, and Teaching in the Pastoral Epistles,” Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, January 30, 1975; cf. *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, Vol. 6, and his Anchor Bible commentary on the Pastorals, forthcoming.

word” suggests a fruitful area of study.

Five times the Pastorals employ the formula, “the saying is sure” (*pistos ho logos*, “the word stands firm” or “is trustworthy”). What is meant by “word” or “saying” here? It seems a key to what “the word of truth” is at 2 Timothy 2:15.

We begin with 1 Timothy 1:15, “The saying (*logos*) is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” The *logos* there is a soteriological statement about Christ. 2 Timothy 2:11 has already been quoted: “The saying is sure: ...,” then follows the hymnic snatch already cited in discussing 2:15. Titus 3:8 uses the same formula, *pistos ho logos*, to refer (in spite of the traditional verse division) to 3:4-7 about how “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared” to save us (note the use of the first person (communal) plural in this formula of affirmation about baptismal justification).

When 1 Timothy 4:9 says “the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,” the reference could be back to the aphorism in verse 8, “bodily training is of little benefit, but piety brings the greatest benefits, for it promises life now and in eternity,” or it could point to verse 10, “For to this end we toil and strive (cf. Col. 1:29) because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially of those who believe.” Might 4:9 be alluding to a New Testament verse in Colossians as the “sure saying”?

1 Timothy 3:1 is by all odds hardest to interpret. The RSV, like many, takes it with what follows, “The saying is sure: If anyone aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task (literally, a good work)...” Then follow a series of rather minimal ethical qualifications for being an *episkopos* (3:1-7). Small wonder that some manuscripts changed 3:1 to “the saying is human,” i.e., “characteristic of mortals” or a “popular” or “common” saying! The alternative is to take 3:1a as referring back to what has been said in chapter 2 - either to verses 9ff., about prayer, or to 2:15, “woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.” The last mentioned verse is riddled with interpretative problems, but if it is the *pistos logos* that is meant, it does, like the other examples, refer to salvation and the Savior.

Titus 1:9 also uses the phrase *pistos logos*, but the sense is different: a bishop, as God’s steward, “must hold firm to the *sure word* as taught.” Titus 2:5 speaks of the word of God not being discredited by members’ conduct; the reference is to ethical teachings or to Christianity itself. 1 Timothy 4:5, about food “consecrated by the word of God and prayer,” may refer to words in a table-grace, perhaps including scriptural content; or to Genesis 1:31, when God saw that all creation was good (cf. 1 Timothy 4:4: or to the word, through whom God created the world (Ps. 33:6). If Lutherans strike some as imprecise in defining the word of God, this verse gives good reason for a certain caution and ambiguity.

“Preach the word” (2 Timothy 4:2) clearly refers to an oral message. Titus 1:3, about life which God promised and “manifested in his word,”

suggests the incarnation; but when Paul goes on, “through the preaching with which I have been entrusted,” we seem again to have an oral message. The same is true for 1:9, already mentioned: “the sure word, as taught,” which gives instruction in “sound doctrine.” While it might refer to written material, it most likely has in mind “oral proclamation-teaching.”

The one reference to the apostle’s writing as instruction in the truth comes at 1 Timothy 3:14, though he doesn’t call it word of God. Perhaps if “the books and ... the parchments” at 2 Timothy 4:13 refer to Old Testament documents, a gospel-source like Q, or even to the gospels themselves, we could have another place where emerging Christian scriptures are mentioned. However one does not have the designation “word of God.”

The Pastorals are the most likely place in the New Testament to find “word (of God)” applied to written materials. However, we must admit that, while in these three letters “the word” and the *pistos-logos* sayings encompass truth, gospel, Christ, creeds, teaching, and hymns (including statements on salvation, cult and law), there are at best hints of the phrase “word of God” applied to books or writing. At most the way was opened, in later development, to refer to books in either testament as “the word of God.”

Message

A third sense of “word of God” is actually the most common one of all in the New Testament. This is the use of the expression for a *message, from and about God, especially the good news of Jesus Christ*. We have already encountered this meaning in 1 John 1:2,3, Colossians 1:25, 2 Corinthians 1:19, 2 Timothy 2:15 and 4:2, and 1 Timothy 1:15. Out of many possible examples this study confines itself to three probes.

The Book of Acts provides a striking starting point through its six summaries about “the increase of the word of God.” (Martin H. Franzmann once used the theme for the title of his introduction to the New Testament. ⁴)

Luke divides his account of the expansion of the gospel message from Jerusalem to Rome into six stages, each marked by a Programmatic summary verse (key terms are italicized):

- (1) 1:1-6:7. Jerusalem - 6:7, “*The word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.*”
- (2) 6:8-9:31, Samaria (Samaritans, a eunuch proselyte believe) - 9:31, “*So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy spirit it was multiplied.*”

4. *The Word of the Lord Grows: A First Historical Introduction to the New Testament*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961.

- (3) 9:32-12:24, Gentiles (Cornelius, Antioch, persecution) - 12:24, "*The word of God grew and multiplied.*"
- (4) 12:25-16:5, Paul (Journey I, Journey II to some of the same sites in Asia Minor) - 16:5, "*So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.*"
- (5) 16:6-19:20, Greece and the Ephesian ministry (Journeys II and III) - 19:20, "*So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.*"
- (6) 19:21-28:31, to Jerusalem and Rome (a long section, little opportunity for church growth) - 28:30-31, "Paul lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, *preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, quite openly and unhindered.*"

Three of these "growth statements" refer directly to the word of God, numbers 1, 3, and 5; number 6 speaks of "preaching and teaching." In light of two other verses we may say this means proclaiming the word of God; cf. 15:35, "Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, preaching and teaching the word of the Lord," and 18:11, "Paul stayed for a year and six months, teaching the word of God."

Summary statements 2 and 4 speak instead of the church(es). Does this mean the church is a vehicle or agent under the word, or that the church for Luke is included in the word and is really what grows?

The final statement refers neither to "church" nor "growth". Does Luke, in spite of "brethren" in Italy (28:15, cf. 17), therefore think of the church as still being planted there (by Paul) or as not growing yet? In any case one knows what the result will be: the word-the church will grow. The content of Paul's message in 28:31, about "the kingdom of God" and "the Lord Jesus Christ," is very much what the later gospels were to write up.

This Lukan glimpse into the early church shows the word of God is a message, preached and taught especially by apostles (the "*kerygma*"), about Christ; it leads to faith and grows into the church community.

Secondly, Jesus himself is pictured as a preacher of the word. While John 1:1-18 called him "the word," he himself never used that title for himself. But the gospels constantly portray him preaching a word or message - about God's kingdom, close at hand, and about its demands.

Acts 10:36f. provides a good example from an early Christian sermon: "You know the word God sent to Israel, preaching good news by Jesus Christ, ... the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee ..." Luke in this vein describes how the people pressed about Jesus "to hear the word of God" (Luke 5:1). Mark does likewise in 2:2, "he was preaching the word to them," or in 4:33, "With many such parables he spoke the word to them."

It is likely that we have here a technical early Christian expression, "to proclaim the word." What of the historical Jesus himself? Though Jesus never used the phrase "The word of the Lord came to me" (contrast Luke 3:2, of John the Baptist). Nor did he say "Thus says the Lord." He did speak with authority (e.g., the use of *amen*, *abba*, or the antitheses in the

Sermon on the Mount) and he acted with authority, like prophets and other recipients of the word of Yahweh in the Old Testament. "The word of the Lord" thus came to be applied to his total message and the message about him, and eventually to his person.⁵ Indeed it is the Old Testament concept of the word which must be assumed for Jesus and all of early Christianity.

Finally, Paul gives us the fullest use of "word-of-God" terminology. We need but recall some examples. 1 Corinthians 1:18ff. expounds his "word of the cross," i.e., proclamation about "Christ crucified." Such is the theme of his ministry, to be handled with integrity (2 Cor. 4:1-2), and to be received with joy (1 Thess. 1:6). This word includes ethical teaching and catechetical implications (Gal. 6:6). It involves a program for Paul and the church (Col. 1:25) and shapes the believer's life (Col. 3:16).

It is instructive to note the genitives used with "the word" in the Pauline corpus - in most cases appositional terms telling us something of the content of the word. It is a word of truth (Eph. 1:13), life (Phil. 2:16), reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19), and promise (Rom. 9:6, cf. the story of Abraham as interpreted in Romans 4 and Galatians 4). It is synonymous with the gospel (Col. 1:5). *Logos* ("word") in Paul includes commands from the Torah which are still the will of God for those in Christ (cf. Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14). Paul would certainly agree with the expressions at Acts 13:26 and 14:3 that the word is a message of salvation and of God's grace.

Summary

The New Testament evidence, in terms of frequency of reference, makes clear the word (of God-the Lord) is a message, generally of good news, from God and about God, working in Israel (especially if we include Old Testament backgrounds) and-or in Jesus Christ; Christ himself; and scripture (though specific references here are harder to find).

We may attempt a definition thus: the word of God is God at work; the working of God, in varied ways - especially through proclamation, persons and events - to address his people and effect his will for them and in them - in Israel and climatically in Jesus Christ - and for and in his world; the testimony to this word of God comes in the witnesses of scripture, which thus itself becomes the word.

5. Cf. B. Klappert, "Wort," in L. Coenen (ed.) et al, *Theologisches Begriffslexikon Zum Neuen Testament*, II/2 (Wupperthal: R. Brockhaus, 1971), pp. 1426-27.