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The New Testament concept of the word: functions of the word

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THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT

OF THE WORD

Functions of the Word

John Reumann

From the New Testament evidence we have already seen[1] that "the word (of God, or of the Lord)" refers, in order of frequency of reference, to (1) a message, generally of good news, from God and about him, at work in his people Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in his church; (2) Jesus Christ himself; and (3) scripture (the Hebrew writings, the emerging Christian books of the canon). Any definition must be comprehensive enough to include the basic proclamatory nature of the word of God as a message, *and* its Christocentricity, *and* the fact it is witnessed to in certain writings which have become standard testimony to God's workings in Israel and Christ, scriptures which are God's word for us.

Hence our definition: "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 climactically 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."[2]

Such a definition, reflecting the New Testament, is also in accord with that articulated in the confession of faith of many Lutherans today; for there is a recognized sequence of authorities, moving from the highest to the lower ones:

    A. God, the author of all truth;

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1. "The New Testament Concept of the Word: I. Forms of the Word," *Consensus* Vol. 4, No. 3 (July, 1978), pp. 15-24.
2. Ibid, p. 24.

B. Christ the Lord, the definitive revelation of God's truth;

C. the Gospel, as revelation of God's will to save by grace;

D. the Bible, as the divinely inspired record of God's revelation;

E. the ancient ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian), as declarations, in later historical settings, of key, often contested, truths in the biblical faith;

F. the later, Lutheran Confessions, from the Reformation period, subdivided into two levels, recognizing the historical fact that not all Lutherans have accepted as equal all items in the Book of Concord and the fact that some confessional writings more positively set forth the heart of the Gospel and others, often polemically, defend controverted points or elaborate details:

   1. The Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism;

   2. the Apology, Smalcald Articles, Large Catechism, and Formula;

G. . . . later statements of all sorts, e.g., in the social realm, from church conventions; liturgies, hymnals, etc.[3]

Our definition above for the word of God deals with levels A through D.

Now we must add to that statement something more about the functioning of the word. Propositionally it can be put thus: "Scripture is word of God when put to the uses the word intends." But what are these uses or functions? What does God's word do? How does it "work"?

WAYS IT HAS WORKED IN HISTORY

We begin with a survey of how God, according to scripture, has worked in past history (and how he can and does work now and in the future). Such a list helps us see the broader context of the functioning of the word, within the total working of God.

DIRECTLY — Scripture, especially the Old Testament, is full of examples of how God is said to have appeared, spoken, intervened, etc. "The (strong) hand of the Lord" is a particularly vivid expression in the story of Israel's liberation from Egypt (Exod. 13: 9, 14, 16; 15:6); e.g. Yahweh spiked the chariot wheels of the Egyptians, making victory possible! The New Testament occasionally carries over such imagery (Luke 11:20, "the finger of God").

Yet for all of this direct manifestation of God, he is never seen frontally or face to face; even at Sinai, Moses saw only God's "glory" and his back pass by, not his face (Exod. 33: 17-23). The New Testament heightens the emphasis that no one sees God, though Christ makes him known (John 1:18; 1 John 1:1). It should be added that even in so-called theophanies it is usually what God *says* which matters (e.g., Isaiah 6), and from Genesis 1:1 on it is his word and what he speaks which are significant.[4]

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3. The above listing reflects the Constitution of the Lutheran Church in America, Article II.

4. Some choices in the Roman *Ordo* and CW-6 lectionary stop short of what is said during a theophany; the 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship* has improved on this by adding Isaiah 6: 9-13, at least as an optional reading and for study purposes, to Isa. 6: 1-8 (Epiphany 5, C), and, for example, by extending the reading for Lent 1,B from Genesis 22: 1-14 through verse 18; likewise Lent 2, B, Genesis 28: 10-17 (18-22).

Throughout Israel's history and in the New Testament, God employed all sorts of media besides "personal appearances" to communicate with his people and others. It is well-known that as the centuries went by, particularly during and after the exile, he came to be considered more and more transcendent. Hence these other "vehicles of communication" became increasingly significant.

ANGELS — While we tend to overlook such messengers of God,[5] they were quite important in the Pentateuch and the gospels; cf. Gen. 16:7; Exod. 14:9; or Luke 1:11, etc. (Gabriel).

WISDOM — in Israel's sapiential tradition a figure which (whom?!) some consider "hypostasied" and others "personified", appears as a helper to God in creation and in ongoing revelation; cf. Prov. 7: 22ff.; Wisdom of Solomon 7:22-30; Sirach 24: 1-22. Christologically, "wisdom of God" becomes a title for Jesus (1 Cor. 1:30; cf. Col. 1: 15-20); he speaks as the wisdom of God (cf. Luke 11:49 and Matt. 23:24) and like the Old Testament figure (cf. Matt. 11:28-30 with Sirach 24: 19-22, 51:23-27).

THE SPIRIT OF GOD — perhaps at creation (cf. Gen. 1:2; Ps. 18:15), certainly in Israel's history (Judg. 3:10, 6:34, etc.) and in the prophets, God's spirit was a vehicle for revealing and effecting what he wills. Obviously the Spirit continues in the New Testament and "comes into his own" (Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12:3, etc.).

THE WORD OF GOD — outlined in previous article, to which there is a rich Old Testament background.

Our task now is to explore how "word of God" has been used and how it functioned in God's expressing of himself, according to scripture. But it must be asked whether any of these other media could not just as well have been concepts applied to Christ as God's supreme manifestation in history. Is our use of "the word" as *the* central theme a Lutheran predilection which does not do full justice to the biblical data?

With regard to the term "angel," the answer is obviously that the term would never have been adequate for one who "bore the very stamp of God's nature" yet became obedient in suffering "in the days of his flesh"; the Epistle to the Hebrews insists Jesus, the son of God, is *not* an angel.[6] Yet "wisdom," we saw above, was employed christologically, though perhaps never fully developed in the New Testament. (The Alexandrian church fathers and Eastern Orthodoxy did more with it.) "Word", through John 1, has become for us *the* category; but "Spirit", a related and important term for expounding God's activity, is favored in Pentecostal, pneumatic Christianity of all ages. While some have seen "the Spirit" and "Christ" as interchangeable and even identical, the New Testament evidence seems to demand we keep them separate, though closely related. The Spirit is to be interpreted in light of Jesus Christ (John 14-16) and the Spirit is sent by Christ (John 15:26, 16:7; cf. however 14:26, the Father sends the Paraclete there), but they are not the same. In 2 Corinthians 3 (which seems to equate them by stating "The Lord is the Spirit," 3:17, 18) the term

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5. This lecture was originally given on St. Michael and All Angels Day — a liturgical reminder.
6. Cf. my article, "Martin Werner and 'Angel Christology,' " *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (1956), 349-58. More recently, from a third-world point of view, Ambrose Moyo has dealt with "The Christological Relevance of Angels in Early Christianity as Exemplified in the Shepherd of Hermas". (Harvard University dissertation, 1978).

"Lord" refers to God, the Father — Yahweh who appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai is now the Spirit in the midst of the Christian community.

Thus "wisdom" and "word" and "spirit" are three Old Testament terms connected with God's activity. That "word" has become the term *par excellence* is probably due not only to John 1 but also to the prominence of God as *deus loquens*, "a God who speaks," in all of scripture. But these other forms of talking about "God acting," especially "Spirit," cannot be overlooked. The latter has come into the theological story of the word at two points particularly. The first is the *epiclesis* in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Luther and the Lutheran heritage had stressed it is nothing else but the power of *the Word* which makes the sacrament what it is, "comprehended in the Word and offered to us through the Word."[7]   Recent ligurgy-making has moved from the Word to Word and/or *the Spirit* as vehicle for God's transforming presence:

> ". . . we beseech thee . . . with thy *Word* and *Holy Spirit* to bless *us* . . . and these thine own gifts of *bread and wine* . . ." (SBH, 1958)

> "Send the power of your *Holy Spirit* upon *us* and upon this *bread and wine*" (CW-2, 1970);

> "Send now, we pray, your *Holy Spirit* . . . that we may live . . ." or "Send now your *Holy Spirit* into *our hearts,* . . . as (our Lord) comes to us . . ." *(Lutheran Book of Worship,* 1978, p. 90, sections 31 and 32 respectively).

Without arguing *pro* and *con* what has happened, it is obvious that Lutherans find "Spirit", not just "the Word," increasingly congenial as medium for the presence of God when they pray, "Come, Lord Jesus." Both terms are biblical.

The second area where "Spirit" is closely allied with "word" is an even more controverted matter — the "inspiration" of scripture. Any discussion here ought to be placed within the full orb of the *total* working of the Spirit of God in the New Testament church. Too often, we isolate one facet, the inspiration of scriptural *books.* The starting point ought to be the Spirit-filled community which Paul and Acts describe. The classical passages in the New Testament assume such a setting. 2 Peter 1: 20-21 talks of how "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God," rather than by their own impulses. 2 Timothy 3:16 assumes not only "a man of God" to be perfected but also a community where "teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness" take place. These passages refer first, then, to the origins of scripture (as "God-breathed-into," *theo-pneustos,* "inspired"; Spirit-moved persons spoke), but secondly to the use of scripture by us. 2 Timothy lists four uses; 2 Peter talks about interpretation" which is not just one's own but under the Spirit. Here is a clear place where the Spirit enters into our use of the word (in the sense of scripture). This same Spirit works at the beginning (in the writing process) *and* today (in use and interpretation).

All this points us to an observation on "the believing community" and "sacraments" under the word.
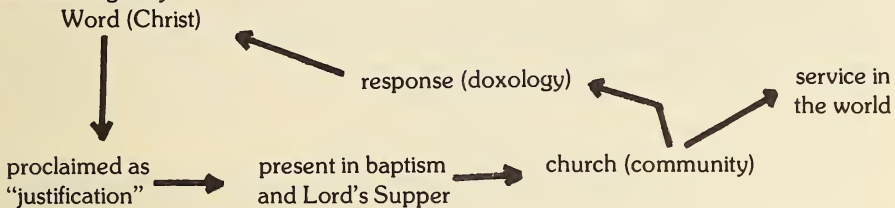
In John 1: 14, 16 and in other passages we sensed a community, reflected in its doxological confession of faith. That is as it should be; the word begets a response from the community.

Sacraments, we say, are "made" by the word, not by water or other elements. ("The Word" here, for Luther, was not just a scriptural command but Christ and his

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7. Large Catechism, Part 5 (*Book of Concord,* ed. Tappert et al., 447.4; 449f.)(28-30).

presence; cf. Romans 6, baptism is into Christ and his death; 1 Cor. 11; Matt. 18:20, 28:20, the *Christus praesens*).

In broad terms a synthesis looks like thus, for God's working sacramentally and ecclesiologically:

Word (Christ)

response (doxology)   service in
                                             the world

proclaimed as   present in baptism   church (community)
"justification"   and Lord's Supper

But while we employ "the word" most frequently as a key term, we have seen that scripture employed additional ways of describing God's working in such a process.

USES OF THE WORD

It goes without saying that for the Bible God's word is marked by power and efficacy. Isaiah 55: 10f. is the classic promise in God's name: "My word . . . shall accomplish that which I propose . . ." In Romans 1:16 Paul centers his message in "the power of God." But for what purposes does scripture see God's powerful word at work?

One passage at which we have already looked lists four purposes or uses. 2 Timothy 3:16 says "All scripture inspired by God[8] is profitable for: (a) teaching (*didaskalia*), in 'doctrine' and 'morals'; (b) reproof (*elegmos*) and (c) correction (*epanorthosis*); and (d) training in righteousnesss (*paideian ten en dikaiosyne*)." Presumably (a) and (d) are "positive" functions and (b) and (c) are "negative" ones. If one adds that the goal for all four functions is to make the child of God "complete" (*artios*) and "equipped for every good work," then the 2-2 balance is tipped toward the positive; all four aspects have a good outcome in mind.

Next consider the tasks of the prophet Jeremiah, who so often spoke the word of the Lord to Israel. Yahweh said to him, "I have put my words in your mouth . . .

to *pluck up* and to *break down*,   (four of the infinitives
to *destroy* and to *overthrow*,   are negative)
to *build* and to *plant*."   (1:9-10)   (two are positive)

This 4-2 balance rightly reflects Jeremiah's mission as a frequent preacher of doom, and his jeremiads. It reminds us that so much of a prophet's word from the Lord depended on the situation being addressed. Weal or woe? God's word takes different forms for different needs. Isaiah could preach woe (cf. 6: 9-12; chapters 13, 24, 28,

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8. It makes very little difference whether we take *theopneustos* as a predicate adjective (RSV text) or as modifying the subject (as above, RSV note). In either case, "all" or "every scripture" is affirmed to be "inspired." The exegetical-historical issue is whether Paul is writing about A.D. 60-67# and refers to the Hebrew scriptures or a later Paulinist is writing and has in mind some or all of the New Testament documents. The adjective has traditionally been extended to the entire canon.

30), but after chapter 40 the Book of Isaiah reflects a new situation when the message is "Comfort, comfort ye my people!"

We look finally at two metaphors in Paul. Christians are described in Philippians 2:15-16 as "lights" in a darkened world because they hold fast "the word of life." 2 Corinthians 2:14-17 portrays Christians (who spread God's word but do not "peddle" it) as a "fragrance" in the world leading to life for those being saved and death to those perishing. Those who bear the word here contrast with the world and offer two possibilities; the word means *life or death*.

All three of these explorations into scripture suggest the word of God is a power leading to salvation or for reproof, judgment, and death.

The classical Lutheran expression for these dual functions of the word has been, of course, "law and gospel" (*Gesetz* and *Evangelium*). The twin terms properly catch the fact that the word of God includes both. Unfortunately what we have sometimes done is divide these functions too acutely, too rigidly, as if each verse of the Bible can be readily classified as "all law" or "pure gospel" for every situation. One fears that holy scripture has sometimes been abused by preachers and theologians to fit such a law/gospel schematic. To do justice to the Bible itself, therefore, at least two observations ought to be kept in mind.

First of all, some verses may on occasion function as *either* law *or* gospel, in different situations. "Take my yoke upon you" (Matthew 11:29) sounds burdensome, till one notes who speaks and how he describes his burden as "light" and "easy" compared to those which people otherwise bear. "Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words . . ., of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes" (Mark 8:38) smacks of a future judgment and sets a high standard of attainment, until we further sense it as an expression of joyous identification by early Christians with their Lord. When Matthew 5:48 states, "You, therefore, must be perfect," Protestant Orthodoxy tended to see that injunction as sheer law. Modern exegesis of Matthew finds it a goal in discipleship and a gift for those who have, and are, the "light of the world"; to describe it solely as a "*Gesetz*-verse" will not do, and some alternate pattern like Gesetz—Evangelium—*Gebot* (for the imperative which follows the divine indicative) may be required.[9]

Secondly, our law/gospel antithesis may too sharply contrast "good news about what God has done" with other parts of God's word. Such a scheme of thinking may even hinder us at times from hearing what the Bible actually says. It is becoming clear, for example, that the Hebrew term *torah* cannot simply be equated with a theological concept of *Gesetz*.[10]   To hark back to John 1:17, it is legitimate to ask whether contrast or "step-parallelism" is involved between "law-Moses" and "grace-truth-Jesus Christ."

It is now time to draw all these observations together. Scripture as God's word achieves its purpose when it is in use, addressing human hearts. That is, of course, supremely the task and opportunity of the preacher-proclaimer, with the aid of the

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9. Cf. Paul Althaus, *The Divine Command: A New Perspective on Law and Gospel*, Facet Books, Social Ethics Series 9 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1966).

10. See the observations by H. Hummel and R. Hals, among others, in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1979), a project of the Division of Theological Studies Lutheran Council in the U.S.A.

Holy Spirit. The word so addressed continues to have its God-given power. To preach the word of God dare not,however, omit the judging, condemnatory side of "law" (as we have come to call it). Law is to be addressed to "secure sinners," even though the word aims ultimately to plant, build, bring growth and maturity, and even to perfect (as "gospel," from God). Lutherans have traditionally been weak in seeing this positive side to the word of God — growth after justification, witness after baptism; beyond justification (or as a part of it) the themes of 2 Corinthians 3:17—4:6 deserve our greater attention.

MOVEMENT OF GOD'S DYNAMIC WORD

We turn finally to some New Testament examples of how the word of God speaks. We are interested here in the process of its movement as well as in its content.
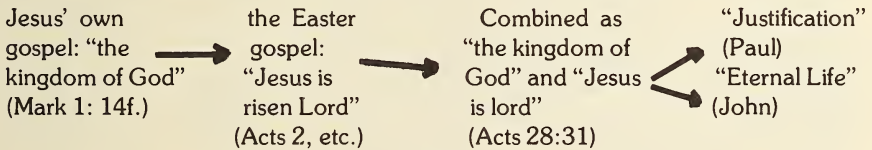
Romans 10:14-17 repays study for its description of the sequence which Paul sets up. We may begin with what he terms "the gospel" or "the preaching of (about) Christ." That is effected by those who are sent forth and who preach, whose words in turn are heard, leading to belief, so that the hearers "call upon God." In chart form:

Gospel ⟶ sending, ⟶ hearing ⟶ belief ⟶ response
(Christ)   preaching
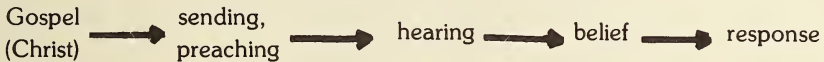
To employ our terms:
  word   us, communications   faith   worship.

If we ask about the contents of "the gospel" in the New Testament to which Paul refers, the outline, at least in its high spots, would run something like this:

Jesus' own ⟶ the Easter ⟶ Combined as ⟶ "Justification"
gospel: "the   gospel: "the kingdom of   (Paul)
kingdom of God"   "Jesus is   God" and "Jesus   "Eternal Life"
(Mark 1: 14f.)   risen Lord"   is lord"   (John)
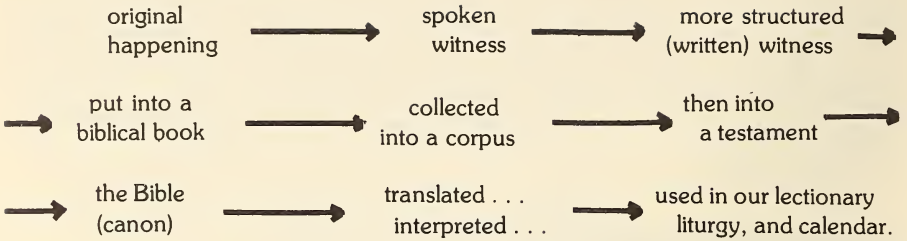   (Acts 2, etc.)   (Acts 28:31)

Of course, there are many other ways scripturally of phrasing the good news, depending on the situation and what needs emphasis. The point is that God's word has content but this varies appropriately.[11]

Recognizing how God's word moves from proclaimer to hearer and takes varying forms and themes, we can now combine these insights to form a picture of how the word of God has moved from age to age, from the time the God, who spoke or acted, expressed himself in history to the time when we today use scripture as a witness of that event. Elsewhere[12] I have sought to sketch how a revelation by God has evoked a chain of witnessings which extends down to us today. It must include the following

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11. The aim of the Bible study portion of the LCA's "Word and Witness" program is to equip people better to see the biblical evangel or good news (plural) for their own witnessing.
12. See "Exegetes, Honesty, and the Faith," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 5 (1978), 16-32.

steps or developments:

original happening →	spoken witness →	more structured (written) witness →
→ put into a biblical book →	collected into a corpus →	then into a testament →
→ the Bible (canon) →	translated . . . interpreted . . . →	used in our lectionary liturgy, and calendar.

We might illustrate with a miracle wrought by Jesus, such as the healing of a centurion's servant. Disciples or onlookers must have told of it; the early Christian document which we call "Q" may have included it; Matthew (cf. 8:5-13) and/or Luke retold the story, each in his own way; their gospels were included with two others in the four-gospels collection, then in the New Testament, and the rest is obvious, right down to the Second Sunday after Pentecost (in Year "C") when we read and may preach upon Luke 7:1-10 in church.

Let us take a more complicated example. Isaiah 45: 23 ("To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear") was word of God when Isaiah proclaimed it. It was reused (with new content, not about Yahweh but about "Jesus Christ as lord") in the hymn which underlies Philippians 2: 6-11, a composition which Paul has incorporated in his letter to Philippi, where it is used to underscore a point about unity and humility in that congregation. When read in the context of Paul's letter and of the New Testament as a whole, it becomes a major passage on Christology. The verse has also been part of theological speculation about the Trinity and concerning the *kenosis* or self-emptying of Christ in heaven before he came to earth.

Our point is not simply to show that Bible verses have a history (though all of them do) but to raise a more profound question, i.e., *when* is a passage "word of God"? Do we equate "word" simply with the beginning of the process with what happened originally, or the earliest witnessing, or the book, or also subsequent use and our own proclamation of that passage today? Or do we relate it to several or all of these steps? The thrust of our presentation has been to argue that the word of God was and is a message, a proclamation, repeated, reiterated, spoken anew countless times, but to which the biblical account is our definitive witness.

To some persons, in explaining what we mean by the word of God, we must struggle to avoid any human presumption that we have it "tied down" in a book, bound up at our beck and call. To others we must strive to show the word is borne to us, generated, and normed by that book, and that Bible and word can never be divorced, even though God's word is more than words upon a page. Proclamation it was; proclamation it becomes again, rebuking, consoling, in conformity with what scripture says. God's word at work in us; the gospel, Christ, calls for interpreting scripture within the church community, nourished by sacraments and the Spirit, in order to do our ministry and bear our witness too, so that the ultimate response will be our praise to the God who spoke and speaks.