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# The Power of God's Word

By ROBERT PREUS

EDITORIAL NOTE: This article was delivered as an essay at a pastoral conference in Florida.

IF there is anything our generation of Christians needs to ponder and experience anew it is the power of God's Word. For only when we seize and are seized by the Word of God do we know the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe (Eph. 1:19). And only when our faith stands in God's power do we discover what the Word of God really is (1 Cor. 2:5). Many theologians recognize the pressing necessity of speaking on this theme.

But there is one fatal flaw in all they have said on this vital matter. After writing countless words concerning the Word and the power of God, modern theologians have consistently failed to tell us what the Word of God is, or rather, where it is. They have not pointed to this Word. They have not located the Word of God, so that we can say: "There it is; what I am now reading, what I am now saying to you is truly and without qualification God's Word." This great weakness of modern theology in speaking of God's Word has become so patent that even a recent article in the *Christian Century* has brought attention to the fact.<sup>1</sup> It is not enough to speak tautologically as Karl Barth and say: The Word of God is God speaking; "God's Word" means 'God speaks.'<sup>2</sup> We

must have access to this Word. We must be able to repair to it. We must have it at hand. A transcendent word—what our old theologians called the *verbum ἐνδιάθετον*, the word in God—or a sporadic word which only now and then unpredictably enters our world in space and time will never become our daily spiritual meat and drink, our shepherd's staff, a lamp to our feet. Jesus has promised that if anyone keeps and treasures (τηρήσῃ) His Word he shall never see death (John 8:51). But that nebulous and distant word of which modern theology speaks, that word which cannot be found or objectified or even repeated,<sup>3</sup> cannot be kept and treasured in our hearts; we cannot even get hold of it to cling to it.

## I. WHAT IS THE WORD OF GOD?

What then is the Word of God? We must answer this question, we must mark out and denote this Word, before we can speak meaningfully about its power.

In the broad, Biblical sense God's Word is His every communication to man, His *dabar*. Such a definition, however, does not get us anywhere until we learn *how* God has communicated to us. Scripture tells us that God has spoken, i. e., made Himself known to us, in many and various ways (πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως, Heb. 1:1).

1. He has first of all spoken audibly.

<sup>1</sup> H. Daniel Friberg, "The Locus of God's Speaking," *Christian Century*, Vol. LXXIX, No. 15 (April 11, 1962), pp. 455—457.

<sup>2</sup> *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), I, 1, 159.

<sup>3</sup> Barth, *ibid.*, p. 160; Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), p. 84 ff. Heineken, "The Authority of the Word of God," *The Voice* (St. Paul: Luther Theological Seminary, 1958), p. 45.

This communication was carried out directly when God walked and talked with the patriarchs. Later God speaks to His chosen prophets and they in turn are to speak to God's people. The man of God speaks in the Word of the Lord (דְּבַר יְהוָה) and His word comes true (1 Kings 13:32). Thus we have the frequent refrain, "Hear therefore the Word of the Lord" (1 Kings 22:19; 1 Sam. 9:27; 1 Kings 12:24; Ps. 81:8). Hearing means heeding, but also giving ear to something audible (Ps. 85:8; Num. 22:38; 24:4, 16; Is. 22:14).

2. Again the Word of God is communicated visibly in the form of a dream or a vision (Is. 6:1; Ezek. 1). Micah (1:1) speaks of seeing (חָזָה) the Word of the Lord. In the prophets there is often an intimate connection between picture (vision) and audible words (cf. Obad. 1; Amos 7:1). The prophets referred to in the above citations were all writing prophets. This fact indicates how closely the visible and audible Word corresponds to the written Word. Speaking of the earlier prophets Procksch remarks: "Here one can still observe the close inner relationship between picture and word in the earliest prophecy."<sup>4</sup>

3. That these visions and oral words were recorded in writing and that this was commanded to be done constitutes a third manner in which God speaks to man. The constant recurrence of the וְאָמַר יְהוָה, "Thus saith the Lord," "The word of the Lord came . . ." (דְּבַר יְהוָה אָשַׁר הָיָה אֵלַי): Hos. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1; Mal. 1:1; Jer. 47:1; Ezek. 14:2), "The mouth of the Lord hath spoken" (Is. 1:20; 40:5; 45:23; 58:14. Cf.

also Matt. 4:4; 1 Cor. 14:27; 2 Tim. 3:16), "Hear the Word of the Lord" — these phrases, now in written form, indicate that God commonly spoke to His people through the writings of His prophets and apostles.

4. God communicates Himself to us through His actions, and His mighty acts of judgment and redemption are indeed a word. Moses speaks to Pharaoh (Ex. 9:5): "The Lord appointed a set time, saying, tomorrow the Lord shall do this thing (דְּבַר יְהוָה) in the land." Often God's acts are called His words, and these word-acts are spoken of in the manner of a personification or hypostatization. Isaiah says (9:8), "The Lord hath sent a word (דְּבַר שְׁלַח) to Jacob and it lighted upon Israel." Then follows an account of the disasters which befell Israel. Again God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah: "Behold, I will bring My words (דְּבַרֵי) upon this city for evil, and not for good; and they shall be accomplished in that day before thee" (Jer. 39:16; cf. also Is. 45:23; 55:10 ff.). In all these cases of hypostatization (suggestive of the Logos doctrine which was articulated later) we observe that the Word of the Lord is an act of revelation which infallibly achieves its purpose. (Jer. 20:7 ff.; Ps. 107:20)

5. The final Word of God to man, His communication κατ' ἐξοχήν, is ἐν υἱῷ, through a Son (Heb. 1:1). He is the personal Word who is with God and is God and who alone reveals God to us (John 1:18). God therefore directs us to hear Him (Matt. 17:5). And we hear Him when we hear His apostles, whose word is His Word (John 17:14). He has sent them into the world to continue His prophetic office (John 20:21). Their word

<sup>4</sup> T{heologisches} W{örterbuch} {zum} N{euem} T{estament}, IV, 92.

is the continuation of His Word (John 17:8, 18; 1 Cor. 1:10), their witnessing is the witnessing of the Spirit Himself. (John 15:26, 27; 16:13; 14:26)

Now when we consider these various ways in which God speaks to us, we find that there is a marvelous unity in the Word of God. There is no difference between God's direct speaking, His speaking through the mouth of a prophet or apostle, and the formulation of this speech in writing. Scripture quite simply calls the words of God's servants and penmen the words of God. Furthermore, no distinction is made between their preached and written Word. It is all the same utterance of God to men. Whether they preach or write, they preface their message by "Thus saith the Lord," "Hear the Word of the Lord." Procksch comments concerning this fact: "This shows then that the entire book of the prophet was to be acknowledged as דְּבַר-יְהוָה, and in the Scripture thought pattern therefore no distinction is made between the voice of God in the prophet and its formulation in poetry, language, and word."<sup>5</sup> In whatever form it may take, the Word of God carries with it His truth, His power and authority. Because His written *dabar* conveys clearly His will for men, God will punish those who disregard the written Word (Num. 15:31) and His judgment descends on people if they "have not kept the Word of the Lord, to do after all that is written in this book" (2 Chron. 34:21). Thus there is one Word of God, although we may speak of it as taking on different forms according to God's condescension. "We have the Word of God in the preaching of the evangelists, in Baptism, in the Sacrament, and in ab-

solution," Luther says.<sup>6</sup> God can even speak through an ass, if need be.<sup>7</sup>

This stress on the unity of the Word is necessary because of late a curious and subtle distinction has been made between the written Word of Scripture and the kerygmatic preaching of the church. According to this distinction (which is advanced by Barth and some other scholars) there is somehow more power in the preached Word, while Scripture, the written Word, remains in itself a dead letter. But Scripture knows no such distinction. The same Word which Jeremiah receives from God he dictates to his amanuensis, Baruch. These same words Baruch writes on a roll and later reads as the "words of the Lord . . . in the ears of the people" (Jer. 36). That which the apostle John saw and heard he wrote (1 John 1:3, 4—*ὃ* governs all the verbs in the passage). Paul says he makes known (*γνωρίζω*) the same gospel which he has formerly preached (*εὐηγγελισάμην*) (1 Cor. 15:1). And he asks that his message be accepted whether it be written or proclaimed by word of mouth (2 Thess. 2:15). On the basis of such data our old theologians are correct in affirming that the Word of God remains the same, even though the outward mode of communication may vary. Quenstedt says,

The act of writing, just as the act of preaching, is incidental to the Word of God and is only an external accident [*πάθος*] of the Word, an auxiliary mode of proclaiming and communicating the Word, which does not alter the essence of the divine Word. For it is one and the same Word of God which the prophets and apostles, taught as they were by in-

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> WA 37, 190.

<sup>7</sup> WA 37, 437.

spiration, preached with the living voice and put down and expressed in letters and writing.<sup>8</sup>

It is significant that this statement of Quenstedt's, which is fundamental to the historic Lutheran understanding of the Word and its power, is in direct antithesis to Barthianism, which insists that the preached Word and the written Scriptures must be distinguished from the Word of God as that which subserves the Word and brings it to man. Scripture and preaching are the "occasion in which the event-of-the-Word-of-God occurs."<sup>9</sup> Strictly speaking, according to modern theology, Scripture and the church's proclamation are not the Word of God, but man's more or less distorted hearing of that Word.

Now what practical benefit do we gain from the unity of God's Word? Today we find that God does not ordinarily confront us directly (as He spoke to the patriarchs) or in visions or dreams; nor does He ordinarily communicate by intervening in our history with signs and wonders. Today His Word to us is found in the testimony of the apostles and prophets and in His church's preaching, which is based on the prophetic and apostolic witness. Here is the locus of God's speaking.

But is our preaching, strictly speaking, God's Word? Insofar as it is drawn from the clear fountains of Israel it is just that. And we must have certainty in this matter. Just as the apostles' proclamation was a continuation of Christ's preaching (John 17:8, 18), yes, *was* His preaching, our testimony is a continuation of their procla-

mation. We dare to say with Paul: "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). We dare to say this because it is His Gospel which we preach. We dare with him even to curse anyone who would proclaim another gospel (Gal. 1:8). We believe, as Luther says, "God has placed His Word in our mouth to preach so that He teaches and preaches through us, and we are nothing more than His mouth and tongue."<sup>10</sup> Let me cite another passage from Luther to indicate the assurance we ought to have that we preach and teach God's Word.

On the last day God will say to me: Have you preached that? And I will answer, Yes, exactly. Then God will turn to you and say, Have you also heard that? And you will answer, Yes. Then He will say further, Why, then, didn't you believe it? And you will say, Oh, I regarded it merely as the word of a man, since a poor chaplain or town pastor spoke it. Thus shall the same Word which sticks to your heart accuse you and be your judge on the last day. For it is God's Word, it is God Himself whom you have heard, as Christ says, "He that heareth you heareth Me." I have sufficiently done my office for the tribunal and presence of God, for I have exposed your sins and offenses and reprimanded you for them, and I am pure of your blood. Now see how you stand.<sup>11</sup>

Such supreme confidence of Luther we share when we recall that there is only one Word of God, which is God's message to man in whatever form it takes. This point is brought out by Procksch's etymological study of *dabar* in Kittel's *Wörterbuch*. He points out that *dabar* is *der Hinter-*

<sup>8</sup> *Systema*, 1702 ed. I, 54.

<sup>9</sup> J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 196.

<sup>10</sup> WA 37, 437.

<sup>11</sup> WA 47, 120.

*grund eines Dinges*. It is the *Sinn und Begriff*; it is the meaning, the *nous*, the thought, *der Gedanke*. Such an understanding is startlingly similar to Luther's conception. To Luther, too, the fundamental meaning of the Word of God was the *Sinn*, the sense or meaning of God's communication.<sup>12</sup> Thus to him God does not speak mere *grammatica vocabula, sed veras et subsistentes res*.<sup>13</sup> Lutheran orthodoxy senses this same basic meaning of "Word," as we observe from its distinction between the *materia* of Scripture, which is the letters and vocables, etc., and the *forma*, which is the divine meaning, the *sensus* and *conceptus* (notice how close this is to Procksch). This divine form, which is the *mens et consilium Dei* and the *sapientia Dei*, is, properly speaking, the Word of God.

What is the significance of all this? Our preaching and teaching, applied as it is to our own day, although it departs markedly from the so-called *materia*, the very words, of Scripture, conforms nevertheless to the content of the divine Word. This fact should be of great comfort to us. What we proclaim is nothing less than the Word of God. Just as Paul and the other apostles quoted loosely from the Old Testament but retained the *sense*, just as Paul could articulate the same doctrine of justification in a score of divergent formulations, you and I today proclaim the divine Word in various languages and new applications and to people of diverse backgrounds, and yet it is the same Word of God.

Now that we have established the locus

<sup>12</sup> Cf. P. Meinhold, *Luthers Sprachphilosophie* (Berlin, 1958).

<sup>13</sup> "*Sic verba Dei res sunt, non nuda vocabula.*" WA 42, 17.

of God's Word today and identified this Word with the sacred Scriptures and the church's proclamation, which is drawn from the Scriptures, and the administration of the sacraments according to Christ's institution, we may proceed to ask

## II. WHAT IS THE POWER OF GOD'S WORD?

### A. Preliminary Data

Just as our chief executive's word carries with it all the power and authority of our nation, so God's Word possesses all of His might and power. And our God is powerful. He is not to be confused with Aristotle's first cause, who sits back and observes what transpires in this world. Nor is He Descartes' quiescent creator, who for some reason does not see fit to intervene in our worldly affairs. Nor is He the God of certain modern theologians who affirm that God speaks and acts but not in our time and space. No, our God is eternally active. He is the living God, acting, speaking, working, striving to make His claim on man. He kills and He makes alive; He exalts and He casts down; He speaks, He gives knowledge, He shows His strength, He performs mercy, He delivers. He not only loves, but He makes His love manifest by sending His only-begotten Son into the world. He not only hates sin, but He executes judgment, and His wrath is actually revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. God's grace and His justice, His omnipresence and His holiness, His majesty and His glory are not quiescent attributes, but are active and dynamic. And as God is, so is His Word.

"As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth and maketh

it bring forth and bud that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My Word be that goeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Is. 55:10,11). Here we are told that God's words are power, life-giving energy. You and I speak and often nothing happens. But God speaks, and it is done (Ps. 33:9). For He does not speak *nuda vocabula*, as Luther says, but *res*.<sup>14</sup> "God speaks, and those things which are not come into being."<sup>15</sup> Therefore God works with His Word. Luther says, "God's works are His words."<sup>16</sup>

Very often in Scripture the Word of God is described as His action and practically identified with His power. The prophet Elijah speaks the Word, and what the Word says happens: the dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel and her carcass becomes dung in the field of Jezreel (2 Kings 9: 36,37). The Word must bring about its fulfillment. This Word is infallible and true (אמת). "Thy Word is true from the beginning: and every one of Thy righteous judgments endureth forever" (Ps. 119:160). This means that God is faithful in carrying out His words, and at the same time faithful to Himself (consistent) in giving the Word. "The Word of the Lord is right; and all His works are done in truth" (Ps. 33:4). Hence, a prophet must remain silent when God does not reveal His Word; and when God speaks he must prophesy (Amos 3:7,8). The very events of history occur at the Word of God (1 Kings 2:27; Ps. 105:19,20). Even the

course Christ took was dictated by the Word (Luke 18:31-33; 24:44,46). And this Word not merely predicts what happens; it creates what happens (Ps. 33:9). The Word of God is an act of revelation which is always effective (Num. 23:19) and infallibly achieves its purpose (Is. 45:23; Ps. 107:20). Thus we have in Scripture such regular refrains as the following: "There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass" (Joshua 21:45); "Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto His people Israel, according to all that He promised: there hath not failed one word of all His good promises, which He promised by the hand of Moses His servant." (1 Kings 8:56)

Now what is to be our response to this mighty and infallible Word? The answer, of course, is faith. How often does the New Testament speak of receiving (δέχεσθαι, λαμβάνειν), believing (πιστεύειν) the Word (2 Cor. 11:4; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13; Acts 11:22; 13:7; 15:17; 18:8; 28:24)! But, oh, how hard it is to believe what God says. His words often appear to be at odds with reason and science and experience. Luther is certainly right when he says, "If you receive the Word of God seriously the world will judge that you are a fool."<sup>17</sup> What are we to do? We must first of all remember something else Luther has told us: "We always regard God's Word and work impossible before it happens. And yet it does happen and happens so easily. But before it takes place we neither know nor understand it; we can only believe it."<sup>18</sup> Isn't this always the case? Think of the impossible things

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *Opera Dei sunt verba eius.* WA 3, 152.

<sup>17</sup> WA 40, 3, 121.

<sup>18</sup> SL XIII, 239.

God has asked people to believe. Jairus is to believe that his daughter is alive although people declared her dead (Matt. 9:24). The nobleman is to believe that his sick son is healed simply by a word of Jesus spoken at a distance from the boy (John 4:50). Abraham is to believe that he will have a son when he and Sarah are old. He is to believe that God is a loving, redeemer-God even when God commands him to sacrifice his child, in whom his salvation centered. The virgin Mary is to believe that she shall have a child, although she has known no man. Martha is to believe that her brother will come to life although his body stinks in the grave (John 11:43). And we are to believe that we shall rise too, although this is contrary to all usual evidence. According to all available evidence women 90 years old do not bear a son, nor do virgins; neither do dead bodies rise from the grave. In other words, God's words which we are to believe are contrary to our common experience and scientific expectation — for science is simply the analysis of the conclusions drawn from the orderly accumulation of human experience. Luther has put it very baldly. "This is the way faith speaks: I believe You, God, when You speak to me. But what does God say? He says things which are impossible, false, stupid, inconsistent, absurd, abhorrent, heretical, and diabolical, if you consult your reason."<sup>19</sup>

### B. The Word as Gospel

But how can we believe such things? How can we believe in spite of evidence

<sup>19</sup> *Nam fides ita dicit: Ego credo tibi Deo loquenti. Quid loquitur Deus? Impossibilia, mendacia, stulta, infirma, absurda, abominanda, haeretica et diabolica, si rationem consulas.* WA 40 I, 361.

and experience? The Word of God is operative in us. It is not merely the object of our faith, but it is also a cause of our faith. How is the Word of God operative in our lives? It is operative as Law and Gospel.

The word of Law has a destructive power. In the mouth of Jeremiah this Word is like fire, and the people are wood, and the Word devours them (Jer. 5:14). Like a hammer breaking rocks in pieces, the Law breaks down every human fortress of self-security and self-righteousness (Jer. 23:29). And the power of the Law is inexorable. People can stop their ears like the Jews who stoned Stephen, they can adopt a condescending attitude or try to outshout the Law like the enemies of Jesus. But God's Law will speak the last word. It is no dead letter, but a letter that kills (*ἀποκτείνει*, 2 Cor. 3:6). Christ's Word will judge all unbelief on the last day (John 12:48). "He shall smite the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips shall He slay the wicked." (Is. 11:4; also Rev. 1:16; 2 Thess. 2:8)

In contrast to the Law the Word as Gospel has as its ministry to give life (2 Cor. 3:6 ff.). In its outer form the Gospel is a report. According to Elert "the Gospel is an authentic report of facts which has as its content the historic Person of Christ from His birth to death. It brings attention therefore to an historical occurrence. But the report is distinctive in that the historic event is designated as the acting, speaking, calling, and decreeing of God."<sup>20</sup> Paul's Gospel offers a report of Christ's death, burial, and res-

<sup>20</sup> *Der Christliche Glaube* (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1956), p. 117.



urrection (1 Cor. 15:1 ff.). But when Paul says *ὅτι Χριστὸς ἐπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν* he says that the Gospel is more than a mere report about which people can learn and know and speak; it is related to the greatest needs of human existence and authenticates itself as power. It is a preaching which brings results into our lives. Its power centers in Christ's resurrection (Rom. 1:4). Through His death and resurrection Christ has conquered death and has restored life. This life becomes an actuality through the proclamation of the Gospel. The Gospel makes the deed of Christ efficacious in the world by giving men life (2 Tim. 1:10). At this point we might quote Gerhard Friedrich in his article on *εὐαγγέλιον* in Kittel's *Wörterbuch*.

The Gospel not merely testifies concerning Heilsgeschehen; it is Heilsgeschehen. It takes hold of men in actual life, shapes them and creates of them a congregation. It is not intelligible to all, but therein the revelation of God is brought. Through the Gospel God calls men to salvation; the preacher is the mouth of God (2 Thess. 2:14). Since the Gospel is God's speech to men (*εὐαγγέλιον Θεοῦ*, 1 Thess. 2:2, 9), it challenges men to decision and works in them obedience. (Rom. 10:16; 2 Cor. 9:13)<sup>21</sup>

We might elaborate on the above by saying that just as the Word of God is action, so also the preaching of the Gospel is action. It is God's action, because it is God's Gospel (*εὐαγγέλιον Θεοῦ*: Rom. 1:1; 15:16); the genitive is subjective. Thus the Gospel is never an empty word, but a creative Word which brings about what it says because its author is God.

Because the Word as Gospel is a living and creative Word we find the Scriptures

employing various similes when referring to it, and attributing all sorts of activities to it. It is likened to a lamp and a light (Prov. 6:23; Ps. 119:105), to a living and incorruptible seed (1 Peter 1:23), to rain and dew (Deut. 32:2), to honey (Ps. 119:103). Again we find the Gospel Word portrayed in the manner of a hypostatization as increasing, growing, multiplying (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). The Gospel is not bound (2 Tim. 12:9), it goes out (Rom. 10:18), it runs (2 Thess. 3:1) through the world and opens doors (Col. 4:3). What is the significance of this peculiar usage? Friedrich comments correctly.

The Gospel becomes a personal magnitude. 2 Cor. 10:14: *ἄχρη γὰρ καὶ ὑμῶν ἐφθάσαμεν ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ*. The choice of place for mission activity is not according to the whim of the preacher, but it is in the Gospel of Christ that Paul presses on, in union with this power in the service of which he stands. Paul calls himself a *συγκοινωνὸς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου* (1 Cor. 9:23), a partaker of the Gospel. The Gospel runs through the world (2 Thess. 3:1; 2 Tim. 2:9) and wins men for itself.<sup>22</sup>

What specifically does the Gospel Word accomplish in our lives?

1. It works *σωτηρία* (Eph. 1:13). James writes that the Word saves our souls (James 1:21). And Paul explicitly says that we are saved through this Gospel (*οἱ οὗ καὶ σῳξέσθε*, 1 Cor. 15:2). He calls it a *δύναμις θεοῦ εἰς σωτηρίαν* to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). Paul was not ashamed of this Gospel because it was not his concoction, but is rather the Gospel of God (Rom. 1:1), and therefore it possesses God's power, power for a spe-

<sup>21</sup> *TWNT*, II, 729.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 730.

cific purpose. The chief and final purpose is to save. Δύναμις is an inherent capacity or potency of the Gospel, and the Gospel possesses this power to save anyone, also the "Greek" who represents all who are outside the covenant. How does this *dynamis* save us? It saves us by revealing God's righteousness, the righteousness which avails before God. The Gospel saves because it delivers and justifies the sinner. On occasion the Gospel is equated with salvation itself. When Paul writes (1 Thess. 2:8) that he imparted the Gospel of God to the Thessalonians, he means that he has imparted salvation. It is significant that to the Old Testament is attributed this same power to save. (1 Tim. 3:15)

2. The Word of the Gospel saves us by bringing us to faith (Rom. 10:17; John 17:20) and by nourishing this faith (Phil. 1:27); by the foolishness of the Cross (Gospel preaching) God saves those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21). For when they believe the Gospel their faith stands not in the wisdom of men, but in God's power (1 Cor. 2:1-5), a power from which nothing can separate them. Word of God, faith, salvation: these three are closely associated.

3. The Word of the Gospel works regeneration and new life. We are born spiritually of an incorruptible seed, Peter tells us (1 Peter 1:23), of the Word of God which is living and remains forever. And James says that God makes us His children by the Word of truth (James 1:18). Paul tells the Corinthians that he has begotten them again through the Gospel (1 Cor. 4:15). Because the Word creates new life by causing us to share in Christ's life, it is called life. "The words

which I speak are πνεῦμα and ζωή," Jesus says (John 6:63); they convey the Spirit of God and life. And the Epistle to the Hebrews asserts that God's Word is ζῶν, that is, living, life giving, and ἐνεργής, that is, actively and effectively working in us (Heb. 4:12). Paul's preaching is ἐν ἀποδείξει πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμεως (1 Cor. 2:4); this means that a testimony and demonstration of its power is to be found in us, in our new life (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6; Phil. 2:16). It scarcely need be said that the life spoken of in these passages is that life which is hidden with Christ in God, that spiritual well of water which springs up into eternal life.

4. The Word of the Gospel works hope, an eschatological viewpoint. Into our present life, crowded with the concerns of this world, the Gospel brings something future, viz., "the hope which is laid up for us in heaven" (Col. 1:5). The Gospel not merely declares this hope, but we now have a share in it by virtue of the Gospel message (Col. 1:23). And this hope changes our outlook and point of view: we recognize that our "conversation (RSV: commonwealth) is in heaven." (Phil. 3:20)

5. Finally the Word is a source of strength for every issue of life. The Gospel is not only the Gospel of comfort and peace (Eph. 6:15). It not only enables me to speak confidently to God and know that my petitions are heard (John 15:7). But this Word establishes my faith in God's own power (ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ, 1 Cor. 2:5). It takes hold of me and effectually works (ἐνεργεῖται) in me (1 Thess. 2:13), that is, sustains me in my faith. And therefore I sing with assurance:

Lord, Thy words are waters living,  
 Where I quench my thirsty need;  
 Lord, Thy words are bread life-giving;  
 On Thy words my soul doth feed:  
 Lord, Thy words shall be my light  
 Through death's vale and dreary night;  
 Yea, they are my sword prevailing,  
 And my cup of joy unailing.

### C. The Power of Scripture

Mention must be made at this juncture concerning the power and practical value of the written Word in our Christian lives. In 2 Tim. 3:15-17, the *locus classicus* for our doctrine of Scripture, Paul is directing his younger co-worker to the Holy Scriptures as a practical power in the life of a man of God. These verses follow a warning directed against all who like Jannes and Jambres resist the truth. Their rebellion is against pure doctrine and will wax worse and worse, men deceiving and being deceived (v. 13). But there is a sure way in which Timothy can avoid these pitfalls. "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of." Then comes the reminder that Paul has been the teacher of Timothy: εἰδὼς παρὰ τῶν ἑμαυτοῦ. (This includes Paul; cf. v. 10; 1:13; 2:2). But from childhood Timothy has known the doctrine which the apostle has more recently taught him; he has known it from the Scriptures, which were taught him by his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (1:5). The term here is τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα, which denotes the same holy writings as the terms ἡ γραφή or αἱ γραφαί used elsewhere, viz., the Old Testament books which were recognized by Christ and the apostles and commonly accepted and known. In other words, these Scriptures offer Timothy the same doctrine which he has learned from Paul; and Paul

does not urge any other doctrine on him (2 Tim. 1:13; 2:2; 3:10) than that which the young disciple has already found in the Scriptures.

To the expression τὰ ἱερὰ γράμματα Paul adds the adjectival clause: τὰ δυνάμενά σε σόφισαι εἰς σωτηρίαν διὰ πίστεως ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. These writings which Timothy has at hand have the inherent power, the same power of God εἰς σωτηρίαν which Paul has so often mentioned in connection with God's Word — power to make Timothy or anyone wise. Paul here is not speaking merely of a certain amount of added information or experience. The wisdom of which he speaks is a divine wisdom; the wisdom of God is a mystery, foreordained for our glory (1 Cor. 2:7). Such saving wisdom, hidden from the eyes of most people, Scripture works in us by leading us to faith in Christ, who is the heart and center of the Scriptures. The Scriptures possess such inherent power, Paul goes on to say, because they are not human records, but God's Word, the product of His breath; πᾶσα γραφή θεόπνευστος. The apostle's argument is clearly that as God's Word Scripture exerts God's power. This capacity of Scripture to work faith in Christ is the first and greatest blessing it brings to man.

But the written Word works also other blessings which we must mention at this point, because the apostle himself is most explicit. Scripture, he says, by virtue of its divine origin is also ὠφέλιμος, useful, profitable, beneficial, and that for certain definite ends. 1. πρὸς διδασκαλίαν, for teaching, instruction. 2. πρὸς ἐλεγμὸν [from ἐλέγγω], for refutation, convincing, persuading, *ad arguendum* (Vulg.). 3. πρὸς ἐπανόρθωσιν, for correcting, revising,

amending. This noun, like the preceding one, is a hapax legomenon. The more common but less emphatic ἀνορθώω means to make straight again, to set straight, to make right (Luke 13:13; Acts 15:16; 1 Tim. 6:3). 4. πρὸς παιδείαν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ, for training, educating in righteousness. Now all four of these phrases pertain to teaching, and there is some overlap in meaning. Perhaps it is not an oversimplification to say that Paul wishes herein to point out that the Scriptures are totally useful in instructing us in doctrine and life. He is saying that Scripture is the most practical book in the world: it tells us everything which we as Christians need to believe and do.

And what is the purpose of Scripture's instructing, convincing, correcting, and training? It is ἵνα ἄριτος [notice the position of the adjective] ἦ ὁ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄνθρωπος. The term ἄριτος means complete, perfectly fitted and prepared, suited for its purpose, *zweckmässig für etwas*. Paul immediately repeats the idea with the intensified participle ἐξηρητισμένως. With this pleonasm he emphasizes as strongly as possible that Scripture teaches one everything he needs for living the life of the man of God. Giving heed to this Word I become perfectly equipped for every issue of life. Scripture is my textbook for godly living.

The burden of Paul's message here is then twofold. First, Scripture leads me to Christ and makes me wise unto salvation by bringing me to faith in Him. Second, while I tarry here on earth it instructs and leads me all the way. Our old theologians have summed up this twofold purpose of Scripture with two meaningful terms:

*efficacia* and *perfectio*, power and sufficiency.

One final question must be answered before we leave our theme:

### III. WHENCE DOES THE WRITTEN, SPOKEN, AND SACRAMENTAL WORD DERIVE ITS POWER?

Our answer to this important question must be threefold, it must be Trinitarian.

1. The written and spoken Word draws its energy and authority from its author, who is God. Although men wrote the Scriptures, these writings are nevertheless God's Word, God's utterances (Rom. 2:2), the product of His breath (Matt. 4:4; 2 Tim. 3:16). Although men preach the Gospel, it is nevertheless God's Gospel (Rom. 1:1; 15:16; 2 Cor. 7:11; 1 Thess. 2:2, 9). God's Word and Gospel are never empty and sterile, but active and creative. Paul makes this point eminently clear when he tells the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2:13): "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because when ye received the Word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God [καθὼς ἀληθῶς ἐστὶν λόγον θεοῦ], which effectually worketh also in you that believe [ὃς καὶ ἐνεργεῖται ἐν ὑμῖν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν]." Paul is clearly tracing the effectual working of his word back to its divine origin. The Word is powerful because it is God's Word. The Word, simply because it is God's Word, carries with it all the attributes of God Himself. At this point we must stress the importance of the old Lutheran doctrine of the Word. Historically Calvinism too affirmed the divine origin of Scripture and of the Gospel proclamation. But Calvinism never drew

the necessary inference from this fact: Reformed theology never spoke of the *efficacia Scripturae* or gave attention to the Gospel as a means and vehicle (Baier calls it an *instrumentum cooperativum*) of God's grace. It is highly significant that under the locus on the efficacy of Scripture Abraham Calov considers the question whether Scripture is *vere et proprie* God's Word. He sees that the importance of the divine nature of Scripture is not a matter of mere academic interest; we are concerned not only with the origin of Scripture, but with the *nature* of Scripture as God's Word. Thus Scripture *is* God's Word, *is* God speaking, is *aliquid Dei*, as Calov said, it is among τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ of 1 Cor. 2.<sup>23</sup> We note that the New Testament frequently cites the Old Testament (or God, the speaker in the Old Testament) as speaking in the present tense (λέγει, Rom. 9:25; Heb. 5:6; 8:8; 10:5; etc.).

2. The written and spoken Word draws its power from its content, Christ. The power of the Word is not some stern and irresistible force which coerces the human will and intellect of its victim into obedience. It is an almighty power, but is gentle and persuasive, working always through a dianoetic message, the message of a crucified and risen Savior. It is the Gospel of Christ which is powerful. Scripture makes us wise unto salvation *through faith in Christ* (2 Tim. 3:15). When Paul speaks of the power of his preaching it is always within a Christological context (cf. 1 Cor. 2). Again Lutheran orthodoxy has spoken well in asserting that there can be no spoken or written Word

(*verbum προφορικόν*) apart from Christ, the personal Word (*verbum ὑποστατικόν*) through whom God speaks and works. The written and spoken Word of God exists through and for the sake of the hypostatic Word. The eternal life which they convey is that life which is found alone in Christ. Scripture brings life because it brings Christ; He is in the Word and confronts us in the Word (John 5:39). On this theme of the Word in the Word Luther spoke with great insistence and fervor. On the one hand he affirmed the Christocentricity of Scripture. "Christ is involved in Scripture through and through, like the body in its clothes. Preaching is the crib in which He lies and is composed, and therefrom we get food and nourishment."<sup>24</sup> On the other hand Luther maintained that Christ comes with His blessings only through the preached and written Word. "All the works which Christ performed are recorded in the Word, and in the Word and through the Word He will give us everything, and without the Word He will give us nothing."<sup>25</sup> Therefore "A man who has God's Word is a partaker of all the possessions of God."<sup>26</sup> Luther is most adamant on this matter: "If Christ were given and crucified a thousand times for us, even so it would all be for nothing if the Word of God did not come, share, and bestow it all on me."<sup>27</sup> We might note at this point that Scripture is Christocentric to Luther not merely in some embryonic typological sense, but he actually finds Christ in specific passages throughout Scripture.

<sup>24</sup> WA 12, 418.

<sup>25</sup> SL XIII, 1556.

<sup>26</sup> SL 3, 760.

<sup>27</sup> SL 20, 274.

<sup>23</sup> *Systema locorum theologicorum*, 1685 ed., I, 717.

3. The written and spoken Word draws its power from its union with the Holy Spirit, who is always operative through it. The Word of God and the Spirit of God are inseparable. When the Word is preached the Spirit is always operative. Paul preaches Christ not in persuasive words of men's wisdom but ἐν ἀποδείξει πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμεως (1 Cor. 2:4), and for this reason our faith stands in the power of God. Hence the work of the Spirit of God and the work of the Word of God are not two works, nor the composite of two different operations, but they are one work, a unity of operation, as our old theologians have called it (*unitas ἀποτελέσματος*, *unitas ἐνεργείας*). Quenstedt says:<sup>28</sup> "The Spirit and the Word are not only united themselves, but they act and work conjointly. Their action is one action and indivisible, the Spirit working as the efficient agent of the operation and the Word as the instrument or means of the

operation. Spirit and Word work together in accomplishing the one result of conversion and salvation." Quenstedt is trying to say that you cannot separate God's Word from God any more than you can separate my word from me, and he is merely echoing the words of Luther: "The union of the Word and the Holy Spirit is perpetual; as a result, wherever the Word is, the Spirit is present as well."<sup>29</sup> And neither Quenstedt nor his mentor have gone beyond our Savior, who said, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life." (John 6:63)

We have not always drawn all the comfort and practical implications which we should have drawn from our doctrine of the Word. Our Scriptures and our preaching and teaching which are drawn from these wells of salvation are God's Word. May God help us to treasure and make rich use of this comforting fact.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

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<sup>28</sup> *Systema*, 1685 ed., I, 183.