

## THEOLOGY OF THE WORD

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### Lecture 1.

By the way of introduction it will be useful to remind ourselves of aspects of a theology of the word of God to mankind, and of the long and complex story of his self-disclosure, which are well known among us and are basic to the doctrine de scriptura sacra. They have been succinctly expressed in the section on Holy Scripture in our Theses of Agreement.

We remind ourselves of the fact that Jesus Christ is the word, an eternal, creative and active word that became incarnate and in which God disclosed himself as judge and redeemer. Jesus Christ as that incarnate word of God, did not simply speak words about God, but he is that word, in his speaking and in his silence, in his deeds of healing and in his suffering, death and resurrection.

But Jesus knew himself to be essentially bound to the history of God's self-disclosure among the Old Testament people of God; and so there is a deep inner connection between Jesus as the Word and God's speaking in his mighty acts as recorded in the Old Testament, beginning with Creation, in the history of the patriarchs, in the great event with Moses at the burning bush, in the mighty exodus out of Egypt, in the establishment of the Covenant with Israel, and so on in judgement and salvation, in anger and in love, in demand and promise, throughout the history of this people to the very doorstep of the New Testament.

In this sense word of God should not immediately be identified with the book known as Holy Scripture. That word is prior to most of the record of that word in that book, it is wider, larger, more comprehensive.

But this word of self-disclosure in God's mighty acts is not in this form necessarily understandable and clear. So the interpretation of faith is needed, and here, particularly in the Old Testament, men of God, prophets and priests, receive the gift of insight and understanding, they interpret God's mighty acts, they show the significance of the oral tradition and proclamation that grew out of those acts, they are given a further gift, that of an immediate and further word, and so we get the written word. This in turn is the basis for the on-going word of preaching and teaching, and so the word becomes a personal address, claiming people, forgiving sins, promising salvation, it is an existential word.

It is the same in the case of the New Testament people of God. There is Jesus, there are his disciples, there is a new people in the making. There is at first no written record, but there is oral tradition, growing out of the words and works of Jesus. There is the decisive event of the resurrection, there is Pentecost, and apostles and disciples go out to proclaim God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, who is Lord. Again oral tradition and proclamation go hand in hand; then there are early collections of a written record of the great events connected with Jesus, but we possess none of them (e.g. Luke 1: 1 Cor. 15:1ff).

We have to wait till the fifties A.D. to get the New Testament message in written form from the pen of Paul, or generally rather from that of his secretary (e.g. the close of the letter to the Romans). And some twenty or thirty years later we get to synoptic gospels, and still later, the gospel of John. And meanwhile the oral tradition continues, and the oral preaching that springs from it. And this continuing preaching, too, is word of God and vehicle of God's self-disclosure. Its content is still one of claim and judgement, and the offer to rescue to man in the totality of his existence.

In this sense it links up with the message of the Old Testament, but the relationship between the two testaments is one of continuity and discontinuity, and in either case the ultimate self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ is criterion for the evaluation of the Old Testament written word in terms of possible and necessary continuity and inescapable discontinuity.

Nevertheless the written word of the Old Testament and of the New Testament is the authentic record of the various forms of God's self-disclosure, in his mighty acts, in oral tradition and proclamation, in Jesus Christ. And Jesus of Nazareth, declared to be Lord and Christ, is the climax of God's many ways of speaking of to men, and as such he is goal and purpose of all forms of word of God, and he constitutes the inner unity of all those forms. So the thrust of the written word of the Old Testament is towards Christ, and Christ is the centre of the written message of the New Testament, and all on-going preaching and teaching in the Christian Church can claim to be word of God and instrument of his on-going self-disclosure, if it is a true reflection in thrust and content on the written record which we call Holy Scripture. And the ever recurring theme of claim and offer, of God confronting men in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit reminds continually that in this written word we do not simply get anamnesis or biography, or history, but self-disclosure of God and the offer of an eternal hope. So the written word of God assumes a very special and central place in the many ways of God's speaking to men and women.

Now it is not easy to say why this written word is word of God. Nor is it less problematic when we speak of oral tradition and proclamation that preceded the written word as being word of God. Both forms of God's speaking are his Word. It will not do to say in Holy Scripture God speaks, in the oral tradition and oral word men speak. In both cases God uses human beings and human words and concepts and expressions as the vehicle for his word, not in a general kind of way, but in every word.

Hence we have to remind ourselves of a further aspect of a theology of the word which is a pre-supposition for all of us, that every word of the written word of Holy Scripture is word of God, at once human and divine. It is an immediate testimony of God's self-disclosure given to certain men, prophets and apostles, whom God chose for the purpose. Only in faith can we say this. And in the ongoing oral proclamation it is a derived, mediate testimony, provided it is grounded in, and bound to the immediate testimony of the written word.

We must now investigate more closely the question we put a moment ago, why this multi-form word is word of God. Naturally the elements of immediate closeness to the mighty acts of God, (in many cases there are eye-witnesses) and hence the authenticity and reliability, are of importance. But these elements as so very much else that we have noted so far, take us more readily into the human context where at best we could say, we have here primary sources. And when we remember the necessary element of interpretation of events, and oral tradition we seem again to be moving in a very human area. But there is one element, already referred to, which needs to be stressed: Prophets and apostles, men and women, preachers and interpreters, all speak from the conviction of faith, that God himself is present and speaking in his mighty words and acts of self-disclosure, e.g. the song of Miriam after God's people have witnessed God's mighty destruction of Pharaoh and his army in the sea of reeds (Ex. 15: 20f).

Does this mean, then, that it is the faith of the people of God that lifts this book, this Bible, beyond its so obvious human history and human context, and by that faith it becomes word of God? This could surely be regarded as wishful thinking. The Koran and the Book of Mormon after all owe their claim to be divine to the faith of Mohammedans and Mormons. Could the Bible itself give us some

objective indication which would indicate what is the basis for the Christian claim that the Bible is the Word of God?

Holy Scripture itself says almost nothing about its nature and origin. Two passages have generally been quoted: 2 Tim. 3:16 which refers to the Old Testament and says it is inspired by God; and 2 Pet. 1:2 of which says that "no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" On the basis of these texts the claim was made, that the Bible is Word of God and the Church expressed this in the doctrine of inspiration.

We must now examine this concept more closely. The first passage simply says that God's pneuma is present in the Old Testament, that this presence is to be found everywhere in its writings. In other words, the passage refers to a general fact, without giving us any information about the way in which this fact came to be. In passing it is worthwhile noting that Luther and his contemporaries never use this passage as a basis for the doctrine of inspiration. The same applies to those 4 passages of the Lutheran Confessions where 2 Tim. 3:16 is quoted. Usually the other passage, 2 Pet. 1:20f, is used in support of the doctrine of inspiration. On the other hand it is true to say that Christ and the apostles looked on the Old Testament as given through men by the Holy Spirit, so that in all the written word of the Old Testament we do not just hear the word of authentic interpreters or eye-witnesses, or of prophets who were called to proclaim or write the message of God, but we hear the speaking of the Holy Spirit. In this understanding Christ and the apostles are in agreement with the Jewish rabbis and theologians of their day. Perhaps that is why the New Testament says so little about the origin of the written word of God. Indeed it is striking that the one relevant passage, 2 Pet. 1:20f, should be found on the very periphery and edge of the New Testament canon. Undoubtedly this is the reason, too, why Luther says virtually nothing in explanation of the doctrine of inspiration.

All this, however, simply means that the early Christians simply adopted the Jewish doctrine of inspiration because they found it adequate for their own attitude to the Old Testament in regard to the origin of that written word. But surely this tacit adoption of a piece of Jewish and Rabbinic theology raises a real problem. Christ's attitude, and that of the apostles and of the writers of the New Testament WRITINGS, TO THE Old Testament is not just one of continuity, but, as we saw, of radical discontinuity. There is critical rejection, for example, by Christ, of the literalist legalism of the Pharisees, as shown by just one aspect which produced deep-going debate and conflict, the attitude to the sabbath. And ultimately we have the major point of difference in the understanding of the inspired message of the Old Testament, the question of the person of Jesus, his claim to divine authority, his claim to be Messiah and Son of God. Here the different understandings of the Old Testament message were irreconcilable. Clearly the Jewish doctrine of inspiration differs accordingly from the Christian understanding of that doctrine. 2 Tim. 3:16 about the presence of the Holy Spirit in the writings of the Old Testament must mean something else for St. Paul than it does for a Jewish rabbi. It was St. Paul who wrote in 1 Cor. 12: 3: "...no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit". In other words, for the Christians of the New Testament the doctrine of inspiration is, as such, taken over from the Jews, but its meaning and basis and purpose is Christ. If therefore there is continuity between the Old and the New Testament, then Christ is the reason; and he is the reason, too, if there is discontinuity. And if the written word of the Old Testament and the New Testament is Word of God, then it is because Christ is the thrust and centre and ultimate concern of God's self-disclosure in the Old and in the New Testament. And if we speak of the inspiration by which holy men of God wrote the writings that comprise these two Testaments, then we regard them as the Holy Spirit's writings, given through human writers, because in them we discover that message which only the Holy Spirit can give, that Jesus is Lord. That God is Creator we

can also read in the Koran; that the Messiah is coming, we also find in the Old Testament of the Jews, but that Jesus of Nazareth is that Messiah and Lord is to be found in the Christian Canon alone. So the Bible speaks of Christ, from its oldest bloodthirsty verse, the Song of Lamech: "I have slain a man" (Gen 4:23), right through to that great chorus in the vision of the seer of Patmos: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power..." (Rev.5: 12). Luther continually stresses this christocentricity of the Bible's content and message and repeatedly stresses that for that reason the Bible is the Holy Spirit's book, an inspired book even much more so than the witness to Christ, given by a martyr to his persecutors; by Christ's own definition that witness is also inspired by the Holy Spirit (Matt 10:20).

Now it is true that this christocentricity is not always immediately apparent in all parts of the Old and New Testament, and that from the angle of Christ some passages seem irrelevant, obsolete, not deserving to be in the canon. We remember Luther's negative assessment of the book of Esther in the Old Testament and of the letter of James in the New Testament. And we today would admit that very much in the criminal and civil codes in the books of Exodus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, and in the cultic codes in Exodus and Leviticus is understandable and relevant only within the *Sitz im Leben* of God's OT people, and the expression of God's revealed will at a certain point in the history of his speaking through inspired writers. But if we say with Luther that for us the Bible is the Holy Spirit's book because its content and thrust is Christ, then we are faced with the question whether such time-bound passages as the codes just mentioned preach Christ, and hence are canonical. These sections of the canon are clearly problematic for us, even if we allow for the critical way in which aspects of them were evaluated by Christ and St. Paul (Galatians) and declared as no longer applicable to the New Testament people of God. Are they therefore, to say it again, uncanonical, not word of God, if we take the thrust towards Christ as our criterion? Luther's attitude to the letter of James or the book of Revelation, is for us hardly a problem, but what of these OT sections, or of 2 and 3 John, or of the book of Jude or of 2 Peter, in the NT. Our answer to these problems can and must be quite unambiguous; these canonical passages and writings are part of the Holy Spirit's book, the Bible, even though the thrust towards Christ, on Christ as the centre of their message may appear to be absent or badly obscured. We cannot urge Christ against such sections of Holy Scripture. Even though we cannot detect Christ in many parts of the Bible, we must nevertheless believe that he's present there, maybe only indirectly, and that the whole of the OT and the NT proclaims Christ and that therefore the total canon is the Holy Spirit's book, that is, given by him through inspired human writers. For us that is an article of faith. This is, of course, vital for our exegesis, because it means that our understanding of Scripture must be based on our belief in the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Even the Law is in a relationship with Christ, notwithstanding the fact that we are not permitted to confuse it with the gospel. In the Law Christ performs his *opus alienum* his strange work, but only to drive us to take refuge in his *opus proprium*, his real work, his work of forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

The fact has clearly emerged by now that Holy Scripture as the Holy Spirit's book is a divine book, in its totality word of God.

But if we remember the point we made earlier about the many forms of this word, about oral tradition and proclamation as *föten* prior to the written word, about interpretation of God's speaking in his mighty acts, about the long and complex history of a variety of literary documents which gradually found their way into a collection which, as we will see in our next lecture, gradually became the canon of the Christian church, then we realize that the Bible is just as much word of men, written by men for men, written by men who were sinners, fallible and imperfect authors.

So the Bible is in all its words and parts human and divine. Naturally we cannot help thinking here of a parallel case, the christological formula of the Nicene Creed, which expresses in creedal form the mystery that Jesus Christ is totally divine and totally human. This parallel is not by chance, because there is a real analogy between the person of Christ as the word that we made flesh and the nature of Holy Scripture. Indeed the parallel is not by chance, since Christ is the Word. For that reason the same dangers and heresies confront us. If we tamper with the relationship between the divine and the human in Holy Scripture, as they do if we upset the relationship between the human and divine in the person of our incarnate Lord. There is the Nestorian danger that we stress the human side at the expense of the divine, as was the case in the period of Liberalism (1865-1917). And there is the Monophysite danger that we stress the divine side at the expense of the human, as was the case in Lutheran Orthodoxy in the 17th century and among fundamentalists in the 19th and 20th century, to steer a safe course between these two aberrations is no easy task, but we have no option but to show equal respect for both the divine and the human. Today, after the demise of Liberalism (it has not recovered from the devastation wrought upon it by Karl Barth; and on my account the Church today is so overwhelmed with socio-ethical problems, that a renaissance of Liberalism would seem to be an anachronism) -to reflect: today after the demise of Liberalism the danger in some sections of the Church is the Monophysite heresy which emphasizes the divine nature at the expense of the human and so is guilty of the further heresy of docetism. Luther likes to say that Holy Scripture is like Christ, the eternal word of God hidden in humanity.

Of course, we must push the parallel a little further and say that we have in Scripture not two scriptures, a word of God and a word of men, but one Scripture, at once wholly human and wholly divine. As in the case of the person of Christ, we may not mingle these two sides of Scripture into a kind of synthesis, nor may we divide and separate them from one another. The whole of Scripture is of one substance with all speaking of God; and the whole of Scripture is of one substance with the speaking and writing of human beings. And following the christological formula again, as in the person of Christ, it is the divinity which determines the meaning and goal and intention of Scripture and binds this strange and varied collection of writings together into a unity in Christ and towards Christ. The initiative lies with the Holy Spirit, at work in and through God's mighty acts of self-disclosure, granting us the gift of interpreting and recording those acts through the oral and written human word of prophets and apostles speaking his divine word in and through their speaking. It is God's gracious condescension that he enters the finite, immanent real of the human race and there communicates with men and women on their level. Mankind could not survive the presence of a *dens nudus*, says Luther, of a God totally and purely God in his full glory and majesty; and so he enters our world, veiled as it were, in the humility of the incarnation. That is the *theologia crucis*, as opposed to the *theologia gloriae*.

At this point we are confronted with the natural question: how does this condescension of God take place, what happens when the Holy Spirit speaks God's word in and under human words? Our fathers attempted to penetrate the 'how' of the event, although the New Testament itself, as we saw, is silent here. They spoke of the *impulsus ad scribendum*, the *suggestio rerum* and the *suggestio verborum*. This is not at all helpful, particularly since it takes us into the realm of psychology and, of course, the work of the Holy Spirit is not at all understandable in terms of human psychology. Certainly in some cases we can detect in the inspired human authors states of mind which are amenable to psychological investigation and diagnosis. There are visions, auditions, dreams, ecstasy, the consciousness of receiving a passage by dictation, there are the attacks of epilepsy in the prophet Ezechiel, there are parapsychological instances of hearing and sight and thought, and there is the completely normal and everyday situation of Amos and Hosea and

Jeremiah, of Paul who dictates letters to a secretary and then, as we do, subscribes his name to the completed copy, and of Luke who like someone writing a thesis in history, gathers up whatever material is available as a primary source, and then settles down to do his writing, ending with John whose book of Revelation is a ground vision. What a multiplicity of psychological states? In short, inspiration cannot be defined in any term of our knowledge of human psychology, it is utterly independent of any psychological state, even though it may occur in conjunction with any one or more of such states. There can be a consciousness of an impulsus and scribendum, but that is by the way and not essential. The process by which the Holy Spirit gives to a human being a word of divine self-disclosure for oral or written transmission remains a mystery of God's gracious condescension which defies theological definition.

So the word of God in the Bible is totally divine. What of its humanity, its obvious humanity the swaddling clothes in which the child Jesus is wrapped, as Luther described it? At this point many experience obvious discomfort. They are disturbed by human features which can hardly be argued away and with the best of intentions they set about to obliterate what they see as blemishes, so that the Holy Spirit's book may truly be that Holy Spirit's book, worthy of a theologia gloriae. In other words, the work of the Holy Spirit needs improvement and so they hurry to his aid and undertake to produce what in their language is the perfect book.

What is at the back of this concern? It appears that there are two aspects which need consideration here. Firstly there is the a priori concept of the perfect, inerrant super-book, that is, a theological theory which is set up as presupposition, before the book itself is permitted to show and manifest itself for what it really is. Consequently the a priori model becomes an over-riding principle and the book must conform. The pre-supposition is understandable. The argument is simple: it is an inspired, Holy Spirit's book and logically we ought therefore to transfer the attributes which are associated with God, like perfection, holiness, infallibility, truthfulness, to that book which is his book, his word. And indeed, these are attributes which we should associate with the Bible, because it is a divine book. But it is also a human book, and so a posteriori we should ask ourselves what in the light of the obvious human features which we discover there and which the Bible quite candidly and unquestioningly presents to us, perfection and truth and inerrancy must mean.

Secondly there is the problem of authority which we will deal with in a later lecture. For the time being it is enough to say that the Bible's authority is seen as linked with what that book is assumed to be. Once again: it is an inspired, Holy Spirit's book and especially the attributes of infallibility and truthfulness guarantee the authority of the book. God is its author, God does not lie, therefore in every detail every statement in the Bible is true. Therein lies its authority. So we have certainty and security.

Here the argument is a development of the a priori model of the perfect book. And once again: the Bible is a human book too, and somehow the concern for authority will have to include this fact.

As we just saw, inspiration plays a decisive role in the thinking of those who find the humanity of Scripture a problem. Very early in the Church this humanity was not problematical. Therefore interest concentrated on inspiration, more particularly on the "how". In Alexandria there was great interest among hellenistic heathen thinkers in sacred books, and theories of inspiration were developed, especially by Philo, a contemporary of Jesus. The inspired writers are mere passive instruments, used by God as one would play a musical instrument. In other words we have here a mechanical dictation, by which all thoughts, all words are given to those writers and they themselves play no role whatever in the process, they are the "hands", the "pens" of the dictating

Holy Spirit. This theological theory entered the Early Church, it was accepted by Augustine and so went on to the medieval Church, to Calvin, and then on to Lutheran Orthodoxy in the 17th century. The idea of the perfect book and the related idea of inerrancy are tied up with this background.

Luther himself never queried the formal matter of inspiration nor the traditional concept of inerrancy. For him, as for all his contemporaries, this was self-understood. There were however variations of understanding in regard to the “how” of inspiration and Luther himself does not appear to have held the more fantastic aspects of the Alexandria, Hellenistic, Jewish theories. On any accounts he introduced a new approach, which when further pursued, would have given the Church a new beginning in the doctrine of Scripture. I refer to the christocentric emphasis as a criterion for establishing the status of a biblical writing, as also the matter of canonical authority. As it was, there was nowhere at that time a doctrine on Holy Scripture. But Luther's approach in spite of his reception of the tradition of the Church was radically new and would inevitably have stressed the human side of the Bible. His trained enegetical eye already sensed aspects in the biblical writings which indicate the earliest hint of an emerging literary criticism, e.g. he complains about the chastic disorder of the content of Isaiah, he suggests a Deuteroisaiiah, he speaks of the slip in Matt. 27:9 as a slight mistake. And again we remind ourselves of his very critical attitude to whole books of the Bible.

Of course, we cannot expect to get answers from him on problems that emerged later and are still with us today. The problem of faith and natural science was just emerging, so Luther is still a member of the pre-Copernican age. Similarly the methods of historical and literary criticism had not been devised and so there is no point in seeking guidance there. He was aware of the discrepancies in the accounts of the Easter stories: he knew of the irreconcilable differences in the references to the stories of the OT patriarchs made by the martyr Stephen in Acts 7 in comparison with the accounts given in the Hebrew Bible. But he was not troubled by all this and passed it by without, however, attempting explanation or harmonisation.

It is unfortunate and regrettable that 17th century Lutheran Orthodoxy by-passed Luther's christocentric approach and went back beyond him and uncritically repeated the Augustinian, Alexandrian, Jewish concepts of inspiration and of the holy book. For them inspiration is a formal process, not an event determined by its content and thrust, Christ. What they teach is the gift of a super-book, WRITTEN BY “hands” and “pens”, transmitting super-human knowledge and divine super-human words, and so get a book of super-human perfection. Clearly there is no room in this monophysite scheme for any humanity, for human authorship, for all the limitations we have to associate with humanity. Inerrancy is absolute and truth becomes propositional, the presentation of cold facts and statements which are without exception literally “true”, no matter with what they are concerned, whether with salvation or history or a Weltbild or a chronology or a genealogy. And this formal, depersonalized approach to inspiration, to the content of the word of God, to the concept “truth”, and hence to the concept of “faith” (this becomes the formal acceptance of the “truths” of the Bible) and to the concept of “inerrancy”, is accentuated by the reception of the Aristotelian categories of thought, this in spite of Luther's clear rejection of the use of that philosophers, of all philosophers, to supply a frame-work for theology.

As a result harmonisation of differences in accounts of one and the same event had to be undertaken, for the sake of “inerrancy”. Osiander's attempt covering the four gospels is a splendid example: it is a harmony “in which the gospel story in the four gospels is so woven together into a whole, that no word of any gospel has been omitted, no alien word has been added no order

disturbed, and everything has been left in its place". So the work of the Holy Spirit is made presentable to fit in with the requirements of "inerrancy". So the human side was wiped out.

This theological theory of Orthodoxy re-appeared in the 19th and 20th century in the struggle against Liberal Theology, especially in Calvinist churches like Holland and Scotland and the United States. So the Fundamentalist Movement came into being with its slogan: believe in the Bible and expressed in a series of American paperbacks called "The Fundamentals" (1909). The authors were mainly Presbyterian and Baptists. The influence of this fundamentalist literature is clearly visible in the Lutheran dogmatics of Pieper and his colleagues. The stress is on the inerrant Book, not on the incarnate Christ, as basis for a theology of the Word.