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The Bible is the Authoritative Word of God

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The Bible is the Word of God. That is to say, as a result of God's direct inspiration the words of Scripture, though put to pen by people, are in fact the words of God Himself. Through propositions expressed in ordinary human language, the Creator of the universe has revealed Himself and intonation about His creatures. The Bible's words are true, clear, and powerful if only because they are *His* words, breathed from His mouth, as it were.

Not everyone believes this. In the 18th century Johann Semler called "the interchangeable use of the terms 'Scripture' and 'Word of God' theology's "root of all evil."¹ But might he have foreseen a claim like the one which ALC representatives to the LCMS made in 1980? They said ALC people

only want to say that all human formulations have a tentativeness within them. They do not want Christian doctrine to become the occasion for idolatry. Our trust is in God, not in human formulation about Him.²

Since the category of "human formulations" also includes the Bible, the ALC representatives thus raise perhaps the most basic contemporary question: not, *is* the Bible the Word of God, but *can it be* the Word of God? Can any human words be identified unequivocally as the words of God Himself? Today, most theologians worldwide would say no.

Why? It is impossible to give all the reasons here.³ We will dwell on but three of the reasons which came to a head in Karl Barth, the theologian of neoorthodoxy who had the greatest impact on conservative American Lutherans. Then I will suggest ideas for asserting today that the Bible is God's Word.

I. Barth and (some of) his Predecessors

Barth (1886 - 1968) called the Bible the Word of God, but only in a special sense. "Scripture is holy and the Word of God," he indicated, "because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness to divine revelation."⁴ For Barth, God so utterly transcended this world that His Word could not simply be available in a book. Rather, God's Word broke in when

A free divine decision is made. It then comes about that the Bible, the Bible *in concreto*, this or that biblical context . . . is taken and used as an instrument in the hand of God, i.e., it speaks to and is heard by us as the authentic witness to divine revelation and is therefore present as the Word of God.⁵

The Bible served as an occasion for encounter with God when God pleased. Barth said the Bible was authoritative for what it *did*, not for what it *was*. He even said the prophets and apostles "can be at fault in every word, and have been at fault in every word, and yet . . . being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they still have spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word,"⁶ For Barth, Scripture was a contact - point for the dynamic Word of God to reach people. But Scripture was not the Word of God, nor could it be.

The Influence of Kant.

Barth had accepted the agnosticism of Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804). In an effort to mediate between the two dominant philosophical movements of his day, radical empiricism on one hand and rationalism on the other hand, Kant said our organs of sense provide us with sensory stimulation and our minds impose structure, order, and regularity on the stimuli. We cannot know things as they are apart from our minds, but only as our minds provide them with structure, order, and regularity. Therefore the idea of revelation would be nonsense. The content which would be revealed would lack structure, order, and regularity, and hence would be fundamentally unknowable. Kant left no room for revelation of God in ordinary language Barth and other neoorthodox theologians had Kant in the backs of their minds when they taught that God's Word was a personal encounter, not a revelation of information.⁷ The Bible could not be the Word of God in a Kantian view because it was information about the unknowable in the structuring category of language.

Historical Criticism.

Modern historical method raised a similar challenge to the Bible as the Word of God. Near the turn of the 20th century Ernst Troeltsch (1865 - 1923) noted that historical accounts are never completely certain, only probable, and can always be revised. He said every event is analogous to every other, and that all events fit into a context. These ideas enabled historians to form judgments and interpretations. But, as Troeltsch realized, they spelled disaster for the traditional Christian faith. Biblical history was also subjected to relentless criticism at the hands of scholars who ruled out the prospect of supernatural intervention in the world. Yet these same scholars, as human beings, had only limited perspective and knowledge, and therefore kept revising their own interpretations. Again the question arose: how can events in the world around us tell us anything about God?⁸

Barth tried to secure faith from the uncertainties of critical history, even though he agreed with most of Troeltsch's principles. Against Troeltsch, he did affirm that God's revelation broke into history in the Incarnation. Still, he saw no reason why Scripture should be immune to criticism. Let historians expose, error upon error. Barth's faith remained unshaken. They could only criticize the Bible; they could not get their hands on the Word of God, the personal revelatory encounter which would happen through the Bible at God's good pleasure.⁹ For Barth, the Bible could not be the Word of God because the Word of a transcendent God simply would not be subject to the kind of criticism to which the Bible, a human writing, was so obviously prone.

Classic Reformed Theology.

It might be surprising to list classic Reformed theology as yet another factor separating the Bible from the Word of God, but Barth himself called attention to it. Once he said his premises were

the Old Testament and the tradition of the Reformed Churches. As a Reformed Churchman - and not only, I think, as such - I must keep my sure distance from the Lutheran *est* and the Lutheran type of *assurance of salvation*.¹⁰

Consider assurance of salvation in Calvinism. It cannot come from the Bible. If I am reprobate (elect to damnation), though I read Biblical promises of grace, God doesn't mean to offer me grace. For me, He designs the Gospel call as "a savour of death and the ground of a severer condemnation."¹¹ Therefore, passages teaching universal grace are *not* the Word of God - not as we use the phrase. They are *not true*. God wants all men to be saved, says Scripture, but if I am reprobate God doesn't want me to be saved.¹²

Further, for Calvin the Holy Spirit does not always work to save through the Gospel; rather, the Spirit bestows His special illumination only on some of those who hear the Word preached.¹³ This concept stands in contrast to the classic Lutheran insistence that the Word which God speaks always brings God with it.¹⁴ In practice, Barth's idea that Scripture becomes the Word of God when God so wills does not differ much from Calvin's view that the Holy Spirit only deigns at times to work graciously through the Word. In both cases, the important work of God is the one that occurs *now*, one that does not necessarily accompany the Bible.¹⁵ In neither case can the Bible in all its parts be the ultimate Word of God because God, in His sovereign will, does not always choose to invest it with attributes of God's Word, such as unqualified veracity and saving power.

II. Asserting in our day that the Holy Bible is the Word of God

There is a parallel here with the Incarnation.

Christ is God in the flesh. The Bible is the Word of God given through the pens of men. It too is divine and human. Just as in the Person of Christ the divine and human natures are distinct but not separate (so that the human blood of Jesus has the divine power to cleanse from sin, 1 Jn. 1:7), so the human words of the Bible are God's words and therefore His truth. The finite *is* capable of the infinite!

This point stands out as crucial because Barth (and his antecedents) assumed "that there is an antithesis between divinity and humanity, the infinite and the finite."¹⁶ With this premise, one easily concludes that since the Bible is a human book, it should be subject to criticism. But the Bible is God's Word, and so beyond criticism. "Let God be true though every man be false" (Rom. 3:4). Charging Scripture with error is as futile as sifting through the Gospels trying to catch Jesus in some sin. We know He is the sinless Son of God on the basis of clear texts which teach this doctrine; we know Scripture is God's Word on the basis of similarly clear passages.¹⁷

The Bible is clear on this point.

After spending so much time on the question whether the Bible can be the Word of God, we must add that no such question exists in Scripture itself. The Bible depicts human words as able to bear God's truth: If we "continue" in Jesus' words, He promised that we will "know the truth" ([Jn 8:31 - 32](#); see [2 Tim. 1:13](#) and [3:7](#)). Scripture says God reveals not only Himself, but also information about Himself: Paul wrote that his Gospel "came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" ([Gal. 1:12](#)). And many passages attest that God has spoken the words of Scripture. In addition to the usually-cited texts, notice how OT quotations are introduced in the NT. Jesus said David was "inspired by the Spirit" ([Mt. 22:43](#)). In Acts 1, Peter told his brethren, "the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David" (v. 16). [Heb. 3:7](#) introduced a psalm quote with the words, "as the Holy Spirit says." In short, Scripture has no problem with the Bible as the Word of God; only human reason does.

Human reason cannot enhance Scriptural authority, but it can head off some attacks on the Bible as the Word of God. We dare not set forth extra-Biblical rationalizations of what God's Word must be like, then expect the Bible to live up to them. For instance, we should not speculate that God *had* to commit His Word to writing (He didn't), or that God's Word can never conflict with science as we know it (science could be wrong), or that the Word must enable us to meet some abstract standard of certainty (Christian certainty is a certainty of faith which rests content with God's truth as He gives it), or that one must be a Christian before he will recognize that the Bible is God's Word (this makes it appear that individual salvation is but a means to solving a basic problem of ignorance. The demons believe, i.e., know, and shudder!).

We may use God-given reason to counter destructive notions, though. For example, sober realism might expose Kant's theory of knowledge for what it is - an attempt to base objectivity on subjectivity.¹⁸ In the Biblical account, God created an orderly world. Its order is independent of the human faculty of thought. We should capitalize on the apologetic value of reason to clear away potential objections to Scripture.

Scripture has power.

In most cases, of course, people will not care much about Biblical authority until they become Christians. So we must not forget that the Word is dynamic: "He (God) sent forth His Word, and healed them, and delivered them from destruction" (Ps. 107:20). The Word is not just God *having spoken* at some time in the, past, but God *still speaking and working*.

God gave us His Word chiefly to make us "wise unto salvation" ([2 Tim. 3:15](#)). Paul noted that "whatever was written in former days was written for our learning, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Jesus affirmed that His gracious words "are Spirit and life" ([Jn. 6:63](#)); they convey the Holy Spirit and life. Anyone hankering for an encounter with God need not resort to Barth's near-mysticism. He can have it via the Bible's message of Law and Gospel. Not only do God's promises depict treasures Christ won on the cross; not only do they excite faith in those blessings and treasures as remote objects; they actually *impart* forgiveness, life, and salvation to us. Jesus made His disciples clean by the Word ([Jn. 15:3](#)). Peter said we are born anew by the living Word ([1 Pet. 1:23](#)). James taught that the Word is able to save ([Jas. 1:21](#)). This Word has power as God's Word, a precious, wonderful gift that goes on giving and giving and giving. It is not mere communication, but transportation. It *brings* us a gracious God.¹⁹ This is the beauty of having the Word from God as we do; it is what the world and the devil always seek to take away from us.

Conclusion

In a Bible class an individual criticized an aspect of the Church Growth movement on the basis of Scripture. One of the other people present objected. He did not fault the interpretation or application. Rather, he said, "That's a theological analysis. We're talking here about practical considerations." Wow! How sobering! Even as we guard against the "Barths" of this world and age, asserting that the Bible is the Word of God, we still can lose the significance of this fact over "practical considerations."

All people always ought to hear and obey what God, their Creator and Ruler, says. The matter does not end here, though. Sin rears its ugly head. Sinners want no part of God's Word, no matter how much they already know about it. Our flesh plays up what we think on the basis of what we see, from the intellectual to the "practical," in an effort to drown Him out. But the Lord will not be silenced. In His boundless love, the Savior refuses to keep His hard-won victory to Himself. He speaks His Word with authority, not as men speak. This authority is not only commanding for our obedience but compelling for our trust. The Holy Spirit accompanies the Christ-centered Word into human hearts, making the unwilling willing. God creates faith through His Word. And faith draws its life from the Word. That faith knows that God's Word is all that matters, and that His Word to us is "yes" in Jesus Christ. So regardless of the difficulties confronting that faith - be they sophisticated sneers, commonsense considerations, or the dread of death - it resolutely ignores sight and clings to the authoritative Word of a faithful God. It holds to Scripture.

Notes

1. Semler's dictum provides the point of departure for Samuel H. Nafzger's helpful essay, "Scripture and Word of God," *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. by John Reumann in collaboration with Samuel H. Nafzger and Harold H. Ditmanson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 107 - 126.
2. "Toward Understanding One Another," Appendix A in *The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod: A Statement of Doctrinal Differences* (N.p., 1980), p. 22. -
3. A variety of issues treated in passing or not at all in the present paper are taken up in the volume *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed by Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). See especially "Adequacy of Language and Accomodation" by Vern S. Poythress (pp. 349 - 376) with responses by Paul D. Feinberg (pp. 377 - 390) and Kurt E. Marquart (pp. 391 - 405); "Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth to Hermeneutics" by John S. Feinberg (pp. 1 - 50) ,with respoaes by Norman L. Geisler (pp. 51 - 55) and W. David Beck (pp. 57 - 67); and "Philosophical Presuppositions Affecting Biblical Hermeneutics" by Winfried Corduan (pp. 493 - 513) with responses by R. C. Sproul (pp. 515 - 521) and John F. Johnson (pp. 523 - 531). Norman Geisler has provided a number of helpful analyses in just this regard, including two essays, "The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate," *The Living and Abiding Word of God: Essays in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz*, ed. by Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns', 1983), pp. 225 - 236; "Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errency," *Inerrancy*, ed. by Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 307 - 334; and a volume he edited, *Biblical Errancy: An Analysis of its Philosophical Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).
4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, tr. and ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 457.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 530.
6. *Ibid.* A penetrating analysis of Barth and others is provided by Robert Preus, "The Doctrine of Revelation in Contemporary Theology," *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, ed. by John Warwick Montgomery, second expanded edition (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1973), 2:18 - 29.
7. A summary of Kant's position, with application to Biblical authority, is offered by W. David Beck, "Agnosticism: Kant," *Biblical Errancy*, pp. 53 - 78. Other critiques of Kant may be found in Beck, "Response," *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, pp. 64 - 67 and James I. Packer, "The Adequacy of Human Language," *Inerrancy*, pp. 204 - 205 and 215 - 16. The way neoorthodox theology, and Emil Brunner in particular, appropriated Kant's categories is further discussed in Richard A. Muller, "Christ - The Revelation of the Revealer? Brunner and Reformed Orthodoxy on the Doctrine of the Word of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (Sept. 1983): 307 - 319.
8. See Van Harvey's description of Troeltsch's nagging issues in *The Historian and the Believer; The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) pp. 3 - 37. The degree to which modern historical consciousness shapes much of contemporary American Lutheran theology ought to be evident from a couple of quotes. Carl E. Braaten has written, "Luther held to the univocal sense of scripture; basically he believed that its literal meaning is identical with its historical content. In other words, things happened exactly as they were written. Today it is impossible to assume the literal historicity of all things recorded," *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 19. And Duane A. Priebe has pointed out that in Luther's case "it was still possible for him to understand his own theology as essentially identical with the theology of the biblical texts, without a strong sense of historical distance. The enlightenment and the subsequent development of historical methodology, coupled with the emergence of historical consciousness in its modern form, have made us much more aware of historical relativity and historical distance", "Theology and Hermeneutics," *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, p. 301.
9. Van Harvey chides the neoorthodox: "It is impossible to claim at one and the same time. . . that Christianity is founded on an interpretation of a concrete historical event and that no historical judgments are relevant to its truth or falsity. One cannot have historicity without risk" (p. 18). It is tempting, though, as shown by a little-noticed exchange several years ago between 2 professors at a theological institution which owed its existence to a commitment to historical criticism (Seminex). Reviewing Edgar Krentz's book on *The Historical Critical Method*, Edward Schroeder criticized Krentz for not going far enough. Instead of looking for a limited "safe zone" where God might still operate in history, Schroeder advocated a search for a different kind of history, one which has been through the critical fires and

has survived, namely, Easter. Krentz responded, in effect, that Schroeder in his clever and equivocating proposal yearned for historicity without risk. He scored Schroeder for saying precisely nothing about "how historical method is useful in the study of the 'post-critical' Easter event," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 6 (Oct. 1979): 316; see the whole discussion, pp. 308 - 317.

10. Karl Barth, "The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry," *The Word of God and The Word of Man*, tr. by Douglas Norton (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 217, emphasis original.

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. by Henry Beveridge, reprint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:247 (III xxiv 8).

12. Calvin knew he might be charged with making God appear to be a liar, or, at best, an equivocator: "Still, it cannot be said that he acts deceitfully, for though the external word only renders those who hear it, and do not obey it, inexcusable, it is still truly regarded as an evidence of the grace by which he reconciles men to himself" (*ibid.*, p. 254 - III xxiv 15). But in Calvin's theology God never intended to offer grace to the reprobate. Calvin thus raises a self-contradiction when he depicts one's rejection of grace in the gospel as "the ground of a severer condemnation." All the universal call can be for the reprobate is "a savour of death" - though at face value it claims to be just the opposite. Again: "But if it is so (you will say), little faith can be put in the Gospel promises, which, in testifying concerning the will of God, declare that he wills what is contrary to his inviolable decree," i.e., promising grace to all people though he has elected some to damnation. "Not at all; for however universal the promises of salvation may be, there is no discrepancy between them and the predestination of the reprobate, provided we attend to their effect" (*ibid.*, p. 256 - III xxiv 17, emphasis added). The last clause seems to entail the assumption that what God wills must unyieldingly come to pass, or to appeal outright to human experience ("experience shows that this will, for the repentance of those whom he invites to himself, is not such as to make him touch all their hearts" - *ibid.*, p. 254 - III xxiv 15), or both. It should be noted that in either case, Calvin is not treating Scripture as the supremely authoritative Word of God. Luther too spoke of God's hidden will, but by that he meant a will truly hidden, and one which in no way contradicted His revealed will which promises universal grace. In fact, in the very section of *The Bondage of the Will* in which he discussed the hidden God, Luther made it clear that Ez. 18:23 is a sure ("If those Divine promises did not stand firm, to raise up consciences tormented with a sense of sin and terrified by fear of death and judgment, what place would there be for pardon or hope?") and universal (it "is concerned only to proclaim and offer to the world the mercy of God") promise - *The Bondage of the Will*, tr. and ed. by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Revell, 1957), pp. 167, 169.

13. See, for instance, *Institutes*, p 247 (III xxiv 8).

14. David Hollaz summarized this view: "For if the Holy Spirit would be separated from the Word of God, it would not be the Word of God, or the Word of the Spirit, but it would be a human word" - quoted in Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), p. 184. The idea of the saving efficacy of the Word, however, can be traced to Luther: "Holy Scripture, especially the New Testament, always inculcates faith in Christ and magnificently proclaims Him" (LW 26, 146). Lutheran theology consistently refused to distinguish between the "inner" and "outer" word in Scripture. See Preus, *Inspiration*, pp. 175 - 176 and Bengt Haeggglund, "The Theology of the Word in John Gerhard," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 (Apr. - July 1982): 209 - 217.

15. I have dwelt on Barth's roots in Reformed theology at some length because nowadays it is a shibboleth in many circles to hold that Calvin identified Scripture with the Word of God more closely than Luther did. This caricature often finds its way into textbooks. E.g., *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert A. King (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 95: "Where Luther and Calvin differ is in their interpretation of the relation between scripture and the Word of God. For Luther, as we have seen, Jesus Christ is the center of scripture, and scripture is gospel only insofar as it points to him. Although Calvin's theology seems to have the same center as Luther's - the Word of God in Jesus Christ - at times the object of faith (what is revealed) seems to be the formal authority of scripture rather than scripture's witness to Jesus Christ."

16. Paul Feinberg, "Response," *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, p. 386. Operating with this kind of premise, the wedge has been driven between "two dimensions" of Scripture perhaps most pointedly in recent American Lutheran theology by Paul G. Bretscher, *After the Purifying* (River Forest: Lutheran Education Association, 1975), pp. 86 - 87 et passim.

17. This point has been made very well by Kurt Marquart. See his "Response," *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, pp. 399 - 400, and *Anatomy of an Explosion: Missouri in Lutheran Perspective* (Ft. Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977), p. 122. It is crucial to the interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God in all its parts that one passage or set of passages not be permitted to mitigate the clear sense of another text or series of texts,

even if this procedure leaves logical lacunae in the interpreter's understanding. The Lutheran Confessions praised Abraham for not allowing the most important aspect of God's revelation (the promise of the Savior) to contravene anything else God had said, such as the command to kill Isaac, which seemed to conflict directly with the Gospel (FC SD VII 46). Robert Preus shows that this was the hermeneutic of Luther himself in "Luther and the Doctrine of Justification," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48 (Jan. 1984) : 1 - 15.

18. See Beck, "Agnosticism: Kant," pp. 76 - 78.

19. This old Lutheran emphasis has particular applicability to neoorthodox views of revelation and the Word of God. See Preus, "The Doctrine of Revelation", *passim*.

Biblical References

1 Jn. 1:7 - But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Rom. 3:4 - Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge."

Jn 8:31 - 32 - To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

2 Tim. 1:13 - What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus.

2 Tim. 3:7 - always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.

Gal. 1:12 - I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

Mt. 22:43 - He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,

Heb. 3:7 - So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice,

2 Tim. 3:15 - and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Jn. 6:63 - The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.

Jn. 15:3 - You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

1 Pet. 1:23 - For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

Jas. 1:21 - Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

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