

HOW DOES THE BIBLE RELATE TO THE WORD OF GOD? – GORDON OLIVER

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HEARERS FIRST

If the Bible is the 'word of God' is it God's first word, only word, last word? Christians today, much as Christians in the past, mostly experience the Bible as *spoken* word. They are much more likely to hear and sing the words of Scripture in worship and see its stories in pictures, drama and film than to read it themselves. When the Bible and pastoral practice come together they meet in the lively interactions of speech, song, stories and dramas that are taking place in the present.

The Bible is full of references to the *spoken* word – from the 'and God said' of the creation stories, 'God said to Moses' in Leviticus, the calls of prophets, warnings to kings, visitations by angels, new speaking at Pentecost, to the proclamation of the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation. Even the more obviously 'written' parts of the Bible – such as the New Testament epistles – are best thought of as words 'spoken from a distance'. The prologue to John is closely structured in parallel with the opening of Genesis with its, 'in the beginning was the Word (brilliantly paraphrased in the Scouse Gospel as 'Affore God did owt 'e 'ad summat to say.')

The Bible comes as written word because first it was spoken word and not the other way round. The *written* word is intended to preserve the 'first speaking of the word of God so that all subsequent speaking of the word can be tested against it.' The act of writing the word establishes the text as the agreed basis from which the interpretations of the writers and the readers can begin their conversation. In other words, when we are dealing with Scripture we need to understand that there must be a dynamic relationship between speech and text – between what is received from the past and what is contributed by the present. This is even more important when we realise that the Bible only ever comes to new generations as translated, and therefore as interpreted, text.

PRIORITY OF WRITTEN WORD

It would be quite wrong, however, to draw too strong a contrast between the Bible as spoken word and written word – the meanings of text with its lively interplay of poetry, history, metaphor, simile, anecdote, reflection ... can be almost as labile as those of live speech. Indeed, for Scripture the primacy between speech and text must belong to the text because that is the foundation of the 'true speaking' in prayer, worship and testimony. This primacy of the written text means that people are not free to make up their own version of the story of faith, without reference to the Bible, and claim fairly that the result can be called 'Christian'. Claims for versions of the human story to be considered as genuinely Christian must allow themselves to be heard and evaluated by reference to the Bible. Put bluntly, accepting the Bible as 'holy Scripture' is basic to Christian identity. This means that we have to consider how the word of God is revealed through the Bible. I will

highlight three traditional ways of understanding this, then discuss a more recent one.

1. The Bible is the Word of God

This first position makes the Bible and the Word of God identical. The contents and the canon of the Bible came into their present shape through people who were specially inspired by God for this purpose. 2 Timothy 3.16 – ‘all scripture is inspired by God’ (NRSV) – is taken to apply literally to both the Old and New Testaments. The theological argument that backs this up includes the notion that if the writers were inspired by God, since God is free from fault they must have been free from error. A linkage is established between Jesus’ testimony in John 8.26; 12.49; 17.8 that the words he speaks are given to him by the Father, and his promise that ‘when the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth’ (John 16.13). This is interpreted as the promise that just as the words of Jesus are divine words, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, the words of Jesus’ disciples that find their way into Scripture will also be the words of God.

Timothy Ward emphasises that what is true of the New Testament is also true of the Old Testament, ‘for Jesus, the Old Testament is not just historically true. It is also ... of divine origin, in the strong sense of that claim: *whatever it says is what God says.*¹ Ward presents this argument in the context of a wider discussion about what it means to understand the Bible in the light of ‘speech-act’ theory. Within this he is keen to rely on a very strong notion of the sovereignty of God working in the lives of the Bible writers, translators and interpreters. Ward’s approach leads him to insist on notions of the inerrancy of the Bible that were fully worked out in the context of the science versus Scripture debates of the nineteenth century.

This approach to describing how the word of God comes through Scripture has the merit of being straightforward, direct, understandable. It treats the Bible fully as *holy* Scripture and it puts the obligation on the hearer to take the words of Scripture seriously. But it also raises questions when it comes to interpreting passages where God is presented as requiring attitudes and practices that most people today would regard as racist, sexist, discriminatory, violent. Interpreting these passages is not just a technical task, but a theological and ethical one. Questions arise such as, ‘if the words of the Bible are the words of God, what kind of God is speaking here?’ ‘If different groups of people hear the word of God differently who decides whose hearing is right?’

2. The Bible Reveals the Word of God

This position also associates the Bible with the coming of the word of God, but does not make them identical. The argument is that the Bible *taken as a whole* is inspired by the Holy Spirit and so reveals the word of God. There is no claim that the words of Scripture and the call of God for now are necessarily the same.

The idea that the Bible reveals the word of God, and therefore the will of God, provides the bedrock for discovering what Christians believe – the Bible is the foundation of Christian doctrine, mission, prayer, spirituality, action. This can be explored intellectually by looking at the different ways different parts of the Bible have been used in history. But there is a mystical or spiritual element too, because for ordinary believers the dominant mode of engaging Scripture is in the context of shared worship, spirituality and witness. Fair enough, but the idea that the Bible *reveals* the word of God can no more escape from the challenge of Old Testament texts about God requiring violence than can the idea that the words of the Bible are the words of God.

One means of handling this is the idea of progressive revelation – the notion that the Old Testament witnesses to ‘primitive’ understandings of the character of God whereas the later parts of Scripture testify to truer understandings. This raises as many questions as it solves, including about the consistency of the character of God; about whether people do progress from ‘primitive’ to more sophisticated ideas of God over time; and whether it is true that people are justified in their claims to be holy because they say their actions accord with the will of God. Nevertheless, this theory does take a broader, more expansive view of the biblical text and is less concerned with the way actual words of Scripture are interpreted. This does not, of course, mean that what the text says can be disregarded. But it does mean that when people make a truth claim based on a particular passage, they will take care to hear what else Scripture has to say about it. They will also want to know whether other parts of Scripture *that do not directly mention the topic under discussion* may also have something important to say.

3. *The Bible Contains the Word of God*

A can contains tomato soup and nothing else. A box contains pencils, but also crayons and chewing gum. The idea that the Bible contains the word of God alongside a lot of other things reflects the way most people use the Bible in practice. One of the ‘historic formularies’ of the Church of England steers clear of the idea that the Bible *is in itself* the word of God, declaring that it ‘*containeth* all things necessary to salvation’ (Article VI) and goes on to accept that although the parts of the Old Testament relating to ceremonies and rites ‘do not bind Christian men’ [sic] the moral law does (Article VII). Lest we imagine that the Articles hold a floppy idea of the authority of Scripture we need to note that Article VI goes on to say that ‘whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby is not required to be believed of any man’.²

But there are two other meanings of *contains* to consider. First, cell 25 contains prisoner Bloggs. All of prisoner Bloggs is in cell 25. Applied to our discussion this leads us to question, ‘if not all of the Bible is the word of God, can we nevertheless say that *all* of God’s word is found in the Bible?’ The answer of most parts of church tradition is an unqualified ‘yes’. Although God and therefore God’s word is independent of the Bible, God has chosen to reveal his full character through Scripture.

This notion that the Bible *contains* the word of God in the sense that God’s definitive self revelation, including its fullness and focus in Jesus Christ, is limited to what can be found in Scripture is hugely important. It is the foundation idea behind the development and fixing of the canon of Scripture and the energy source for claims about the authority of Scripture. The authority of the Bible derives from God whose word it contains, and from the solidarity of present day Christians with the early communities of believers who collected, edited and wrote it, not from some quasi-magical property of the text itself.

The final meaning of *contains* can be shown by saying that a country contains communities of people within its borders whose common life depends for their well-being on attitudes of openness, hospitality, generosity of spirit – especially where traditions are being lived and celebrated by incomers that are foreign to the experience of the indigenous peoples. This meaning of *contains* expects that engagement with Scripture will be freely chosen, attitudinally open, interactive – but it does not carry with it the notion that the Bible is less foundational for faith than the other understandings of *contains*.

It should be clear that *any* claimed linkage between the Bible and the word of God

is a faith claim, not a technical literary one or even a canonical ecclesiastical one. This faith claim takes ordinary human evidence and does two things with it. First, it assumes that the Bible exists because God has something to say that people have responded to in the past. Second, it assumes that through Scripture God will have something definitive *and similar* to say to people today. Whichever metaphor is used to describe the relation between the Bible and the word of God must hold these two aspects of this faith claim together. Metaphors are important because they are suggestive and open-ended rather than definitive and final. Many of the theological problems between people who hold different views of the relation between the Bible and the word of God centre round the hard question of where symbolic speech such as metaphor ends and where definitive speech begins.

SCRIPTURE AS SACRAMENT

Stephen Wright uses the theological model of *sacrament* to describe the relation between the Bible and the speaking of God. A sacrament is a kind of open container within which the drama of holy words, divine gift and human actions are held together. It is also an 'effective action' in the sense that it is intended to deliver what it symbolises. Sacraments are not magic. They do not 'work' apart from the speaking of God and the response of faith. The model of sacrament as a container holding together different sorts of reality has possibilities for helping us understand the relation between hearing the words of Scripture and receiving the word of God. Wright explores the affirmation, 'This is the word of the Lord' at the end of Bible readings in church: 'Understood ... as sacramental language, "This is the word of the Lord" is precisely the *saviour* of Scripture from the irrelevance and offensiveness into which it would inevitably sink without it. It is only because we say *sacramentally* that the Bible is the word of the Lord that we can *both* continue to use it as formative and central to Christian life and worship, *and* treat it seriously as a collection of human documents ... Treated ... as a sacramental affirmation which heightens the possible *contrast* between what Scripture says and what God says, "This is the word of the Lord" affirms the gracious truth that God continues to speak through an amazing variety of fallible human view- points.'³

Wright expresses an important principle. When you bring together the faith commitment that the Bible is or reveals or contains the word of God with the question about how this can happen, you need a particular way of talking about it. This must be able to hold together comparisons and parallels between Scripture and the experience of the hearer with possibilities of contrast, confusion and mystery.

The very idea of the word or the speaking of God carries the invitation to engage in conversation that can lead somewhere new with resources for getting there. This gives the clue to the kind of interpretive framework within which the Bible can be freed to offer guidance about God's call to holy living that is expressed in practical action. By choosing to speak at all God chooses to take risks about where the conversation may lead. Sharing in that risk is part of what it means to be human and biblical at the same time.

NOTES

1. T Ward, 'The Bible and How It Works', in P Gardner and C Green, *Fanning the Flame :Bible, Cross and Mission* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2003), pp. 17–41 (my italics).
2. Thirty Nine Articles of Religion VI and VII, with *Book of Common Prayer*.
3. SI Wright, 'The Bible as Sacrament', *Anvil* 19.2 (2002), p. 81.

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