

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE WORD OF GOD

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Christian faith is dependent on the idea that God speaks, that God communicates with people, revealing himself and his works. Christian thought has traditionally identified that speech as Scripture, and this identification has become perhaps the most distinctive mark of evangelical Christianity today. The evangelical position is driven by the conviction that God himself speaks in the Scriptures, that what Paul says of “all Scripture” in 2 Timothy 3.16 is true of the whole Bible, that the Scriptures are inspired by God. This essay aims to investigate the *structure* and *meaning* of this conviction in relation to the New Testament. The first section addresses the rationale and structure behind this understanding of Scripture: why it is right to understand the New Testament as the word of God. The second section discusses the meaning of this conclusion: what it means for scripture to be the word of God.

I

The evangelical understanding of Scripture is based on the apostles and their authoritative witness to God’s work in Jesus. Their witness is authoritative because it was an *authorised* witness. The apostles were authorised by Jesus to be his witnesses. This authorisation is central to the accounts of Jesus’ appearances to his disciples after his resurrection. They were to be his witnesses to all nations (Matt. 28:16-20; Lk. 24:47-48; Jn 20:21). This witness was to be under the teaching and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who had been promised by Jesus before his death and after his resurrection (Jn 14:26; 16:12-13; Acts 1:8), and who was sent by the ascended Lord to his church (Jn 20:21; Acts 2:1-33). Jesus envisaged people coming to believe in him through this apostolic witness (Jn 17:20). This commissioning as authorised witnesses was acknowledged by the apostles (e.g. Acts 5:32). Although in a different position, divine authorisation was also central to the apostle Paul’s conviction of his vocation to bring the gospel to the gentiles (Rom. 1:1-6; 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 11:23; 2 Cor. 2:17; 5:18-21; Gal. 1:12, 16; Col. 1:25; 1 Thess. 2:4, 13; 2 Tim. 1:11; Tit. 1:1-3).

The apostles’ witness is authoritative also because of the unique relationship of the apostles to Jesus: they were *eyewitnesses*. The significance of this unique relationship is noted by both John (1 Jn 1:1-5) and Luke (Lk. 1:1-4). It was this unique knowledge of Jesus that put the apostles in a position to testify to him, and so they were authorised for that task. They were commanded by Jesus to testify because they had been with him from the beginning (Jn 15:26-7). The apostles were the authorised witnesses to Jesus. Their testimony to Jesus is the apostolic gospel.

Within the New Testament it is clear that from the beginning this authorised apostolic testimony to Jesus, the apostolic gospel, was received by the early church and recognised by the apostles themselves as *the word of God*. The Thessalonians received Paul’s testimony “not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word” (1 Thess. 2:13); the word of faith proclaimed by the apostles stands beside the word of God in the Law that “is near you” (Rom. 10:8); Paul expects anyone who has spiritual powers to acknowledge, “that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37-8); Paul and his companions are not “peddlers of God’s word” (2

Cor. 2:17); and Peter writes that, “You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God,” which “is the gospel that was announced to you” (1 Pet. 1:23-25) and says that the commandment of Jesus was “spoken through your apostles” (2 Pet. 3:2). Thus the written letters of the apostle rightly demand obedience (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:14). The apostolic proclamation of Jesus is not simply a human word, but a divine word with divine authority.

See also the numerous references to the spread of the gospel in the book of Acts, where the message is frequently identified with the word of God: 4:4; 6:7; 8:4, 14; 13:26, 49; 14:3; 15:7; 20:32. The paradigm of understanding scripture associated with Karl Barth, which emphasises that Jesus is the Word of God and sees the New Testament as primarily a witness to this word, can run the risk of not doing justice to this powerful testimony within the New Testament of the apostolic gospel being regarded as the word of God (this point is well made by Peter Jensen in *The Revelation of God*ⁱ). While defending the crucial point that Jesus preeminently reveals God, this paradigm tends to unhappily distance the New Testament documents from the category of “word of God” somewhat. The right balance is struck by Oliver O’Donovan: “Scripture is not the first moment of God’s self-announcement; that is the historical deeds themselves by which he raised up Israel and Jesus. But neither is it a moment *after* God’s self-announcement, a retrospective commentary that could be peeled away, leaving the core intact. Scripture is, we may say, God’s administration of his self-announcement, the record he has authorised to it and the seal he has set on it to confirm that it is true.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The apostolic gospel is the word of God. An evangelical understanding of the New Testament flows directly from this recognition, for the New Testament is the definitive exposition of the apostolic gospel. Two things must be said by way of explanation.

First, the apostolic gospel is the core content of the New Testament. The naming of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as “Gospels” rightly reflects their core content. They are written proclamations of “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1:1), apostolic witness to the person and work of Jesus (Lk. 1:1-3; Jn 20:30-31). The book of Acts is the record of how “with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,” and central to it is the record of special moments of this apostolic witness (e.g. Acts 2:14-42; 3:11-26; 4:8-12; 7:1-53; 8:26-40; 10:34-43; 13:16-41; 16:22-31; 24:10-21; 26:2-23). Similarly, explanation of the gospel is central to the letters sent by the apostles to the earliest churches.

This is not as straightforwardly evident as it is with the book of Acts and the Gospels. However, Paul’s ministry of “defence and confirmation of the gospel,” is clearly reflected in his letters. He is an apostle “set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1), and his words to the churches are flooded with references to this message. At a number of points, especially at the openings of letters, these references are explicit and sometimes extended (e.g. Rom. 1:1-5, 16:3-31; 1 Cor. 15:1-8; Gal. 3:23-4:7; Eph. 1:3-2:22; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-23; 2 Tim. 2:8). We can imagine Paul saying of his letters as well as his ministry, “woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” Similar things can be said of the later epistles (see e.g. 1 Pet. 1:3-9; 1 John 1:1-10). Likewise, the exhortations of the book of Hebrews are based on lengthy exposition of the meaning of Jesus’ work; and the Book of Revelation echoes with praise to God for what he has done in Jesus (e.g. 5:9-10; 11:15-18).

Second, however, it is obvious that many parts of the New Testament are not just straightforward statements of the gospel. The book of Acts is also concerned to document important moments in the history of the early church; and the letters are concerned with a range of issues, from household codes and community organisation to circumcision. Yet, these wider concerns are not incidental to the gospel, but an integral part of it. They are the “Therefore” that flows from the cry of “Blessed!” at the work of God in Christ (e.g. 1 Pet. 1:3, 13). Appeals to the work of Christ in the context of instruction reveal the organic connection between the gospel and its implications (e.g. 2 Cor. 8:9; Tit. 2:11-14). The apostolic gospel was wider than a simple statement. It was the testimony to how God had worked in Jesus, which had profound implications for every aspect of life. It required elaboration. Proclaiming the gospel inevitably entailed its application in the real lives of those individuals and communities that accepted it. Testifying to the gospel meant teaching of its implications. So the apostle Paul proclaims Christ, and this means “admonishing” and “teaching” (Col. 1:28). The New Testament is the authoritative “expansion and interpretation” of its “decisive and central confession.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This broader understanding of the apostolic task of witnessing to mean the application of the gospel to the early church was reflected in the broader commission the apostles received. They were commissioned, fundamentally, to testify to Jesus, but this would entail a broad range of activities. Amongst other things it would mean: “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20); binding and loosing (Matt. 16:18-19); forgiving and retaining sins (Jn 20:23); and judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28; Lk. 22:30). Essentially, that is, the apostles were authorised by Jesus, not just to proclaim the message, but also to guide the church. They were to make disciples, and to teach them and lead them. Within the New Testament, this broader commissioning is reflected in apostolic “commands of the Lord” relating to church practice (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:37-38; 2 Pet. 3:2; 1 Cor. 7:25;); and it is the basis for exhortations to hold to apostolic “instruction” and maintain a “standard of sound teaching” (Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 6:13-14, 20; 4:6, 11; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2 Jn 9-11). The gospel entailed instruction. But this apostolic instruction was not separate from the message; rather, it was part and parcel of their commissioning to be Jesus’ witnesses – it was the practical content of the message of reconciliation with which they had been entrusted.

The New Testament derives its authority from its connection to the gospel. As Oliver O’Donovan comments, “At the centre of the biblical message is an announcement of what God has done in history – ‘when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son...’ (Galatians 4:4) – and in that announcement all the authority of the biblical texts finds its source.”^{iv} The source of authority is there, because, as Christian experience attests, in that announcement, God himself addresses us. Yet it is not just this central announcement that should be regarded as the word of God, but also the wider teachings that flow organically from this centre. “The New Testament is the totality of what this eyewitness generation was given to tell us about God’s work in Jesus, just as Peter’s famous sentence [‘You are the Christ’] is the centre of it.”^v So the implication in 2 Peter 3:15-16 that Paul’s letters are Scripture is to be welcomed, along with the assertion that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). The New Testament is to be received as the word of God because it is the

definitive record of the uniquely authoritative apostolic proclamation and explanation of the gospel.

II

The New Testament, with the whole of Scripture, is inspired by God; it is his word. This provokes an immediate question: what does it mean for Scripture to be God's word? Or to put it differently, what can we expect from these texts as a result of their being inspired? It is this question that we will try to briefly sketch an answer to in this second section.

One classic answer to this question is that the Scriptures are *infallible*. That is, as God's Word, the Scriptures *do not fail*. Although this could be understood in a number of ways, most commonly it is taken to mean that the Scriptures do not fail to achieve the purposes God has for them, namely, to save humanity and govern the church. Thus, in this understanding, the main implications of the Scriptures' being inspired are teleological, not ontological. The infallibility of Scripture is not primarily a claim about the *nature* of the Bible, but about its *function* within God's ways with his creation.

There is great strength in this approach. It recognises that the Scriptures are not eternal, but play a particular role within the saving purposes of God and are to be understood in relation to this role. Yet the infallibility approach is open to the criticism that it inadequately expresses the reality that Scripture *is* something because it is the word of God, that there are teleological implications of inspiration precisely because there are also ontological implications. Focussing purely on the *effectiveness* of Scripture relativises the question of the truthfulness of its content; all that matters is Scripture's success or failure. But God's word does not fail to achieve its purpose precisely because of what it is, precisely because it is a *true* word.

This ground has traditionally been defended by the notion of the *inerrancy* of Scripture. Advocates of inerrancy argue that because the Bible is Scripture, the word of God, it is therefore without error. God's speech is always true; and so Scripture, as God's very words, cannot contain falsehoods. "Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions".^{vi} And logically, "this includes all matters scientific and historical in scope".^{vii}

The strength of this approach is its stress that Scripture's being the word of God means it *is* something: there are ontological implications for these books' being the word of God. However, this idea is immediately challenged by the obvious existence of difficulties with the Bibles we all possess. These range from minor textual problems, to significant passages of dubious origin (e.g. Mark 16:9ff; John 7:53-8:11), to places in the Bible which seem to, in one way or another, be in obvious error. When I open my Bible and discover that the lengths of different reigns as recorded in I and II Kings and I and II Chronicles do not match up, or that according to Mark (and Jesus) David ate the bread of the presence when Abiathar was high priest (Mk 2:26), but according to I Samuel the high priest was Ahimelech, I am forced to conclude that, although there may be some unknown solution, *my* Bible is not inerrant.

In the face of difficulties like these, the inerrancy approach is often forced back onto an idea of the inerrancy of Scripture “as originally given”. That is, that it was the *autographs*, the original versions of the texts, that were inerrant. This makes some sense, although we might point out that, as we cannot look at the autographs, this move somewhat conveniently shifts the question beyond the reach of possible enquiry. The fact of the matter is that as far back as we can go, the text of the Bible has always been problematic in one way or another.

More importantly, however, the appeal to an original, inerrant version of Scripture may be misconceived. Part of the problem is with our concept of “errors”. What, exactly, constitutes an error? How, for example, should we think about Matthew’s re-ordering of gospel material? This re-ordering clearly leads to occasional chronological inconsistencies in the gospel accounts, which we might fairly label “historical errors”. However, this judgement strikes us somewhat silly, given that Matthew probably did this re-ordering quite deliberately. The problem is that the line dividing the end of literary freedom and the beginning of “error” does not exist. Human language is always limited and constrained and to elevate the Bible above the level of any “errors” in the broadest sense of the term may be to refuse to allow it to be written in human language and so ultimately to demand far too much of Scripture.

There are assumptions at work here, too, about the nature of inspiration. Inspiration can be assumed to mean direct divine authorship in a way which, while not necessarily excluding human authorship, can subordinate it too much. The idea of divine authorship can be made to rule over and exclude what we actually know about the processes of the Bible’s production. This can become clear in the way that discussions of questions of authorship, sources, traditions, and text-histories can sometimes be viewed with extreme caution. Although some of this caution is surely warranted, given that scholarship has often been prejudiced and unfairly critical in relation to these questions, there is also a confusion of methodology at work. It is almost assumed that, if critical scholarship discovers certain, all-too-human things about the nature of these texts, they will be shown not to be the word of God. But does this not reveal that the human authorship of the Scriptures is only given lip-service? Despite the ambiguous witness of the way they have been practiced in the past, belief in the humanity of Scripture should mean that historical investigation into the Bible is, at least in principle, thoroughly welcome. In this connexion, the suggestion by John Webster that our dominant way of thinking about inspiration should not be direct authorship but sanctification is helpful.^{viii} God has sanctified the whole process of the production and recognition of the Scriptures, thereby choosing them as his word. We may speak of God “superintending” the processes of scriptural production and sanctifying them; but the ramifications of this sanctifying work are not necessarily that the resulting product is perfect in the sense of being free from error of any kind.

The idea of the autograph may, in fact, be something of a mirage: an imaginary, transcendent original that avoids the limitations and concreteness of every other text we know of, which appears to be required by a perceived tension between the humanity and the divinity of Scripture, but for which we have no real evidence whatsoever. The humanity and divinity of Scripture are not in conflict, and one does not rule out the other. There is a “perfection” of Scripture, but it is not one which undercuts its human origin. Again, Oliver O’Donovan expresses it well:

“In a thousand ways the texts that lie between the covers of our Bibles show that they are the product of painstaking and creative human labour and reception. But we must be careful what we make of the word “human”. If we glide from speaking of their humanity into implying some kind of inadequacy in them, as though their being human were a shameful secret we have laid bare, a deficiency we are now in a position to patch up, then it is we, not they, that must stand charged with ignorance and superstition. The humanity of the Scriptures does not entitle us to patronise them. Just as we speak of the sinlessness of the human being Jesus of Nazareth, and some Christians speak of the immaculate human conception of the Virgin Mary, so we may speak quite appropriately of a perfection in Holy Scripture. Its perfection is *sui generis*, a fitness for its own assigned task.”^{ix}

This “fitness for its own assigned task” does, however, require that Scripture be truthful. Scripture would not be fit for its task if I could not pick it up and know that what it said was trustworthy. This does not, however, mean a hard inerrancy which requires of Scripture a perfection beyond its assigned task; it is a recognition that God’s inspiration of these words and books means that they will not err in relation to their purpose.

We may therefore suggest the following summary statement:

As the authoritative record of the apostolic proclamation and application of the gospel, the canon of Holy Scripture is those human writings that have been chosen and sanctified by God to be his word; that is, the authoritative stories and teachings by which his people are saved and governed in the power of his Spirit. This word can always be trusted; and it does not err in relation to its purpose of governing and saving God’s people.

This statement is an attempt to define the ontological implications for the books of the Bible of their being Holy Scripture, i.e., those writings chosen and sanctified to be the word of God. It expresses both the reality that there are concrete ontological implications, but also that these implications are limited by the role Scripture plays within God’s purposes: to save and govern his people. The statement introduces a deliberate and inevitable ambiguity with the phrase “does not err in relation to its purpose...”, opening up the possibility that Scripture might contain some errors that do not have an impact on its fulfillment of God’s purposes for it, which do not despoil its perfection.

This understanding permits a potentially more fruitful approach to reading the Bible. Rather than a pre-emptive dismissal of any study that suggests the existence of discrepancies in the Scriptures, it leaves room for dialogue and interaction with historical study about the nature of the texts of the Bible. If, after due investigation, it was discovered that there was indeed a discrepancy at a particular point, this would not call into question the whole nature of the Scriptures. Reading the Bible as Scripture will not require ignoring historical questions of sources, traditions and authorship. However it may mean that we will have certain expectations about the results. We will expect Scripture to be found generally reliable (as, indeed, it has been); and we will be sceptical about the assertion that there are *major* errors at any significant point. This is not because it is *ontologically impossible* for the Bible, as God’s speech, to contain errors, but because it is *soteriologically improbable* for the Bible to contain these errors. Supposed inconsistencies and difficulties do not need to

be ruled out *a priori*, but must be assessed on the basis of their soteriological improbability, not their ontological impossibility.

This criteria enables us to distinguish between matters of differing significance. For instance, we may suggest that it is of no great consequence that some of the numbers in II Kings do not add up or conflict with Chronicles, and that it has very little impact on the trustworthiness and authority of the texts. But the same could not be said of the assertion that certain parts of the New Testament are morally reprehensible. Such a claim would surely call into question the capacity of the text to fulfil its purpose. Likewise we might argue that it would be of great significance if St Paul turned out to not be the author of Ephesians.

Holy Scripture is the inspired word of God, and as such, we are right to expect it to be reliable and truthful. But this does not mean viewing Scripture as a divine artefact removed from the world of human imagination and initiative. God has chosen and sanctified these human writings to be his word and they are perfect for the task he has assigned them. But what exactly this perfection means for the details of the Bible is given for us, more and more, to discover.

Endnotes

ⁱ Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, Leicester: IVP, 2002, 47-49.

ⁱⁱ Oliver O'Donovan, "Scripture and Obedience," *Sermons on the Subjects of the Day* 4, available at <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/pageinfo.cfm?author=Oliver%20O'Donovan>, 19 February, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Oliver O'Donovan, *On The Thiry Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity*, Exeter: Paternoster, 1986, 112.

^{iv} Oliver O'Donovan, "Hermeneutic Distance," *Sermons on the Subjects of the Day* 5, available at <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/pageinfo.cfm?author=Oliver%20O'Donovan>, 19 February, 2007.

^v O'Donovan, *On The Thiry Nine Articles*, 112.

^{vi} From *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, quoted in Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, 200.

^{vii} Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, 200.

^{viii} John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, Cambridge: CUP, 2003, 5-41.

^{ix} Oliver O'Donovan, "Scripture and Obedience".