

JUST WHAT DO YOU MEAN “THE WORD OF GOD”?

Preached January 11, 2009 at FBC, Boulder, CO

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Text: John 1:1. 14

Introduction: The 19th century was called by Baptist historian Kenneth Scott Latourette the “Great Century”. These hundred years were characterized by a prevalent peace, as no major wars disrupted humanity. A whole new world of communications arose with the advent of the telephone and telegraph as the energy of electricity was harnessed for the good of the people. Developments in geology, and disciplines such as sociology and psychology increased our awareness of who we are while at the same time disturbing some whose traditional views seemed threatened. Discoveries of ancient Biblical manuscripts resulted in a growing interest in the Bible, not only as a religious book but also as a work of literature, which reflected its historical context. Man could shape his destiny for the better and the view called post-millennialism taught that we could establish God’s millennial kingdom and then Christ would return. Liberal theology with a weak concept of man and the divinity of Jesus, while at the same time bringing a needed emphasis on his humanity, reflected the heady spirit of the time.

The twentieth century was inaugurated with great optimism, although there were voices that all was not well. The German Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch saw the depravity of man in Hell’s Kitchen and became the prophet of what is known as the Social Gospel. But something tragic happened which upended man’s optimism. It was WWI which began in 1914 and lasted until 1918.

In 1918 a radical development in theology began. Karl Barth, pastor of a Swiss church, published his commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. An avowed liberal at one time, he rejected the movement and called for a return to orthodoxy. It was not the old orthodoxy of fundamentalism but what became known as the New Orthodoxy. It stressed the sinfulness of man, the revelation of God, the Christ-centeredness of the Gospel, and the distance between God and man. Some called it crisis theology or dialectical theology. In a world of evil and corruption, the believer could not stand in a neutral corner. One had to decide, one had to say “yes” or “no”.

While rejecting the false optimism of liberalism Neo-Orthodoxy was not simply a return to the old ways of Fundamentalism. Fundamentalism hid behind the wall of orthodox teaching but did little to address the needs of man or the ills of society. The lesson to be learned as we head into a new century, and I might add one into which there is a great deal of enthusiasm and optimism, is this. The church to be relevant must have a word that reflects both hope and reality in light of a rapidly changing existence that often seems to be advancing at the speed of light. How can be ready to face this challenge.

I. One of the significant contributions to my understanding was Barth’s teachings on the “Word of God”.

A. I was a undergraduate and then graduate student in the 1960s and early 1970s, struggling through a world which was characterized by the assassination of the President of the United States and then his brother and then a Baptist preacher who was the heart and soul of the Civil Rights movement. Civil unrest was demonstrated by the burning of Watts. Violence permeated our society as segregation defiantly gave way to integration on daily battle fronts throughout the nation and especially in the South. A war thousands of miles away in Asia divided our country in a way that was superseded only by the “Civil War” of a century earlier.

For the first time in my Christian life I began to realize that my faith was shallow and insufficient to meet the inward struggles related to the outward world about me. Debate in minute detail over selective passages of Scripture did little to resolve the tension felt by one in a world that seemed to be crumbling on the evening news broadcast by the one national figure that I seemed trust, “Uncle” Walter Cronkite.

It was the teaching of Karl Barth on the Word of God that opened a new understanding that seemed to give some hope in resolving the anxieties that I felt. Barth described the “Word of God” from three perspectives - the Proclaimed Word, the Written Word, and the Revealed or Incarnate Word. He

described the Word as it was proclaimed from the pulpit by the preachers of his day. He gave new perspective on the Bible in its role as the Word of God. And then he focused upon the Revealed Word or the Incarnate Word, the Word that John tells us was in the beginning, that was with God, and that was God, the Word that became flesh, became one of us, and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.

Such teachings opened my eyes to new possibilities. They certainly raised new questions, but they also provided direction for new and relevant understanding. Today, I want us to think about these teachings from a Baptist perspective. And let me preface this by stating unequivocally that all three concepts concerning the Word of God - the proclaimed Word, the written Word, and the revealed Word - are all very important. It is not a case of choosing one over the other. Rather it is a case of determining priorities and relationships between these three approaches.

A. One of the more frightening burdens that I have born through the years is that of proclaiming God's Word. In my younger days I used to hear the phrase describing the preacher, and sometimes myself, as one who was going to bring "God's Word" in a worship service.

People, I say to you in all honesty that this is a humbling and a heavy responsibility. How do I know this morning that what I am conveying to you is God's Word? Since my student days in the mid-1960s I have preached many sermons. From time to time I go back and look at them. I am surprised that a few of them were pretty good for a minister of my age and limited experience. They were sound theologically and offered the hearers a challenge in one way or another. Most were pretty bland and disguised in the form of mini-sermonettes. And a number of them were just awful. Either the congregation was totally deaf, theologically and biblically illiterate, or compassionate and caring beyond reason. If what I preached in those sermons was the Word of God, then people should have stamped out of the church and never returned.

How then can I be certain when I stand in a pulpit and speak that it's not my own delusional, cockamammy ideas hidden behind the pretense of a sermon? If I did my research by surveying congregations to whom I have spoken, I could probably document the later. How do I know this morning that what I am trying to say will please God and offend the forces of evil?

Let me try to give some direction. The proclaimed Word has always been important in Baptist life. We came out of the Protestant tradition, where the pulpit replaced the communion table as a symbol of what was important. Proclaiming the written word was important. Baptists and other Protestant cousins have always held the Bible in high esteem. In fact, we used it as our sole authority in matters of faith and practice to justify rebelling against the Established Roman Catholic Church.

But the proclaimed word also must be more than just an exposition upon Scriptures, which it has been confined to so much in contemporary Christianity. To be the true Word of God, the proclamation must be prophetic. It must confront the hearers with the responsibilities of faith to confront the challenges present in the contemporary world. It must be proclamation at risk.

I heard a speaker once tell of a friend of his troubles from a critical congregation. His friend responded, "Just because they throw rocks at you doesn't mean that you are a prophet. But you can be sure that if they don't throw rocks at you, you are not a prophet". How can the proclaimed Word be prophetic? I believe that it can only reach this status when the preacher is guided by the Living Word, the Revealed Word. We as Baptists teach the reality of the Living Christ experienced through faith. One who seeks to proclaim the Word must be humbled, led, and taught by the Spirit of the Living Word. Not a simple task, I can assure you.

B. When it comes to the Written Word, Baptists have a tradition unsurpassed by most other denominations. We have proudly been called the "People of the Book". We have used the Scriptures as our guide in matters of our faith and the practice of that faith. The Second London Confession of 1677 described the Scriptures as "the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience". The delightful Sandy Creek Baptists of the South in the 18th century described the "Word of God" as the "only rule of faith and practice". They also found not two ordinances but nine rites taught

in the Bible and they had women preachers. Other Baptist confessions, and these qualifications are very important, held the Scriptures in the highest esteem when it came to our faith, our doctrines, and the practice of our faith. The Bible was certainly a book of religion. It was not a science or math text, nor even a book on history even though it contained much historical material. It was a book of religion which flowed out of the faith of its authors.

In 1845 William B. Johnson, first president of the newly formed Southern Baptist Convention, pointed to the source of Baptist convictions and practices when he stated that “We have constructed for our basis no new creed; acting on an aversion for all creeds but the Bible.”

Because of this distrust of creeds and confessions and simply the lack of any crisis necessitating clarification of the faith, Southern Baptists waited eighty years before they produced their first confession of faith in 1925, the first “Baptist Faith and Message”. That confession underwent a major revision in 1963 under the Chairmanship of Herschel Hobbs, distinguished pastor of FBC, OKC.

All important Baptist confessions have held an extremely high view of the Bible. They reflect the conviction of Baptists that the Written Word is indeed the Word of God. At the same time there are some troubling and divisive developments, reflected in the most recent changes in Southern Baptists 2002 BFM.

The 1963 BFM referred to the Bible as “the record of the revelation of God” and stated that Jesus Christ was the “criterion” by which the Scriptures are to be interpreted and understood. Furthermore, the preface to the 1963 confession clearly affirmed that the “sole authority for faith and practice for Baptists was Jesus Christ, whose will is revealed in the Scriptures”. The 2000 version of the BFM deletes all of these statements and boldly asserts that the Bible “is the revelation of God” and that Christ is the focus of the Bible rather than the criterion by the Scriptures are to be interpreted. These are not subtle nor insignificant changes by the largest Baptist denomination in the world.

C. Baptists need to be reminded on the central place of God’s Revealed Word. When God chose to communicate his Word to us, Baptists and so many others affirm that He sent His son. Jesus was the incarnate Word, the Word that took on humanity, that became flesh that dwelt among us full of grace and truth. He came, he lived, he ministered, he taught, he set an example for all to follow, he died, he rose again. Such a living Word expressed the reality of God’s love and compassion for humanity, his openness to forgiveness, his willingness to pay whatever price was necessary to restore fellowship with his creation.

The Word of God, which surely could be proclaimed and recorded in Scripture, was much more. It was a living Word, a Word that demonstrated rather than just merely communicated what God had to say to us. Let me say this clearly. There would be no Proclaimed Word, there would be no Written Word, without the Revealed Word, the Incarnate Word. Both the Proclaimed Word and the Written Word testify to God’s revelation of Himself in Christ.

II. The question today is “Does this mean anything?” “Does an awareness of these three understandings of the Word of God really matter very much?” My answer is unequivocally “Yes, it really is very important.” Let me try to explain, and I certainly hope that it is God’s Word, his message this morning.

A. The approach that we take will have major implications on how we respond to our world in the 21st century. If we choose to approach the Bible as the revelation of God we elevate the Written Word above the Revealed Word. We limit the freedom under Christ to grow in our understanding and our application of our faith. We chose between the leadership of God’s Spirit and the Bible alone for the source of direction rather than the Bible and the Spirit together.

Following the earthly ministry of Jesus his followers faced a major challenge which quite simply would determine whether or not there would even be a church. Their task was to give witness to Jesus as God’s revelation to mankind. The only written word they had was what Christians called the Old Testament, and even then it had not officially been accepted as authoritative, although it certainly was in practice.

One example suffices to make my point. To whom were these Jewish-Christians to proclaim the Revealed Word that they had received. Their Written Word, the Old Testament,

had narrowed the scope of their message to the Jews and those who might convert to Judaism by adopting the Law. These early Christians had no New Testament writing, and they would not have any for another 25 to 30 years when Paul's first letter, probably to the Thessalonians or the churches of Galatia, would appear. These early Christians were the witnesses to the Christ, God's revealed word.

They proclaimed God's word without a Written Word. They had listened to Jesus teach but he wrote down nothing for them to cite. They had observed his life and his service to others but no one at that time had kept written records of his ministry. And, they expected Him to return quickly, so who needs a "Bible?"

As they preached not only the narrow-minded, provincial Jews from Palestine began to respond but so did Hellenistic Jews from throughout the Roman world, who began to have faith and become followers. Were they on the right track? Yes, because the presence of the Spirit confirmed their actions, not because they recited chapter and verse from a "Bible". When Samaritans, who were part Jew and part Gentile or non-Jew and who were despised by the pure Jews, responded positively what was the church to do? They followed the leadership of the Spirit and accepted the Samaritans into their fellowship. Then Gentiles began to respond, resulting in a major dilemma. Was the church more than just a sect of Judaism? They had no Bible but they had the Spirit and the church became universal with no barriers separating believers.

Here's what happened. The first Christians were witnesses to God's revelation in Christ. They gave testimony to God's Incarnate Word. Only when they began to die off, sometimes from natural causes, sometimes as martyrs to the faith, and when Christ did not return as anticipated, did they recognize the need to preserve their witness to the Revealed Word through a written one. Out of crises and questions in the first-century church letters like those of Paul appeared. Out of the need to teach new believers the basics of the faith there arose the Gospels. As the first generation of believers died off their witness was preserved through new converts and through the writings that finally by the end of the fourth century became the accepted basis for faith and practice.

My fellow believers and Baptists, the Bible is the record of God's revelation in Christ. Such a description does not lower the worth of the Scriptures. However, if I were writing the Baptist Faith and Message, and for some reason some Baptists don't seem to be inviting Baptist historians to participate in such endeavors these days, I would suggest the words "witness" or "testimony" rather than the "record" of the revelation of God. But hear me, Jesus is the revelation of God. We must begin with this foundation.

One consequence of an over-emphasis on the Written Word is that it often leads to demands for orthodoxy. We want a true faith, an intellectual faith. The result is a constant narrowing of what can and cannot be believed. The spirit cannot lead us in new directions that contradict our boundaries that we establish. Furthermore, orthodoxy is determined not necessarily by truth but too often by power. The winners in battle determine what is acceptable theologically. The losers are labeled heretics.

B. A terrible inversion has taken place in our understanding of the Word of God. We have substituted God's revelation for the testimony to God's revelation. When that happens we are no longer free to respond to the Spirit in a rapidly changing world but have become slaves to

Conclusion: The 21st century surely needs a Word of God. Technological developments, incredible communications advancements, a reshaping of what it means to be family, incredible wealth for some and substandard poverty for so many others, ecological concerns, rampant materialism, and unimaginable access to knowledge and information will bring with them both opportunity for good and potential for evil. A relevant church must have a relevant word.

A. The proclaimed word and the written word will always occupy a major focus in Baptist life. There is no need to minimize their place in our heritage in order to win some political advantage. Both the Proclaimed Word and the Written Word, in fact, participate in the Revealed Word. As you and I hear the Preached Word, as we are confronted with God anew in the witness of the Bible, both become a part of the revelation process. God's Incarnate Word comes to us again, alive, in sermon and Scripture.

B. At the same time their relevancy depends upon our witness and testimony to the Revealed Word. In a real sense, God's Word must become incarnate in our lives, the lives of those who are believers through faith in the Revealed Word who dwelt among us full of grace and truth.

C. Even if we had no written Word and no proclaimed Word, we still would have evidence of God's love through the witness of those who are followers of Jesus. That incarnate Word would be evident in the lives of those who were trusting Jesus, and whose lives touched the lives of those without a Word. The burden is upon us.

D. There is a Word from God every day. It is a Living Word, a Word communicated through Jesus of Nazareth who simply chose to give his life in order to give us life. From the pulpits and from the Sunday School classes this Word continues to be proclaimed, testifying to what God has done in Christ. The Scriptures continue to give witness to God's redemption in his incarnate Word as it records God's revelation in Christ rather than by drawing attention to itself. In the beginning was the Word. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. May that word become incarnate through the way that we conduct ourselves in our world and our time as we testify in word and deed to God's grace and truth. .

CHILDREN'S SERMON

Rosetta Stone - Why is it called the Rosetta Stone? What is a stone? What makes this stone different than other stones you have seen?

There are words written on it. Words are wonderful. Without words we couldn't talk to each other. We might grunt and groan. But I couldn't ask you questions. I couldn't tell you those marvelous stories, or you couldn't even sing the songs that you like to sing, could you? You couldn't even answer my question. But do you know what, even though words are wonderful, they are never as good as that which they remind us. How many of you have a dog? Which is better, your dog, or the word "dog". It's more fun to play with a puppy than to say the word "puppy". When I say "Mom" do you think of the word "Mom" or do you think of your mother. Which would you rather have - the word "mom" or your Mom? Love is a good word. But would you rather have a warm hug from your parents, a sweet kiss on your forehead when you cut it, or the smell of warm cookies coming out of the oven when you come in from playing.

Words are wonderful because they remind us of things that are around us that are really wonderful. Some words are bad and not so wonderful. But so many are so really great.

One other thing. God has spoken to us a Word. But it really wasn't a "Word" but his Son Jesus. A man named John said that Jesus was the Word of God. And you know that God's Word Jesus loves us, cares about us, and understands us. This word is warm and good and wonderful.

So learn as many words as you can. But always remember, the words are not as much fun and not as important as the things of which they actually remind us.