

# Luther's Concept of the Word of God

by Siegbert Becker

A generation ago the Lutheran Church in America was engaged in a controversy over whether it was sufficient to say that the Bible contains the Word of God or whether it was necessary for an orthodox Lutheran to confess that the Bible is the Word of God. That controversy ended in what seemed to be a total victory for the forces of conservative and orthodox Lutheranism, for there is scarcely a Lutheran in our country today who would be unwilling to say that the Bible is the Word of God.

The triumph, however, was more apparent than real. At that time, at least, both sides in the controversy knew what they meant when they spoke of the Word of God. Today even those who defended the proposition that the Bible is the Word of God are asking, "In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?" To say that the Bible is the Word of God when one is not sure at all about what is meant by that statement could hardly be called a confession of faith. It would appear, therefore, that the triumph of conservatism in many sectors of Lutheranism was a Pyrrhic victory and that the doctrine of the Word of God, its inspiration, authority, and inerrancy, is still one of the great theological battlegrounds of our time. In fact, the student of contemporary theology finds on all sides even a lack of clarity about what is meant when men in high places and honored positions in the visible church speak of the Word of God.

We ought not to imagine, however, that our situation is unique. Every unbeliever from the beginning of time has implicitly denied the authority, inspiration, and inerrancy of the Word of God. In the modern denials of this doctrine and in the hidden and hypocritical attacks on it in our generation, we hear only the echoes of the hissing of the old serpent who led the mother of us all astray, by leading her, first, to doubt whether the words by which she was to guide her actions were really and truly the words of God, and then, to reject in unbelief the words of the Lord by which He clearly threatened her with death if she disobeyed His command. It was, above all else, her failure to take the words of God seriously, and to believe what He had said, that brought sin into the world and death to us all. "Yea, hath God said?" is still the question the old evil foe seeks to insinuate into our hearts in one form or another. The sheep's clothing of professed reverence for the Word of God in which our modern deniers creep in unawares and unnoticed does not entirely succeed in covering up the cloven hoofs and the forked tail of the old dragon, and those who have eyes to see will still discern the diabolical deception which is practiced on Christendom today by its theological spokesmen, and those who have noses to smell will still know (as Luther would have put it) *wie dem Teufel die Hosen stinken*.

The controversy concerning the Word in the Lutheran Church of our time centers on the definition of the term, "the Word of God." In this anniversary year of the Lutheran Reformation, the followers of Luther will surely be prompted to ask how the great reformer understood this term.

We are all aware; of course, that though we are called by his name, yet the question of Luther's views concerning the Word of God is by no means the most important of the questions that call for an answer, even in the Lutheran Church. Followers of Luther know that, as Luther says it, the Word of God must establish articles of faith and no man and no angel has a right to impose his views on the church of God, which knows no master save Jesus Christ and listens only to the voice of the Good Shepherd. If the Lutheran doctrine of the Word of God has any validity at all, and if God has indeed, as true Lutheranism always insists, spoken to us in the Holy Bible, then the very first question must always be, "What does the Bible say about itself?" No human judgment and no rational argument, no matter how cogent, fitting, and persuasive it may be, dare ever be permitted to have the weight and the force of Scripture's own testimony about itself.

Still, we remember that three of the Lutheran confessions, the two Catechisms and the *Smalcald Articles*, which every unperjured Lutheran accepts as a correct restatement of Biblical doctrine, came directly from the pen of Martin Luther. His word does count for something among us, even though it is not on the same level as that of the Apostles. As members of the Lutheran Church, who are proud to bear the name of the man who stood before princes and bishops and confessed, "Councils have erred and popes have erred: prove to me

out of the Scriptures that I am wrong and I will submit,” we would be happy to have Luther on our side in the present battle for the inspiration and truth and authority of the Bible.

Unfortunately, most Protestants have this same desire, at least to some degree, and so we have men of such divergent views as Theodore Engelder and Emil Brunner, both claiming Luther as their champion. It is noteworthy, however, that of these two, Brunner has had to admit that he was wrong in imagining that the chief reformer of the church held views of inspiration and revelation which were similar to those promulgated by the neo-orthodox theologians of the modern visible church. In 1951, Paul King Jewett wrote his doctoral dissertation at Harvard on “Emil Brunner’s Concept of Revelation.” Bernard Ramm, who takes notice of this unpublished work in his *Types of Apologetic Systems*, writes:

Jewett traces in Brunner’s works—Brunner has written over three hundred periodical articles—the first affirmations of Brunner that he and Luther saw practically eye to eye till in his latest works in which Brunner has come to admit that Luther was more of a traditional orthodox and fundamentalist (*sic*) than he imagined him to be at first.<sup>1</sup>

At least we must give Brunner credit because he has had the honesty and the decency to admit that he was wrong when further study convinced him that Luther held the view of inspiration which has been the traditional and ancient view of all Christendom, Lutheran, Reformed, and Romanist. However, sad to say, people still read Brunner’s early works and gullibly conclude from them that Luther was liberal and neo-orthodox in his view of the Holy Bible. If men would only read Luther, they would very quickly come to the conclusion to which Brunner has come. Much of the confusion in the church over Luther’s position on the inspiration of the Bible stems from this that men do not read Luther, but instead they read the works of those who write about Luther, who in turn often simply repeat the erring conclusions of respected scholars whose books about Luther they themselves have read. And so the same old arguments are repeated, the same old words are quoted out of context are cited again and again, often by men who did not even take the trouble to verify the correctness and the fairness of the quotation. Anyone who holds that Luther had a liberal view of Scripture either has not read Luther, or else he has used his sources dishonestly, or else he has come to the study of Luther, as Luther himself might have said, with a pair of colored glasses before his eyes, so that he could not see what was there.

### 1. The “Word of God” in Modern Theology

If we are to have a clear conception and understanding of Luther’s doctrine of the Word as it compares with the views of modern theology, we shall first of all need to know how he defined this term “Word of God” in his own thinking. If ever a term used in theological literature and in the Bible has suffered martyrdom, it is this phrase, “the Word of God.” Just as in a former generation, when Modernism was in style for the theologians of the church, the term “Son of God” was so emasculated and watered down that its application to our Savior became almost meaningless, because it was asserted that any good man could be called a “son of God,” so the theologians of neo-orthodoxy have murdered the term “Word of God.” What it really means to them is almost impossible to discover, but on one thing they seem to be in agreement. They hold that this term “Word of God” is applied to the Bible only by a sort of figure of speech. This view is eating like a cancer also at the heart of Lutheranism. Not so long ago, one of the best-known Lutheran theologians of our day published a book in which he wrote, “The Scriptures were the ‘Word of God’ in a derivative sense for Luther—derivative from the historical sense of Word as deed and from the basic sense of Word as proclamation. As the record of deeds of God, which were the Word of God, the Scriptures participated in the nature of that which they recorded.”<sup>2</sup> And not so long ago, the writer heard of a Lutheran professor who stood before his class and asked,

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, Wheaton, Van Kampen Press, 1953, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> J. Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor*, St. Louis, Concordia, 1959, p. 67.

“What is the Word of God? Is it a book?” Holding up a Bible and saying, “Why this is just paper and ink,” he threw the book on the floor and stepped on it. The next day one of his students took a volume of Kierkegaard’s writing to class, stepped on it, and said, “I assume that your opinion of the author of the book you stepped on yesterday is the same as my opinion of the author of the book on which I am stepping today.” As a result of such disparaging attitudes toward Scripture, articles on “The Bible *and* the Word of God,”<sup>3</sup> implying by their very form that these two terms stand for a pair of related but entirely different concepts, any resemblance between which is purely coincidental, have become a dime a dozen.

## 2. The “Word of God” as Event

Neo-orthodox scholars are inclined to stress that the Word of God is the deed of God, that the greatest deed or Word of God in the Old Testament is the Exodus, and the greatest deed or Word of God in the New Testament is Jesus Christ. Not satisfied with having introduced this confusion into the church’s theology, they go on to claim that this peculiar and confusing view is found also in the writings of Martin Luther. We shall not pause to ask what such views will eventually do to the Messianic character of the Old Testament, but even a casual reader of Luther will know that the greatest Word of God for him was the Word of forgiveness spoken by the mouth of men.

It is true that occasionally Luther speaks of God’s speaking as being equivalent to God’s acting. This is by no means common in Luther and it might be noted that in the same place where he says, “In the case of God to speak is to do, and the word is the deed,”<sup>4</sup> he gives an example of what he means by saying that the invasion of the Turks is a word of wrath and good crops are a word of grace. It seems evident that when Luther says that God speaks to us in His deeds, he means about the same thing that we have in mind when we say that through calamities such as war and pestilence and famine God calls us to repentance.

When Luther said that in the case of God to speak is to do, he was operating with the concept of the creative Word of God as a cause of events that happen in this world. He speaks of the Word by which all things are created, governed, and preserved.<sup>5</sup> He says that when a hen hatches an egg, this takes place because of the Word “Be fruitful and multiply” which is present still in the very body of the hen.<sup>6</sup> “When God speaks a word,” he says, “the thing expressed by the word immediately leaps into existence. God says to my mother: ‘Conceive!’ and she conceives. He says to me: ‘Be born!’ and I am born.”<sup>7</sup>

But to say that events happen as a result of God’s Word is not the same as saying that the event is the Word. Commenting on the statement of Moses that God gave the children of Israel manna to eat so that they might learn that man shall not live by bread alone but by the Word of God, Luther says that we are by no means to say that the manna was the Word of God.<sup>8</sup> It would therefore certainly seem that Luther sharply distinguished between the Word and the events which transpire because of the Word. He says, for example, that God acts also in the deeds of the Gentiles, in fact, he says that God acts in *all* the deeds of the Gentiles but that the deeds of the Gentiles do not have the testimony of the Word.<sup>9</sup> Significantly he adds:

Therefore when the history of the whole world is taken together, it is incomparably less significant than even the most insignificant story of this (Israelite) nation. This is why the proud and carnal are deceived by the simplicity of things in the Scriptures, for they take no notice of the Word of God and value only the things.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> WA 40 ii, 231.

<sup>5</sup> WA 40 iii, 522; 42, 96.

<sup>6</sup> WA 42, 39, 40.

<sup>7</sup> WA 46, 558; cp. 31, 232-234.

<sup>8</sup> WA 14, 630.

<sup>9</sup> WA 14, 567.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* For the passages for which they were available, the translations employed are those of the American edition of Luther’s Works.

In this connection, it might also be noted that in his comments on the story of creation in Genesis 1, Luther stresses the fact that the Hebrew verb used in the statement, “And God said,” denotes an uttered word,<sup>11</sup> though no one heard it spoken except God Himself.<sup>12</sup> Yet of all this he says, “These are difficult matters, and it is unsafe to go beyond the limit to which the Holy Spirit leads us.”<sup>13</sup>

Luther therefore recognizes that when we speak of the Word of God in these matters, we are dealing with something that goes beyond the experience of man and therefore is in large measure incomprehensible to us. Yet this aspect of the question is exalted by modern theology to the primary place in its discussion, and it is no wonder that much of modern theology is beyond all comprehension, confusing, and productive of little that makes a real contribution to the welfare of the souls of men. It would be far better if we would follow the advice of Luther and say that it is unsafe to go beyond the words of Holy Scripture here, as we ought to go beyond those words nowhere in theology.

### 3. Christ as the “Word of God”

It is also true, as we might expect from any Biblical theologian, that Luther occasionally speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Word of God,<sup>14</sup> but it would be a gross misstatement of the case to say that for Luther the term “Word of God” primarily denotes the Son of God, or as one modern Lutheran scholar puts it, “The ‘Word of God’ in the New Testament was essentially the historical Christ.”<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to see how it is possible for any honest scholar to say this when Luther himself says that when John calls Jesus the Word of God, this is an obscure, rare, and peculiar way of speaking which is uncommon and lacking in clarity in any language.<sup>16</sup> That Luther was not at all accustomed to thinking of Christ when he used the term “Word of God” is evident, for example, from his comments on John 8:28, where he says, “Christ derives comfort from the fact that it is not He who is doing this, but another, namely, the Word of God.”<sup>17</sup> Such a remark could hardly come from the lips of a man for whom the Word of God was primarily and “essentially the historical Christ.” That Luther was not inclined to think in this way is clear also from his work *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, where he writes, “We do not call the gospel Christ, or the kingdom of Christ, but speak of it as an oral, bodily preaching, regarding it as a part of Christ or his kingdom.”<sup>18</sup>

At times Luther also says that the Word of God is God Himself.<sup>19</sup> But we must learn to interpret Luther here as Luther taught us to interpret the Bible. The obscure passages in Luther must be understood in the light of the clear passages. The context makes it clear that what Luther meant when he said that the Word of God is God Himself is that any offense against the Word is an offense against God. The statement usually occurs in a context where the honor and reliability of the Scriptures is discussed. In his comments on Psalm 111, for example, he says that the Word of God has been preserved for us in a book, and shortly thereafter he writes, “Since it is God’s Word, it must be regarded as no less high and venerable than God Himself.”<sup>20</sup>

### 4. A Speaking God

Usually, however, when Luther uses the term “Word of God,” he means by that what we would expect it to mean in human language, without any allegories or figures of speech. The Word of God is, very simply and

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<sup>11</sup> WA 42, 13.

<sup>12</sup> WA 42, 15f.

<sup>13</sup> WA 42, 13f.

<sup>14</sup> WA 42, 13f; 46, 543-546, 635.

<sup>15</sup> Pelikan, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> WA 46, 635.

<sup>17</sup> WA 33, 636.

<sup>18</sup> WA 18, 212.

<sup>19</sup> WA 8, 49.

<sup>20</sup> WA 31 i, 403.

very clearly, what God says. To Luther, God was above all else a speaking God. At the oral examination of Heinrich Schmedenstede at Wittenberg on July 7, 1542, Luther is reported to have remarked:

All the patriarchs believed in God, not as in a creator but in God who spoke with them. They did not have a speechless God, or one who was only fabricated, but one who spoke... Adam, Eve, and Abraham heard God speaking. Therefore they were believers. We, too, have such a communicative God. He speaks to us daily through the ministers of his Word and his sacraments.<sup>21</sup>

When Luther says that our God is not a speechless God, he calls our attention to something that we are apt to overlook at times. When we meet God on the very first pages of the Bible, He is immediately introduced to us as the God who speaks. He is the God who speaks the creative Word in his majestic “Let there be.” He is the God who speaks in loving concern for man when He says, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” He is the God who speaks in the Law and says, “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” He is the God who seeks fallen man with His voice and says, “Where art thou?” He is the God who speaks in the Gospel and tells man that the woman’s Seed shall come to crush the serpent’s head. In the first three chapters of Genesis we are told no less than twenty times that God spoke, and the creative Word and the revelatory Word are not in any way distinguished from each other. And if we take the first verse of Genesis as a sort of title for the whole chapter, then we can even say that the first specific act of God of which we have any knowledge is that God spoke.

We might well ask here whether it is of any special significance that the very first act of Adam, who was created in the image of God, is this same act of speaking. He gave names to the animals, and when Eve was brought to him, he said, “This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” In like manner, the very first thing that we are told of Eve after her creation is that she spoke to the serpent. When we speak of man’s creation in the image of God, should we include also this that they have speech in common and thus are able to communicate with each other? It is evident that the gift of speech sets man apart from the rest of God’s creatures. In his *Preface to the Psalms* (1545) Luther writes, “There is no mightier or nobler work of man than speech. For it is by speech more than by his shape or any other work, that man is most distinguished from other animals.”<sup>22</sup>

It may not be unimportant either, in this connection, that Eve was led astray by words spoken by the serpent. Luther says that the devil imitates God in speaking to Eve.<sup>23</sup> Whatever all these facts may mean in their full import, one thing should be clear to anyone who begins to read the Bible from the beginning—in this book we will meet a God who speaks to men in words which they can understand and to whom men in turn can respond in words to which He will listen. This fact helps, at least, to make man a responsible creature.

Luther insists that even when God Himself speaks directly from heaven, the language in which He speaks is intelligible human speech. In his essay on *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525) he discusses the appearance of God on Mt. Sinai. He says there that God did not actually speak in the sense that He formed words with His mouth, tongue, teeth, and lips, as we do. Nevertheless, he continues, He who formed the mouth and put speech into it can also speak without a mouth. The children of Israel actually heard a voice like the voice of a man. The syllables and letters made sounds, which the physical ear was able to perceive.<sup>24</sup> Luther says exactly the same thing about the voice that came from heaven at the baptism of Jesus. He says that the Father’s voice was no illusion (*Gespenst*) when He pronounced these words from heaven. They were real, natural, human words.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> WA 39 ii, 199.

<sup>22</sup> WA, DB 10, 100.

<sup>23</sup> WA 42, 111.

<sup>24</sup> WA 16, 368-370.

<sup>25</sup> WA 46, 686.

## 5. God's Word Is What God Says

God's Word therefore is what God says. In the *Large Catechism* Luther says of the close of the commandments that believers should recognize it as God's Word and be careful not to regard it as if men spoke it.<sup>26</sup> In these words God Himself declares how important the commandments are to Him.<sup>27</sup> We shall have more to say of this when we speak of God as the author of Scripture, but there are hundreds upon hundreds of passages in Luther in which statements of the Bible are cited with the assertion that this is what God says or declares or commands. Speaking of the deity of Christ in his comments on Psalm 45, he admits that this doctrine is difficult for human reason to accept, but he tells his students that they should simply take their stand on the Word of God and not let it trouble them when He says incredible things.<sup>28</sup> When Satan and his instruments, the heretics, seek to draw us away from such articles of faith with their clever arguments, we should simply hold the clear texts of Scripture before them and tell them that we do not want to hear their sophistic speculations, for the doctrine that is taught in those passages is "what the Spirit says."<sup>29</sup>

We have seen that Luther says that when the Bible speaks of Christ as the Word, this is a rare and unusual manner of speaking. Anyone who has read only a little of Luther knows that it is not rare or unusual for him to speak of the spoken and written words of Scripture as the Word of God. Of the command concerning the tree of knowledge given to Adam in the Garden of Eden, he writes, "Here the Lord is preaching to Adam and setting the Word before him. Although the Word is short, it is nevertheless worth our spending a little time on it."<sup>30</sup> The Word of God thus is the Word that God spoke to Adam and on which we still are able to spend time because we have it before us in the Holy Bible. In fact, Luther specifically asserts that this command given to Adam was a "spoken Word."<sup>31</sup> And in connection with the temptation that came to Eve to disregard this Word of God, Luther says that we are not to sit in judgment on God's Word, but "When we hear God saying something, we are to believe it and not debate about it, but rather take our intellect captive in the obedience of Christ."<sup>32</sup> If these passages are not enough to convince us that in Luther's thinking the Word of God is what God says, it should certainly become clear when we hear him say, "It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's Word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken."<sup>33</sup>

When Luther speaks in this way there is no hidden esoteric meaning involved in what he says. Unlike the unclear terminology of modern neo-orthodoxy, which often empties the good old Biblical terms of all concrete meaning, Luther's language is not of such a nature as to require initiation into the mysteries before it can be understood. When he speaks of the words spoken by God, he means the plain ordinary words of human speech, words such as you and I use every day. In a sermon on John 3:15, which speaks of the brazen serpent, he says that it is surprising that the human heart could believe the words of Moses that promised them healing if they would look at the serpent. Human reason, he says, would have been inclined to ask what good mere looking and mere words can do.<sup>34</sup> A few days later, he preached on John 3:16, and in the introduction to this sermon he referred to the story of the brazen serpent again and said:

It was the Word that healed the Israelites, the Word spoken by God: "Whoever looks at this bronze serpent shall suffer no harm from the bite or sting of any fiery serpent." ... There God

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<sup>26</sup> LC, I, 41f.

<sup>27</sup> LC, I, 322.

<sup>28</sup> WA 40 ii, 587.

<sup>29</sup> WA 40 ii, 592.

<sup>30</sup> WA 42, 79f.

<sup>31</sup> WA 42, 110f.

<sup>32</sup> WA 42, 118.

<sup>33</sup> WA 16, 384f.

<sup>34</sup> WA 47, 65f.

was speaking and promising aid, not the serpent. Whoever believed in this Word and promise of God and looked at the serpent was obedient to God.<sup>35</sup>

## 6. The Word of God Is Made Up of Words

It is evident therefore that when Luther spoke of the Word of God he thought of it as an entity consisting of individual words, sentences, and phrases, which were meant to be understood according to the common usage of human speech. Now that may all seem to be self-evident to us who from childhood have breathed a theological atmosphere in which the winds still blow from Wittenberg. One can hardly memorize the *Small Catechism* without being conditioned to that mode of thought. And yet we ought to be aware that modern theology often denies that the Word of God consists of words. According to this view, “The comprehension of man is unequal to the task of putting into words what God has done to break the silence of eternity,”<sup>36</sup> and “Our everyday language is much too shallow to contain the Biblical revelation without major and even fatal adjustments.”<sup>37</sup> If this means anything at all it means that the Word of God, the message of God to mankind, is really too great and too exalted and too holy ever to be expressed in the common, ordinary words of human speech. It is the same old rationalistic argument, which said that all the infinite majesty of God could not possibly dwell in the body of Jesus of Nazareth, for the finite is not capable of the infinite. But we might well say that just as the personal Word of God, the eternal Son of the Father, made Himself known to men in the lowly, humble carpenter of Nazareth, so the spoken Word of God in all its fullness and majesty comes to men in the unpretentious and simple words which God chooses to utter, and it might be well also to remember that the Savior says that He will be ashamed of those who are ashamed of His words.<sup>38</sup>

Repeatedly Luther speaks of the Word of God as consisting of actual spoken words. He says that the eternal, audible, oral words of Christ are the Father’s Word.<sup>39</sup> In the *Large Catechism* he writes that it is the Word of God, which makes bread and wine to be the body and blood of Christ, and if the words remain, then by virtue of these words, the bread and wine will be truly the body and blood of the Savior.<sup>40</sup> In the same confession, he says that we must continually keep the Word of God on our heart, that we should ponder it, hear it and put it to use, and then continues, “These words are not idle or dead, but effective and living.”<sup>41</sup> In 1522, in his treatise *On Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament*, he advised priests to marry, but at the same time he cautioned them against doing so if they could not do it with a good conscience, thoroughly equipped with the Word of God. He then calls their attention to the saying of Paul in I Timothy 4, where the apostle says that the prohibition of marriage is a doctrine of devils. Luther advises them confidently to believe that “these are the words of God, who cannot lie.”<sup>42</sup> These are only a few of many examples that could be cited, but when one reads Luther at length and sees the ease with which he uses the phrases “The Word of God” and “the words of God” interchangeably as perfect equivalents, it seems clear that it never occurred to him that anyone could be so foolish as to deny that the Word of God comes to us in the words of human language.

One of the clearest examples of this phase of Luther’s thought we find in his writings which deal with the controversy with the sacramentarians, who denied the power of baptism and the real presence of the body and blood of the Lord in the Holy Supper. Repeatedly he cites the words of institution and says that we should believe these words, as we ought to believe all the words of Christ. This is what the Spirit says and it is the Word of God, and when we have God’s Word, we should hold fast to it and let our own opinion go.<sup>43</sup> When we hear that God speaks in this way, he says, we should give Him honor and “let His Word remain right and

<sup>35</sup> WA 47, 73f.

<sup>36</sup> M. Scharlemann, “The Bible as Record, Witness and Medium,” an unpublished MS, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Mark 8:38

<sup>39</sup> WA 33, 145-147.

<sup>40</sup> LC, V, 10-14.

<sup>41</sup> LC, I, 101.

<sup>42</sup> WA 10 ii, 36.

<sup>43</sup> WA 19, 496.

true.”<sup>44</sup> When we see the clear and distinct and powerful words of God, we should confess the real presence, for the Word of God says that the body and blood of Christ are in the sacrament.<sup>45</sup> This alternation between the words of God and the Word of God is so natural that it is difficult to imagine how it is possible to hold that Luther taught that the Word of God is anything else than just these words we hear and read.

In one of his sermons on the Lord’s Supper, preached in 1528, he spoke of the word “is” in the words of institution, and he told the congregation:

It is not the word of our prince or the emperor but of God. Therefore, when you hear this word “is,” then do not doubt. Thus the sacrament is bread and body, wine and blood, as the words say and to which they are connected. If, therefore, God speaks these words, then don’t search any higher, but take off your hat; and if a hundred thousand devils, learned men, and spirits were to come and say, “How can this be?” You answer that one single word of God is worth more than all of these. A hundred thousand learned men are not as wise as one little hair of our God. In the first place, therefore, learn that the sacrament is not simply bread and wine, but the body and blood of Christ, as the words say.<sup>46</sup>

## 7. The Word of God Is Spoken by Men

Since the Word of God comes to us couched in human words, it is not surprising to hear Luther say over and over that the Word of God is spoken by man and that it is no less the Word of God on that account, just as he was fond of asserting that the deity of the eternal Son of God is in no sense impaired by being joined to humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Luther says that the preaching of the Gospel, when it is viewed superficially, looks like “a trifling thing, like any ordinary man’s speech and word.”<sup>47</sup> Luther often admonishes us not to be offended at this fact that the Word of God comes to us through the mouth of men. When we hear the words of God in Baptism, in Holy Communion, and in the absolution, we should remember that it is still God’s Word in spite of its utter simplicity, and we should not say, as the smart alecks do, “God should really offer us something more imposing.”<sup>48</sup> God deals with us in this way so that we might be able to bear it when He speaks. If He wanted to, He could utter a Word so powerful that one could hear it all the way from heaven to earth, but such a word would bring no one to faith. Therefore God puts His words into the mouth of a human being.<sup>49</sup> We might well be reminded here of the fact that when God spoke with His own voice from Mt. Sinai, the children of Israel fled in terror and said to Moses, “Speak thou with us and we will live, but let not God speak with us lest we die.”

What is involved in Luther’s thinking is not only the doctrine of verbal inspiration. It is true that the relationship of God to the men who spoke His inspired Word was of a very special kind. So Luther says, for example, that we should believe Moses when he teaches, no less than we should believe God Himself, for Moses “teaches us as a man of God whom we are to believe as if God Himself were speaking.”<sup>50</sup> Luther does not demand that we give this same kind of credence to those who do not speak under the same influence of the Holy Ghost, and yet he says that we should adhere to the Word of God whether a disciple, apostle, saint or ordinary man speaks it.<sup>51</sup> At another time he said that we should believe it even when it is spoken by an ass, whether male or female.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> WA 18, 186.

<sup>45</sup> WA 18, 166.

<sup>46</sup> WA 30 I, 117.

<sup>47</sup> WA 41, 150.

<sup>48</sup> WA 47, 37f.

<sup>49</sup> WA 47, 37f.

<sup>50</sup> WA 40 iii, 492.

<sup>51</sup> WA 33, 303.

<sup>52</sup> WA 1, 595.



Since the beginning of time, Luther holds, God has spoken to men through the patriarchs and the prophets,<sup>53</sup> and to this day God still speaks to us through our parents and our pastors and we should believe that the preacher's words are God's Word. Yes, we are justified even in saying that the "voice and words of father or pastor are not his own words and doctrine but those of our Lord and God."<sup>54</sup> We are not to look for the Spirit elsewhere than in His words, which proceed from and are preached by the lips of men.<sup>55</sup> In the last sermon that Luther preached to the congregation in Wittenberg during the absence of Bugenhagen from the pulpit in 1537 to 1538, Luther told the people:

God is speaking through the voice of the preacher who brings God's Word... Now you have the Word of God in church, in books, in your home... Our hearers and we are just beginning to recognize that it is not a man that we are listening to, but that it is God who is telling us things that contain an everlasting treasure. My dear friend, regard it as a real treasure that God speaks into your physical ear... You do not hear the pastor. Of course, the voice is his, but the words he employs are really spoken by God. A poor speaker may speak the Word of God just as well as he who is endowed with eloquence. A father speaks the Word of God as well as God does, and your neighbor speaks as well as the angel Gabriel. There is no difference between the Word when uttered by a schoolboy and when uttered by the angel Gabriel; they vary only in rhetorical ability.<sup>56</sup>

Luther does not in any way intend to say here that schoolboys, fathers, and preachers speak the Word of God in the same manner or degree in which the prophets and apostles speak the Word. He is not here speaking of the verbal inspiration of the Bible, as we said. Quite the contrary; he says that we are not to rely on men, but that we must always test their sermons and decide whether they agree with the Word of God.<sup>57</sup> He said in one sermon:

I, too, am a pastor and doctor; the ministry and the mysteries of God have been entrusted to me. But if I were to preach at variance with Christ's command, one would justly say to me: "You are the devil or Judas with the red beard."<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, if godless and wicked men speak what God wants spoken, then they also truly speak the Word of God. St. John has recorded the Word of God spoken by Caiaphas. Moses and the children of Israel did not reject the preaching of Balaam because he was a godless man. They looked upon his prophecy as a Word of God. The wise men heard the Word of God from the mouth of Herod, who in turn had heard it from the godless high priests and scribes.<sup>59</sup>

In 1530 Luther wrote a rather lengthy essay on the office of the keys. In the course of this work, he discusses the Romanist notion of an "erring key" according to which it was supposed that sometimes when the pastor spoke the words of absolution to an individual he made a mistake and the man's sins were not really forgiven. Of this perverted teaching Luther says:

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<sup>53</sup> WA 46, 568.

<sup>54</sup> WA 47, 227.

<sup>55</sup> WA 33, 277-279.

<sup>56</sup> WA 47, 228-230.

<sup>57</sup> WA 33, 304.

<sup>58</sup> WA 33, 306.

<sup>59</sup> WA 26, 164.

(Such ideas) originate in the mistaken notion that God's Word is not God's Word. Because it is spoken through men it is regarded as the word of men. And God is thought of as 'way up there in heaven, very, very far removed from His Word here below.<sup>60</sup>

We who have been given the privilege of sharing in the office of the holy ministry would do well to give some serious and earnest consideration to this aspect of Luther's thought. On the one hand, it ought to fill us with holy pride and joy in our office. It is truly the Word of God we proclaim in our teaching and preaching, the Word of which God Himself has said that it shall not return to Him empty, but that it shall accomplish that which He pleases. On the other hand, however, it should arouse us to a deep sense of the responsibility that rests upon our heart and conscience, and when we preach and teach, we should be sure that what we say is what God wants spoken, and of this we can be certain only so long as we constantly hold up our ideas to the touchstone of Holy Scriptures and evaluate our teaching in the light of God's written Word.

### 8. The Scriptures Are the Word of God

In the final analysis, the only Word of God that we have is that which we have in the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures are the Word of God *par excellence*. At the root and base of Luther's concept of the Word of God you will always find the Holy Bible. He generally uses the terms "Scripture" and "Word of God" as synonymous and interchangeable terms, and while, as we have seen, he knew as well as any student of Scripture that this term "the Word of God" is used for the creative Word by which the universe is brought into being and kept in existence, and the personal Word, which is the eternal Son of God, yet when he uses the term without explanation he almost invariably identifies the Word of God with the Scriptures. It is not at all difficult to find passages in Luther wherein he does this in so many words and says, "The Holy Scripture is the Word of God,"<sup>61</sup> or in which he appeals to the Word of God and then cites a passage from the Bible.<sup>62</sup> How completely he equates the two with a casualness that assumes that this identification is self-evident becomes clear when we hear him say of Eraser:

He has the effrontery to say that the Holy Spirit and Christ did not teach us enough, the Scriptures are not sufficient, God's Word must have additions, and he who has not more than God's Word, God's Scripture, and God's teaching is venomous, a heretic, an apostate, the worst man on earth.<sup>63</sup>

We find Scripture and the Word of God identified also when he says that we Christians believe that Christ is both God and man because God's Word says so, since the Holy Scriptures assign the title of Creator to Christ, and from this it follows beyond question that He is truly and essentially God.<sup>64</sup> In the funeral sermon, which he preached for Duke John in 1532, Luther spoke of "the Word of God in the Scriptures."<sup>65</sup> In 1521 he said that the papists would not allow the simple meaning of Scripture to stand, and thus they distorted the Word of God.<sup>66</sup> In 1525 he said that the radical reformers were twisting the words of Scripture to mean what they wanted them to mean and in this way put the Word of God to torture.<sup>67</sup> In 1537, in a sermon on the three ecumenical creeds, preached at Smalcald, he said of the Jews and Mohammedans:

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<sup>60</sup> WA 30 ii, 497.

<sup>61</sup> *e.g.*, WA 46, 542.

<sup>62</sup> WA 12, 235.

<sup>63</sup> WA 7, 667.

<sup>64</sup> WA 46, 600f.

<sup>65</sup> WA 36, 238.

<sup>66</sup> WA 7, 341.

<sup>67</sup> WA 18, 145-147.

When they want to interpret our Scriptures, we will not permit this. They have neither the ability nor the right to do this, for it is God's Scripture, and God's Word, which no man can or should interpret.<sup>68</sup>

In 1538, he denounced Thomas Muenzer for doing what he pleased with God's Word and for not treating the Scriptures with the "veneration and profound awe" with which they deserve to be treated.<sup>69</sup> In all this Luther was simply echoing the position that he took already at the Diet of Worms, where he said that his conscience was captive to the Word of God, and a few moments later asserted that his conscience was captive and bound by the Holy Scripture.<sup>70</sup> Already then the two terms stood for the same concept.

And when he thus equates the Word of God and the Holy Scriptures, he means again, very simply, as he himself says, that God speaks to us in the Bible.<sup>71</sup> He says that if we want to know what is to be taught in the church, we should ask God, and we will find His answer in the Scriptures.<sup>72</sup> "Holy Scripture presents the Word to us everywhere," he asserts,<sup>73</sup> and we are required to believe only "what God has commanded us in Scripture to believe."<sup>74</sup> "The truths of God were committed to writing by divine authority," he told his class in his lectures on Genesis,<sup>75</sup> and in his commentary on Psalm 111 he wrote that God's Word is preserved for us in a book.<sup>76</sup> We may see only the poor letters of the alphabet in the book, but "this Word has such a secret power that it will flush throngs of devils out of the heart,"<sup>77</sup> for "Holy Scripture's inseparable companion is the Holy Spirit,"<sup>78</sup> who "comforts us through the Holy Scriptures."<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, Scripture is also full of threats, and we should not imagine that God is either joking or lying when He speaks these words.<sup>80</sup> With such expressions as these scattered throughout the writings of Luther, it is not surprising to hear him say in a sermon on I Peter 3:15–18 (1523):

If the people do not want to believe, you should be silent, for it is not your duty to force them to look upon Scripture as God's book or God's Word. You have done enough if you have shown that what you say is based on Scripture. When you hear people who are of this opinion and say, "You preach that a man should not accept the teachings of men, but Peter and Paul, yes, even Christ, were also men"—when you hear people who are so blinded and hardened, that they deny that this is God's Word, or doubt it, then just be quiet. Do not speak one word to them. Let them go.<sup>81</sup>

In these expressions we also find Luther's answer to the question so often asked in our time, "In what sense is the Scripture the Word of God?" The moment a theologian feels compelled to ask that question, he is already drifting away from the simplicity of a childlike faith. The question arises from the fact that the identification of the Scripture with the Word of God is so patently taught by Scripture itself and so ingrained in the whole doctrinal tradition of the whole Christian Church, that it is well-nigh impossible to find any theologian, even among the most liberal, who would openly deny that the Scripture is the Word of God, just as

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<sup>68</sup> WA 50, 282.

<sup>69</sup> WA 47, 10.

<sup>70</sup> WA 7, 838; cp. *Ibid.* 839.

<sup>71</sup> WA 14, 684.

<sup>72</sup> WA 8, 536.

<sup>73</sup> WA 47, 33.

<sup>74</sup> WA 7, 673.

<sup>75</sup> WA 42, 258.

<sup>76</sup> WA 31, 402, 421.

<sup>77</sup> WA 33, 436.

<sup>78</sup> WA 40 iii, 543.

<sup>79</sup> WA 19, 592f.

<sup>80</sup> WA 14, 658f.

<sup>81</sup> WA 12, 362.

you will not find any who will deny that Jesus is the Son of God, no matter under how many rocks you look. After all, false prophets must still come in sheep's clothing if they expect to be heard by the people of God. The denial of the truth that the Scripture is the Word of God usually comes in the form of this question, "In what sense is the Bible the Word of God?" In essence this question is very much like the very first question asked about God's Word, "Yea, hath God said?" In other words, "When you say that the Bible is the Word of God, you don't really mean to say that God said these things that are said here, do you?"

Luther would have been not a little impatient with a question like this, for to him the answer was self-evident. He would have said about the Word what the *Smalcald Articles* say about the church, "Among us a seven-year-old child knows in what sense the Bible is the Word of God." He was not a speculative theologian, and speculation he hated as he hated the devil himself. Philosophy he considered one of the greatest enemies of the Christian faith. To him, very simply, the Scriptures were the Word of God because God speaks the words of this book, and what this book says, God says. We have previously heard him say that God speaks to us in the Holy Scriptures. In his lectures on Galatians, he equates the Scriptures with the sayings of the Holy Spirit.<sup>82</sup> In another lecture, on Isaiah, he admonished his students to persevere in the constant use of God's Word and not to grow tired of reading it (and who can doubt that he has in mind the Word of God as we have it in written form in the Scriptures), because, as he said, "Pious hearts believe that it is the Word of God, that it is inspired by God through the Holy Ghost."<sup>83</sup>

This conviction that Scripture is the Word of God because God speaks to us in the words of this book characterizes his thinking during the whole course of his career as the reformer of the church. Anyone who has carefully read the accounts of his appearance before the Diet of Worms must come away with the conviction that this poor emaciated monk could never have stood against the combined might of church and empire as he did if he had not the conviction deeply ingrained in his heart that the voice of Scripture is the voice of God. Ten years later he stood before the congregation in Wittenberg and sought to win them to that same conviction by saying:

If a thought comes to you, no matter if it seems so beautiful and holy that you imagine it to be downright angelic, then take a good look at it, compare it with God's Word and see if it is grounded in Scripture, and whether God has commanded or said or ordered it or not.<sup>84</sup>

God's Word is therefore what God commands or says or orders, and in the final analysis this is found only in Scripture. And twenty-four years after Worms, the year before he died, in his *Wider das Papsttum zu Rom vom Teufel gestiltd*, he still held the same position and wrote, "Whoever wants to hear God should read the Holy Scripture."<sup>85</sup>

We could go on for a long time multiplying such samples of Luther's thought to show that in his mind the Bible is the Word of God just in this sense that what is said in this book is said by God. In this sense, much of modern theology would not be willing to call Scripture the Word of God, and it is no wonder that Brunner was finally forced to admit that Luther did not see eye to eye with him on the doctrine of Scripture.

## 9. The Oral Word of God

Neo-orthodox theologians, in an effort somehow to reduce the significance and meaning of the statement that the Bible is the Word of God, are fond of asserting that for Luther the Word was primarily a spoken, proclaimed, preached Word and not a written Word. A nationally known Lutheran scholar, who acknowledged his debt to Karl Barth by introducing him to a University of Chicago audience with the words, "To Karl Barth, as probably to no other living theologian, we may without blasphemy or exaggeration apply the

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<sup>82</sup> WA 40 I, 286.

<sup>83</sup> WA 25, 344.

<sup>84</sup> WA 33, 275.

<sup>85</sup> WA 54, 263.

words of the Fourth Evangelist, ‘And of his fullness have all we received and grace for grace,’”<sup>86</sup> has written of Luther that for him the Scriptures were the Word of God only “in a derivative sense,” derivative, that is, “from the basic sense of the Word as proclamation.”<sup>87</sup> In this section of our paper we shall attempt to show that this is an inexcusable, unwarranted, and misleading caricature of Luther’s thought on this matter, and that exactly the reverse is true, that the proclaimed or preached Word can claim to be the Word of God only as it partakes of the nature of the Word as written and recorded for us in the Holy Bible.

It must be admitted at the very outset that there are a few passages in Luther that seem at first glance, at least to the superficial reader, to exalt the spoken Word above the written Word. For the most part they come from early in his career, and it seems rather strange that most scholars in discussing these few, rather unique passages seem to forget that they come from a time when Luther’s own translation of the Bible in a language that the people could read and understand had not yet appeared. Moreover, it should be remembered that these words were written at a time when the Lutheran school system had not yet been established and the ideal of universal education, which owes so much to some of Luther’s later writings, had not yet gripped the imagination of the people. In such a cultural context, the spoken Word would always be more significant for the masses in the church than the written Word, for the latter was not available to them. If these facts were kept in mind, even these early remarks would not be interpreted as they are by neo-orthodoxy.

In 1521, for example, in the preface to the *Church Postil*, which was a book of sermons intended for reading by the preachers of Saxony to their congregations, he wrote:

The Gospel should really not be something written, but an oral Word which brings the Scripture before us, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ Himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called His teaching not Scripture but Gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth.<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, in a sermon in this *Postil*, he said, “Christ did not command the apostles to write but only to preach.”<sup>89</sup>

Even if it is granted that this passage was written in a book in which he was seeking to encourage the preaching of the Gospel in Saxony and to remind the priests of their duty to proclaim the Word, it must still be admitted that it does seem to exalt the oral Word above the written Word. Yet it should not be forgotten that the passage occurs in a context in which Luther is seeking also to encourage the study of the Old Testament, of which he says that it deserves to be called Scripture more than the New Testament. On the other hand, one could adduce passage after passage from the writings of Luther in which he gives the name Scripture also to the New Testament. It bears repeating also to call attention once more to the fact that this was said in the preface to a book of sermons, and that Luther was attempting to point out to those who used the book the importance of the office of preaching. Whatever may have been in Luther’s mind, however, when he wrote this, it should be remembered, first, that this was spoken early in his career, secondly, that it is a note which is rarely sounded by Luther, and thirdly, that to balance this one of few passages of this nature there are many passages in Luther in which he places the preached Word and the written Word on the same level or where he actually places the preached Word under the judgment of the written Word. We shall have more to say of this later, but we might here call attention only to the fact that in the same year in which he wrote the words quoted above, he also wrote, “The Gospel was not meant only to be written, but rather to be proclaimed with the physical voice.”<sup>90</sup> Here he no longer says the Gospel was not meant to be something written, although he still expresses a preference for the preached Gospel.

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<sup>86</sup> Pelikan, J. in *Criterion*, a publication of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, II, 1 (Winter, 1963), p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

<sup>88</sup> WA 10 II, 17.

<sup>89</sup> WA 10 II, 626.

<sup>90</sup> WA 8, 33.

A second passage often cited to show that Luther exalted the preached Word above the Scripture is found in the reply of Luther to the attacks of Catharinus, which also dates from the same year 1521. Catharinus had argued that if the pope were not recognized as the head of the church, no one would ever know where the church is. In his answer Luther develops the line of thought which comes to full expression later in the seventh and eighth articles of the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology*, namely that the church is known by its marks, that is, the Gospel and the Sacraments, the Gospel being the chief mark of the church rather than the sacraments. He then proceeds, “I am now speaking not of the written Gospel, but of that which is proclaimed with the physical voice.”<sup>91</sup> He makes a similar statement in his book *Of the Councils and the Churches*, in which he writes: “This Christian holy people [he is speaking of the Christian Church] is to be known by this that it has the holy Word of God... We speak, however, of the external Word orally preached by men like you and me.”<sup>92</sup>

At first glance, here again it appears that we have the same thought expressed as in the previously cited passages, but a closer study of the context will show that this is not correct. Unlike the previous passage this one is clear, and Luther’s intent is easily discernible. The question is “What is the true church?” If the answer is given, “Where you find the Word of God, there you find the true church of God,” then, as Luther well knew, the papists could argue that they also had the Word of God, for they had the Scripture. Luther himself says in one place, “To be sure, a bit of light remained in the papacy, such as the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, and the Bible.”<sup>93</sup> Therefore he says here that the true church of God is found where the Word of God is preached. He goes on to say, however, that he is not speaking of all preaching, but of that preaching which sets forth the doctrine of Christ. The papists, he said, were preaching the words of Thomas Aquinas rather than the words of Christ. Luther expresses his whole argument in succinct form in one of his sermons, where he says, to the pope and the bishops, “You bear the name of the Christian Church. You have Baptism, the Sacrament, and the Bible. And yet you do not teach and preach the truth.”<sup>94</sup>

Thus it is evident that in this passage at least, Luther is not exalting the oral Word above the written Word at all. He is simply giving expression to the idea which was later summarized in the words of the seventh article of the *Augsburg Confession*: “The Church is the communion of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are administered in the right way,” and which is repeated in our time in the words of the *Brief Statement*:

The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name or by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine that is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications.

Luther puts it this way in his book on the *Misuse of the Mass*, also published in 1521:

A sure sign by which we may know where the church is, is the Word of God... How can we ourselves know where the church is, if we do not hear her prophesying? ... It is certain that the church and those in whom God truly dwells do prophesy; but it is uncertain where the church is which is capable of prophesying unless it actually does prophesy.<sup>95</sup>

The contrast Luther is drawing in these statements is not that between the written and the oral Word of God as such at all. He is rather setting forth here the difference between having the Word of God in written form sitting on the shelves of the church library and having it proclaimed in all its truth and purity from the pulpit. A church may own a beautifully bound copy of Scripture, but that will not mark it as a Christian church.

<sup>91</sup> WA 7, 720f.

<sup>92</sup> WA 50, 628f.

<sup>93</sup> WA 33, 447.

<sup>94</sup> WA 33, 402.

<sup>95</sup> WA 8, 491f.

A church may have an orthodox creed to which it subscribes in its constitution, but that does not make it a church that teaches the Word in an orthodox fashion. This is the point that Luther often wants to drive home when he seems to exalt the spoken over the written Word.

However, in most of the passages in which Luther speaks of the importance of the spoken Word, the contrast is not with the written Word at all, and when the proponents of neo-orthodox views seek to show that Luther somehow considered the spoken Word to be superior to the written Word by citing the repeated references that one finds throughout the writings of Luther to the oral Word, the preached Word, or the shouted Word, they are not dealing intelligently or fairly with the evidence. The most common synonyms in Luther for the “oral Word” are not the “preached Word,” or the “shouted Word,” but rather the “external Word” or the “physical Word.” The German terms he uses are *das mündliche Wort*, *das äusserliche Wort*, and *das leibliche Wort*. The antithesis to the oral Word might seem, at first glance, to be the written Word, but as we shall see in a moment, this is not the case. The contrast becomes clear when we see that he called it also the external Word, the antithesis to which is certainly not the written Word, but rather the inner Word; and when he calls it the physical Word, we all recognize that the antithesis must be the spiritual Word. But all this becomes still clearer when we look at the context in which he uses these terms.

He uses these expressions especially in his controversies with the so-called “*Schwärmer*,” the fanatics, the Anabaptists, the radical left. He describes them as people who “hate or neglect the external Word and are captivated by their own vain and inane speculations.”<sup>96</sup> These *Schwärmer* are the spiritual ancestors of those people, whom we still find in the church today, who are not satisfied with the plain, bare promise of forgiveness in the Gospel but insist that God must speak directly to the human heart and that only he is a true Christian who has had a “spiritual experience” of the operation of the Holy Spirit in his own heart. These are the people who still go around asking people, “Are you saved?” instead of proclaiming the Gospel and saying, “You are saved.” Luther says of them that they disparage the external Word and want to hear a spirit from heaven apart from the external Word.<sup>97</sup> Luther knew how dangerous such a teaching is to true Christian faith and in no uncertain terms rejected what he called the “self-made spirituality” of the sects “who seek a special enlightenment and a secret revelation from heaven, and lay claim to something apart from the commonly preached Word of the Gospel.”<sup>98</sup>

This is the sort of thing that is condemned also in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, in which all of us agree that

God does not want to deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.<sup>99</sup>

The *Smalcald Articles* describe these people in detail. After the brief discussion of the Gospel, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Keys, and Confession, we read in that document:

In these points, which have reference to the oral, external Word, we must hold fast to this that God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through or with the preceding Word, so that we may be on our guard against the Enthusiasts, that is, the spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without or before the Word, and afterwards judge, interpret, or twist the Scripture or oral Word as they please, as Muenzer did and many still do today, who want to be sharp judges between the Spirit and the letter, and do not know what they say or teach; for the papacy is also pure Enthusiasm, in which the pope boasts that “all laws are in the shrine of his heart,” and what he together with his church says and decides, that is supposed to be Spirit and law even though it goes beyond and against the Scripture and oral Word. That is nothing but the old devil and the old serpent, who also made Enthusiasts out of Adam and Eve, led them away from the external

<sup>96</sup> WA 40 ii, 410.

<sup>97</sup> WA 33, 139f.

<sup>98</sup> WA 41, 130.

<sup>99</sup> S.A., III, viii, 10; cp. WA 46, 577.

Word of God to spirituality and private opinions, and yet did it with another external Word, just as our Enthusiasts condemn the external Word and yet they themselves do not remain silent but fill the world with their blabbering and their writing, just as if the Spirit could not come through the Scriptures or the oral Word of the apostles, but had to come through their writing and word. Why do they not put an end to their own preaching and writing until the Spirit comes into the people without and before their writings, as they boast that He came into them without the preaching of Scripture?<sup>100</sup>

This citation from the Confessions, which, by the way, was also written by Luther, places everything into proper perspective. It is crystal clear that the antithesis to oral Word in all these passages is not the written Word but rather the “spiritual Word” of the Enthusiasts, which is for all practical purposes identical with what neo-orthodoxy means by the “Word of God.” The oral Word and the Scripture are in this passage from the Confessions identified with each other, and the contrast is between the oral and written Word on the one side and the spiritual Word on the other. Luther himself states the contrast in this way when he writes in his comments on the preaching of Christ predicted in Psalm 2, “This passage must be understood entirely with respect to oral rather than spiritual preaching. He is true, visible, and tangible man, who also teaches with a human voice.”<sup>101</sup>

For a correct understanding of the theology of Luther, it should be noted in this place that when Luther criticizes the Enthusiasts for their emphasis on the spiritual experiences of men, he does not mean that God does not speak to our heart or that Christians are forbidden to have such spiritual experiences, but he merely meant to emphasize that if such experiences do come they ought to be based on the oral, external Word, heard first in the ear and then in the heart. He specifically states in his work *On Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament* (1522):

The Master does his teaching in the hearts of men—through the external Word of his preachers, however. The preachers impress the Word upon the ears, but Christ impresses it in the heart.<sup>102</sup>

And of the blessings of the children of God of which David speaks in the 23rd Psalm, he writes:

Through the oral preaching of the Word, which enters the ears and touches the heart by faith, and through the holy sacraments, our Lord accomplishes all these things in Christendom.<sup>103</sup>

Luther discusses this whole matter in great detail in his attack *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525).<sup>104</sup> He says there that God deals with us in a twofold manner, outwardly through the oral Word of the Gospel and the material signs of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and inwardly through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But the outward means must always come first, and the inward experience always follows as an effect of the outward Word and sign. “God has determined,” he writes, “to give the inward to no one except through the outward.” He then quotes Carlstadt and his followers as saying: “Will a handful of water make me clean from sin? The Spirit, the Spirit, the Spirit must do this inwardly. The Wittenbergers are ignorant of this and make faith depend on the letter.” Luther then continues:

But should you ask how one gains access to this same lofty spirit, they do not refer you to the outward Gospel but to some imaginary realm, saying: Remain in self-abstraction where I am now and you will have the same experience. A heavenly voice will come, and God Himself will speak to you... With all his mouthing of the words, “Spirit, Spirit, Spirit,” he tears down the

<sup>100</sup> S.A., III, viii, 3-6.

<sup>101</sup> WA 40 ii, 245, 250.

<sup>102</sup> WA 10 ii, 23.

<sup>103</sup> WA 51, 287.

<sup>104</sup> See e.g., WA 18, 136ff.



bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come to you. Instead of the outward order of God in the material sign of baptism and the oral proclamation of the Word of God he wants to teach you, not how the Spirit comes to you, but how you come to the Spirit.<sup>105</sup>

And just as Luther by no means wishes to disparage the true Christian feeling and experiences of the heart by his emphasis on the external Word that we hear with our ears, so he does not in any way downgrade the written Word by his many references to the oral Word. In fact, even a rather cursory reading of Luther will reveal that in Luther's thinking the oral and written Word are the two forms in which the external or physical Word comes to us. There is a passage in Luther in which he says that the oral Word is stronger than the written Word, which for some reason or other is seldom quoted by neo-orthodox theologians, although it might appear at first to favor their point of view. In this passage, found in his sermons on the Gospel of John, we find these words:

The Holy Ghost speaks to those who read the Word of God. Here then speaking and writing is one thing, except that the oral speaking is more powerful than the written, because through writing you can also speak with those who are more than a hundred miles away from you.<sup>106</sup>

This passage is interesting for several reasons. In the first place, when he says that the Holy Ghost *speaks* to those who read the Word of God, it becomes clear why he so often simply speaks of the oral or spoken Word even though it seems evident that he includes also the written Word in that term. What is written in the Bible is a "spoken Word," an "oral Word," and not the spiritual word of the Enthusiasts.

Secondly, the statement that speaking and writing are one thing shows clearly that his assertion that oral speaking is more powerful than written speaking is not intended in any way to give the written Word a secondary or subordinate position to the spoken Word.

In the third place, I would question whether Luther really said that oral speaking is more powerful than written, for it would be much more intelligible if the passage read, "Written speaking is more powerful than oral, because through writing you can also speak with those who are more than a hundred miles away from you." Finally, even if Luther did say that the spoken Word is more powerful than the written Word, this should not be hard for those who are teachers to understand. Luther was primarily a teacher and what he meant by such a statement should not be difficult for teachers to see. A statement in writing may be identical in every respect with a statement made orally, and yet all of us know that a spoken statement, which can make use of the inflections of the human voice, is pedagogically more effective than the same statement made in writing. St. Paul already indicates this in the Scriptures when he writes to the Galatians that he wishes that he could be present with them and change his voice to emphasize the words he was writing to them.

There can therefore be no question whatever that Luther included the Scriptures when he spoke of the oral Word. In the selection from the Confessions quoted previously, Luther three times uses the expression, "the Scripture and oral Word," not "the Scripture and the Word of God," mind you, but "the Scripture and Word of God." Ordinarily, when one article precedes two nouns in English as well as in German, or Greek for that matter, the two nouns are to be understood as referring to the same person or thing. But beside this the context makes it clear that this expression, "the Scripture and oral Word," is for all practical purposes equivalent to "the written and spoken Word." But this becomes still more apparent when we hear him say in his letter *Concerning the Rebellious Spirit* (1524):

They want to teach the people orally and in writing, though they still boast that each one must hear the voice of God for Himself; yet they ridicule us who teach the Word of God orally and in

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<sup>105</sup> WA 18, 137.

<sup>106</sup> WA 47, 184.

written form, which they claim is of no value. They have a much higher and more precious office than the Apostles and Prophets and Christ Himself. These all taught the Word of God orally or in writing, and said nothing about the heavenly voice of God we are supposed to hear... We recognize and judge this spirit as having as his purpose the invalidating of the Scriptures and the oral Word of God, and doing away with the sacrament of the altar and of baptism.<sup>107</sup>

In the same work he describes Muenzer and his followers in these words:

They come from heaven, and hear God Himself speaking to them as to angels. What is taught at Wittenberg concerning love and faith and the cross of Christ is an unimportant thing. "You yourself must hear the voice of God," they say, "and experience the work of God in you and feel how much your talents weigh. The Bible means nothing. It is Bible, Booble, Babel," etc.<sup>108</sup>

In another place he speaks of the Anabaptists as people who ridicule the external Word and say that it is "after all, a mere word written with pen and ink. As soon as it is spoken it passes into thin air and vanishes."<sup>109</sup> When we read such things in Luther, we must come to realize once more that also in theology there is nothing new under the sun. These are the kind of people who would step on a Bible and say, "How can an object of paper and ink be the Word of God?" These people, too, put on a false show of spirituality as though they were above finding God in such material things as paper and ink and water and bread and wine. These words of Luther make it clear as anything can be that when he emphasized the oral Word in his controversies with the Anabaptists and Carlstadt and Muenzer, he was defending the Holy Scriptures and their place in the church, and there is no hint in them anywhere that the Bible is to be considered the Word of God only in a derivative sense. If this is what you mean by fundamentalism, then Luther is a fundamentalist.

### **10. The Spoken Word Derives Its Authority from the Written Word**

In fact, for Luther the written Word, the Scripture, the Holy Bible, is the basis in which the spoken Word must find its foundation and the criterion by which it must be judged. Just because a man is a preacher and occupies the pulpit and the office of the ministry gives no one a guarantee that people must believe him, for there can be scoundrels in the holy ministry.<sup>110</sup> If any preacher comes and proclaims anything which is at variance with the voice of Christ<sup>111</sup> or inconsistent with Moses,<sup>112</sup> we are not to follow him. We are to listen only to those pastors who bring us the words and the thoughts of Christ.<sup>113</sup> True Christian preachers must proclaim the Gospel of Christ, which the apostles transmitted to us; and of those who preach this message, and only of them, we can say that they are sent by God and speak the Word of God. Those who do not preach this are false prophets.<sup>114</sup> What we invent or what we get from the opinions of Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, is not the Word of God.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, the church itself has no power and no right to change one single word of God, for if she had this right, the whole foundation of our faith would become uncertain, for if the church has the authority to change one word, then she has the right to change any word and all the words, "even the one by which she is founded and confirmed as a Christian Church."<sup>116</sup> We must always remember that not only

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<sup>107</sup> WA 15, 216.

<sup>108</sup> WA 15, 211.

<sup>109</sup> WA 46, 582.

<sup>110</sup> WA 32, 507.

<sup>111</sup> WA 47, 158.

<sup>112</sup> WA 47, 192.

<sup>113</sup> WA 33, 568f.

<sup>114</sup> WA 47, 188, 193.

<sup>115</sup> WA 47, 193.

<sup>116</sup> WA 36 iii, 340f.

individual preachers but also a whole church body may fall into error.<sup>117</sup> When we hear Luther speak in this way, we must realize again how much he can still teach us. And in these days, when we are urged by ecumaniacs all over the world to listen to all the voices in the church, we need to pay a little more attention to Dr. Luther; and when we are told by neo-orthodox scholars that Scripture grew out of the faith of the church, or that the Scripture is the gift of the church to the world, we might keep in mind that Luther said, “It is not God’s Word just because the church speaks it; rather, the church comes into being because the Word is spoken.”<sup>118</sup>

According to Dr. Luther, a preacher, and this would certainly also apply with equal force to those in the teaching ministry of the church, who wants to be faithful must suppress his own words and speak nothing but the Word of God; he dare not say anything else but what God says and orders him to say; and if he does say something else, it will not be God’s Word even though he yells like mad.<sup>119</sup> It is evident that when Luther spoke of the oral Word and the shouted Word, the emphasis was always on the noun and not on the adjective. Luther says that Christ did not tell His disciples, “Teach them to observe what you invent,” but rather, “What I have commanded you.”<sup>120</sup> The written Word therefore remains the touchstone by which the spoken Word must be evaluated and judged.<sup>121</sup> Luther says that all the books of the fathers and the councils together cannot improve on what we find in the Holy Scriptures.<sup>122</sup>

One ought to conclude from all this evidence that no man is justified in saying that in the theology of Martin Luther the Scriptures derive their character as Word of God from the basic character of the Word as proclamation. Rather the very opposite is true, and the spoken Word is the Word of God only when it is based on and derived from the written Word in Scripture. To Luther, the Word of God was first and foremost the Holy Bible. He gives voice to the deep awe and reverence he held for this book when he says:

Only the Sacred Scriptures have such a majestic and powerful tone, even without our effort, that they can meet and dispose of all the debating tricks and compel one to say: “No man ever spoke like this man.”<sup>123</sup>

And it might be well for us to pray to the Lord for a double measure of the Spirit that Luther displayed when he wrote in the dedicatory letter to his commentary on Psalm 1:

I do not know why; but I cannot help loving those of whom I hear that they love the Holy Scriptures and hating those who distort and despise them.<sup>124</sup>

Perhaps out of that would come a new reformation of the church. God grant it. Amen.

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<sup>117</sup> WA 30 iii, 341.

<sup>118</sup> WA 8, 491.

<sup>119</sup> WA 47, 774.

<sup>120</sup> WA 10 ii, 88.

<sup>121</sup> WA 33, 275.

<sup>122</sup> WA 50, 657.

<sup>123</sup> WA 5, 21.

<sup>124</sup> WA 5, 22.