



The Word of God as the Foundation of the Church’s Mission

BY DR. PETER WILLIAMSON

Some years ago I was fishing on a remote stretch of the coast of Ireland’s Berra Peninsula when I spotted what I thought would be a perfect place from which to cast my line, a couple hundred yards below me and to the right at the foot of a steep incline. A faint path seemed to lead above, and then down to, the place where I wanted to fish. As I climbed the trail, the hill became steeper, and I noticed that the gravel on the rocky face made for treacherous footing. When I reached a point eighty or ninety feet above where I wanted to fish, I realized that the path had petered out. As I attempted to retrace my steps, I discovered that the gravel was too slippery to go back the way I had come.

I sat down, since now the steep incline was causing the gravel on which I was standing to slide. I could go neither forward nor backward. I began to panic. It was clear that to slide from that height to the rocks below would result in serious injury. There was no one who knew where I was or who could see or hear me. I prayed: “God, help me!” Suddenly the thought came into my mind, “Climb higher.” Going higher appeared only to increase the danger, but lacking any better alternative, I started to climb. I soon discovered that the footing going up was better than it was coming down, although I had no idea how I would get down from the top of the rocky hill. As it turned out, on its opposite side the summit opened onto a grassy slope that I was able to descend easily and safely.

My predicament that day provides something of an analogy to the human condition. We find ourselves in trouble, and we do not know the way out. We need help from beyond ourselves, revelation from above that can guide us to safety. God’s Word is like that. Human beings are beset by dangers far greater than those I faced. We are beset by the consequences of sin and failure that we are unable to escape, by evil in the world that threatens at times to overwhelm us, and finally by death itself. How can we free ourselves? How can we help others?

The Word of God explains the root causes of all that threatens us, and it offers the Good News that God has provided a means of rescue for us through the life, Death, and Resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. This is what we have to offer the world, the one thing it needs most: a word from

God. This is the mission entrusted to the Church: to tell people the Good News of salvation.

What Do We Mean by “the Word of God”?

The phrase “the Word of God” has a variety of meanings in Scripture, and it is worth examining them more closely. At the very beginning of the Bible we read that God creates the heavens and the earth merely by speaking. “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gn 1:3). So the first thing to note is that when God speaks, his Word carries more than information; it brings divine power. “By the LORD’s word the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their host” (Ps 33:6). In Exodus we read how God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt; the book of Wisdom explains that it was God’s all-powerful Word that achieved this (see Wis 18:15). God then gives Israel the Ten Commandments and his holy law, from which we learn that the Word of God is instruction (in Hebrew, *torah*) about how to live. The Psalms repeat this idea: “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path” (Ps 119:105). Sirach (see 33:1-3) and other writings explain that God’s Word is wisdom.

The prophets, who exhorted Israel to repent and do justice and who spoke promises of God’s future blessings, had intimate personal experience of the Word of the Lord. Ezekiel describes it as being “sweet as honey in my mouth” (Ez 3:3). But when the Word came to Jeremiah it was “like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones” (Jer 20:9) until he spoke it; its effect was “like a hammer shattering rocks” (Jer 23:29). Isaiah confirms that God’s Word is effective. Speaking in God’s name he says, “My word . . . shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it” (Is 55:11). The Word of God both reveals God’s favor and brings judgment on evil. It is a privilege for Israel to hear and to speak God’s Word, and Moses longs for the day when all God’s people can prophesy (see Nm 9:11), a hope finally fulfilled at Pentecost (see Acts 2:17-18). Meanwhile, the prophet Amos warns of a famine upon the land, not of food or drink, but of “hearing the word of the LORD” (Am 8:11).

In the New Testament the meaning of “the Word of God” as prophecy continues. After a long silence, “the word of God came to John . . . in the desert” (Lk 3:2), and he

preaches to the people, summoning them to repentance and telling about the one who is to come after him. After being baptized by John, Jesus begins preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom: “The kingdom of God is at hand!” (Mk 1:15). He describes the Word of God as a seed that falls on different kinds of soil (see Mt 4:14-20). Like a seed, it has life in itself that will germinate and bear fruit if the conditions are right. The Word is alive, something vital. Those who heard Jesus experienced something unusual when he taught; he spoke with authority, unlike their other religious teachers (see Mk 1:22). The disciples at Emmaus put it this way: “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32).

By far the most profound meaning of “the Word of God” in the Bible is the use of this term at the beginning of the Gospel of John to refer to the second person of the Trinity who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1). Jesus is the perfect expression of the Father’s love. He reflects the Father’s thought. “Whoever who has seen [Jesus] has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). He is the fullness of Revelation. All prior meanings of “the Word of God” are fulfilled in him: he is Creator, he is Redeemer, he is instruction, he is wisdom, he is promise and hope, he is warning and judgment, he is the Good News, and he effectively accomplishes the Father’s will. There is no one closer to the Father than he. The very Spirit that he shares with the Father is the “mighty wind” that hovered over the waters of creation (Gn 1:2), that inspired the prophets, and that filled the first Christians at Pentecost.

In the rest of the New Testament “the Word of God” refers mainly to the Gospel, the Good News about Jesus Christ. The Gospel provides a second chance for the human race to achieve its original purpose of eternal fellowship with God and with one another. It is a precious opportunity to be forgiven for sins, to be rescued from the power of Satan, to receive the Holy Spirit, and to be brought into a new community, the Church. Christ entrusts this Word to the Apostles and to the whole Church. He sends us: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20).

Scripture as the Word of God

The final sense in which the Bible speaks of the Word of God is in reference to Scripture itself. Jesus calls Scripture “the Word of God” and says that Scripture cannot be set aside (see Jn 10:35). Israel, Jesus, the Apostles, and the early Church all regarded the biblical writings of the Old Testament as divinely inspired. The classic text is 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” Scripture is both *inspired* and *useful*. Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the papal household, explains that the Greek word translated “inspired,” *theopneustos*, has both a passive and an active meaning: “Once and for all time, the Holy Spirit inspired Scripture and now, each time we open the book, Scripture breathes the Holy Spirit! . . . The Holy Spirit is, as it were, contained in it, lives in it, and enlivens it unceasingly with his own divine breath . . .” (*The Mystery of God’s Word* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 80). However, these verses from 2 Timothy place primary emphasis on the usefulness of Scripture for every kind of ministry. The text goes so far as to imply that if a person is thoroughly acquainted with Scripture, he or she is competent for every good work!

Scripture is the Word of God in a very special way. Not only does it faithfully convey what God has spoken in the past, report God’s mighty acts to save his people, and impart inspired wisdom about how to live, but Scripture is also a means that God uses to speak to people in the present, to bring us into communion with himself: “In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 104).

In the history of the Church, God has used the Bible to call people to himself. St. Augustine, St. Anthony, and St. Francis all came to conversion under the influence of the words of Scripture. The stories of friends of mine show that God still does this. One agnostic friend, who was working on her doctorate in comparative literature, became disillusioned by the powerlessness of politics to remedy the world’s problems and dissatisfied with her own rationale for being

a moral person. She resolved to remain in her apartment and read works of philosophy and literature until she could discover the truth. After a few days of reading, she picked up a Bible and opened it at random to a text from Matthew about looking and not seeing, hearing but not understanding (13:14-15). Suddenly she saw and understood what the Gospel says about God, about Christ, about sin and Satan, and about conversion. She believed what she read, began to read Scripture from cover to cover, and gradually saw her whole life change.

Another friend grew up in Kazakhstan in a traditional Muslim family. A high school English teacher gave her an English New Testament to read. Intrigued by what she read there about Jesus, she talked to a missionary priest at the only Catholic church in her city. Between reading the New Testament and pestering the priest with questions, Gulnara decided to convert. She was baptized and received into the Church.

Tom, a man in his mid-forties, is president of a small software company. A regular at Mass who wanted to learn more about his faith, he took a few courses at the seminary where I teach. In his third Scripture course, as the class discussed Jesus' words in John 3:3 about being "born from above," he suddenly exclaimed: "I get it! I've seen it happen—these months of studying Scripture have changed me. I am a different person with different desires and a different understanding of reality. This is what it means to be 'born of the Spirit'" (Jn 3:8).

The Mission of the Church

The mission that Christ has entrusted to the Church corresponds to humanity's greatest need. The Gospel is the Good News about Jesus, God, who has become a human being, who loved us and gave himself for us so that our sins could be forgiven and so that we could be changed from the inside out. What the world needs is transformed people. The problem of world hunger is not that there are too many people or not enough food. The earth produces more than enough to feed everyone. What is needed is more transformed people who, like Jesus, devote themselves to the needs of others, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Only the Spirit of God acting through the Word of God in human hearts can produce people like that.

It is true that human beings have used the gifts God gave us to develop many solutions to the problems facing us,

whether in the fields of medicine, education, economics, or the social sciences. All of these are good and are meant to be used in the service of others. Sometimes, however, we Christians are dazzled by these means and are tempted to neglect the unique resource entrusted to us, God's Word, and to offer the world more of what it already has.

The Church's mission today is to proclaim Christ, crucified and risen, the Word of God made man, just as the Apostles did. Every Christian is called to share in spreading the Good News for the sake of people around us caught in situations that they cannot escape on their own.

We can only give to others what we ourselves possess. If we wish to share in the Church's mission of proclaiming the Good News, we must immerse ourselves in the Word of God. We must prayerfully read Scripture daily—whether we follow the liturgical readings or a more comprehensive reading plan—and we must study the Bible to really understand it. We must overcome an exaggerated fear of making mistakes in interpretation. Our greatest danger today lies not in mistaken interpretation but in unfamiliarity with the Word of God. Many solid Catholic Bible resources are available to guide our study and prayer. The Tradition of the Church provides Catholics with extra protection. If we read the Bible with the Church, interpreting it in harmony with the *Catechism* and other expressions of the Church's teaching, we will not go astray, even if we do not understand every text perfectly.

As we are nourished by reading, praying, and studying the Bible, we will be changed and empowered by Christ. As Pope Benedict has said, "The Church knows well that Christ lives in the Sacred Scriptures" (Address, September 16, 2005). We will become witnesses as the Word of Christ comes to dwell in us (Col 3:16) and we share what we have learned. The Word of God is the foundation of the Church's mission because it bears divine power and is the only thing capable of meeting humanity's deepest need. Christ has entrusted his Word to the Church and commands us to proclaim it (Mt 28:20). That proclamation centers on the Word that "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:14).

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