

# CONTENTS

Foreword	11
Introduction: One Thing Is Necessary	15
Part 1: The Word	
1. Acts	27
2. Invites and Divides	43
3. Frees	57
4. Gathers	83
Part 2: The Sermon	
5. Exposes	97
6. Announces	109
7. Confronts	123
Part 3: The Church	
8. Sings	139
9. Prays	149
10. Disciples	159
11. Scatters and, Once Again, Invites	173
Notes	181



# THE WORD

## Acts

“Words, words, words.”

Have you heard that phrase? It’s from Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*. Another character asks Prince Hamlet what book he is reading, to which he replies, “Words, words, words.” It’s a despondent response. Surely the book was saying *something*, but the hopeless Hamlet found that *something* to be meaningless. The words were no more than syllables of sound. Splashes of ink on paper.

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* around 1600, but here was a post-modern moment if there ever was one. It’s awfully tempting these days to agree with Hamlet about the emptiness of words. There’s no real meaning; there are just words. There’s no real truth; there are just words. We believe in words like we trust in promises—very little. Both words and promises are unstable. Sometimes they will be kept, but most of the time they’ll be broken. You don’t have to read sophisticated French philosophers to know that.

Largely, we don’t trust words because people are constantly trying to sell us something with their words. A credit card advertisement recently promised me, “Get the most of what you love.” The most? Wow!

Then there was the foil wrapper on a piece of almond-filled dark chocolate that instructed me, “Keep believing in yourself and

your special dreams.” Yes, I will resolve to keep believing. Thank you, almond-filled dark chocolate. I was beginning to lose hope.

And then, shortly after I purchased a pair of brown leather clogs years ago, I discovered the words on the soles, “Think fast, live slow.” Hmm, maybe I should slow down in life, but also think faster. That’s life-changing.

So the soles of my brown clogs are preaching. A chocolate wrapper is trying to shape my worldview. And a credit card advertisement heralds the eschatological promise of providing most of what I love.

How does such language affect me? It makes me cynical about words, much less wise words and prophetic words. And I know I’m not alone. We live surrounded by so many money-mad marketers, salesman preachers, and humpty-dumpty heroes that we’re all a bit weary of words.

## A THEOLOGY OF BUZZ

Still, words matter, and God’s Word is what grows God’s church. In the introduction, I described how the Word reverberates—as in a canyon—through a church, giving life to all its parts. Here’s another analogy that helps me visualize the power of God’s Word: God’s Word gives life to a church like electricity gives power to a city.

Picture it. Electricity leaves the power plant and buzzes through power lines. Then it makes its way into streetlights, grocery store freezers, office computers, and rows and rows of neighborhood homes. Lamps glow and refrigerators hum. In the same way, I’m contending that God’s Word buzzes and hums through people and the local church, giving light to their eyes and hope to their hearts.

The problem is we all know that words are unreliable and misleading. So how can it be that words give life?

We need to pause and consider the little vibrating thing

itself—the Word. We need a theology of the buzz, because what I’m contending in this book is a faith proposition. Trusting God’s Word to build our churches is an act of faith. Faith in God. Faith in His Word. And such faith is not natural, even for the Christian. It’s supernatural. God must give it.

If you walk away from this book with just one thing, I pray it is greater faith in the power of God’s Word.

The “old man” in each of us—to use Paul’s language—continually tempts us to build or center our churches on other things, things we can see and measure. We want to rely on marketing research, personal charisma, good music, or other natural devices. I’m not saying that “natural” devices are bad, *per se*. But if we’re relying upon them, there’s no difference between us and the world. God means to challenge us right here. “Is not my word like fire,” He would say to us, “and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” (Jer. 23:29). That’s why I was not surprised to read a recent email in which a member of my church reported, “I was broken to pieces by the end of Sunday’s sermon.” And he was praising God.

In this chapter, I’m going to make five statements that will be foundational for everything else in this book. If you want to consider the following ideas more deeply, you can turn to the recommended reading that concludes the chapter, especially Horton, Packer, and Ward. Furthermore, Scripture uses the phrase “Word of God” in a number of ways, but I will be using the phrase “God’s Word” as synonymous with the Bible throughout the following discussion. When I use the phrase “God’s words” I’m referring to His words more broadly.

## FIVE FOUNDATIONAL STATEMENTS:

### 1. God’s Word Is an Extension of God

The first thing to realize is that *God’s Word is an extension of*

*God Himself.* To hear His words that comprise the whole Bible is to hear Him. To obey His words is to obey Him. To ignore His words is to ignore Him. God “invests” Himself in His words, as Timothy Ward puts it. He so identifies Himself with His words that our response to His words is our response to Him.

After King David slept with Bathsheba and killed her husband, God said to David, “You despised the word of the LORD,” and in the next breath, “You have despised me” (2 Sam. 12:9–10; see also 1 Sam. 15:19, 23 in which Samuel rebuked King Saul).

Jesus, speaking to His disciples, identifies His words with Himself in the same way: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word” (John 14:23a).

You can measure a person’s opinion of God by his or her opinion of God’s Word. That’s why a person who loves God loves His Word, and the person who hates God rejects what God has spoken. God’s Word is an extension of Himself—His identity, purposes, affections, and power.

Notice how the psalmist speaks of God’s voice interchangeably with God Himself: “The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. . . . The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh” (Ps. 29:5, 8). For God’s voice to break or shake something is for God to break or shake something. The equation is simple.

Maybe too simple? Am I not just stating the obvious? After all, this is how we treat the words of the people we encounter every day. How would my wife respond if I ignored her words by explaining, “It’s *you* I’m interested in, not your words.” How would a drill sergeant respond to the soldier who said the same? Our words are an extension of us. They express us.

Likewise, it may seem obvious that God’s Word is an extension of Himself, but it’s worth observing for at least three reasons. First, there has been a satanic impulse inside each of us to separate God from His Word ever since the serpent said to Adam and

Eve, “Did God actually say . . . ?” (Gen. 3:1). It’s part of our fallen nature to say we love *Him* and yet give no heed to *His words* (see John 14:15; 1 John 5:3–4). We claim to love God, but how much time in the week do we spend reading the Bible?

Second, a host of twentieth-century theologies, like the serpent in Genesis 3, tried to separate God’s Word from the Bible. Some said the Bible merely “gives witness” to God’s words. Some pitted Jesus against the Bible, saying that Jesus alone is the Word. Some leveled charges of “bibliolatry”—worshiping the Bible—against anyone who makes a big deal of the Bible. I can assure you my wife would not be pleased if she emailed me at work and asked me to pick up five items at the store, but I picked up only three and explained, “I assumed your email was merely ‘giving witness’ to your words, and that I was free to pick and choose from the list.” As for the occasional charge of “bibliolatry,” I am honestly not sure if a response is merited. People worshiping their Bibles—really? Has anyone seen people doing this?

Third, there’s a mystical impulse among many evangelicals that wants to close its eyes and simply experience God’s presence and love. But imagine sitting next to a friend on a couch and saying, “Don’t talk to me. I just want to feel your presence.”

In Scripture, God communes with His people by communicating with them. Even God’s Old Testament temple, the place where God is said to *dwell*, was distinguished from other ancient Near Eastern cultic temples because its most sacred spot contained not magical incantations for manipulating the gods into sending a good harvest or fertile wombs, but God’s ten commandments, literally, His ten “words.” God dwells with His people through His Word.

To read the Bible is not merely an exercise in intellectual comprehension; it’s an opportunity to stand before the throne of the King of the universe. It’s an opportunity to encounter Him. God communes through communication.

Do you want to measure your regard for God? Then consider your regard for the Bible. In Scripture, God is addressing you. Are you listening? Our attitude should be like Jeremiah's, who considered the false prophets of his day and trembled: "My heart is broken within me; all my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the LORD and because of his holy words" (Jer. 23:9).

## 2. God Acts through His Word

Evangelicals typically place their theological discussion of God's Word under the heading of "revelation." The Bible reveals God and His purposes to us, we say. It imparts information. And so we discuss the attributes of Scripture accordingly. We describe the Bible as inspired, authoritative, sufficient, inerrant, and clear. That is, the information it imparts is inspired, authoritative, and so forth. Such emphases make sense in light of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment's attack on Scripture's authority. God's people have responded to these challenges by rightly reinforcing their arguments for the propositional nature of Scripture.

I wholeheartedly affirm all of this. But now let's add another element. God not only reveals information through His Word; *God acts through His Word*. That's our second foundational statement. God acts when He speaks. He acts in three ways: He creates, He sustains, and He both establishes and breaks relationships.

God creates with His Words. You and I create with hands, computers, shovels, and bulldozers. But not God. God is Spirit, and He creates by speaking. He says, "Be," and it is. So the psalmist looks back on Genesis 1 and exclaims, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host" (Ps. 33:6). The author of Hebrews agrees: "We understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible" (Heb. 11:3). Invisible words create visible matter.

God sustains the universe by His word. Scientists tell us that atoms and quarks, planets and suns are held together by the mechanical laws of gravitation, electromagnetism, and strong and weak interaction. But think: Such laws are themselves the gusts of God's breath. They are words rolling off God's tongue second by second. As the author of Hebrews puts it, Jesus "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3)—by His buzzing and electric words. It's worth meditating for a moment on what actually happened when Jesus said to the wind and the waves, "Peace! Be still!" (Mark 4:39). Particles of nitrogen, oxygen, and hydrogen *listened*. Electrons and protons *obeyed*. Can you explain that?

*God establishes and breaks relationships through His word.* God made a verbal covenant with Abraham and another one with Abraham's descendants, the Israelites. When they failed to keep that covenant, God exiled them. At every step, God's relationship with the people of Israel was established and broken by His words.

Now, it's one thing to make this point in reference to the old covenant and the people of Israel. But the point becomes even more striking with the advent of the new covenant and the church. We're no longer talking about words written on tablets of stone, but, somehow, words written on human hearts. We're talking about the soul's very posture—its hopes and affections. It appears that, just as God created the universe with words, so He re-creates fallen hearts with words. He makes us "new creations." He "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). The apostles speak in unison here:

- Peter reminds his Christian readers that they had been "born again . . . through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23 NIV).
- James says similarly that by God's "own will he brought us forth by the word of truth;" therefore, James exhorts his

readers to “receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:18, 21).

- John speaks of the Word that “abides in you” (1 John 2:14), and the truth that sets us free (John 8:32).
- Paul makes the parallel between God’s work in creation and new creation explicit: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Elsewhere, he teaches “faith comes from hearing” (Rom. 10:17).

Of course, the apostles learned these promises from Jesus Himself, who said, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63b).

God’s Word causes the new birth. It abides. It gives the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ. And God’s Word can do all of this because it’s “living and active” (Heb. 4:12). It buzzes and hums into the heart and turns on the light. Click! You can now see. You can now love God. Before, you couldn’t.

### **3. God Acts through His Word by His Spirit**

But is this really the case? Time and again, God speaks to the Israelites, and they still disobey. Time and again, preachers preach the Bible while people yawn, fall asleep, or forget. Where are all the clicking lightbulbs and new-creation hearts?

This brings us to a third foundational sentence: *God acts through His Word by His Spirit.*

God’s words have power because they move by God’s Spirit and do exactly what the Spirit wishes. So Jesus told Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is

with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Sometimes the Spirit uses God’s words to harden a heart (Isa. 6:9–10; Matt. 13:14–15; Acts 28:26–27). Sometimes He uses them to soften one (Matt. 13:16; Acts 28:28; Rom. 15:18–21). But God’s words always act according to the Spirit’s will. He blows where He wishes.

The electrical operations of God’s Word are not magical. They are spiritual. God’s Spirit works together with God’s Word. Here’s Jesus putting it all together: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). The Spirit’s work is not contrasted with the work of Jesus’ words in this passage; it’s contrasted with the flesh’s work—the kind of work accomplished by strength, beauty, or intelligence (see 2 Cor. 10:3). Jesus’ words and the Spirit work together to give us spirit and life.

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of this in the Bible occurs in Ezekiel 36 and 37. In chapter 36, we encounter God’s astounding new covenant promises:

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:26–27)

God promises to give His people a new heart and a new spirit by putting His Spirit within us.

How exactly will God do this? Ezekiel 37 contains the answer. The chapter begins with God giving the prophet a vision of standing in a valley of dry bones:

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among

them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. (vv. 1–2)

The stage is set. Then comes the challenge: “And he said to me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ And I answered, ‘O Lord GOD, you know.’”

That, of course, is the question that should drive every Christian and every church leader—how does life come to those who are spiritually dead? God gives the first half of the answer by telling Ezekiel to preach:

Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. (vv. 4–8)

Ezekiel preached words, and life began to form. Bodies took shape. But more was needed. Words weren’t enough. The next sentence reads, “But there was no breath in them.” Keep in mind that the Hebrew word for both “breath” and “wind” is the same word for “spirit.” The author seems interested in the double meaning as the story continues:

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath [spirit]; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord

GOD: Come from the four winds [spirits], O breath [spirit], and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath [spirit] came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. (vv. 9–10)

The passage is drenched with the word for “spirit,” and the meaning can hardly be missed. God’s Spirit joins God’s preached word—a word preached through a man—to give spiritual life where there is spiritual death. This very interpretation is offered moments later, as the new covenant promise of chapter 36 is recalled:

Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the LORD GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. . . . And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD. (vv. 12, 14)

The power of God’s Word is a faith proposition. It takes faith to believe that invisible words and the invisible Spirit could give life to a valley of dry bones. By comparison, it takes absolutely no faith to believe in the power of beauty, intelligence, strength, style, or humor. These qualities are attractive, and we can literally watch them draw a crowd. We can watch them build a “church.”

The apostle Paul knew better. He knew that spiritual life is created through God’s words and Spirit working together. He knew that the Thessalonian church was loved by God “because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5; see also 1 Cor. 2:4; Gal. 3:2–3). How did he know this? He had witnessed the change in their lives. Amid temptation, they were obedient. Amid persecution, they had joy. “You became imitators of us and

of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (1 Thess. 1:6–7). It’s not surprising then that Paul would refer to the Word of God as the “sword of the Spirit” (Eph. 6:17).

There is no greater power a church has at its disposal than preaching the Father’s Word of the Son working through the Spirit. God’s Word always accomplishes what God means it to accomplish, which brings us to a fourth statement.

#### 4. God’s Word and Spirit Act Together Efficaciously

Combined, the Word and Spirit make a difference. This point has been implicit so far, but it’s worth making explicit: *God’s Word and Spirit work together efficaciously.*

Our words are unstable, unreliable, and untrustworthy. Even when they are true, people will ignore or misunderstand us. They’re just not effective. They don’t get the job done. So we say things like “Money talks” or “Actions speak louder than words” or, as Theodore Roosevelt put it, “Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.”

But God’s words are different. They are *efficacious*. That is, they have their intended effect. Christians, as a matter of faith, must remember this. Listen to the prophet Isaiah and pay attention especially to his verbal phrases:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it *shall not return* to me empty, but it *shall accomplish* that which I purpose, and *shall succeed* in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10–11, emphasis added; see also Ezek. 12:25)

Rainwater comes, makes, and gives. Droplets of water filter into the dirt, germinate seeds, and yield green shoots of life. Such is God's Word. It doesn't fail. It accomplishes. It succeeds. Every time. Maybe it hardens and maybe it softens, as we said earlier. But it accomplishes its will every time.

As Michael Horton has put it, God's Word does not merely impart information; it creates life. It's not only descriptive; it's effective. It produces worship, obedience, communion, and disciples.

When God speaks, some kind of change happens—always.

### 5. God Speaks through Human Preachers and Human Words

Finally, we come to a fifth statement, which may be the strangest and most surprising of all: *God speaks through human preachers and human words.*

It is one thing to look back at Genesis 1, read about God commanding light to appear, nod our heads, and affirm that God's words are powerful. It feels like another thing to say that what the preacher does on Sunday morning bears the same kind of power.

It's true that it would be downright silly to confuse our words with God's primordial words at creation, and just plain heretical to confuse our words with the words of inspired Scripture (see 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19–21). Those all-important qualifications made, the Scriptures say over and over again that God will speak with new-creation power as we faithfully expound the message of Scripture.

So testifies Jesus about human preachers. When sending seventy-two disciples out to preach, Jesus tells them, "The one who *hears you hears me*, and the one who *rejects you rejects me*, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16, emphasis added).

And so testify Paul, Peter, and John. Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul remarkably equates the words he preached with God's words: "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted

it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13; also Gal. 1:11). But Paul didn’t simply mean his own words; he knew that God works efficaciously through preaching generally: “It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21).

Peter also equates God’s eternal, unchanging Word with human preaching: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. . . .And this word is the good news that was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:23, 25). He is even more explicit later in the letter: “If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God” (1 Peter 4:11 NIV).

John makes a similar equation: “Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us” (1 John 4:6).

God speaks through human preachers and human words. It’s hard to believe, but that’s why we must ask for faith:

- faith that encountering the Bible is encountering God;
- faith that God acts efficaciously through His Word by His Spirit; and
- faith that God puts this power to work when Christians like you and me speak.

## POWER FOR THE UNIVERSE—AND THE CHURCH

God’s Word, working through God’s Spirit, is the most powerful force in the universe and in the church. Father, Son, and Spirit wonderfully collaborate to pour forth their power through speech, to accomplish their single will through words.

That’s the theological foundation for the rest of this book. Our goal now is to trace the Word and Spirit’s power from one area of the church’s life to another, almost like we were following the flow of electricity through power lines from one building to the next.

The best place to begin, I believe, is with the heart of the individual person. What happens when the evangelist's invitation zaps the human heart? What do the electric reverberations of God's Word and Spirit look like in action? Furthermore, how should we view the apparent effectiveness that other things can have in persuading people, like good deeds or music or the style of a building's décor? These are the questions to which we now turn.

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