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# Words of Life

Scripture as the  
living and active  
word of God

ivp

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: GOD AND THE BIBLE

In my own Anglican denomination it has long been customary, at the end of the public reading of Scripture, for the reader to say, 'This is the Word of the Lord.' Throughout Christian history, the overwhelmingly predominant view of the Bible has been that it is itself the living and active Word of God. To say that the Bible is the Word of God is to say, putting it another way, that 'what the Bible says, God says'. In this book I shall refer to this view of the Bible in different ways: as the evangelical view of Scripture, or as the view held by the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century, or sometimes as the orthodox view. When I talk in these ways, however, those different labels ought not to obscure the fact that the conviction most commonly held about the Bible by Christians has been, and is, that it is the *Word of God*.

However, this is not always an easy view of the Bible to defend in the face of critics, or to understand properly for oneself. I once saw a pencil-drawn cartoon that depicted a man, alone in a bare room, sitting on an uncomfortable-looking chair. Open on his lap was a ridiculously oversized book, and the book's title was visible, written on the spine: 'Brief Notes on Leviticus'. He was studying

the book intently, and was frankly looking pretty serious and dour. The caption underneath read, 'Chris the Calvinist just lived for pleasure'.

I know this is only a cartoon (and am ignoring the cheap shot it makes about Calvinists, among whom I would want to identify myself!). Yet it does put its finger on a worry about the Bible that lies not far below the surface for many Christians. Indeed for some people this is a worry that long ago broke through the surface, and that they have had to face explicitly. It is at heart the worry that, if we insist the Bible is itself God's Word, we might pay so much attention to Scripture that we fail to pay all the attention we should to Christ. And that would be a very serious mistake to make, tantamount to the sin of idolatry (or, as it is sometimes called in this case, 'bibliolatry': worship of the book). We often like to think our concerns and questions are brand new ones, but of course that is rarely the case. This worry about the Bible and Christ has been thought through for centuries, as we shall come to see.

The same basic question can be asked in many different ways: Does the fullness of life which Christ came to bring really have to involve paying such close attention to the Bible? Does our new life in the Spirit really need to be centred around what seem to be comprehension exercises on biblical texts? Has a high view of Scripture led some of us to turn our weekly gatherings for worship into little more than preaching rallies, where we sit passively, when in fact our meetings should be joyful, collaborative and encouraging? Surely Christ came to call us to be disciples, not bookworms? Indeed did Jesus not reserve some of his harshest criticisms for groups such as the Pharisees and teachers of the law, taking them to task for being obsessed with rightly interpreting tiny details of Scripture, while missing the great spiritual realities to which Scripture was pointing them? Is the evangelical view of Scripture in the end therefore fundamentally Pharisaic, and not really fully Christian?

The biblical scholar John Barton, who wishes to build on these worries in order to encourage people away from the evangelical view of Scripture, has put it this way:

it is not primarily the Bible that is the Word of God, but Jesus Christ. I do not think one could find a single Christian who would dissent from

this proposition, for to do so would plainly be to commit what is sometimes called bibliolatry: the elevation of the Bible above Christ himself. . . . Christians are not those who believe in the Bible, but those who believe in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to find Christians who say they have abandoned the evangelical doctrine of Scripture because they have found this kind of argument persuasive. (In some places, such people have terms like ‘open evangelical’ and ‘post-conservative’ to describe themselves.) Indeed it can seem impossible, at first, to disagree with this quotation from Barton. Christians certainly are in relationship with a saviour, not with a paper-and-ink book. Our devotion should be towards a living Lord, not to words printed on a page. Of course many Christians, looking again at Barton’s words, would soon realize that in the last sentence he is forcing a false dichotomy on us. We do not have to choose between ‘believing in the Bible’ and ‘believing in Christ’. As Christians we are called on to do *both*. In fact one crucial means by which we demonstrate our faith in Christ is by also believing what the Bible says. Perhaps the most straightforward argument for this begins by observing the fact that Jesus himself treated the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, as themselves words from God, and so if we are going to be devoted to him then we must make sure our view of the Scriptures is the same as his.<sup>2</sup>

This gets us to the heart of what I am attempting to do in this book: I want to articulate, explain and defend what we are really saying when we proclaim, as we must, that the Bible is God’s Word. In particular, this is how I want to go about this: *I am attempting to describe the nature of the relationship between God and Scripture*. Why is it the case that, in order to worship God faithfully, we need to pay close attention to the Bible? Why is it the case that,

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1. John Barton, *People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1988), pp. 81, 83.

2. A classic (and still very helpful) exposition of Christ’s high view of the Old Testament is found in John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1993).

in order to be a faithful disciple of the Word-made-flesh, I need to base my life on the words of Scripture? Why is it the case that, in order to walk in step with the Spirit, I need to trust and obey what Scripture says? And how can we do all of this without beginning to worship a book instead of the Lord? What I am offering here, then, is *an outline of what is usually called the doctrine of Scripture*.

The outline has three main components, each building on what comes previously. The first is *a biblical outline*. We shall look within the Bible itself, in order to discern the Bible's own description of the relationship between, on the one hand, God and Christ, and, on the other hand, the words by which they speak and act. To give a very brief summary in advance: we shall find that the words of the Bible are a significant aspect of *God's action* in the world. The relationship between God and the Bible is at heart to do with the actions God uses the Bible to perform. (The word of God is, after all, living and *active*, according to Heb. 4:12.)

It is important that we start in this way with a biblical outline, for too often writing on the doctrine of Scripture, whether supportive or critical of the evangelical view of Scripture, has started elsewhere than with the biblical shape of God's acts of speech. This shape is that of the history of God's revelatory and redemptive activity in the world. It is focused initially on his covenant people in Israel, and then comes to a climax in the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of his Son, the Word made flesh, before spreading out to the whole world through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the gospel. Claims that 'the Bible is the Word of God' must be explicitly related to God's speech and actions in this history.

Writing on Scripture that does not take account of this usually runs into trouble of one kind or another. Examples of this can be found in consciously evangelical writing that wants primarily to defend one or another historic formulation of the doctrine of Scripture, without seriously reflecting on the areas where that formulation might need reconsidering in the light of Scripture. However, a hallmark of Protestant theology ought always to be its adherence to the Reformation maxim *ecclesia semper reformanda* (the church is always in need of reforming). Other writers have approached Scripture from a theological or doctrinal starting

point. Such works can give real insights, but lack the explicit biblical moorings each aspect of the doctrine of Scripture requires in order to demonstrate that it is not just coherent within systematic theology, but also that it is in genuine conformity with the content of the very book it intends to describe, and with the actions of the God revealed in that book.<sup>3</sup> Still other writers have begun their work on Scripture with categories drawn from outside Scripture and theology, usually with the apologetic aim of updating the doctrine of Scripture in order to make it more comprehensible (and, in some cases, apparently more credible) to a new generation in a new culture.<sup>4</sup> The explicitly biblical foundation I shall lay aims to avoid some of these problems.

Following this biblical outline, I shall begin to draw the threads together into *a theological outline of Scripture in its relationship with God*, focusing on Scripture's role in relationship with each of the persons of the Trinity. In the construction of any aspect of Christian doctrine it is appropriate to move in this way from an analysis of the biblical material to a theological exposition of that material. However, it is especially important to make these theological steps explicit here, because of the history of the

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3. I think here most recently of John Webster's stimulating *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

4. I think here particularly of the work on inspiration by William Abraham, which, while retaining the word 'inspiration', long used in evangelical doctrines of Scripture, in effect redefines the theological use of that term according to its regular use in vernacular non-theological contexts (William Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981]). My own previous work *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) has also been chided by a few for relying too heavily on a concept drawn from the philosophy of language, namely speech-act theory. I did not, though, mean to claim that the philosophy of language alone can provide the entire basis for a fully reworked doctrine of Scripture. I was using it as a tool to provide a fresh angle on Scripture, which future biblical and theological work might exploit. This book is an attempt at this latter task.

evangelical doctrine of Scripture in recent centuries, and because of criticisms regularly made of it.

Much evangelical writing on Scripture from the last four centuries has been taken to task for allegedly not being as truly theological as it should have been. That is, it is said that the doctrine of Scripture has not been integrally related to the primary Christian doctrines: the doctrines of God, Christ, the Spirit, creation and salvation. Indeed it is certainly the case that in the period following the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century a significant shift took place in the form in which evangelical theology was constructed. The sixteenth-century Reformers mostly did not devote an entire separate section to Scripture itself in their theological writings. Thus John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) does not contain a section explicitly on Scripture. Instead he deals with Scripture within a more general opening section entitled 'The Knowledge of God the Creator'. By contrast, theologians of the following seventeenth century more usually opened their systematic theologies with an introductory discussion of the nature of theology itself (usually termed the 'prolegomena'), followed immediately by a section devoted entirely to the doctrine of Scripture. Only after this came discussions of God, creation, Christ and salvation. Modern works of evangelical systematic theology often follow this same pattern.

It is often said that this represents a major theological shift, and a mistaken one, in orthodox Protestant theology after the Reformation. The claim being made is that from the seventeenth century a doctrine of Scripture was developed as central to theology expressed in mostly philosophical and speculative terms, in isolation from the Bible's teaching about God and Christ. Thus the theology of the generations who came after the Reformers often stands accused of talking about the Bible without always being conscious, or at least making explicit, that we ought not to theologize and theorize about Scripture without beginning squarely with the Bible's teaching about God's character and actions. However, this interpretation of theology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been subjected to searching and persuasive criticism. What was happening was that theologians were changing the *format* in which they wrote their theology, but without substantially

moving away from the basic theological views of the Bible that Luther, Calvin and others had articulated.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless it is probably the case that, since the eighteenth century, this revised format in which evangelical systematic theology has been presented has had some unforeseen negative impact on popular evangelical thought. Many presentations of evangelical theology often begin by discussing Scripture, and discuss Scripture under doctrinal headings such as Scripture's sufficiency, clarity and authority. It is certainly not the case that these headings are misleading; later in this book I shall defend them and explain them. The problem is, rather, that when the doctrine of Scripture is presented primarily in this form it can at least *appear* as if Scripture is unrelated to the great central doctrines of the Christian faith. At the very least, much contemporary evangelical teaching and writing on Scripture has not gone out of its way to demonstrate in its very content and form that such accusations are mistaken. The result can be that believers are left at least slightly unclear on just why the Bible ought to be so central to

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5. See Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark (eds.), *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999). On respectively Reformed and Lutheran theology of the post-Reformation period, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970). The format of theology was changing in the seventeenth century because of the need to answer the increasingly sophisticated objections to the Reformation's view of the Bible, coming from both Roman Catholics and sceptics. Philosophical influences in the surrounding culture also affected the mode in which it was felt that theological arguments ought to be presented. Indeed the prolegomena of seventeenth-century systematic theologies, while addressing philosophical issues and drawing on philosophical concepts, are usually at root thoroughly biblical-theological in content. Thus the subsequent section on the doctrine of Scripture, when it comes, has been introduced theologically, even though the fuller discussions of God, Christ, Spirit and salvation come only later.

faith, and especially on how it can be kept central without itself attracting attention away from Christ, thereby becoming an idolatrous focus of worship.

Indeed if we talk about the Bible without explicitly structuring what we say about it around the great doctrines of God, Christ and the Spirit, then two unfortunate things happen. First, the doctrine of Scripture can begin to look like a preface or appendix to the central doctrines of the Christian faith, as these have been expressed in the church's great creeds. As such it can seem easily dispensable. (Most books, after all, lose very little of substance if stripped of their preface and appendices.) The doctrine of Scripture is certainly *not* dispensable, but evangelicals can sometimes, quite contrary to their intentions, make it appear so. This is an especially attractive option to anyone who has personal and painful experience of controversy between evangelicals over the nature of Scripture, and who has consequently come to think that focusing in doctrinal detail on Scripture usually results in a destructive fall away from Christ. It is also attractive to those Christians who wish to remain largely orthodox in their understanding of God, but who disagree with the orthodox doctrine of Scripture.

A second unfortunate consequence of a doctrine of Scripture developed apparently in isolation from other central Christian teachings, and from the shape of the narrative structure of Scripture as a whole, is that it can turn out to be a doctrine that seems impoverished and thin, lacking deep roots in the rich glories of the character and actions of God himself. This can be the case even if the doctrine, considered detail by detail, is unimpeachably orthodox and biblical. Such a doctrine can feel, even to some of those who at heart want to uphold it, more like an interesting and necessary tangent in theology than part of the heartbeat of theology itself. It comes to look like a kind of theological throat-clearing, prior to the main business of actually talking about God, as if in articulating the doctrine of Scripture we were really saying little more than this: 'Let's establish the basis on which we talk about God . . . and that's where the Bible comes in. Now that this is clear, we can get on with the business of actually talking about God.'

There may be times in Christian history when it is right to begin one's theology with the doctrine of Scripture, because the prevailing culture makes it important apologetically to address questions of how God can be known right at the outset. However, the doctrine of Scripture itself is often distorted through this approach, and therefore the kind of doctrine of Scripture this book will outline is one that aims to demonstrate that its every aspect is shaped from the bottom up by the character and actions of God, and is integrally related to God's being and action, yet without the inert book coming to eclipse the living Saviour.

After these biblical and theological outlines comes, thirdly, a *doctrinal outline* of Scripture. It is in this chapter that I discuss Scripture under the headings with which evangelicals are usually most familiar, namely Scripture's necessity, sufficiency, clarity and authority. These doctrinal headings certainly do flow naturally and necessarily out of the biblical and theological outlines of Scripture, and I shall be concerned to demonstrate carefully that that is the case. They are often termed the 'attributes' of Scripture, and the doctrinal outline will try to show that they are not a list of abstract qualities assigned to Scripture for questionable philosophical reasons. Instead they emerge as appropriate and necessary descriptions of Scripture, in the light of its dynamic and integral function within God's actions in the history of redemption. I shall offer a definition of each attribute, shaped by the preceding biblical and theological material.

The final major chapter seeks to open up some significant areas where the doctrine of Scripture, as I have outlined it, should be *applied*. We shall look first at that great slogan from the Reformation, *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), and then more specifically at some basic questions about the place of Scripture within the Christian community. Then come two final sections: one on the nature of preaching, in the light of the nature and function of Scripture I am describing, and one on the appropriate role and aims of the private reading of Scripture by Christians. In these sections I want to demonstrate how a proper doctrine of Scripture can and should make the way a Christian approaches Scripture day by day more faithful, dynamic and life-giving.

To help the reader keep pace with the doctrine of Scripture which will build up as the book progresses, regular summary paragraphs have been included, often at the end of each major section.

It will be helpful to note here at the outset the theological writings on which I have drawn most heavily. As the book progresses, readers will find the names of certain theologians appearing more often than others in the text and footnotes. These are the four primary ones:

1. *John Calvin*, the great systematizer of Reformation theology in the sixteenth century.
2. *Francis Turretin* of Geneva, an influential and leading figure of Reformed theology from the middle of the seventeenth century.
3. *B. B. Warfield*, the American theologian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whose writings on Scripture have set the agenda for many debates on Scripture in the last century, especially in the United States.
4. *Herman Bavinck*, Warfield's brilliant contemporary in Holland.

It is not that all four agree with each other on every detail; nor are they to be slavishly followed at every point, since like us they were fallible people. Nor am I suggesting that nothing worthwhile has been written on Scripture since the 1950s; the writings of J. I. Packer, for example, have helped many people understand and remain committed to the evangelical doctrine of Scripture in recent decades. Nevertheless in the works of these four older theologians we are given some of the great high points in Christian history of the explanation and defence of the evangelical doctrine of Scripture. We are therefore impoverished in coming to grips with Scripture in our own day, and dealing with contemporary challenges to Scripture, if we are not rooted in the thought of people such as these.

Overall, then, this book intends to describe the nature and function of Scripture in explicitly biblical and theological terms, as well as doctrinal ones. I aim to offer an outline of the doctrine of Scripture that stands firmly in line with the best of the theological traditions that have come down to us, and that is also expressed in

a form appropriate for the twenty-first century. If it turns out that this will help some readers to understand God's actions in and through Scripture in a little more depth, and so worship the God of Scripture with greater assurance and joy, then my aims will have been fulfilled.

## 2. GOD AND SCRIPTURE: A BIBLICAL OUTLINE

The fundamental question to which we seek an answer in this chapter is: What, according to the Bible, is in fact going on when God speaks? We need to be clear on this, if what we eventually say about our understanding of the Bible as the ‘Word of God’ is going to be true and coherent. The focus will be on how God relates himself to words, both spoken and written. Therefore this chapter will sketch an outline of how central language is to who God and Christ are, and to what they do. If this way of putting it sounds a little abstract to some readers, the picture being pieced together here should become increasingly clear as the chapter progresses.

### **God’s action and his words**

#### *The Old Testament*

It is often observed that God’s words and actions are intimately related in the Bible. To say of God that he spoke, and to say of God that he did something, is often one and the same thing. The

examples that follow here have been drawn deliberately from different parts of the Bible. One of the most obvious examples is found in the biblical creation accounts. According to the Bible, God creates by speaking: 'God said, "Let there be light," and there was light' (Gen. 1:3). It seems that here God expressing the wish that light exist, and the coming into existence of light, are two ways of describing the same event. In Genesis 1:6 he says, 'let there be a vault between the waters', and verse 7 adds, 'so God made the vault'. In the light of verse 3, verses 6 and 7 do not appear to be describing two different actions. It is not the case that God first expresses verbally his desire to create and then actually forms creation wordlessly. A more natural reading is that verses 6 and 7 give two different aspects of the single divine act of creation. The rest of Genesis chapter 1 follows the same pattern. In some cases God's act of speaking is simply sufficient for an act of creation, with no additional account of God 'making' or 'creating' (as in vv. 9 and 11, each of which ends with the simple description 'and it was so'). In others his creative words are followed by a summary description of what that act of speech has achieved ('God made/created . . .', vv. 14-16, 20-21, 24-25, 26-27).

Immediately after the creation comes the account of the fall, where humankind sins and, along with the rest of the world, comes under God's curse. Following humanity's creation by means of an act of speech, it is tragically fitting that humanity's fall should also be precipitated partly by language. For that is indeed how it happens. The snake mounts his attack on humanity, and therefore on God's action in creation, by speaking. He speaks words that call into question the reality of what God had in fact commanded. God had said, 'You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die' (Gen. 2:17). The snake throws this clear command into confusion first by distorting God's words, 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from *any* tree in the garden"?' (Gen. 3:1), and then by explicitly denying the fatal consequence God declared would follow from disobedience to his command: 'You will not certainly die' (Gen. 3:4).

God's immediate response to these tragic events is to speak directly himself. He first calls to the man, 'Where are you?' (Gen.

3:9), and then proceeds to pronounce curses on the serpent, on the woman and on the ground, and by extension on the man (Gen. 3:14–19). It would have been quite possible for God to have introduced painful child-bearing into the woman's life, and to have made the snake crawl on its belly, and made the man's labour on the land difficult, all without speaking, by wordless acts of judgment. However, the God who is presented to us in the Bible is quite unlike that: he is a God who, by his very nature, acts by speaking. The divine word that created in the first place continues to speak in warning humanity against disobedience to God, and subsequently in uttering curses when disobedience occurs. And the act of cursing is for God as effective as the act of creating; for God to say the words is to perform the action.

God's speaking activity in the Old Testament continues, as his plan of redemption begins to unfold. This redemption was first hinted at even in the pronouncing of the curse back in the fall (Gen. 3:15). As Scripture develops, it becomes clear that the primary form in which God works for the redemption of humanity from the curse of sin and death is *through his establishment of the covenant*. A covenant, of course, is at heart a relationship established by means of the uttering of a promise.<sup>1</sup> Thus the covenant with Noah, symbolized by the rainbow, takes the form of a spoken promise never again to destroy the earth by a flood (Gen. 9:8–17). This is God, as throughout the Old Testament, tying his future actions to the words of his promise.

The same is evident a few chapters further on in Genesis, when God begins the long redemptive process of forming a people who will bear his name, through the calling of Abraham (as Abram). Again, we could imagine the possibility of God beginning this long historical process through silent acts in history, providentially prompting Abraham to move from his homeland to the land that

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1. Telford Work has a helpful description of the place of God's words in the redemption history of Israel in *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 130–166. For example, 'a fundamental part of God's mercy to Israel certainly took the form of words' (p. 136).

God intended for him. Instead, though, God acts by speaking. He calls Abraham, and makes a covenant promise, which Abraham is invited to accept as his solid basis for trusting that God will do what he undertakes to do (Gen. 12:1–3). In giving Abraham the words of a promise (“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”) God commits himself to a course of faithful action that leads up to the birth of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, and continues through the present ‘last days’ right up until the future return of Christ. With these words God defines and explains the goal of his future redemptive activity, committing himself to a particular course of action in history.

It is helpful to show that the point being illustrated here (that God in the Bible very often acts simply by speaking) is not an event that occurs only at the high points of God’s linguistic action, such as his creating, cursing, and covenant-making. Instead it is a characteristic of God’s action that runs throughout the Old Testament. The following examples, from different literary genres within the Old Testament, are chosen almost at random to demonstrate this point.

The same relationship between God’s action and his words can be found, for example, in 1 Kings 13. This chapter recounts at some length the strange and sad events that took place immediately after the division of Israel into two kingdoms, north and south, which occurred under Jeroboam. A prophet came from Judah to Israel, but was deceived into disobeying the words God had already spoken to him. Thus the chapter begins, ‘By the word of the LORD a man of God came from Judah to Bethel, as Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make an offering. He cried out against the altar by the word of the LORD, “Altar, altar! This is what the LORD says . . .”’ (vv. 1–2). The key phrase ‘[by] the word of the LORD’ becomes the great refrain of the chapter (vv. 5, 9, 20, 21, 26, 32), such that the ‘word’ emerges as the main agent in driving the narrative forward. One commentator judges that ‘This is a story about the word’s power to get itself done.’<sup>2</sup> Words on their own, though, can of course get

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2. Richard Nelson, *1 & 2 Kings*, Interpretation Commentary (Louisville: John Knox, 1987), pp. 84–85.

nothing done. The word of the Lord has power only because it is the Lord who sends it. Therefore ascribing to ‘the word’ the ability to perform certain actions, turning the word itself into an agent, is a way of talking about God himself performing certain actions. For 1 Kings 13 to say that an event happened ‘by the word of the LORD’ is synonymous with saying ‘God acted by means of language in order to cause it to happen’.

The same equation of God speaking and God acting is evident in Psalm 29. A central theme of this psalm is the power of God’s voice:

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;  
     the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon . . .  
 The voice of the LORD shakes the desert;  
     the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh.  
 (Ps. 29:5, 8)

The poetic parallelism of each of these verses equates God performing an action by means of his voice, with God simply performing that action himself. Each half of each verse is a different way of talking about the same divine reality. Therefore to say of God that he did something, and to say that his voice did something, is to refer to the same action of God in two different ways.

A classic passage in this regard is Isaiah 55:10–11:

As the rain and the snow  
     come down from heaven,  
 and do not return to it  
     without watering the earth  
 and making it bud and flourish,  
     so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
 so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
     it will not return to me empty,  
 but will accomplish what I desire  
     and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

The transcendent God here describes his word as the means by which he acts in the world. The language about God’s ‘word’

seems to be a way of speaking of God's active presence in the world. This avoids such a strong insistence on transcendence as God's primary mode of being that his presence in the world comes to seem bizarre or incomprehensible, while also steering away from a collapse into a view of God as primarily or exclusively immanent. God and his word share the divine ability infallibly to perform their purpose; human words often fail to perform their intended purpose, but God's words do not. Thus an action of God can be appropriately described both by saying that God's Word has performed an action for which he sent it, and by saying that God himself has performed an action.

### *The New Testament*

Moving to the New Testament, the relationship between Christ's words and the action of God will be outlined later in this chapter. However, at this point two examples from the New Testament's teaching on God's action in salvation can be given. First, orthodox Protestant theology has regularly identified an aspect of the divine act of salvation in which God *declares* the sinner to be righteous in his sight. This point has traditionally been developed under the heading of 'justification', with the aim of making clear that God restores us into proper relationship with himself prior to, rather than subsequent to or simultaneous with, any actual change in our spiritual state. As the apostle Paul says, 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8). God establishes, by his own declaration, a fundamental change in our standing before him, before he brings about, by the sending of the Holy Spirit, a real change to our sinful state. There is a clear parallel here with the accounts in Genesis of God's acts of creation discussed above. God did not declare his intention to make us holy before him, and then get on and make us fit to enter a relationship with him. Instead he spoke, making us by that declaration to be justified in our relationship with him. Then he subsequently went on to bring about in our lives, by an increase in holiness, the necessary and natural effects of that change in our standing before him. This wonderful reality in the practice of God's work of salvation is illustrated in the willingness of Jesus to talk and share food with social outcasts and notorious sinners, often to the

horror of the religious establishment. Thus a fundamental aspect of God's redemptive work occurs when he chooses to speak, and in so doing unilaterally brings us to share here and now in the right standing with him that Jesus Christ has.

Secondly, Protestant theology has often discerned in the New Testament's description of salvation an act of God that has been called his 'effectual calling'. This is an act of God by which he calls us to be saved, and where the very action of calling itself brings us to salvation (see e.g. Rom. 8:30). God can choose to call people to himself in such a way that it is appropriate to say that the call itself brings about in the person's heart the very thing God intends, namely that they respond in saving faith. In other words God speaks not just to *describe* salvation to us, or to encourage us to come to him to be saved, although he certainly does both these things. God *speaking* is also an integral part of God *acting* to save. Thus, in biblical language and theology, *God speaking and God acting are often one and the same thing.*

### **God's person and his words**

Now we need to consider the relationship between God's person (God himself) and the words he speaks. What we find in Scripture is an astoundingly close relationship between God himself and the words through which he speaks.

This is evident as early as Eden. God has established a relationship between himself and Adam and Eve in part by means of a command ('you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil') and a threatened consequence if the command is disobeyed ('for when you eat of it you will certainly die', Gen. 2:17). These words also imply a positive promise: the blessings of life in the garden will continue to flow to humanity if they obey God's command. Humanity's fall into sin is a fall into disobedience in this relationship which God has established between himself and his human creatures, and occurs when they disobey his verbal command. God's action in response is to curse, fulfilling the negative promise of Genesis 2:17 with a curse that amounts to a spiritual death, since it cuts humanity off from the tree of life

(Gen. 2:24), and that later climaxes in physical death (Gen. 5:5). Thus, when Adam and Eve disobey God's *spoken command*, they fracture their relationship with *God himself*. From God's side, when the words of his command are set aside by his creatures in favour of their own desires and their own claims of wisdom, then God himself has been set aside.

What this suggests about the relationship between God and his words seems rather obvious. To disobey the words God speaks is simply to disobey God himself, and to refuse to submit to the commands God utters is simply to break one's relationship with him. Thus (we may say) God has *invested* himself in his words, or we could say that God has so *identified* himself with his words that whatever someone does to God's words (whether it is to obey or to disobey) they do directly to God himself. Obvious though this may seem, in the following pages we shall discover that its implications are enormous. When they are overlooked, it is always detrimental to our understanding of Scripture. To ask how or why this can be, that words and persons can be so intimately related, is to enter deep theological and philosophical waters (into some of which we shall dip our toes in the next chapter). What does it *mean* for God to invest himself in his words, or to identify himself with his words? The complexities of this notwithstanding, the point itself is quite a straightforward one.

Although the word 'covenant' is not used in these opening chapters of Genesis, it has commonly been thought that God relates to Adam and Eve in a *covenantal* manner, that is, according to the same pattern he will repeat constantly in his ongoing relationships with his human creatures, and that will become the fundamental characteristic of his redemptive relationship with humanity. Common characteristics of God's covenant with his people are his declaration of the relationship he is establishing between himself and his people, his explanation of how his people must live as covenant partners, promises of blessings if they remain faithfully within the covenant, and warnings of disasters if they abandon their covenant responsibilities. In the case of Adam and Eve it is a covenant that implicitly promises life. In the case of Abraham it is a covenant that promises that blessing will come to all peoples on earth in some way 'through' Abraham (Gen. 12:3).

God comes to Abraham initially with a command: ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you’ (Gen. 12:1). The promise that God will make Abraham into a great nation and bless all peoples on earth through him follows on directly (vv. 2–3), and seems by implication to depend on Abraham acting in faithful obedience to the command. Here, at the birth of God’s covenant people, God relates himself to his people by speaking. Abraham leaves his home in Haran and sets out. He does so in direct obedience to God’s command, and trusting that God will keep the promises he has made. Merely in so doing, obeying the words of command and trusting the words of a promise, Abraham enters into a covenant relationship with God. In other words Abraham’s response to God’s words simply is also a response to God himself. His obedience to and trust in God’s words are also, at one and the same time, an obedience to and trust in God himself. Thus in straightforward and apparently unsophisticated ways Scripture reveals profound things about God’s relationship to the words he speaks.

The same feature underlies the next manifestation of the covenant, which is the covenant of law proclaimed by God through Moses. It is prefaced with a repetition by God to Moses of the promise regarding the land which God had made to Abraham and his descendants (‘I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD’, Exod. 6:8). This demonstrates that this covenant is a further revelation of the covenant initiated with Abraham, not a replacement for it. It is then inaugurated with these words at Sinai, spoken by God to Moses on the mountain, and to be passed on to the whole nation of Israel:

This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. (Exod. 19:3b–6)

Once redeemed by this gracious and sovereign act of God in the exodus, God's people continue to relate to him as their God by obeying the stipulations of a verbal covenant. They will retain the identity and status they have by virtue of the relationship God is developing with them ('a kingdom of priests and a holy nation') only if they remain faithful to the new words God will speak to them. Thus the reality and nature of their relationship with God himself will be determined entirely by the reality and nature of their relationship to the *words* God is about to speak to them.

This point is dramatically illustrated for the covenant people in the establishment of the tabernacle, whose physical features are prescribed in extraordinary detail in the Mosaic covenant (Exod. 25 – 30). At the heart of the tabernacle (and then subsequently at the heart of the more permanent temple in Jerusalem) sat the ark of the covenant, containing the stones inscribed with the summary of the covenant law (Exod. 25:10–22). Moreover it was directly over this ark, containing God's covenant words, that God promised to meet with Moses and speak to him (Exod. 25:22). This was a powerful illustration of all God's covenant-based relationships with his people. His words, literally written in stone, represented the place where he met with the leader of his people, at the centre of their encampment (and later at the centre of their city, Jerusalem). This spoke powerfully of the fact that God's words were in some sense the mode in which he had chosen to be present among his people.

It also explains why people are regarded as having acted directly in relation to God simply by acting in relation to the inanimate ark of the covenant, experiencing sometimes blessing and sometimes judgment as a result (as is especially narrated in 2 Sam. 6, where the Lord's anger burns against someone who touches the ark irreverently, and his blessing falls on a household in which the ark is placed). The point is not that God has 'reached down' to invest an inanimate object with a reflection of his divine powers, such that the ark or the tablets *as objects in their own right* have the power to bring blessing or judgment; this is not a question of magical 'holy' objects. Nor is it the case that God establishes an arbitrary test 'from above' in relation to the ark, as if he were saying, 'Touch it irreverently and bad things will happen; bring it

respectfully into your house and I'll bless you. That's just the way I've chosen to operate.' Instead God has in reality so linked himself with the words inscribed on the tablets in the ark that he is, in some sense, present in those words. Telford Work has explored this point well in the Old Testament: 'It is *in* the Ark of God and *in* the words said to reside there that ancient Israel sees God savingly present.'<sup>3</sup>

The nature of the 'personal presence' represented by a person's written words is something to be explored in the next chapter. For now, though, as throughout this chapter, we simply note that Scripture makes the point quite clearly that God's words in some way convey his presence.

We now need to pause and take stock a little. The covenantal nature of God's relationship with his people should lead us to draw two conclusions about God's own relationship to the words he speaks. First, it is in and through *the words of the covenant* he speaks to his people that God makes himself knowable to humanity. We come to know other people by living for a time in relationship with them, listening to them speak about themselves and others, and watching them act. Here in the Old Testament covenant, God graciously allows his people to come to know him in the same way. Of course it is not that God speaks only but does not act, since his prime act in the Pentateuch is the redemption of his people from Egypt through the exodus. However, as has often been pointed out, the exodus as an event would be incomprehensible as divine redemption to those experiencing it, were it not preceded and followed by explanatory words from God. Moreover, God decreed that the exodus event should set a pattern (a typological pattern) for the entirety of his redemptive work, and that the memory of the event should shape the life of his people for the future, by means of verbal repetition of the event and its meaning (Exod. 12:24–28).

Thus God identifies himself for his people as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: the God who makes and keeps his covenant with his people. God promises us that he really is the God

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3. Work, *Living and Active*, p. 142 (italics original).

who presents himself to us in the covenant he establishes between himself and us. The covenant is not a means by which God deals with us, as it were, at arm's length. God's covenant is not a form of mediation, transaction or negotiation that takes place between essentially separate persons, with God remaining entirely transcendent. It is not a relationship where God himself remains fundamentally absent. Rather the covenant, and therefore the human words in which the covenant is given expression and enacted, are the means by which God elects to be God in relationship with us. It is the very means by which he comes to be God for us. Thus when Abram hears and obeys the divine command to leave Haran and go to the land the Lord will show him, he thereby comes directly into relationship with God. To trust God's covenant promise is not to enter into an agreement with an absentee God; it is to trust the God who has come to you. There is, then, a complex but real relationship between God and his actions, expressed and performed, as they are, through God's words. In philosophical terms, there is an ontological relationship between God and his words. It seems that *God's actions, including his verbal actions, are a kind of extension of him.*

Our second reflection about the covenant is this: God cannot meaningfully establish his covenant with us, he cannot make his promise to us, without using words. God's covenant promise is a complicated affair, in which God is referring to himself, to the relationship he is establishing between himself and his people, to what is now required of his people, and also referring to the future, promising a future of blessing if his people keep the covenant, and warning of a cursed future if they disobey. None of this is possible without words. God chooses to use words as a fundamental means of relating to us, we must presume, because the kind of relationship he chooses to establish cannot be established without them. Moreover, the words he uses need to be words human beings can comprehend, since only if the covenant promise is given in such words is it a covenant to which we can respond.

All of this means that words, including human words, do not necessarily obscure a relationship with God, somehow getting in the way. More mystically minded people sometimes suppose that words by their very nature are an obstruction to the goal of a deep

communion with God, but that is just not so. Instead words are a necessary medium of a relationship with God. To put your trust in the words of the covenant promise God makes to you is itself to put your trust in God: the two are the same thing. *Communication from God* is therefore *communion with God*, when met with a response of trust from us.

This is not to say that words are everything, as if speaking and being spoken to constitute the whole of our relationship with God. The kingdom of God is not just a matter of talk. There are and should be varieties of wordless contemplation of God, and wordless resting in his presence. Yet it remains true that, if the God with whom we are in relationship is to be the true God and not an idol, our only access to a real relationship with the living God in which words sometimes fall away is precisely in and through words which God speaks to us. After all, a man and a woman sitting in a restaurant gazing silently into each other's eyes over the table are engaging in a much more genuine relationship if they are doing so with twenty years of conversation-filled marriage behind them, than if they are on their first date and have not yet spoken to each other.

It is of course a dangerous mistake to suppose that the words by which God chooses to establish his relationship with us present him to us exhaustively. There is much that we do not know about God and his actions, simply because God has not told us. In Christian living and thinking there is a right place for the mystery of God, as the Lord states forcefully to Job (Job 38 – 41). However, a necessary focus on God as mystery must not be allowed to obscure the extraordinary act of grace by which God speaks to us human words of promise, such that for us to trust those words is in itself an act of trusting God himself.

### **God's words and human words**

The third relationship to consider is that between God's words and human words. With a great deal of God's speech in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, the precise way God

'speaks' is not made known to us. Many Bible readers ask at this point, 'What does it really mean to say that God "speaks", when he has no physical vocal cords with which to make sounds, and no physical hand with which to write?' In the face of this question some, it is true, have concluded that we ought to stop saying of God that he 'speaks', and instead speak of him as prompting, guiding and overseeing, or using some other similar wordless actions. However, a little thought about 'speech' even between human beings shows that we need not jump to that conclusion. We can 'speak' through movements of our hands in sign language, or through flashes of light from one ship to another in Morse code, or through a message delivered on our behalf by another (such as an ambassador communicating a message from one head of state to another). Thus the notion of 'speaking' can be extended beyond face-to-face and speaker-to-hearer contact, and even beyond the movement of air over vocal cords or of a pen over paper, while still being identifiably and meaningfully 'speech'.

Now if we carry this thought over to what is meant by God's speech, we find ourselves asking: exactly what was happening when God 'spoke' and 'called' in the garden to Adam and Eve, when he 'spoke' to Abraham, commanding him to leave home and making great promises to him, and when he 'spoke' to Moses on the top of the mountain, giving him the covenant law to be delivered to the whole of Israel? We may speculate about this, but the true answer is that we cannot be sure, because we are not told. However, the diversity of forms of 'speech' even among human beings, which go far beyond actual utterances by lips, means that God's incorporeal nature cannot be said to render him incapable of speech.<sup>4</sup>

As the Old Testament unfolds, one form of divine speaking does emerge as prominent: God's speech through his appointed

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4. For further reflection on this, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

prophets, in words they utter in ordinary human languages. The Old Testament regularly assumes that God can and does speak in and through certain human words, in such a way that those words can truly be said to be his words. This is remarkable, but is so common in Scripture that most people familiar with the Bible have ceased to be astounded by it. The Bible gives no worked-through theological or philosophical account of how human words can be said to be also words from God. Indeed for many people this claim has seemed absurd, and even idolatrous. How can something as limited as human language ever be said to convey anything of God reliably?

The Bible hints at its answer to this in its account of the creation of humanity. God makes his human creatures, as he says, ‘in our image, in our likeness’ (Gen. 1:26). The precise meaning of this phrase is of course much discussed, but it must be significant that, in the immediate context of Genesis 1, the activity of God referred to most frequently is his speaking. In this light it seems that ‘the image of God’ in humanity must include at least some reference to humanity’s capacity for complex language, as a reflection of God’s own character as a speaking God. Indeed God’s use of a first-person plural pronoun in the creation of humanity (‘let *us* make . . .’), following directly on from his acts of speaking earlier in the chapter, may be best understood as an early hint of what the New Testament will reveal to be a plurality of communicating persons within ‘God’.<sup>5</sup> Whatever else may be true of human language, it is quite reasonable to suppose that it has the ability to speak truly of God, both because it was given to us by a God who speaks within himself as eternally three speaking persons, and also because our possession of language, as made in God’s image, is analogous to God’s communicative capacity. Our language can be made by God to speak truthfully of him because our language has

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5. I know this interpretation of Gen. 1:26 is unfashionable, but it seems to me a more likely explanation than the idea that God is addressing the ‘royal court’ of the heavenly host, or that he is using some divine version of the ‘royal we’, as favoured by some powerful humans. It is more likely because it is related to God’s repeated activity throughout the chapter.

its origin in him and in some way is like his own. The fall makes this much more problematic, of course, but sin does not erase humanity as the image of God, and thus does not destroy the capacity of human language to speak truly of God.

Throughout the life of Moses, in particular, God gives him words to speak to the rest of the people of Israel that, although delivered by a man in ordinary language, are to be identified as also God's words. This general principle of prophetic speech is expressed powerfully in Deuteronomy 18:15–20, where God promises to send a prophet after Moses: 'I will put my words in his mouth' (v. 18). The opening of the book of Jeremiah provides an excellent example of the complete identification of the prophet's words with God's words. God says to Jeremiah, 'I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant' (Jer. 1:9b–10). Jeremiah is appointed by God to have power over nations and kingdoms, but this power comes only from the divine words God has put in his mouth. Only God has this power over nations. Jeremiah, as his deputized speaker, is given the same power only in that he speaks words given him by God – words which therefore can perform what God intends them to perform. Jeremiah will speak ordinary human words in an ordinary human language; God does not put special magic formulae or a previously unknown heavenly language into Jeremiah's mouth. Yet still those words will also be God's words. Jeremiah's words are ordinary human words, but are not any less divine for also being fully human. In a rather different incident, God put his words into the mouth of Balaam, and even into the mouth of his donkey (Num. 22). In so doing the Lord was perhaps warning Israelite prophets not to get too presumptuous or arrogant, just because the Lord sometimes used them to speak his words.

This identification of human and divine words extends beyond actual prophetic speech and also covers written texts, within the Old Testament itself. This point has been argued recently with regard to the book of Jeremiah by Gordon McConville. He points out how Jeremiah 36 allows for the word once given to the prophet to be written down and to be effective as God's speech beyond Jeremiah's life and beyond the circumstances in which the word was first given

to him.<sup>6</sup> This is so because that chapter tells how Jeremiah dictated to a scribe all the words God had delivered to him, and the scribe wrote them on a scroll designed for public proclamation. As regards the non-prophetic aspects of the book, McConville argues that the experiences of Jeremiah which the book narrates, whose suffering reflects God's suffering over Israel's unfaithfulness, 'all in some sense mark the involvement of God in Israel's history, in a way that may be called "incarnational"'. In adding both this theme and the clear hope of a new covenant to the wider Old Testament canon, the book of Jeremiah as a whole becomes part of God's speaking through Scripture.<sup>7</sup> The non-prophetic, prosaic parts of the book are therefore woven intricately together with actual prophetic speech in a form that subsequent communities received in its entirety as canonical.<sup>8</sup>

It is probably helpful *to summarize the biblical outline of this chapter so far*. When we encounter certain *human words* (e.g. the words of an Old Testament prophet), we are in direct contact with *God's words*. This is itself a direct encounter with *God's activity* (since God's speech is one form in which he regularly acts), especially with his *covenant-making* activity. And an encounter with God's covenant-making communicative activity is *itself an encounter with God*.

So far the main focus has been on the Old Testament. We turn now to the New Testament, to consider the relationship of the words spoken by Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate, to God's action and person.

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6. Gordon McConville, 'Divine Speech and the Book of Jeremiah', in Paul Helm and Carl Trueman (eds.), *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of Scripture* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), pp. 25–26.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 37.

8. Herman Bavinck says, 'word and fact, the religious and the historical dimensions, that which was spoken by God and that which was spoken by human beings, is [*sic*] so tightly interwoven and intertwined that separation is impossible. The historical parts in Scripture are also a revelation of God' (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, gen. ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003], p. 438).

## Christ's words, and God's action and person

Jesus Christ comes as the fulfilment of all the Old Testament's covenant promises. In particular, as the Word-made-flesh he comes as the fulfilment of everything 'the word of God' in the Old Testament had been anticipating.

Although this is made clear throughout the New Testament, it is especially evident in the writings of John. Jesus says to one of his disciples, in John's Gospel, as something of a summary of this point, 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). He is claiming that anyone who has encountered him in person has, in so doing, encountered God. As the early church soon came to realize, it was not just that Christ's words and actions were a much clearer reflection of the image of God in a human being than could be found in anyone else. Much more than that, to encounter Christ was in itself to encounter God, albeit in the hitherto unexpected form of a human individual. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul is claiming precisely the same thing when he refers to Christ as 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:24), and as the one in whom 'God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell' (Col. 1:19). It is worth noting, incidentally, that comments such as these by Paul demonstrate that this view of Christ was a feature not just of John's writing in the New Testament, but was also central to the apostolic proclamation of Christ from the beginning.

This 'fullness' of God in Christ includes of course Christ's *actions*. Jesus goes on to explain to Philip, in the passage from John just quoted, 'it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:10b-11a). Earlier in the Gospel he has said something similar: 'Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does' (5:19). Therefore to witness (e.g.) the Son raise Lazarus from the dead was directly to witness God's power over death at work. And the people who were healed of sickness by a word or touch from Christ were directly healed by the restoring action of God.

Moreover, the 'fullness' of God, which God was pleased to have dwell in Christ, also included the *words* Christ spoke. It is important to linger over this point for a moment. Christ says, 'I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me' (John 8:28b). Also, 'I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say' (John 12:49-50). And again, praying to his Father about his disciples, Jesus says, 'I gave them the words you gave me' (John 17:8a). The most likely implication is that these words were given by the Father to Christ in eternity, and not exclusively during his earthly life, such as during his childhood, or his adult life before the beginning of his public ministry, or during the forty days in the wilderness, or throughout his life (say, during times of prayer), although none of these can be entirely ruled out. This becomes clearer if we continue reading the last verse quoted (John 17:8): 'They [the disciples] knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me.' Although this statement on its own is inconclusive proof of Christ's pre-existence (for that, a more wide-ranging case needs to be made, and can be made, from the New Testament as a whole), the strong implication is that the Father gave the Son the words he would speak on earth *before* his 'coming' and his 'being sent' by the Father.

We can say, then, that these statements by Jesus provide a glimpse into the eternal life of the triune God. It is a glimpse of the Father preparing for the appearing of the Son in human form by giving him words he would speak during his earthly ministry. The humble obedience of the Son is therefore seen not just in his painful and willing submission to suffering and death, but also in his faithful and obedient passing on of words he had been taught by his Father. As result, his earthly existence in its entirety, in both deed *and* word, was a genuine revelation of the wisdom and power of God. If this is right, then the statements from Jesus we have just been considering constitute a fuller revelation of the communicative activity that exists between the persons of the Trinity, first hinted at in the accounts in Genesis 1 of the creation of the universe and of humanity.

This sheds light on what Jesus means when he says, ‘The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life’ (John 6:63). It is not that Jesus is saying in some metaphorical sense that his words will bring fullness of life and lead people to walk in the power of the Spirit, if they obey them, true though that may be. Instead he means what he (literally) says: because his words are words which God identifies as entirely his own, they are literally ‘full of the Spirit’, who is himself God, and full of eternal life. For how could words that have their origin in God and that God names as his own be anything else?

In the same passage, where many of Christ’s followers are deserting him, he asks Peter, ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Peter replies, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God’ (John 6:67–69). At this early stage in the development of the disciples’ understanding of Christ it is hard to be certain precisely what Peter is asserting here. At the time it may well have been simply a forceful way of saying something like ‘As the Messiah, you faithfully speak the messianic message that God has given you.’ However that may be, subsequent reflection by the apostles on Christ’s life and teaching quickly led to the much stronger claim I have been outlining here: the straightforward but extraordinary claim that God the Son, the Word incarnate, speaks to us in ordinary human words the very things he has heard God the Father say within the eternal life of the Trinity. John begins his first letter by making precisely this point:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (1 John 1:1–2)

That which was with the Father and has now been revealed in Christ (what John here calls ‘the Word of life . . . the eternal life’) includes, as he describes it, both Christ’s actions *and* his words.

## Christ's words and human words

Jesus' earthly ministry was limited in time and space. The Word was made flesh in one individual, to live one actual human life and to die one death. This is often described as the 'scandal of particularity', and throughout history many who have been presented with the gospel of Christ have stumbled over it. Many Greeks who heard the apostles proclaiming Christ as the risen Lord and as the coming judge were not open to the possibility of God's truth being revealed in the life of one individual born in a Palestinian backwater. They expected to find it instead in a 'wisdom' that would seem to them more obviously to be of divine origin. Paul responds to this in 1 Corinthians 2:20–25 in his defence of his preaching of the cross.

In a similar vein, some sixteen centuries later, many post-Enlightenment Protestant theologians were happy to continue to talk about the divine origin of Scripture, as long as Scripture could be stripped of its historical particularities, in order to reveal a set of supposedly universal moral and human truths. A key figure in the development of this approach to Scripture was Baruch Spinoza, a seventeenth-century Dutch thinker. For Spinoza the history and doctrine the Bible contains are of no authority for us; religion and biblical authority are matters of *morality* alone. What he says of the prophets is representative of his attitude to the whole Bible: 'the authority of the prophets has weight only in matters of morality, and . . . their speculative doctrines affect us little'.<sup>9</sup> The philosophical conviction underlying this view of the Bible is summed up in the often-quoted assertion of the eighteenth-century German writer G. E. Lessing, that 'accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason'.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, in *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, vol. 1, tr. R. H. M. Elwes (London: George Bell & Sons, 1883), p. 8.

10. Lessing, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed. Henry Chadwick (London: A. & C. Black, 1956), p. 53.

This philosophical assertion continues, sometimes unconsciously and therefore unquestioned, to shape much contemporary rejection of the orthodox doctrine of Scripture. At root, the rejection of Scripture as divine special revelation is often a side effect of the greater rejection of the particularity of Christ as God's ultimate self-revelation in the world. Here should be noted a feature that underlies many discussions about Scripture: people's view of Scripture is often largely determined by their view of Jesus Christ. That is one practical reason why the doctrine of Scripture must be articulated in a way that makes explicit its dependence on the doctrine of Christ.

Of course, the particularity of revelation in Christ leads directly to a universal offer of new life in him. The Old Testament is the story both of the expansion of God's people, and also of the narrowing of God's redemptive purposes, as the southern kingdom of Judah stays centre stage while the northern kingdom of Israel disappears; as the 'faithful remnant' emerges as more significant in God's purposes for salvation than the nation as a whole; and as Israel's hopes for the future become focused on the emergence of a single Messiah figure. This narrowing reaches a climax with the arrival of Christ. He is the new Moses proclaiming a new law, and the new David establishing God's reign on earth. Yet he is also representative of the nation of Israel as a whole, tempted by Satan in the desert, just as they were. And he is representative of the whole of the new humanity to which God is giving spiritual birth, a point Paul expounds in Romans 5 and 6.

Because of Christ's representative role, the narrowing focus of the progress of redemption on to Christ is immediately followed by an explosion outwards. After the ascension of the one individual who died at Calvary and rose again, the Spirit can be poured out on all Christ's followers. Indeed the book of Acts is structured around the Spirit being received by a growing diversity of people, as the ripples expand out from Jerusalem. Hand in hand with this outpouring of the Spirit is the increasingly widespread passing on of the good news about Jesus Christ in verbal form. The Son of God lived one human life in one place at one time. The pattern of his ongoing ministry, now offered to all through his followers, revolves around the Spirit and words.

Jesus implicitly taught his disciples about this in the last week of his life. He prayed to his Father, 'I gave them the words you gave me . . . My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message' (John 17:8, 20). This expands the history of divine words becoming human words, outlined in the previous section. For the words God the Father gave to God the Son have been given by the Son, in ordinary human language, to his disciples. Now those words are to be passed on through the words of the disciples. Therefore everyone who never met the Word incarnate directly, but who hears the words of Christ from the disciples, nevertheless encounters the words of the Father and of Christ, who in those words present themselves to us as a covenant-making God.

This theme is also found in Matthew's Gospel. As Jesus sends out the Twelve, according to Matthew, he tells them:

If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. . . . Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

(Matt. 10:14–15, 40)

Thus to reject the disciples' words, which come from Christ and are about Christ, is to reject God, and so to be liable for condemnation. It is easy to be familiar with these words and not to be struck by what lies just below their surface. God has identified himself both with Jesus Christ in person *and* with the passing on by his disciples of the words Jesus brought from the Father, with the result that to reject those human words spoken by the disciples is to reject God. It is only by rejecting God himself that people open themselves up to his condemnation, which is precisely what they did when they rejected human words the disciples brought from Christ.

The same point is made in the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31–46). Here the Son of Man saves or condemns people on the basis of kind deeds they have done for 'the least of these brothers and sisters of mine'. One of the key questions of

interpretation in this parable is whether this phrase refers to suffering humanity in general, or to Christian disciples in particular, especially those disciples who come bringing the gospel of Christ in culturally hostile circumstances. A study of that phrase and similar phrases throughout Matthew's Gospel suggests very strongly the latter restricted sense.<sup>11</sup> In this parable too, therefore, the rejection of those who come speaking Christ's words is itself a rejection of Christ.

As a final point from the New Testament here, it should be observed that the canonical writings of the apostles anticipate the future beyond their own lifetimes, and prescribe the basis on which the post-apostolic church should continue. Paul describes the covenant community as God's household, 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone' (Eph. 2:20). The vital bequest of the apostles to subsequent generations of Christians was of course their writings, so Paul in effect draws the closest possible link between the church being founded on Christ *and* founded on the words Christ spoke through the apostles, as set down in their writings. It cannot be the former without also being the latter.

Thus the coming of the Word incarnate does not alter the fact that, for all who come after Christ, human language is the essential medium by which God acts in relation to us and presents himself to us in the offer of a covenant relationship with him in Christ. The final step in this biblical outline will be to draw the link between the words of the Bible and the human language through which God speaks.

### God's words and the Bible

So far we have had in view not the Bible in particular but the general proclamation of the words of Christ and of the covenant. Now, though, we need to ask, 'Why equate God's words, and all that that

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11. See e.g. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), pp. 744-745.

concept entails theologically, supremely with the human words of the Bible?’ For of course it is the case that many theologians who are happy to speak of the proclamation of the gospel as God’s speech refuse to identify *the Bible in its entirety* as itself the Word of God.

However, it remains impossible to avoid the fact that our only access to Christ and his words is through the content of the Bible. When some parts of the Bible are accepted as God’s Word, but others are rejected, the process that usually follows is one where theologians attempt to draw out of the Bible those sections or themes that for them express the true Gospel *over against* other parts of the Bible. This is usually known as discerning ‘a canon within the canon’.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, however radically liberal someone becomes in their view of Scripture, they usually regard at least some short phrases from Scripture, such as ‘God is love’, as accurate expressions in human language of God’s real nature.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to point out that this ‘canon within the canon’ approach is a quite different thing from the normal recognition that some parts of the Bible do not tell the whole truth of a matter, for example because they only foreshadow a reality that has not yet come. It is also quite different from acknowledging that certain sections of Scripture are not to be applied to modern believers exactly as they stand, because a later stage in the progression of divine revelation has explicitly superseded them. An example of this is the Old Testament food laws, which are given a radical reinterpretation by Christ in Mark 7:18–19. By contrast, the ‘canon within the canon’ approach involves identifying certain teachings that the Bible really does affirm, even when appropriately and canonically interpreted, as of only human origin, and not at all as a word from God. Once this ‘canon within the canon’, a supposed central core of ‘the Word of God’ within Scripture itself, has been identified, it can then be used as the basis of an ‘inner-canonical criticism’ of other parts of

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12. John Goldingay gives a lucid analysis of the different senses that have been given to the phrase ‘canon within the canon’ (John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], pp. 122–127).

Scripture, effectively distinguishing between those biblical words through which God does choose to speak and those through which he supposedly does not, because they are thought to be in no way expressive of the gospel.

This strategy is employed especially clearly by the contemporary theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. He says that the Bible is God's Word only to the extent that it gives expression to the apostolic gospel. He thinks that certain parts of the Bible do that, while others do not. He writes:

the authority of scripture rests on that of the gospel and its content – the saving presence of God in the person and history of Jesus Christ. Only insofar as they bear witness to this content do the words and sayings of scripture have authority in the church. . . . How far this is true must be tested for each writing and each saying in each writing.<sup>13</sup>

He judges that the New Testament writings can be regarded as inspired Scripture 'only insofar as those writings witness to the Pauline gospel of God's saving activity in Jesus' death on the cross and in his resurrection'.<sup>14</sup> Any part of Scripture that, in his view, falls short of this ought not to be regarded as the authoritative word of God in the church.

The difficulty with this approach is that, since our only access to the gospel of Christ is through Scripture, it is hard to see how a principle of inner-canonical criticism can be discerned that is not arbitrary, being instead determined largely by our own tastes and prejudices. In other words the outcome of any process of 'inner-canonical criticism' is usually a pared-down Bible whose content accords suspiciously well with the insights, obsessions and neuroses of our own culture, and is limited by our own (inevitably inadequate) spiritual experience of our existence in Christ. The suspicion then remains that what is being offered as the 'true' word of God from

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13. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 463.

14. Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'On the Inspiration of Scripture', *Theology Today* 54 (1997), p. 213.

within the Bible is a human construction, and not divine speech itself. The New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger asserts that

New Testament scholars have the responsibility as servants of the Church to investigate, understand, and elucidate, for the development of the Christian life of believers, the full meaning of every book written within the canon and not only of those which may be most popular in certain circles and at certain times. Only in such a way will the Church be able to hear the Word of God in all its breadth and depth.<sup>15</sup>

Our only access to the words the Father gave the prophets and his Son, and to the words Christ gave his first disciples, is through the Bible as a whole.

Indeed we find that Christ, towards the end of his earthly life, anticipated a time when his own words would continue to be passed on through the apostolic community. In a highly significant passage, he says to the Twelve:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you. (John 16:12–15)

The key question these verses raise, of course, is this: In what sense did God intend this statement ultimately to be addressed to a wider audience than the original Twelve? If it is addressed *as it stands* ultimately beyond the Twelve, to *every individual believer*, then the resulting situation seems to be the unfortunate one in which all Christians could reasonably claim, of a wide variety of questionable positions they hold, that Christ by the Spirit has led them into that ‘truth’. If, though, this teaching is addressed as it stands beyond the

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15. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), p. 282.

Twelve to *the future church as an institution*, then we are in the equally troublesome situation where the teaching authorities of the church could both add further ‘authoritative’ revelation to Scripture and interpret Scripture as they wish with impunity. Alternatively, and much more likely, Christ intended these verses to apply, in their fullness, *only to the twelve disciples* (and, by a small extension, as it turns out, to their immediate associates). In other words in this teaching Jesus is anticipating the future communication, through the faithful and obedient work of the Holy Spirit, of words that come from him and that have their ultimate origin in the Father, to the original apostolic community. This lays down part of the theological background to the subsequent writing of the texts that came to form the New Testament by virtue of being recognized as Scripture. It is also the earthly Christ’s contribution to our understanding of what is usually called the ‘inspiration’ of Scripture, which we shall examine in the next chapter. And one further point can be made: this teaching from Christ provides warrant from within the Gospels for the early church’s practice of making ‘apostolicity’ (whether in authorship or source) a vital external criterion in the recognition of certain writings as Scripture and others as not.

In the differing interpretations of John 16:12–15 given above can be recognized a repetition of one of the key issues the main Protestant Reformers faced in the sixteenth century. Does the ongoing authoritative speaking activity of the Holy Spirit reside in the institution of the church as it interprets the Bible, as Roman Catholicism came to say it did? Does it reside in the individual believer, as the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century came to say it did?<sup>16</sup> Or, as the Reformers were

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16. ‘Anabaptist’ means ‘rebaptizer’. These groups rejected the validity of infant baptism, and insisted on the baptism of adult believers. They had other crucial beliefs about Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit that marked them clearly off from the mainstream Reformers, which we shall focus on later. Important leaders of the diverse Anabaptist groups included Thomas Müntzer, Conrad Grebel, Jacob Hutter and Menno Simons. The latter two have followers down to the present day who still bear their founder’s name: Hutterites and Mennonites.

convinced, does the ongoing authoritative speaking activity of the Holy Spirit take place in and through Scripture, as Scripture is read and as the church thereby finds itself addressed by God through his written Word in the power of the Spirit? This latter answer is the one suggested by the application of John 16:12–15 primarily to the apostolic community alone.

One additional piece of scriptural evidence that these words of Jesus were to be restricted in this way to the apostles is the fact that the later New Testament writings, especially, consciously signal the approaching closure of canonical writing. Thus the Pastoral Epistles, which explicitly face up to the impending post-apostolic period, are characterized *not* by injunctions to future leaders to remain open to whatever words Christ will continue to send from the Father through the Spirit. Instead their focus is on instructing the generation of leaders coming after the apostles to preserve and faithfully pass on the apostolic gospel already delivered (e.g. 2 Tim. 2:2; 3:14). Similarly the book of Revelation ends by closing off the prospect of being extended by further verbal revelation with scriptural status (Rev. 22:18).

The biblical outline offered in this chapter can be summarized fairly simply. God chooses to present himself to us, and to act upon us, in and through human words that have their origin in him, and that he identifies as his own. When we encounter those words, God is acting in relation to us, supremely in his making a covenant promise to us. God identifies himself with his act of promising in such a way that for us to encounter God's promise is itself to encounter God. The supreme form in which God comes to encounter us in his covenant promise is through the words of the Bible as a whole. Therefore *to encounter the words of Scripture is to encounter God in action*. This biblical outline will form the foundation on which subsequent chapters will build, and will determine the shape of our doctrine of Scripture.