

SACRED SCRIPTURE: GOD'S WORD AND THE CHURCH'S WORD

• Cardinal Leo Scheffczyk •

“[B]ecause she is gifted with the Spirit, the Church possesses the genuine capacity to lend her voice, through her preaching, to the Word of God in Scripture, and to make it public in properly human words without detriment to its essence.”

Since Christianity is the ultimate divinely revealed religion,¹ it possesses from the outset a special affinity to the reality of the word. It has its origin in the (analogous) characterization of the inner-trinitarian Logos² as the “Word of the Father,” which, as the self-expression of a divine I to a Thou, immediately sheds light on the experiences that constitute a “speech-event”—personal opening, selfless sharing, and generous self-gift. The speech-event acquires a

¹ Cf., in this regard, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's statement “Dominus Jesus: On the Unicity and Saving Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church” (6 August 2000).

² On the derivation and determination of the Johannine concept of “Logos,” see R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium I* (Freiburg, 1965), 257–69.

unique and unrepeatable intensity in the divine sphere. However, insofar as it extends in the freedom of God's will to creation, and insofar as it addresses itself to human beings, the revealed Word³ or the Logos made flesh is transformed from an inner-trinitarian Logos into an “opening of the Father”;⁴ he becomes the revealer *par excellence*, the one who remains the source, content, and norm for every further transmission of revelation.

The transmission of grace-filled revelation can likewise be grasped at bottom only as a word-event, even if the divine Word subsequently passes into the medium of human speech and thus takes on various forms, from the words of the prophets, to the preacher's homily in the Church.⁵ In this, we see a certain line of development of the reality of the word, which, like the history of revelation, can be understood as a “history of the word.”

1) *The Word of God in Salvation History*

Evoking the history of the Word of God in humanity carries a certain presupposition and at the same time offers an aid for grasping the status and significance of the particular form it acquired when, through the Church's further dissemination, it entered into the textual mode of the Bible. This development seems to represent a continuous line descent from its origin in the inner-trinitarian life of the Spirit, a descent wherein the Word apparently loses density and strength in accordance with its human representation. Thus, the suspicion may arise that the Word of God has lost its power over the course of this “history,” and that, particularly the moment it was set down in writing and translated into the Church's human speech, it evaporated into a faint shadow of the original Word of God. The Protestant theologian P. Tillich (d.1965), among others, evinces such a concern when he rejects the appellation “Word of God” for the Bible, insofar as such an identification would seem to presuppose a “monophysitic teaching” regarding the infallibility of a text and would render

³ On the passage from divine, primal word to the word of revelation, see “logos,” by O. Proksch, in *ThWNT*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart, 1942), 93.

⁴ J. Gnülka, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Freiburg, 1994), 237.

⁵ On the “forms” of the Word of God, see P. Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik* (Göttingen, 1979), 45–47.

impossible any candid interaction with the Bible. We must therefore, according to Tillich, maintain that the Bible is merely the "record" (*Urkunde*) of the revelation that was promulgated, and participates in that revelation to a certain (indeterminate) extent.⁶

In fact, we need to affirm that there is nothing comparable in greatness and mysterious power to the inner-trinitarian Word in which God expresses himself, which soars far above all human speech and earthly words. *Ad intra*, this Word is the second divine Person; *ad extra* it signifies the Word of creation that summons things into being out of nothing (cf. Gen 1:3-31), the Word that lends subsistence to every creature and preserves its meaning and intelligibility, the Word undergirds and supports the creature. For human beings, the Word of creation at the same time represents God's first revelation, which already points ahead to salvation, the revelation that is in the New Testament identified with Christ, insofar as "all things exist in him" (1 Cor 8:6) and insofar as "the Father created all things through him" (Heb 1:2), so that "all things have come into being through the Word" (Jn 1:3). All created things are held in being and governed by this Word; for "he sends his Word to the earth, his command hurries thither" (Ps 147:15), "in order to effect all things on the earth's sphere" (Job 37:12). This Word is an eventful, creative, and effective divine deed-word.

Through his Word, however, Jahweh himself becomes implicated in human history, and especially in the history of his people, to whom he reveals himself not only as Creator but also as Savior. In the medium of history in which man is called to become God's partner, the Word of God acquires a form that corresponds to man, insofar as it becomes *also* a *human word* in the mouth of the prophets.⁷ To be sure, it does not thereby surrender its event- and deed-character. What is telling in this regard is the introduction formula that we commonly find in the prophetic tradition: "The Word of Jahweh that came to Hosea" (Hos 1:1; cf. Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1). This formula suggests that, before any prophetic speech, God deals first of all with the prophet, and sends his very own Word to him. Thus, in the mouth of the prophet, it becomes a testimonial or "attested" Word of God. Moreover, the prophet's "attested Word

of God" necessarily gives rise to the "proclaimed word," in the community and in mission; and in this word, the original divine Word reaches its final, saving goal.⁸

When Jahweh's original and active Word takes on the form of the prophets' testimony, it loses nothing of its deed-character and effective power. The word of the prophet is not a mere reporting of events or a communication of truths, but it brings about what it utters and creates new realities. Being a revealed word, it carries out what Jahweh intends and wants with his Word. In a highly significant place in Deutero-Isaiah, right after a reference to the fruitfulness of the falling rain and the sprouting seed, the author can therefore say of Jahweh's Word that the prophet utters: "So shall it be with the Word I utter from my mouth; it shall not return empty to me, but shall carry out my will and shall fulfill all those things for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).⁹ Thus, even in the mouth of the prophet (that is, even as assimilated into the prophet's human-temporal horizon of representation, into his thoughts and concepts), the Word of God remains powerful and effective; it possesses divine might, "like a consuming fire, like a hammer that strikes the iron" (Jer 23:29).¹⁰ Only the shape and outward form of the word changes; it retains its divine origin and power in content and effect.

This being said, a problem nevertheless arises in the passage of the Word of God into the mouth of the prophet. This problem can be formulated as the question of the infallibility and genuineness of the prophet's testimony; for, although the Old Testament does not reflect on the issue, there is no doubt that the Lord's Word becomes embodied in human speech when it is uttered by the prophet, and that it thereby undergoes a "translation" through the prophet. Indeed, it cannot avoid such a translation if the Word of God is to reach the listeners through the prophet's preaching, if it is to be accessible to their own understanding. That such a translation occurs is something we can already infer simply by virtue of the variety of literary genres—the hymns (Is 42:10ff.), admonitions (Jer 7:2-15), songs of lament (Jer 3:21-25) and warnings (Is 1:2-4)—which have their

⁸On this three-fold distinction, see P. Stuhlmacher, 46.

⁹Cf. on this position, Cl. Westermann, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 19 of *The German Old Testament* (Göttingen, 1966), 230-34.

¹⁰A. Weiser, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, vol. 20/21 of *The German Old Testament* (Göttingen, 1955), 213ff.

⁶P. Tillich, *Systematische Theologie I* (Stuttgart 1956), 188.

⁷On the significance of prophecy for the development of the biblical understanding of the word, see *ThWNT* IV, 92.

immediate source only in the mind of the particular prophet himself. This is why the fundamental hermeneutical question regarding the correct original understanding of the Word of God emerges already in this early part of the history of salvation and of the Word, just as it is also the place where we encounter the problem of the authentic transmission of the original divine Word. The Old Testament solves this question by pointing to the calling of the true prophet and to his being inspired, which is a state he enjoys in being possessed by the Spirit of God and empowered to proclaim the true Word of the Lord. This process comes to expression with particular clarity in Isaiah's vision of his calling (Is 6:1-9).

Nevertheless, in the Old Testament an uncertainty regarding this justification becomes apparent, which reveals itself in the disputations between the true and the false prophets. This uncertainty allows us to understand the rule expressed in Deuteronomy, namely, that we can discern a true prophet by whether his predictions come to pass (Det 18:21ff.).¹¹

Thus, the contemporary prophet can never be completely assured that his authority will be acknowledged. In spite of this uncertainty, though, the interpretation of the classical prophets in salvation history as proclaimers of the Word of God, an interpretation that is ultimately set down in writing, is not significantly placed in jeopardy. This danger is prevented through the remarkable calling the true prophet receives. Through this call, the prophet's word is given an official legitimation; it is no longer taken as his own, human word, but, by virtue of its origin, it is given a claim to being the "Word of God," and may thus be introduced by the formula, "Thus says the Lord."

Emerging from within the Old Testament tradition, the New Testament evinces a great deference and respect for the Old Testament prophets, in whom, as Paul says, "God's Gospel" was in fact heralded (Rom 1:1ff.). Thus, on certain occasions, Jesus could be taken as a prophet even by his contemporaries (Mk 6:15 par.; Jn 4:19; 6:14; 7:40; 9:17), even if his prophet-status is distinguished as unique because of his being the Messiah, and thereby rendered incomparable. This conviction, moreover, is reflected in Jesus' preaching and again in the power of the words he spoke, which admittedly do not yet manifest what uniquely characterizes him as the incarnate Word of

¹¹ Cf. "Prophet," B. Lang, in *Neues Bibel-Lexikon*, Lfg. 11 (Zürich, 1997), 181.

God; for "the words of the one who reveals . . . are not yet the same as the revealer himself, who is the 'Word.'"¹²

In the Word's "becoming flesh" (cf. Jn 1:14), the history of revelation reaches its culminating point, which recapitulates all that had preceded it. The Incarnation of the divine Word is his personal entrance into the world of men, an entrance that has an eschatological significance and effectiveness; for "many times and in many different ways God once spoke to our fathers through the prophets; in this final age, however, he has spoken to us through his Son . . ." (Heb 1:1ff.). In its dignity, comprehensiveness and effectiveness, the Incarnation of the Logos is the definitive and abiding Word spoken by God in history, it is the absolute dawning of God's "deed-word," a "word-event"¹³ (*geschichtliches Wort*) that is different from and soars above every figure of speech that it subsequently produces. The Second Vatican Council expressed this conviction thus: "The most intimate truth which this revelation gives us about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation."¹⁴

By virtue of the Word that has, in Christ, become a definitive eschatological event, the words spoken by the historical Jesus acquire their unique significance and power. This was already evident to the very first hearers of the message; as Scripture says, "he taught like one who has [divine] authority, and not like one of your scribes" (Mt 7:29 par.). The unprecedented authority of Jesus Christ's speech and teaching was proven then and proves itself still by the irresistible power of the words of election he addressed to the disciples (Mk 1:16-20), by the power of his words of healing to the sick and those that drove out demons (Lk 7:7; Mt 8:28-43), and by the healing power of his preaching (Lk 8:21), in which there is a resonance of eschatological determination and definitiveness (Lk 6:20-26). Looking back on the life of Jesus, the disciples in Emmaus were able to make the following comprehensive judgment: "He was a prophet, mighty in word and deed before God and his whole people" (Lk 24:19).

All of this remains valid even irrespective of a thoroughgoing elaboration of the historical-critical question of Jesus' "*ipsissima*

¹² R. Schnackenburg, 259.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴ *Dei Verbum*, 2.

verba," that is, the problem that we possess the words of Jesus only in the early Church's (post-Easter) formulation, the genuineness of which does not seem to have been secured beyond all doubt as far as the exegetical critic is concerned.¹⁵ In spite of the difficulties in responding to the questions regarding the historical events and words,¹⁶ questions that are indispensable for scholarship, we nevertheless have sufficient criteria for judging that the foundation of Jesus' message is accessible and has not gotten lost in the process of formulation, composition, redaction, and transmission in the period after Jesus. The three inevitable phases¹⁷ that occur in the passage from Jesus' speech to the disciples' and apostles' post-Easter transmission and preaching and to the first written records cannot obstruct the continuity and connection with the historical origin. This cannot happen, above all, because the unique person of Jesus Christ always remains visible as the link that unifies every element and provides the standard by which to measure genuineness or falsity. The event of the deed-word of the Incarnation always stands behind the individual words that Jesus speaks and lends to them their unique validity and power.

2) *The Word's Becoming Text in the Church*

With respect both to Jesus' spoken word and to the personal-eschatological deed-word of the Christ-event, it is important to see that what is at issue is not a quantity that increases or decreases over the course of history, but rather an event that transcends and outlasts history. However, after an initial period when it was passed on only orally, the continuance of the Word had to be ensured by being set down in writing.

Above all, for the sake of the authenticity and genuineness of God's Word becoming text, we ought in particular to recall the period when the Word was transmitted solely by mouth through the

¹⁵Cf., moreover, the elaboration of this question in relation to Christology as a whole, in A. Ziegenaus, *Jesus Christus: Die Fülle des Heils. Christologie und Erlösungslehre*, Katholische Dogmatik IV, ed. by L. Scheffczyk and A. Ziegenaus (Aachen, 2000), 30–34.

¹⁶Cf. W. Egger, *Methodenlehre zum Neuen Testament* (Freiburg, 1987), 195–200.

¹⁷On this, see P. Stuhlmacher, 45.

disciples and apostles in the early Church, because we see that, at the moment of the dawning of the new age of salvation, the Word of God entered into human words and in a certain sense became the Word of the early Church. This is confirmed by the existence of a "Gospel before the Gospel," which was proclaimed by the apostles, disciples, and the "servants of the Word" (cf. Lk 1:2). This proclamation, accompanied by the initial written reports, was not the private affair of individual preachers and conveyors of the Word. It occurred in the "demonstration of spirit and power" (1 Cor 2:4), that lived and grew in the early Church. Thus, already at that time, what was at issue was a word *in* the Church and *through* the Church.

Like the prophets, the ones who first handed down the Word of God faced the question of the undiminished preservation of Christ's words and the genuineness of their transmission. Insofar as the disciples took over the words of Christ and Christ himself as *the Word*—not without communicating to it something of their own understanding and formulation—they appear as witnesses of the message who lay claim to a genuine testimony. As eyewitnesses of the events that occurred through "his whole life," "from his baptism by John to the day he departed from us and was assumed (into heaven)" (Acts 1:22), they were given the power to assume the task of bearing a witness that corresponded in truth, but they were also given a mission through the particular transmission of office (Mk 3:13f.; Lk 6:13; Mt 28:18–20; Jn 14:18; Acts 1:8). This mission was linked with an authority related to that of Christ (Mt 10:40; Lk 10:16) and endowed with his particular assistance (Mt 28:20; Jn 17:18, 26). Thus, the apostle also received the inerrancy, or infallibility, of testimony.

Now, if we compare the legitimation of the apostle with that of the Old Testament prophets, what strikes our eye in the former is the immediacy of his personal contact with the God-man who sends him forth, and also the intensity of his personal connection to the Lord who entrusts him with the task. The rabbinic principle, that "the person sent images the one who sends," has the effect of strengthening the apostle's personal bond with Christ, which allows him to present himself "*in persona Christi*" (2 Cor 5:20), so that he can be received by the community "as Jesus Christ himself" (Gal 4:14). Christ himself speaks through the apostle and lends his testimony the character of God's Word.

At the same time, there emerges at this point a principle that runs counter to the Protestant understanding of apostolic witness. According to this understanding, we cannot ascribe to the apostles, *qua* human beings, any personal authority in relation to their testimony and its authenticity. Their testimony is meaningful only insofar as it conveys the authority of that to which they testify, i.e., the Word of God.¹⁸ They cannot themselves answer for the truth of their testimony, but can only, like John the Baptist in Grönewald's crucifixion painting, point to the divine Word who holds all authority. This fragmented interpretation of the apostle's witness, which raises again the question concerning the authority of the written word, is rooted in the principle of the strict "*sola*" of God's Word and its implied exclusion of any compelling human influence. But this rigid exclusivity does not accord with the consciousness of authority that Scripture shows us belonged to the apostles (cf., *inter alia*, 1 Cor 4:2-15; 2 Cor 10:8ff; Gal 1:8ff), even if it is correct to distinguish between the object of witness and the one who bears witness.

The inviolability of the apostolic witness, which preserves the Word of God and of Christ undiminished, leads to the question why the Word of God had to be written down. The question also arises because Christ himself did not leave behind a single written word; nor did he leave instructions that his spoken word was to be set down in writing. Nevertheless, the first communities and the early Church, employing many "servants of the Word" for the task, proceeded to lend the spoken and initially orally transmitted words of the Lord a documented, written form. To be sure, they were influenced by the impressive example of the Old Testament, which mentioned the written recording of the law already at the time the Covenant was made (Deut 4:13; 10:4). The authority that the texts of the Old Testament had over the life of Israel, and over the Christians as well, must have been an inspiration and spur for the young community to provide Jesus' message a similar foundation for present and future posterity. The extraordinary character of Jesus' speech was also a reason to set his words down in writing so that they would not be forgotten.

Exegesis offers many practical reasons for the written recording of the words of Christ: the preservation of the true Jesus-tradition against the ever-possible popular distortions, the provision

of reliable texts for liturgy, catechesis, and for missions, particularly in the second generation, the documentation of the first age for all the subsequent ages. All of these are illuminating reasons why the oral tradition concerning Jesus needed to be set down in writing in the Gospels. They become compelling, however, only if we take for granted that, in the passage from the oral transmission of Jesus' word by elected witnesses to the fixing of that word in the written Gospels, Jesus' apostolic word was preserved in its uniqueness and identity, and the undiminished proclamation of God's and Jesus' "viva vox" is safeguarded.

The early Christians had this conviction, influenced as they were by late Jewish reflection on the concept of inspiration,¹⁹ and the Spirit's filling the prophets and their books (Acts 28:25; 1 Pet 1:11; 2 Pet 1:21; 2 Tim 3:15f.), even though the evangelists and authors of the New Testament did not put their trust in the notion of a special, personal gift of the Spirit (cf., in this respect, the sobering motivation for writing down the Gospels, Lk 1:1-4). Awareness of the authenticity of the written Gospels grew in the early Christian community because of their own experience of being filled by the Spirit and by the affinity between these writings and their most profound life of prayer. Thus, inspiration did not need to be connected with extraordinary visions (as it was in Hellenism²⁰), but could be understood as the guidance of the sacred writer's mind and free will by God's will. This is a reason why there soon arose a belief that the holy books (as defined by the First Vatican Council) were written "through a gift of the Holy Spirit" and why "they have God as their author" (DH 3006). The formal effect of God's influence was taken to be the infallibility of the Holy Scriptures (initially applied to the original text), and secondarily referred to the meaning expressed through the sacred writer's words. The inspiration that the Church recognized in particular writings was finally also the reason for the delimitation of a fixed canon of holy books. The acknowledgment of the inspired character of a text occurred in the living tradition of the Church and went hand in hand with the fact that this particular text was incorporated into the canon while other texts were excluded. With the formation of a canon and the

¹⁹See the Canon Muratori (from the late second century) and in Irenaeus of Lyons (d.202), *Adv. Haer.* 3.11.7f.

²⁰See M. Limbeck, "Inspiration," in *Neues Bibel-Lexikon*, 7, Lfrg. 233-35.

¹⁸Cf. H. Diem, *Was heißt schriftgemäß?* (Neukirchen, 1958), 35.

delimitation of this canon with respect to other religious texts, the Spirit-inspired quality of the Word of God acquired, in an external sense as well, the authority and evidential power due to it.

Among the various questions that have been treated in the history of theology and answered in different ways by different confessions,²¹ the ones that arise today with a particular relevance are those that concern the type and scope of inspiration, as well as the question how far inspiration extends over the authorship. In relation to the first question, the Church's doctrine has always tended to affirm an "inspiration of theme" (as opposed to the orthodox Protestant notion of a mechanical "word inspiration"); in other words, an inspiration that does not concern individual words, but instead has to do with thoughts and contents, in such a way as to allow the humanity and individuality of the sacred writer to have a secondary-causal role, and to allow space so that the exegete may treat the human-historical contribution freely in a historical-critical manner.

As for the question regarding the scope of inspiration, the Church's dogmatic pronouncements in the modern era²² have strictly maintained that we must ascribe infallibility to the whole of Scripture—i.e., in both its religious and profane content—by virtue of its inspired character, and that we therefore should not insist on a strict distinction between the truths of salvation and profane truths (although the latter are not always to be taken as true in the same sense). Ultimately, the Second Vatican Council did not change anything essential in this respect. Nevertheless, we cannot fail to acknowledge that the "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," in a decisive passage, places the *emphasis* on the *truths of salvation*, and says that the books of Scripture "firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures."²³ It is thus possible to conclude that we ought to judge the truth-value of profane or natural truths according to their relationship to the truth of salvation, and that their claim to truth is thereby somewhat relativized.

²¹ *Dei Verbum*, 11.

²² Cf. in addition L. Scheffczyk, *Grundlagen des Dogmas: Katholische Dogmatik I*, ed. by L. Scheffczyk and A. Ziegenaus (Aachen, 1997), 48ff.

²³ *Dei Verbum*, 11.

The many-layered history of a text's development, in which a series of conveyors, redactors, and composers come into play, raises the question how far inspiration extends. Presumably, the question ought to be answered by saying that all of the actual authors of a work have a share in this divine charism, which indisputably applies as well to the final editors or redactors of a book.

The Catholic doctrine of inspiration, which is objective and realistic, has never found a perfect counterpart in Protestantism. In this latter tradition, the development has oscillated between the extremes of a perfect identification of the Bible with the Word of God and a subjectivistic reduction of inspiration to the Spirit-filled hearing of Scripture. The objective meaning finds itself to a certain extent so marginalized that, at the extreme, one can speak about the "lies in the Bible" (when they are not read in the prophetic and apostolic Spirit).²⁴ Scripture thereby surrenders its quality as an objective witness of the "*intertextum testimonium Spiritus Sancti*," a problem that has not infrequently been referred to as the "Achilles heel" of Protestantism.²⁵

The purpose of the teaching on inspiration is to confirm that the Bible can be and remain the Word of God even as caused in a secondary sense by the human author, and even if it is expressed in human words and contained within the word of the Church. Moreover, it can be said from a Catholic perspective that Scripture does not only *contain* the Word of God, but *is* the Word of God. This explains the observation made by the "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation": "The Sacred Scriptures contain the Word of God, and, because they are inspired, they are truly the Word of God."²⁶

Nevertheless, the word that Christ spoke and that became the word of the Church through inspired writing, cannot allow us to identify the divine and human words because of concerns prompted by Protestant theology. Upon a closer consideration of the process by which the Word of God is taken into the human word (which begins with the prophets and reaches its completion in the deed-word of the Incarnation), we find the essential foundational

²⁴ Cf., on this point, R. Prenter, *Schöpfung und Erlösung: Dogmatik I* (Göttingen, 1958), 119.

²⁵ See D. Fr. Strauß; cf. Th. Preiß, "Das innere Zeugnis des Heiligen Geistes," in *Theologische Studien* 21 (1947): 9.

²⁶ *Dei Verbum*, 24.

principle of Christian faith at work, namely, the Incarnation principle. Here, too, we find the joining of the divine and the human in a genuine unity, in which "no aspect of the distinction of natures is eliminated through the unity."²⁷ In light of the Incarnation principle, we can make sense of the fact that Sacred Scripture, as the Word of God, cannot be formally identified with the human word, nor can it, as the Church's book, be formally identified with the Word of God. Though it is authored by ecclesial witnesses, it remains the authentic and infallible witness of God's words. In a way that is once again analogous to the sacramental mystery of the God-man, this witness takes on the particular quality of containing and making present that to which it bears witness. But to say that it "contains" does not imply that the Word of God is present in the Church's book in the way a thing is present within a container, which would reify the Word of God. Instead, it is an *immanence* (*Insein*) that is simultaneously linked to a *transcendence* (*Übersein*), in which the Word of God always remains that which surpasses and stands over Scripture, that which rises ever anew in its mystery.

3) The Proclaimed Word

The writing down of the Word by the Church was an event in the founding age of Christianity whose importance for the history of faith is hard to exaggerate. However, the proper significance of this event comes to be seen only over the course of history; for, in looking at the inspired written Word, the Church saw the authentic proclamation of salvation, and she could refer to it as an indubitable and genuine document. As the witness of the fullness of revelation, however, Scripture also stood over her as an authority; for, as the source of revelation and as the authentic witness of revelation, Scripture provided the Church with the measure and abiding norm for the life of faith. This enabled a distinction to be made between what was original and what was added later, between the abiding and the changeable, between the divine and the merely human.

In spite of the unique significance the "Holy Book" has for the Church, the transformation of the Word into text was nevertheless only one stage in its history. Just as the book had its beginning

²⁷See the Council of Chalcedon, DH 302.

in living proclamation, it also had its end in living proclamation; it is made to be actualized again and again in the spoken word. The reason for this is ultimately to be found in the personal character of the Word, which is truly expressed only when it is vocalized among persons and in language. This is why the setting down of the Word in writing was not understood as a mere recording of past events and speech; rather, arising from God's living speech and the Church's oral tradition, it was meant once again to provoke the living word of preaching, even if the inspired written word remained its measure and norm. In this respect, we should keep in mind that it was not only the words spoken by the Lord that were written down, but also the surrounding, comprehensive event of the manifestation of Christ as Spirit and Life, which naturally insisted on coming to life again and again in preaching. Indeed, the word of the first letter of John announces: "That which was in the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, have looked upon and touched with our hands, that is what we proclaim: the Word of Life" (1 Jn 1:1). For this reason, the Church's preaching must liberate the life of the written word of the Bible and reawaken the innate vital power within it.

The Church's preaching, which actualizes the written Gospel, and which occurs in the liturgy, in catechesis, in teaching and giving homilies, as well as in dogma, could of course prompt the question whether God's Word is genuinely present in the proclamation, or whether it is not perhaps displaced by the preacher's human word. To this critical question, the Church has always responded with a single answer: "*praedicatio verbi divini est verbum divinum*," i.e., "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." This belief arose at *one time* because of Christ's own remark, "Whoever hears you hears me" (Lk 10:16), and *ever since* it has been supported by the Church's knowledge of her being inspired by the Spirit, who has been promised to her in the acts that constitute her life—in the Word and Sacraments.

Nevertheless, this key statement needs to be elaborated if we are to account for, and make intelligible, the distinction between Sacred Scripture and the Church's preaching. Just as Sacred Scripture is not simply identical with the word of revelation, but rather represents the infallible witness of that revelation, so too the Church's proclamation is not identical with Sacred Scripture. Sacred Scripture *contains* and is the Word of God in the mode of an inspired

witness to revelation; in Scripture, the Word of God appears in the form of the "witness of the witness." This distinction brings out the fundamental meaning of the original biblical preaching as the source, the foundation, and the norm of the manifestation of God's word in preaching.

It remains the case that, because she is gifted with the Spirit, the Church possesses the genuine capacity to lend her voice, through her preaching, to the Word of God in Scripture, and to make it public in properly human words without detriment to its essence. To be sure, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the Church's proclaimed word does not retain the same charism of inspiration and infallibility as the biblical word. It still enjoys the general guidance of the Holy Spirit, by virtue of the preacher's mission and the powers invested in the office, but these do not exclude human inadequacy and error. Thus, the Church's preaching remains bound in an essential way to inspired Scripture as its norm, and after the Word has become text, the transmission of God's Word through preaching becomes in a fundamental sense interpretation, reflection on, and actualization of Sacred Scripture. The word of the Church's actual preaching is the Word of God only *insofar* as it is aligned with and measured by the *standard of Scripture*.

Of course, this does not mean that the preacher has licence only to quote and repeat Scripture. This would contradict the nature of a living, personal speech-event. A genuine speech-event requires that the written word come into existence with the preacher's personal stamp and testimony. If the evangelists already referred Jesus' original words to their own situation, and thus received them in an individual and varied manner, so too the preacher is obliged to do the same in order to bring the Word of God to life. Thus, the homily becomes a supremely personal event, it has the quality of a testimony, in which all of the temporal, historical, and situation-conditioned elements come sharply to the fore—as they should—without, of course, diminishing or falsifying the Word of God.

The moment of personal witness, however, must not in any way be confused with subjective determination. The objective criterion for the advent of the Word of God is the preaching's fundamental concordance with Scripture. Such a concordance, however, is not measured by a slavish attachment to the written word, but by the spirit, the essential content, and the meaning of Scripture, which is identical with the Spirit of the living tradition

and the existing Church. Finally, another prerequisite for an authentic personal speech-event is the preacher's moral disposition. Of course, preaching that is in accordance with Scripture always possesses an objective efficacy, which St. Paul affirms when he concedes that Christ himself can come to expression even if a person preaches "from envy and rivalry" (Phil 1:15). And yet, this does not imply that the preacher's inner subjective disposition does not have an essential role. In fact, such a disposition is even more necessary here than in the effecting of the "ex operato" efficacious sacraments. Indeed, the total absence of the subjective disposition can have such a negative effect on preaching that the Word of God can be deformed beyond recognition in the human word, and the listener can in fact be prevented from recognizing and receiving it. It can be "falsified" by preachers (2 Cor 4:2), who thus "deceive the hearts of the innocent" (Rom 16:18).

As a spiritual and personal speech-event, preaching is more susceptible to being falsified by the preacher than the sacrament is by the one who administers it. In the Church's preaching, God's Word attains to its most complete and sharpest point of unity with human words. But the sharpness of this point is precisely why it is in such danger of being dulled by an improper bearer of the Word. This danger can be overcome to the extent that the preacher's human word is continually nourished on and rooted in the witness of Sacred Scripture and in the deed-word of Christ made present in the Church through the Spirit. In this way, the efficacy of God's primal Word, which is in itself mysterious, can be given a foundation of certitude in the fragile word of human preaching in the Church. That which is a mystery for the believer remains for the Church and the preacher a task entailing heavy responsibility.—*Translated by David Christopher Schindler.* □

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