

[Bib. 7 Landaff]

INTRODUCTION

Since my task was to present mainly a biblical paper for the purpose of introducing a discussion on the theme "Word and Church", I have devoted the main part of this short essay to an analysis of the biblical datum on the Word, taking as a point of reference John McKenzie's recent Dictionary of the Bible, to which I have added a few complements that seem to me to be forgotten in the Dictionary's article on the Word. This is followed by some remarks on the biblical datum and its meaning for theology.

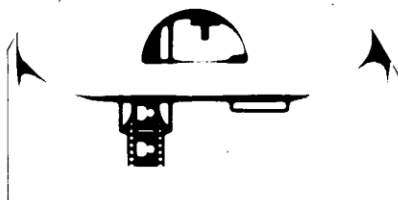
It has seemed to me useful to add a few pages on the subsequent history of the theology of the Word, in order to help see our problem in historical perspective. I have concluded the paper with some theological reflections.

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THE WORD IN THE SCRIPTURES

As it appears in the Old Testament, the Word (Dabar, Dabar Adonai) designates both God's communication with man, which may be made directly, as when God calls the patriarchs and talks to the prophets, or indirectly, as when God speaks to his People as a whole or to one of the People (David, 2 Sam. 12:7; Ezechias, 2 Kings 20:1) through a prophetic utterance. God speaks, and there are times when what he says may be communicated to others. But a Word, in the biblical mentality, is not only a sound; it is also a fact, for it carries the very power of God and therefore effects what it says: "The word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do" (Is., 55:11)

The Word is thus active. It creates the realities and events of the history of the Hebrews, v. gr. through its call of the patriarchs, through its selection of David (2 Sam., 25:2), through its splitting of the monarchy (1 Kings, 11:31-39), through the work of the prophets (Amos, 8:11-12). It also creates the whole world, and the

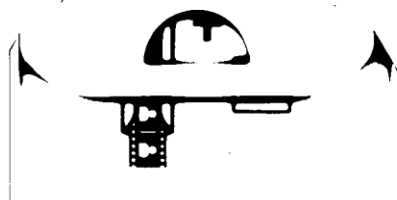


account of creation is introduced with the expression "God said..." (Gen. 1). Accordingly, the Word denotes not only what God says and effects, but also what we see that God has done, whether or not its being spoken by him has been recorded. Thus, the Word gives Torah, written under God's dictation (Ex., 34:27); through the sages it teaches wisdom (Wisdom, 9:1-2), and obedience which brings life (Dt. 8:3; Baruch 3:10-14) and knowledge (Wisdom 7:17-21). Since it also calls and guides the prophets and directs and judges the kings, nothing, in the life of the People, lies outside the realm of the Word.

Accordingly, the Word does not only affect the life and destiny of the People as a whole. It also intervenes with sovereign power in the life of the members of the People. The liturgy of the Temple, both as structured around the institution of priesthood and as interpreted by the Prophets, is focused upon the Word. Its main feasts and daily celebrations proclaim the Word, which is acknowledged in the Psalms sung and the sacrifices offered. The rituals of the synagogue, of the anawim circles, of the home, are centered on the meditation of Torah and on the praise of God's redemptive Word. The life of a pious Jew implies a constant "blessing" of God for all his deeds.

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The New Testament passages which mention or allude to the Word do it in the same perspective as the Old Testament. In the synoptic gospels and in the epistles, the Word most of the time denotes the Gospel, the good news, both the preaching of Jesus himself (Mk., 2:2; Lk., 4:32), which Luke often calls "the Word of God" (Lk., 5:1), and the apostles' preaching about Jesus (Acts, passim), called "Word of God" (Acts, 4:29-31), "Word of the Lord" (12:24), "Word of the gospel" (15:17; also Paul, 1 Cor., 14:36; Gal., 6:6; Phil., 1:4...), "Word of truth" (Col., 1:5),



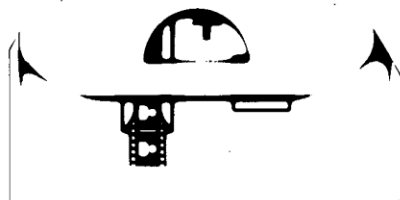
"Word of reconciliation (2 Cor., 5:19).

All these sources show a tendency to personify the Word, either in parabolic form, as in the parable of the sower (Mt., 13:18-23), or by way of an identification of the Word with the life and the development of the Church (Acts, 19:20 : "Thus the Word of the Lord increased and was powerfully strengthened"), or with the life of the faithful (the Word is the seed received at baptism, Peter, 1:23). The Word is active in the believers (1 Th., 2:13); it penetrates all, even "to the point of division between the soul and the spirit", thus being able to "judge the feelings and thoughts of the heart" (Hebr., 4:12). The conception of the prophetic word, which not only speaks, but judges, is preserved here; it is prominent in the thought of St. Paul, for whom the proclamation of the Gospel brings both preachers and listeners to judgment. The apostle must choose between "the verbal wisdom" (1 Cor., 1:17) of philosophy and "the word of the Cross" (1 Cor., 1:18). The proclamation of this Word sorts out those who condemn themselves and those who are saved (id.).

The highest point is reached when Paul identifies the "coming of the Word" with the "mystery", hidden for centuries and now faithfully revealed to the saints, unfolding its richness, which is no other than "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col., 1:25-27). Thus, Word, Mystery, Christ are ultimately one.

St. Paul brings us on to the Johannine literature, which is precisely focused on the Word as personified divine communication made visible in Jesus, rather than on the Word preached by the Apostles or by the Church.

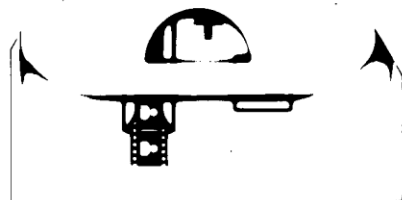
In the Gospel according to St. John, Word commonly designates the sayings of Jesus in his ministry (v. gr., 8:43) rather than the preaching about him. But the evangelist insists that these Words of Jesus do not come from him only but from the Father ("The Word that you hear is not mine, it is the Word of the Father who



ent me", 14:23). In this perspective John uses the expression "the Words of God" (not logia, but rhemata, 3:34; 8:47), meaning both the teachings and the acts of God, word and act remaining close to each other, as they are in the Old Testament. Thus the unity between Jesus and the Father is stressed (10:30 : "I and the Father are one"). And a perspective is opened on the fact that the greatest of the rhemata tou Theou is Jesus himself as Word made flesh. It is this "Word of life" that the disciples were able to hear, to see with their own eyes, to watch, to touch with their own hands (1 J., 1:1). This Word is described in the prologue to the Gospel in terms that are reminiscent of the description of Wisdom in the Old Testament : it is, not only from God and of God, but eternally with God and, one step beyond the Old Testament, it is itself divine (1:1). This Word is life and light; nothing has been made without it : it is the active, creative Word.

If the Word is one with Father, it is also one with those who hear it : it abides in them (5:38) and they in it (8:31), thus joining the Father and the disciples in unity : "If anyone loves me, he will keep my Word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him" (14:23).

The note of judgment is not absent from the Johannine Gospel : because Jesus has addressed "them" in words (15:22) and works (15:24), "they have no excuse for their sin" (15:22); or from the first Epistle ("If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his Word is not in us", 1 J., 1:10). It becomes more prominent in the Apocolypse, where the Word of God appears in the shape of the rider of a white horse, carrying the sword of judgment in his mouth; his name is "Faithful and True", and also "King of Kings and Lord of Lords"; he leads the armies of heaven on white horses (the faithful disciples who have triumphed), and will bring God's anger to bear on the pagans, the unfaithful (19:11-21). Thus, if the Word presents options and pronounces judgment in this life, he is also the instrument of



the eschatological judgment. The description of the New Jerusalem does not use the expression "word of God", yet God is shown in it speaking, and this speech is his action : "Behold, I make all things new" (21:5).

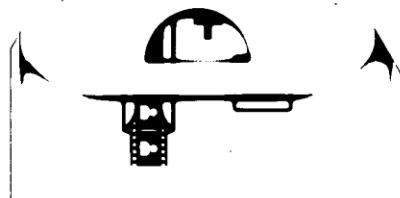
In this way the Johannine writings place the whole history of creation between the creative action of the Word at the beginning and his creative action at the end.

The creative intervention of the Word also takes place, as in Judaism, within the community. Comparing the data on the Last Supper (including St. John's), one sees a close connection between the Word and the Eucharist, which was originally a Jewish ritual re-interpreted. The Thanksgiving evokes the eschatological triumph of the Word in the messianic banquet, which is now identified - this is the radically new element, the point where the Word breaks through again - with the new and eternal Covenant, the Word-deed of the death and the rising of Jesus.

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REMARKS ON THE BIBLICAL DATUM

Scripture does not contain a theology of the Word in the sense of speculative explanation and synthesis of all its data on the Word. Nor does it seem to put forward one fundamental principle that could serve as guide-post for such an elaboration. It would be possible to take any one of the aspects of the Word that Scripture mentions, and make it the central point of a theology. Thus we may have a trinitarian theology of the eternal Word; a Christology, centered on the coming of the Word among men; a Pneumatology, focused on the reception of the Word under the impulse of the Spirit; a Soteriology, emphasizing the saving function of the Word; a theology of the kerygma, stressing the Church's task of passing on the Word through its preaching, etc. All these stresses are ambiguous, for they may tend to become exclusive, whereas Scripture, in its absence of a systematic organization, is all-inclusive. Thus, all attempts at systematization of the scriptural datum are bound to remain restrictive :



Scripture is richer than all theologies.

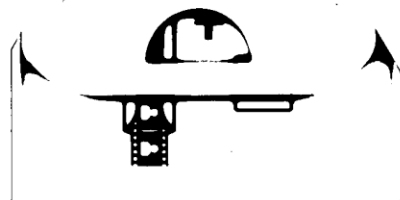
Even a biblical theology, which would try to construct the biblical teachings on the Word with the very categories of Scripture, would seem to be beyond reach as long as we do not think along biblical lines. And unfortunately the categories of the Bible escape us : we think according to other cultural norms. The emphasis of modern civilization on visual pictures does not help us, but makes it all the harder for us to make ours the world of the Bible, and especially its concern for the Word as spoken and heard.

If we add to this the belief that the Word will never cease guiding the Church and speaking to her, it would seem that theological concern for the Word cannot have a fully constructive function : we can never elaborate a complete theology of the Word. Yet concern for the Word can have a critical and reforming function : we should examine and correct all theologies in the light of what we may grasp of the Word, and we should reform our thinking in the light of it. In particular, the biblical datum invites us to avoid a number of excesses.

Firstly, we should not try to pinpoint too closely the norm for interpreting the Word, for the Scriptures show the Word as the norm and the judge, not to be judged by any man. The Church itself is its servant.

Secondly, the biblical datum does not allow us to identify the Word and Scripture. The Word is reported in Scripture, but not everything contained in Scripture is this Word. There are indeed problems of biblical hermeneutics; but if the exegesis of Scripture with the help of scientific tools may provide a "good" text, it does not yet give the Word. Reading or hearing the Word is a matter of interior openness, which requires the presence and suggestions of the Holy Spirit, who may be operative whatever degree of scientific competence the reader of the Bible may enjoy.

Thirdly, the biblical datum itself does not identify the interpreter of the Word

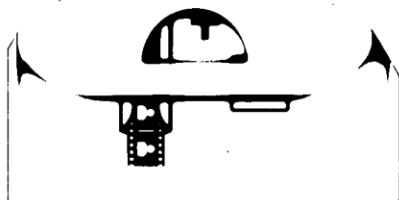


with the Church. Rather the Church is presented, in the Epistles and in the Apocalypse, as recipient, not exponent, of the Word. The Word and the Spirit are the witnesses whom the Church is to believe. Yet those who have seen must also give their testimony (1 J., 1:2). All the faithful should be prepared to account for the hope that is in them (1 Pet., 3:15). And there are leaders in the community who, like Timothy, have the function of preaching the Word (2 Tim., 4:1) and therefore must fully know the "teaching of the trustworthy Word" (ten didaken tou pistou logou, Tit., 1:9), such a knowledge being fidelity rather than a merely intellectual grasp of doctrine.

NOTE ON HISTORY

Little by little, the theological reflection of the early Fathers developed the two foci of the relation of the Word to man, and of its relation to the Father. This was done first in a cosmological context in connection with the conceptions of Middle-Platonism, and next, especially with Athanasius, in a soteriological context. The Arian controversy was a decisive factor in bringing the Church to adopt a definitive doctrine, which was expressed in the Creed of the Council of Nicea in terms of homoousia between the Father and the Logos. The long Christological controversies which followed show the Church's hesitancy to pass from the scriptural datum about the Word to a metaphysical statement concerning the inner life of God. But the implications of homoousia for the theology (in the older sense, as distinguished from the economy) did not blind the patristic Church to the kerygmatic dimension of the Word : the Word must still be spoken in the Church and therefore the Church must proclaim the Word both to her members for their sanctification and to the unredeemed world in order to bring it to salvation.

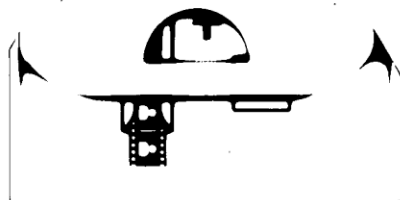
A change of perspective may be discerned in the Middle Ages. The Word is still preached, and medieval homilies remain profoundly scriptural. Yet theological speculation tends to highlight the inner Trinitarian relations, and Verbum is considered chiefly in its eternal generation from the Father. Especially since Augustine, the biblical expression "Word" is understood analogically with the conception and expression



of human thoughts and words. Yet the Middle Ages kept a dynamic view of the Word, well summed up in the three aspects that St. Bonaventure enumerates : Verbum increatum, incarnatum, inspiratum. The Verbum inspiratum is the Word present in the Christian soul.

The Reformation maintained integrally the divine and incarnate aspects of the Word ("The Son, which is the Word of the (eternal) Father, begotten from everlasting of the Father, the very and eternal God, and of one substance with the Father, took Man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin, of her substance... ", Art. II). But where the Middle Ages had stressed the Verbum inspiratum as dwelling in the Christian soul, the reformers more strongly insisted on the Word announced as good news (gospel) in the Church's preaching. It is in part by this preaching that the Church is known to be the Church ("The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached... ", Art. XIX). The Reformation thus re-emphasized the spoken aspect of the Word, both as written in the Scriptures and as communicated in the preaching of the gospel.

Largely as a result of this, the Counter-Reformation placed the Word at the center of its conception of "sacred eloquence", as witness this sentence of Bossuet : "Il faut s'imprimer bien avant cette vérité chrétienne, qu'outre le son qui frappe l'oreille, il y a une voix secrète qui parle intérieurement, et que ce discours spirituel et intérieur, c'est la véritable predication, sans laquelle tout ce que disent les hommes ne sera qu'un bruit inutile" (Sermon for 2nd Sunday in Lent, 1663). In its theology, however, the Counter-Reformation did not give the central place to the Word, and its scholasticism was slanted, much more than in the past, in the direction of a theology of the Institution characterized by triumphalism (theologia gloriae) and over-stressing the guarantee of infallibility to a point where it would assure the Church of teaching the right doctrine by its tradition regardless



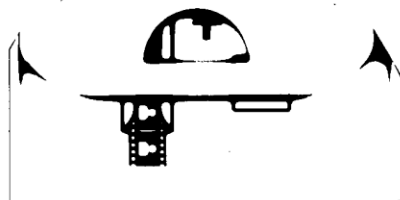
of her concern for listening to the Word in Scripture. Thus the Word seems to be spoken by the Church rather than to the Church.

This slant has been considerably reduced in the documents of Vatican Council II, where the doctrine of the Word, especially in its spoken form, is prominent, mainly in the Constitution Verbum Dei (n. 2, n. 3, n. 9, n. 10, etc.) and the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (n. 35). The Decree on Ecumenism (n. 4) views the Word as standing at the heart of the ecumenical dialogue.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The question, "What is the Word?" cannot be answered by a definition. One can attempt to describe the Word in biblical language, by pointing to what the Scriptures say about it; in historical language, by showing what we find in the Fathers, the Councils, the Doctors past and present; in speculative language, by relating the doctrine of the Word to human philosophy and trying to express it in philosophical terms (as was done by the Schoolmen in the categories of the Aristotelian philosophy of relation); in the symbolic language of mystical experience, by describing the life of the Word in man which acts as the leaven of Christian holiness (v. gr. John of the Cross, Living Flame of Love, stanza 2). None of these approaches is ever adequate to the subject, for the Word is unfathomable and escapes the limitations of human speech even at the very moment when it uses language for communication.

Here lies the ultimate foundation for the traditional insight, dear to the Reformers, that the Church is subject to, and not mistress of, the Word. Here we also find the reason why it has been possible for some periods or some sections of the Church to underline one aspect and somewhat neglect another. Since there is a constant danger of losing the balance found in Scripture, the Church has the permanent task and duty of looking afresh at its doctrine and preaching of the Word, or re-setting its life and teaching with the help of the Scriptures, and of reforming itself in the light of



the Word better known and better followed.

A total theology of the Word would include many levels : the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, the self-revealing of God, the embodiment of Revelation in Scripture and the doctrines of prophecy and inspiration, the tradition of the Word in the kerygma, the function of the Gospel in the Church's life, the subordination of the Church to the Word, the fidelity of each faithful to the Word, the indwelling of the Word in the Christian man, the nature of Christian witness and the missionary presentation of the Gospel. Thus this is an all-embracing theme which opens many avenues to reflection.

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