

## STUDY 12

# The Ministry of the Word (2): The Written Word

*Siew Kiong Tham*

Paul instructs young Timothy, ‘Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture . . .’ (1 Tim. 4:13).<sup>1</sup> This of course refers to the Old Testament. Nowhere in the Bible is the goal of the written word stated more clearly than in the writings of the apostle John when he closes his gospel with these words, ‘But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31). This is the ministry of the written word.

We have come to acknowledge the written word as inspired and authoritative. Again, Paul wrote this to young Timothy.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it,<sup>15</sup> and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.<sup>16</sup> All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:14–17).

Because the sacred writings are inspired and authoritative, they ‘are able to instruct [us] for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus’.

How does the written word do that? Are we permitted to treat it as any other written text and understand it in an intellectual fashion? If that were so then would we be treating it as the inspired writing that it claims to be? What does reading the inspired writing do to us and how does it achieve that?

Is the written word merely a tool in our hand? It is not. It is not merely a text for us to analyse with various modalities of literary schemes to uncover its meaning, though in certain situations, these literary schemes can be helpful. So often we take the written word, analyse and dissect it and in many instances force it to deliver what we regard as a hidden meaning. When we do that, all that happens is that we impose upon the word that meaning by our own construction and by the assumptions we hold when we come to it. This is part of our secular training in the construct of meaning. It is a modern form of narcissism as Oswald Bayer explains:

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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Instead of emphasising the authoritative gift given in advance, which empowers us to understand and think, modernity emphasises the task of interpreting and understanding what is given. *Appropriation has become more important than dedication and communication.* For the modern Narcissus even hermeneutical ‘reason only has insight into what it itself has produced corresponding to its own projections’. So it becomes the ‘highest task of education’ ‘to appropriate one’s transcendental Self, and at the same time to become the Self of my Self’. In this understanding of education, what is heard and read only exists by the grace of the human interpreter and his interpretative activity, by the grace of the human heart—a heart that in effect *writes* the fiction that it claims to interpret, and in this way constructs meaning.<sup>2</sup>

The written word is also not meant to be a system of incantation for the release of its power as if when we say the right words, it will give the desired effect. The question for us is whether the word is subject to our judgement or are we subject to the judgement of the word? If we regard it to be authoritative, then we must be subject to its judgement.

### THE LIVING WORD

The Old Testament does not treat the word as a static entity. The psalmist refers to the word as something living and active. ‘By the word of the LORD the heavens were made’ (Ps. 33:6). The word is personified. ‘In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise’ (Ps. 56:10). The psalmist celebrates the living word this way—it does something to us:

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the decrees of the LORD are sure,  
making wise the simple;  
<sup>8</sup> the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is clear,  
enlightening the eyes (Ps. 19:7–8).

There is a unity of word and action as well. Isaiah said:

. . . so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isa. 55:11).

That is why the sages of old do not classify any of the books in the scriptures (Old Testament) as historical books. The Hebrew scriptures consist of the Torah, Prophets and Writings. What we classify as historical, the Hebrews regarded as prophetic. The word of God is active. It does its work in its readers. The spoken word of God implies its accomplishment. History is already written as God speaks his word.

It is in this context that the book of Acts refers to the word. Very often when Luke refers to the word, he regards it as alive and active. So when he writes, ‘The word of

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<sup>2</sup> Oswald Bayer, ‘Hermeneutical Theology’ in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 2003, 56(2), 132–133. Horizon Lecture given 16 June 2000 at Birkbeck College, University of London; translation by Dr Gwen Griffith-Dickson.

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God continued to spread' (Acts 6:7), he continues with this statement, 'the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith'. The visible result is produced by the ministry of the word as we see in the following quotations from the book as well:

But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents (Acts 12:24).

Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region (Acts 13:49).

So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed (Acts 19:20).

The apostles, realizing the priority of the word in the new-found life of the church said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables' (Acts 6:2).<sup>3</sup> And for their part, they will devote themselves 'to prayer and to serving [ministry of] the word' (Acts 6:4).<sup>4</sup>

There is a sense here of the written word pointing beyond itself to the incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. 'Serving the word' in Acts 6:4 could have reference to both. The ministry of the written word is ultimately the ministry of the incarnate Word, 'For Christ is the end [*telos*] of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes' (Rom. 10:4). The writer to the Hebrews also noted:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,<sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.<sup>3</sup> He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word (Heb. 1:1-3).

### **THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD (THE WRITTEN WORD)**

We may understand this in two senses. Firstly, we may understand this to be our service (ministry) of the word as in teaching or proclamation. Secondly, we may read it as ministry that is of the word, that is, the word's ministry. It is the latter emphasis that is the focus of our discussion.

The ministry of the word in Acts 6:4 is contrasted with serving at the tables in Acts 6:2. The apostles were to make a change from serving at tables to serving the word. It is a change from an administrative ministry to a word ministry.

What does it mean to serve the word or what does the ministry of the word mean? We are speaking in the context of the written word. It is firstly a ministry to us, whether individually or collectively, before it is a ministry to others in proclamation. The latter is the subject of another paper. So how does the written word minister to us? There is no doubt that some degree of an intellectual component is involved. We need to wrestle with the literary structure and style, and the cultural milieu, in which the text is written. That may not be an easy thing to do with the passage of time. We will need the scholarship of others to reconstruct something of the ancient world and the ancient text. Even then, we may question the completeness of the reconstruction

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<sup>3</sup> Gk: διακονεῖν τραπέζαις, *diakonein trapezais*.

<sup>4</sup> Gk: διακονία τοῦ λόγου, *diakonia tou logou*.

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as the knowledge is amended from time to time with the discovery of new data from the past. The problem for us is how much of this can we rely on? I am not saying that this reconstruction is not reliable but that we need to be aware of its benefits and deficiencies.

### **THE INSPIRATION AND AUTHORITY OF THE WORD**

The written form has come to us through men and women inspired by the Holy Spirit as Paul wrote to young Timothy:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

There is a human element to it, but it is not merely that. It is sacred scriptures. Thus it is not a text simply requiring intellectual prowess. It requires something more. The Westminster Confession noted:

VI. The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, *we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word*: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.<sup>5</sup>

In order to truly understand what is spoken by another, there needs to be an interlocking of each other's framework as to the context and intended sense. The two persons are then relating and communicating. The exchange of words expresses what is within each of the persons communicating and this enhances the relationship.

However, in relation to the written word, there is a problem in this framework of communication. Our sin prevents us from comprehending the word. The word is given to us as a gift. Its purpose is that 'you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31). The problem is that the human mind is not able to come to God unaided. While Paul acknowledged that the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16), he also noted that:

... for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.<sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools (Rom. 1:21–22).

There is a veil over the human mind because of sin. Thus attempts to understand the word unaided would only result in the creation of a god after our own image. This

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<sup>5</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. 1, sect. 6, taken from A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1978), p. 37 (italics mine).

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is because the word is approached with the wrong premise. Calvin commented that ‘the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit’.<sup>6</sup> This is because:

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation,<sup>21</sup> because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Pet. 1:20–21).

Since the word has come to us as men and women spoke the word through the agency of the Holy Spirit, then its work in us must also be through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The word of God cannot be separated from the Spirit of God, as Isaiah put it:

And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the LORD: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children’s children, says the LORD, from now on and forever (Isa. 59:21).

Before Jesus went to the cross, he told his disciples that when the Holy Spirit comes, he ‘will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you’ (John 14:26). The word cannot be understood without the agency of the Holy Spirit.

The written word, whether it is read or heard, does its work of restoration in those who come under its influence. To those who choose to stand above the word, in judgement of the word, its influence is the ‘fragrance from death to death’. But among ‘those who are being saved’, it is the ‘fragrance from life to life’ (2 Cor. 2:15–16). That is why you need to ‘pay attention to how you listen’ (Luke 8:18).

We cannot continue the attempt to receive the word intellectually. What we need is a theology of word and Spirit as D. Bloesch wrote:

In a theology of Word and Spirit we receive or hear the concrete speech of God, which makes an indelible impression on the human soul but can never be fully assimilated by the human mind. To know the full import of what is revealed, we must act in obedience to what we presently ascertain to be the will of God.<sup>7</sup>

Our God is Triune. The written word points to the incarnate Word. The incarnate Word does not exist or work alone. The written word has come to us on the printed page through the agency of the Spirit, and for that same written word to do its work in our lives, it must also require the agency of the Spirit. Thus the written word directs and takes us to the incarnate Word and the process is effected by the Spirit. It restores us to communion with the Father—the Triune Word in action. Or we may say, it is the ministry of the Triune Word as the song suggests:

Ah, Father God—whose Word is power—  
Ah, Spirit-Word that flows so free,  
Ah, Living Word, ah, Son of God,  
We worship—Word-in-Trinity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 1, ch. 6, pt 4 (*Institutes*. 1.6.4), ed. J. T. McNeil (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977), p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> D. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> G. Bingham, *New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 250.

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### **THESE ARE WRITTEN SO THAT YOU MAY COME TO BELIEVE THAT JESUS IS THE MESSIAH . . .**

We have often read the purpose of the written word this way—‘that [we] may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah’. Yet this is not complete and has led to an academic and speculative, or worse still, a narcissistic theology. To believe is not quite the *telos*. The *telos* is that ‘we may have life in his name’ (John 20:31). This is the work of the written word.

Paul wrote this to the Thessalonian Christians:

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers (1 Thess. 2:13).

The word that comes to us is not mere human words, but the living word of God and hence is active and does its work in our lives. Our modern-day approach is to listen, then discuss, and then we form our opinion as to what we really believe to be true. Luther gave to us three rules for the study of the word. They are *oratio*, praying for enlightenment; *meditatio*, studying and meditating on the word; and *tentatio*, spiritual attack or suffering at the hands of others. Through these, we hear the word speaking to us and transforming us. We pray for the Spirit’s enlightenment as we come to read and meditate on the word. The *tentatio* is also part of that process. Geoffrey Bingham wrote this in his book, *Love is the Spur*:

The conclusion I have come to is that what happened in Kranji is that we learned how to live and how to die after the man of true love, that is, Jesus of Nazareth. We must never be ashamed of what we learned and the fact that we needed to learn it as POWs.<sup>9</sup>

Much of popular theology is worked out from the position of affluence. We might have prayed and meditated over the text, but if it is not oiled by *tentatio*, it is not a theology of the cross on which hung the paschal Lamb. The ministry of the written word is the ministry of the Triune God. Our diligence in reading and re-reading the word together with the work of careful exegesis is essential. We may wrestle with what is written, but as we pray for understanding from the Spirit, he brings about our submission to the word. The devil, as Luther said, is also a teacher of the word. He wrote, ‘For as soon as God’s Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and love God’s Word.’<sup>10</sup>

What has been discussed above is not meant to be a methodology for the hearing of God’s word. It is the word working through the person who is created in the image of God and relates with him. Bayer quoted from Luther when he wrote:

. . . the scriptures are not simply printed words to be read off a page but life-giving words that stimulate our senses and emotions, our memory and imagination, our heart and desires. He [Luther] says that the Holy Scriptures ‘are not . . . mere literature; they are words of life, intended not for speculation and fantasy but for life and action.’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Love is the Spur*, Eyrie Books, North Parramatta, 2004, p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, ‘Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio’, Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings, 1539, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, vol. 34 (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1960), p. 287.

<sup>11</sup> Oswald Bayer, tr. J. G. Silcock & M. C. Mattes, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007), p. 64.

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Geoffrey Bromiley closes his section on 'The Ministry of the Written Word' this way and I quote:

Obstructed in one age, place, or person, it works in another. Dissected, reshuffled, and mauled by scholarly know-alls, it retains its substance and power. Defeated on the surface, it tackles the roots. Outshone by dazzling novelties, it steadily radiates the light of eternal truth which lasts when the flashy brilliance of its critics and competitors fades. Shouted down by noisy theorizers, it speaks its simple, saving message which as the Word of the Lord endures forever.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> G. Bromiley, 'The Ministry of the Word of God', in *Incarnational Ministry*, eds C. D. Kettler and T. H. Speidell (Colorado Springs, Helmers & Howard, 1990), p. 89.