

## What is the Word of God?

### Louis Berkhof

Louis Berkhof (1873-1957) was born in the Netherlands and emigrated as a child to the United States where his family joined the Christian Reformed Church. His theological training began at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He then went on to study at Princeton Seminary. After briefly serving as a pastor of a local congregation he was called to teach at Calvin Seminary in 1906 where he remained for three decades. His magnum opus was the still popular, *Reformed Dogmatics (Systematic Theology)* published by Eerdmans. This work was condensed into the *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, 1933. He was also the author of *The History of Christian Doctrines*, published by the Banner of Truth Trust.

This article is taken from *The Word of God and the Reformed Faith*, addresses delivered at the Second American Calvinistic Conference held at Calvin College and Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, June 3, 4, and 5, 1942. (Baker)

PERMIT me first of all to express my sincere gratitude for the kind invitation to address the Second Calvinistic Conference. It may be regarded as an encouraging sign that such Conferences as these are held. They augur well for the future of Calvinism in our country, and may make a real, though modest, contribution to American religious life, a contribution that is much needed in these days of spiritual declension. And certainly the subject that will engage the attention of this Conference is one of supreme importance, and one that is fully deserving of careful consideration.

It is only natural that one of the first of the Calvinistic Conferences should focus its attention on the Word of God, the foundation on which Calvin built. Some are of the opinion that Calvin was too speculative in his theological work, but they who are really acquainted with his writings are deeply impressed with the fact that all his teachings are pre-eminently Scriptural and strike their roots deep down into the sub-soil of God's special revelation. His thought is never divorced from the Word of God, as he understands it, and he is thoroughly honest in his convictions. All true Calvinism lories in the fact that it is not independent of the Word, but aspires to be a true reflection of the thoughts of God. In the eyes of many scientists and philosophers, this is exactly the great offense of Calvinism. It is the fruit of an unquestioning faith, based on authority, and does not recognize human reason as the final arbiter of the truth. Moreover, it even dares to assert that the wisdom of men may be foolishness in the sight of God.

The Calvinist stands in the firm conviction that it is impossible to know God, unless he has been pleased to make Himself known to man. He recognizes the force of Zophar's

question, "Canst thou by searching find out God?" It seems utterly impossible to him that man, by his unaided reason, should discover God, and he therefore considers the question, "Has God spoken?" as one of the utmost importance. The subject assigned to me for this occasion proceeds on the assumption that He has, for it puts the question as to the nature or character of His Word.

It is not only perfectly natural — Calvinism being what it is — that this Conference should take up the subject of the Word of God at once. The subject is also a very timely one. During the last decennia the revelation of God has repeatedly been called in question by scientists and philosophers. The new materialistic psychology excludes the idea of such a revelation, and the Humanists ridicule it. Julian Huxley wrote a book on *Religion Without Revelation*, a religion, in which we worship the impersonal, the unknown, and the unknowable. It seemed to some as if the account with revelation had finally been settled.

Today, however, there is in the religious world a new emphasis on the subject of revelation. Several recent works testify to this fact, such as those of E. F. Scott, *The New Testament Idea of Revelation*, E. P. Dickie, *Revelation and Response*, F. W. Camfield, *Revelation and the Holy Spirit*, E. Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, J. Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God, Revelation* (a Symposium, edited by John Baillie and Hugh Martin), and G. C. Berkouwer, *Geloof en Openbaring in de Nieuwere Duitse Theologie*.

This new emphasis is in part due to a reaction against the extreme position taken by the protagonists of Psychoanalysis, Behaviourism, and Humanism, and in part to the appearance of the Theology of Crisis, which calls the Churches back to the Word of God. Barth's Prolegomena is entitled *Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes*. The theology, to which Barth and Brunner, Thurneysen and Gogarten, and others, have given rise, is commonly known as the Theology of Crisis, or the Dialectical Theology. But of late it was repeatedly pointed out that Barth's theology might with greater propriety be called the Theology of the Word of God. Since he wants to be considered as a Reformed theologian, it is not only fitting, but also imperative, that a Calvinistic Conference should take some account of his conception of the Word of God.

What is the Word of God? This is a very simple question, and one to which a Calvinist, it would seem, could give a very simple answer. And yet that simple answer would hardly be adequate for an occasion of this kind, since the query to which a reply is sought involves such questions as these: Is it a natural or a supernatural Word? Is it a communication of truth, addressed to the intellect, or a behest or command, addressed to the will? Is it a written or a spoken Word or both? Does it represent a verbal or a factual revelation, or one that is both verbal and factual? Is it a Word spoken in the past, and now a finished product, or is it rather a continuous speaking of God? Is it wholly or only in part identical with the divine revelation? Is the Bible the Word of God or is it not?

The mere mention of these questions is sufficient to indicate, at least in a measure, the comprehensive character of the subject under consideration, and to lead to the surmise

that it may not be possible to do justice to it in a single paper. Such a surmise would be perfectly correct, and it would not surprise me at all if, after this paper is read, the verdict should be that it can hardly be regarded as an adequate treatment of this vast subject. After careful consideration, it seemed to me that a historical approach to the subject would have decided advantages, since it would enable us to see the different views that come into consideration in their true historical perspective. And therefore the greater part of this paper will consist of a historical survey of the doctrine of the Word of God.

In this study there is one point that stands out with great clarity, namely, that from the earliest Christian centuries up to the present time the idea of the Word of God is always in some way connected with the Bible. The prevailing opinion in the Churches has always been, that the Bible is the Word of God, though the Roman Catholic would insist on qualifying this by saying that the Bible is the *written* Word of God. This qualification should be borne in mind in reading the strong statement of Brunner in his *The Word and the World*, p. 82. Says he — and we intentionally quote him at length here —:

Christian faith is faith in the Bible. When the Christian speaks of the Word of God, he means in the first place the Word of Holy Scripture. That which holds together all the Churches of the world, from Roman Catholicism to the Quakers, from Luther to Cardinal Newman, that which throughout all historical changes of the Church has remained the same, the source from which Christianity has again and again drawn the power of renewal, is the Bible. During the nineteen hundred years of its history the Church has been more than once sick unto death; two hundred years ago Voltaire prophesied its end as certain in the near future. In the very house in which he made that prophecy there is at present an office of the British Bible Society, which annually sends out millions of Bibles in all languages into the world. It is the Bible which has again and again made the Church young and sound. True, there would be no Bible without the Church: this will be our subject tomorrow. But it is just as true that there would be no Church without the Bible. Christianity without the Bible would long ago have degenerated into an unrecognizable caricature. When we say that Christian faith is belief in Jesus Christ, we tacitly imply that it is faith in the Bible. No Bible — no Christ; no Bible — no Word of God.

But to Brunner this does not mean that the Bible and the Word of God are altogether identical, for he wants to consider separately the question: "What now more accurately is the relation between the Word of God and the Bible?" That is a question which we shall also have to bear in mind in our historical survey.

There were disputes about the Bible in the early Church. The canon of the Old Testament was fixed, but that of the New Testament was in process of formation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When the opinion of the Church on this point crystalized, the two Testaments were regarded as integral parts of an organic whole, and were together honored as the Word of God. The Gnostics and Marcion sought to undermine

the unity of the two by representing the Old Testament as the work of a lesser or evil God; but the Anti-Gnostic Fathers gave a clear representation of the proper relationship between the two, and thus maintained the organic unity of both.

From that time on there was a frank recognition of the Bible as the Word of God. Its inspiration was in some cases tacitly assumed, and in others clearly expressed. Justin and Athenagoras thought of the writers as passive under the divine influence, like a lyre in the hands of a player. Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian regarded both the Old Testament and the New as equally inspired and therefore infallible. Eusebius called it presumptuous to admit the possibility of error in the sacred books, and Augustine said that the apostles wrote what Christ dictated. Chrysostom saw in the prophets "the mouth of God," and Gregory the Great spoke of the Holy Spirit as the real author of Scripture. All this goes to show that the Bible was regarded as the Word of God.

It may be well to remind ourselves here of the fact that some of the early teachers of the Church, such as the Apologetes and the Alexandrian Fathers used the term "Word of God" in an even more fundamental sense in their Logos doctrine. The Logos was identified with divine reason, the principle of all revelation in God. This impersonal Logos was personalized with a view to the creation of the world, and went forth from God, first of all as the creative Word, then also as the divine revelation in Old Testament theophanies and prophecy, and finally as the highest revelation of God in the incarnate Word. This Logos doctrine, stressing the significance of Christ as the supreme revelation of God, redeeming man through the inculcation of divine truth, gradually retired into the background, when the attention was focused more particularly on the priestly work of Christ for the redemption of sinners; but it contained a valuable element, which should never be forgotten in the construction of the doctrine of the Word of God.

The firmly established belief that the Bible is the Word of God was not shaken during the middle Ages. However, the thought was stressed that the apostolic *kerugma* was originally handed down to succeeding generations, not merely in a written, but also in an oral, form. This gradually led to the development of the idea of an apostolic tradition, handed down by the Church from generation to generation. And this tradition was soon regarded as being equal, if not superior, to the Bible in authority. The theory gained ground that Holy Scripture stands in need of tradition. Only tradition can testify to the Bible as an inspired book; it only can determine with certainty and authority the right meaning of Scripture; and without it the Bible can be made to speak in so many discordant ways that its authority is altogether destroyed. The result of this theory was detrimental to the appreciation of Holy Writ. It is true, in theory, the Bible was still regarded as the Word of God, but in practice its authority was made dependent on tradition, and that means, on the Church. The importance ascribed to the so-called apostolic tradition was of such a nature, that it even involved a denial of the absolute necessity, the sufficiency, and the perspicuity of the Bible.

Another problem, which received a great deal of attention during the Middle Ages, was that of the relation between reason and revelation, and this also bore on the proper conception of the Word of God. The work of E. Gilson on *Reason and Revelation in the*

*Middle Ages* contains an instructive survey of the different representations of this relationship. He points out that Augustine opened up a new era in the history of western thought, when he said that the safest way to reach truth, is not the one that takes its starting point in reason, and then proceeds from rational certainty to faith, but the one that starts from faith, and then proceeds from revelation to reason. Among the Scholastics who accepted this principle, Anselm was the most outstanding. Like Augustine, he too said, "I believe that I may understand," but the two did not agree as to what it means to understand. For Augustine it meant giving an interpretation of Christian truth in terms of Platonic philosophy, but for Anselm it was equivalent to logical demonstration. His bold procedure was entirely foreign to the mind of Augustine. Roger Bacon was also interested in a rational understanding of the Christian revelation, but he placed the greatest emphasis on an experimental investigation, and on a mystical insight into the truth.

Others ascribed the primacy to reason. The Arabian philosopher, Averroes, held that the absolute truth could not be found in any sort of revelation, but only in the writings of Aristotle. If the latter had said anything, reason itself had spoken. He felt, however, that some sort of agreement between religious faith and philosophical reason was not improbable, and asserted that revelation even demands that we seek God by rational methods. He and his followers were not successful, however, in reconciling the truths of reason and revelation. Yet some of his followers, though conscious of their inability to harmonize the two, were eager to retain them both.

Still another tendency found expression particularly in Thomas Aquinas. He deemed it necessary to keep the truth of philosophy and the truth of revelation each in its own place, and stressed the fact that it was necessary to handle philosophical problems as a philosopher, and theological problems, as a theologian. Of these two methods, the one leads to scientific knowledge, and the other to faith, that is, to an assent which the intellect does not see to be true. He considered it possible to construct a science or the basis of reason, but not on the basis of faith, though some of the propositions of faith can and should be proved. From all this it is quite evident that the evaluation of the Bible differed during the Middle Ages.

The background, briefly sketched in the preceding, should be borne in mind in considering the doctrine of the Word of God during the Reformation. In some points of this doctrine the Reformers felt constrained to take position over against that of the Roman Catholic Church. When they spoke of the Word of God, they had the Bible, *and the Bible only*, in mind. They rejected the authority of what was called apostolic tradition, and acknowledged the Bible alone as the final authority and the absolute norm in matters of faith and conduct. Instead of admitting its dependence on the testimony of the Church, they boldly declared its *auto pistia*. Moreover, they maintained the perspicuity of Scripture, and asserted the right of private judgment. It was pointed out that the so-called apostolic tradition was not necessary for the authentication of Scripture, nor for the maintenance of its authority, since it is the inspired Word of God. The doctrine of inspiration was given greater prominence than it had before, though its detailed formulation followed at a later date. Finally, they also rejected the dualism

between general and special revelation, taught by Thomas Aquinas, and took the position that the truths of general revelation, that is, its revelatory elements, were incorporated, republished, and even interpreted in God's special revelation. Speaking generally, it may certainly be said that the Reformers considered an appeal to Scripture as quite sufficient for the establishment of theological truth. For them the Bible was in the strictest sense the Word of God.

However, this statement does not go unchallenged. It has become a rather common practice among those who are averse to the doctrine of plenary inspiration, to stigmatize this doctrine as a product of the Protestant Scholasticism of the seventeenth century, and to appeal from it to the more spiritual conception of the Reformers. Such writers profess to be in agreement with the latter, but declare that the former with its cold intellectualism is inimical to true evangelical Christianity. This sentiment can be found in the writings of Rationalists, of Schleiermacherians, of Ritschlians, and even of the representatives of the Theology of Crisis. They usually appeal to the supposed fact that the Reformers place great emphasis on religious experience as warranting the authority of the Bible; that they stress the fact that it is only by faith that the Bible becomes a real revelation for man; and that they express themselves with great freedom respecting the canonicity of some of the books of the Bible. This means that the advanced proofs are inferential rather than direct.

It is confidently asserted that the Reformers distinguished between the Bible and God's special revelation, and therefore did not identify the two. This assertion may even be found in such works as Heppé's *Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*, p. 16; A. Schweizer's *Die Glaubenslehre der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* I, p. 198 ff.; Sabatier's *Religions of Authority*, p. 174 f.; Ladd's *What is the Bible?*, p. 47, and Brunner's *The Word and the World*, p. 94. Permit me to quote a couple of typical statements. Says Lindsay in his *History of the Reformation*: "The Reformers drew a distinction between the Word of God and the Scripture which contains or presents that Word. This distinction was real and not merely formal; it was more than the difference between the Word of God and the Word of God written; and important consequences were founded upon it. . . . The Reformers uniformly teach that the *substance* of *all* Scripture is the Word of God, and that what is no part of the record of the Word of God is not Scripture. Finally, the distinction between the two need not prevent us from saying that the Scripture *is* the Word of God. . . . Only it must be clearly understood that the copula *is* does not express logical identity, but some such relation as can be more exactly expressed by *contains, presents, conveys, records* — all of which phrases are used in the writings of the Reformers or in the creeds of the Reformed Churches." (Vol. I, p. 463.)

The second quotation is taken from the more recent work of Edgar P. Dickie, *Revelation and Response*, p. 126, where we read: "Over against the misuse of tradition, the Reformers set the Word of God. But they did not fall into the error of 'verbal inspiration'. They pointed to the moral and religious substance of Scripture, which were matters for faith; they left on one side the letter and the outward form, which are matters for

historical study. They did not hold that the Word of God was identical with the books contained in the canon.”

There is a familiar notion, rather current in our day, that Luther regarded only those parts of the Bible as the Word of God which preach or urge Christ (“Christum treiben”). It is expressed also by some of the writers in the Symposium, edited by Vergilius Ferm, on *What is Lutheranism?* Cf. pp. 25, 238. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the Word of God in the Bible. Is this a correct appraisal of Luther’s evaluation of the Bible? Faulkner in his article on *Luther and the Bible* in the *Union Seminary Review*, Oct. 1931, quotes several statements from Luther’s *Werke* which point in quite a different direction. He says that Tholuck started the “liberal” Luther on his way, to be followed by Luthardt in his *Dogmatik*. He points out that Luther recognized, as does every one else, that different books of the Bible have different values, and that for the great Reformer, from his soteriological point of view, the value of a book depended on the measure in which it preached Christ. This is quite in harmony with the interpretation of Koestlin and Pieper. The former says in his work on *The Theology of Luther* II, p. 223: “Luther designates the Sacred Scriptures as ‘the Book given by God, the Holy Spirit, to His Church.’ Without any discrimination, he presents as the rule of faith and practice, now ‘the Scriptures,’ now ‘the Word of God,’ employing the two terms as perfectly synonymous.” And he further points out that, according to Luther, when the question of the significance of a book is raised, “*Christ Himself is the central point*, by its relation to which all else is to be estimated.” p. 228.

Pieper in his *Christliche Dogmatik* strongly defends the view that according to Luther the whole Bible is the Word of God, and shows that the other view rests on the misinterpretation of a couple of passages in Luther’s *Werke*. Cf. I, p. 334 ff. And Locher, who wrote a splendid monograph on *De Leer van Luther over Gods Woord*, proves that, while Luther in his earliest period did not speak of the Bible as a whole as the Word of God, he does this clearly and repeatedly in the later periods of his life. He quotes even the Epistle of James several times without any restriction, but does bring in, alongside of the testimony of the Holy Spirit, also the gospel of Jesus Christ as a test of Scripture.

Now the question may still be raised, How about Calvin? Ladd says that Calvin “only in the most general and indefinite way makes the Bible as a whole identical with the Word of God.” — *The Doctrine of Sacred Scripture*, II, p. 155. J. Selden Strong avers that, according to Calvin “the Bible is authoritative, not in a close literal sense, not as a mere rule, but as giving account of the best religious experience of the human race, the best thinking about God, the best life ever lived, the best statement of those great moral and social principles, upon which religious and civilized society must be built.” — *The Essential Calvinism*, p. 120. Would any Calvinist recognize this as Calvinism? Would Calvin himself recognize this picture? Quite contrary to these views, Seeberg makes the following statement: “Thus Calvin establishes the authority of the Scriptures partly upon their divine dictation, and partly upon the testimony of the Holy Spirit working through them. Historically considered, he thereby combines the later medieval conception of inspiration (*supra*, p. 192) with the theory of Luther. *Calvin is therefore the author of the so-called inspiration theory of the older dogmaticians.*” (Italics mine, B.). Several

statements of the great Reformer could easily adduced to prove this point. He says that the historical books as well as the prophecies were “composed under the dictation of the Holy Spirit” (Inst. IV. viii. 6), declares of the New Testament authors that they were “infallible and authentic amanuenses of the Holy Spirit” (IV. viii, 9), and speaks in the most absolute terms of the authority of Scripture. Says he:

But since no daily responses are given from heaven, and the Scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign His truth to perpetual remembrance, the full authority which they ought to possess with the faithful is not recognized, unless they are believed to have come down from heaven as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them.

And he repeatedly refers to the testimony of the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of his assurance on this point. There can be no reasonable doubt about it that Calvin recognized the Bible in all its parts as the Word of God; and that the idea of it as a book which can be called unique and divine only because it breathes an exalted spirit, or because it contains among many myths and legends, and many human stories, also a divine message, is entirely foreign to him. The following statement of Dr. Warfield is perfectly warranted:

Now these sixty-six books of canonical Scriptures handed down to us, in the singular providence of God, in a sound text which meets the test of critical scrutiny, Calvin held to be the very Word of God. This assertion he intended in its simplest and most literal sense. He was far from overlooking the fact that the Scriptures were written by human hands; he expressly declares that, though we have received them from God’s own mouth, we have nevertheless received them ‘through the ministry of men.’ But he was equally far from conceiving that the relation of their human authors to their divine author resembled in any degree that of free intermediaries, who, after receiving the divine Word, could do with it what they listed. On the contrary, he thought of them rather as notaries (IV. viii. 9), who set down in authentic registers (I. vi. 3) what was dictated to them. *Calvin and Calvinism*, p. 60 f.

It was deemed necessary to devote considerable attention to the views of Luther and Calvin, because so many of those who do not believe in the plenary inspiration of Scripture claim the support of these great Reformers, and seek to play them off against the great dogmatists of the seventeenth century, who worked out the doctrine of Scripture in greater detail in their discussion of the perfections of Scripture.

Under the influence of Rationalism, strong opposition arose to this strict view of the Bible as the infallible Word of God. Rationalistic philosophy, historical and literary criticism of the Bible, natural science with its application of the principles of evolution, and the study of the history of religions, — all served to undermine belief in the supernatural, and therefore also in the divine inspiration of Scripture. The old

conception of the Bible as the Word of God was brushed aside as untenable, and several other theories were suggested as alternatives, but, even according to Ladd, not a single one of these succeeded in entrenching itself in the hearts and minds of Christian people in general. The only conclusion which may be said to be quite generally accepted in modern liberal theology is that the old theory cannot stand the test of reason. Cf. Ladd, *What is the Bible*, p. 72 ff.

It may be well to give a brief indication of the views of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, which have had a determining influence on modern views of the Bible. Under the influence of Schleiermacher the idea of inspiration was gradually replaced by that of divine illumination. There was a heightening of the spiritual life, the spiritual insight or intuition of the New Testament writers (inspiration), as a result of which they saw the truth about God and His redemptive work with greater clarity, so that it really became a revelation to them. Here revelation ceases to be a positive divine communication of truth to man in unusual ways, and by means not open to the ordinary channels of investigation, and therefore supernatural; and it becomes a disclosure of the truth through the ordinary channels of human experience; through reason, reflection, and intuitive insight. It is something like a spiritual dawn, dimly revealing the beauties of a new landscape. One feels at once that it is a far cry from the old conception of revelation, as a self-disclosure of God by communicating to man divine truth in redemptive facts and words, to this modern conception, in which one, as Dr. Warfield expresses it, conceives "that which from the divine side is spoken of as revelation, as on the human side simply the natural development of the moral and religious consciousness." *Revelation and Inspiration*, p. 41. There is nothing supernatural about this process of revelation. Mackintosh is perfectly correct when he says: "To Schleiermacher, on the whole, revelation is only another name for human discovery" *Types of Modern Theology*, p. 71. Hence it is no wonder that they who have come under the spell of this theory often speak of discovering God, as if this were quite within the range of human possibility. John Baillie, who is very much under the influence of Schleiermacher, says: "What we have learned, then, is that human discovery and divine revelation, instead of dividing the field of religious knowledge between them, hold the field of it in common and are but complementary parts of the self-same fact of experience." He does not want to go quite as far as some others who say: "Discovery and revelation are two aspects of the same process," so that "all truth is both discovered and revealed." *The Interpretation of Religion*, p. 458. In this view, the Bible becomes a mere record of human experiences without any divine authority, though having a certain normative significance.

The school of Ritschl wanted to improve on this view. In truly Neo-Kantian fashion it denies the possibility of any theoretical knowledge of God and, in opposition to Schleiermacher, also repudiates the idea of a direct mystical communion of the soul with God. The Ritschlians want to be more objective, and therefore make a show of basing their views on an objective revelation. True to the activism of Kant, they conceive of the divine revelation as a series of divine acts rather than as a communication of the truth. It is the historical manifestation of God in Christ, as the Founder of the Kingdom of God. This manifestation makes such an impression on the minds of men as to warrant

their speaking of it as a revelation of God. Strictly speaking, however, this idea is worked out in the Ritschlian system in such a way that even the objective manifestation of God in action, that is, in the work of Christ, does not in itself constitute the revelation. Revelation consists rather in the value which faith ascribes to the various phases of the life and work of Christ. Value judgments determine the extent of that which is recognized as the revelation in Christ, and these lead to the exclusion of, for instance, the virgin birth and the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to Dr. Orr: "Revelation generally, it is held, does not consist in a sum of doctrines, or even of facts, but is associated with any event which produces in us a vivid immediate realization of the presence and working of God. But this realization of God's presence is awakened in us in a powerful and pre-eminent degree by the historical manifestations of Jesus Christ." *The Ritschlian Theology*, p. 89; cf. also Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration*, p. 42. In faith we feel that God is really drawing near to us; it connects up with the historical fact of Christ's appearance. Yet it is not dependent on any historical testimony, and therefore is in no way contingent on the establishment of the genuineness of the historical records. Cf. On, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

Now the question arises, What conception of Scripture does this position imply? It sounds rather encouraging when Ritschl says in his *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, p. 2: "The Christian doctrine is to be drawn alone from Scripture." But it is quite evident that this does not imply that he regards the Bible as the inspired Word of God. He rejects the doctrine of inspiration, and this naturally gives rise to the question, What then gives Scripture its supreme value? How does it come to be defined as the sole source of theology? According to the Ritschlians this value belongs exclusively to the New Testament, and that not because of any special inspiration, but because the writings which it comprises constitute "a perfect monument of the beginning of Christianity." They are the records of the foundation epoch of the Church, and their value lies in their historical witness. Yet they are not the rule of faith for Ritschl and his school. The books of the New Testament are given up to the freest criticism. Miracles are eliminated, the virgin birth and the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ are set aside as non-essential. Moreover, the elements of the primitive faith, found in the Epistles, which do not harmonize with the Ritschlian postulates or the Ritschlian system, or are regarded as unsuitable to modern requisites, are simply excluded, as, for instance, the Logos doctrine, the pre-existence of Christ, His deity, and His future advent. On the one hand Christ — not the Bible — because of His work is lauded as the revelation of God, and on the other hand the figure of Christ, as represented in the Gospels, is mutilated beyond recognition. This emphasis on Christ as *the* revelation of God continues right down to the present time. This appears very clearly from the recent Symposium on *Revelation*, edited by John Baillie and Hugh Martin. And for this emphasis we may well be grateful for, rightly understood, Christ is the supreme revelation of God. He only could say: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." The Ritschlian interpretation of Him, however, is unacceptable, since it is contrary to the Word of God. However the Ritschlians may have tried to escape from the subjectivism of Schleiermacher, they did not succeed in surmounting it. Even in their own theology, there is what Berkouwer calls "a latent subjectivism."

From the views of Schleiermacher and Ritschl we pass on to a brief consideration of the conception of the Word of God that is found in the writings of Barth *cum suis*. H. Strathearn McNab, the translator of *Credo*, credits Barth with having led the Church back to the Word of God. He even calls him “Doctor of the Holy Scriptures.” It should be borne in mind, however, that this is true only in a certain sense. The dialectical theology must certainly be regarded as, at least in part, a reaction against the subjectivism of Schleiermacher and Ritschl. There is in it a renewed emphasis on the Bible as a reliable witness to the truth. But this does not signalize a return to the Bible as the *infallibly inspired* Word of God, for that idea does not find favor with the representatives of that theology. Brunner is more explicit on this point than Barth (Cf. his *Theology of Crisis*, p. 19; *Our Faith*, p. 10; *The Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 32, 34, 36; *The Word and the World*, p. 92); but even Barth is sufficiently clear (Cf. his *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, pp. 60, 61; *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, pp. 126, 139). In the matter of inspiration the latter is quite in agreement with his favorite teacher, Herrmann. Both Barth and Brunner on more than one occasion speak of a word quoted from the Bible as a “very human” word, albeit a word that witnesses to the original revelation.

Brunner says that “the word of Scripture is not in itself the Word of God, but of man, just as the appearance of the God-man is in itself that of a man.” *The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 32. The Word of God can never become static, can never be so objectified that we can lay our hands on it and say, Here it is. It does not lie in a book as an abiding possession of man, of which we can make use. It is always God speaking to, God addressing, man, that is, some particular man. “The Bible,” says Barth, “is God’s Word, so far as God speaks through it.” *Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 123. Brunner speaks of the “incognito of the purely human appearance” of the Word, and says that this “is unmasked only by faith, by the testimony of the Holy Spirit which enables us to hear the Word of God in the mere word of man. Only by becoming ‘clear’ does it become the Word of God, and if it does not become ‘clear,’ it is not the Word of God.” *The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 32. The Word is never “uttered in a vacuum,” but is always addressed to someone. McConnachie, a very sympathetic interpreter of Barth, says that according to him, “The whole Bible is never to any individual the Word of God, perhaps only a small part of it is, and now one and now another.” *The Significance of Karl Barth*, p. 115. Strictly speaking, it cannot even be said that parts of the Bible are in themselves the Word of God — for this would again make the Word static — but parts of it may become for some individual the Word of God, and then come to that individual with the force of a personal message.

It is a well-known fact that Barth distinguishes three forms of the Word of God. (1) The primary form, the original revelation, is Jesus Christ, the revelation given once for all. Hence, both Barth and Brunner speak of the revelation as *einmalig*. Says Barth: “To know anything about revelation in the original, true and strict sense of the concept, we must know Jesus Christ.” *Revelation*, p. 45. However, this revelation given once for all is not to be found, where the liberals find it, in Jesus as a historical person, nor in the teachings of Jesus, but in the appearance of something absolutely new in Him, something formerly veiled and hidden. It is the manifestation of the eternal Word of God in Him, the actual coming of God to man as a God of grace, bringing sinful man into

judgment, but at the same time offering a way of escape. This revelation shines forth especially in the incarnation, in the passion of our Lord, and in His resurrection. However, even this revelation is not completed and does not become a real revelation, until it is brought to recognition in, and meets with the response of, a God-given faith. Faith must pierce the incognito of Jesus and see in Him very God of God. (2) The second form of the Word of God is the written Word, the Bible. This is not in itself the divine revelation, but a human word full of imperfections; and yet it can be called the Word of God in a secondary sense. Says Barth: "Holy Scripture as such is not the revelation. And yet Holy Scripture *is* the revelation, if and in so far as Jesus Christ speaks to us through the witness of His prophets and apostles." *Revelation*, p. 67. One may read or listen to many parts of the Bible without hearing the voice of Jesus; but may also, while reading, all at once, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, recognize the voice of the Master addressing one personally. The Bible is not the revelation, but the witness to the revelation. The Word of God may come up out of the word of this witness, and is never heard apart from it. In view of all this the Bible can still be called the Word of God. (3) The third form of the Word of God is that in Church proclamation or preaching. Barth expresses the relationship between this and the previous form as follows: "But the Bible, speaking to us and heard by us as God's Word, *attests* the past revelation. The proclamation that speaks to us and is heard by us as God's Word promises the future revelation." *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 125. Church proclamation rests upon the attestation of the past revelation in the Bible. And what constitutes preaching Church proclamation, is exactly the hope or anticipation with which it is accompanied, that it will itself become a real revelation through faith in Jesus Christ on the part of those that hear it.

There is one point that deserves special emphasis here, namely, that the polarity of revelation and faith is in a sense dissolved. The situation is not this, that God gives a revelation, and that man accepts this by faith. God is the subject in both, and God's revelation never becomes an object for man. It may be thought, and has sometimes been said, that Barth, by emphasizing this point, simply wants to stress the fact, over against Pelagians and Arminians, that faith is a gift of God; but there is something more in it than that. In the first place, Barth does not conceive of faith, even after it is wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, as a constant possession of man, something which enables man to lay hold on God and His revelation. This would again put man in possession of a way from man to God, and would make God and His revelation an object. And in the second place revelation is always simply God speaking, and never something *given*, and now having an objective existence apart from the Speaker, so that man can accept it by faith. Revelation does not exist as a historical datum. It is something that comes from above and strikes through history. The conception of the revelation of God as a given datum at once places man as subject over against God as object; and this may not be. Hence, Barth cannot possibly identify God's revelation and the Bible, and merely says that the Bible may become for us the Word of God at various times. *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, p. 124. There is no revelation apart from faith, and this faith is not primarily an activity of man; it is rather something in which man is passive. It is a miracle wrought in man by the Holy Spirit. Says Camfield in his Barthian study on *Revelation and the Holy Spirit*, p. 103: "In faith man becomes the subject of a

great aggression upon his life, a great approach of God, which disqualifies his consciousness, his thought-world for purposes of revelation." The revelation itself creates faith through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Where this God-wrought faith is non-existent, there is no revelation. The principle that God is always subject, and never object, is thus consistently carried through.

There are, of course, several other particulars connected with the Barthian doctrine of the Word of God, which might be mentioned, but what was said is sufficient to convey at least some idea of the Barthian view. We gratefully record the fact that he absolutely rejects the modern view of the Bible as a record of the experiences of the writers in their search for God. The idea of man's discovering God is entirely foreign to his theology. Moreover, it is a matter of satisfaction also that he declares war on the philosophy of evolution, which underlies the modern conception of Scripture. He maintains that the Word of God speaks to us from the Bible and from the Bible only, and does not believe that it can be learned also from nature, from history, or from the sacred books of other religions. While he strongly emphasizes the unity of the Bible and the Biblical revelation, the idea of a progressive revelation does not find favor with him, since it would again make revelation something historical. It is regrettable that he regards the Bible as a merely human book with many imperfections, and therefore as a legitimate subject for literary and historical criticism. He absolutely repudiates the doctrine of plenary inspiration, and of the Bible as an infallible book. At the same time he is willing to regard the Bible as the Word of God in the sense that it is the accredited witness to the original revelation, that various parts of it may become at different times, for individuals, the Word of God in the strict sense of the word, and that the revelation of God never comes to us apart from the Bible. In his search for the truth man is bound to the Word of God that speaks from the Bible. Of course, he would fully agree with Brunner in saying that "the statement that God's Word speaks to us in the Holy Scriptures has at once to be supplemented by adding that the word of the Bible is the Word of *God to us* only in so far as God's Holy Spirit opens our ears so that we can hear His voice in the word of the Apostles — something which at no time can be taken for granted." *The Word and the World*, p. 89 f. The following statement of the same author is also significant: "While for living Christians the Bible always is the living present voice of God, orthodoxy has made the Bible an independent thing, which just as such, a *corpus mortuum*, is stamped with divine authority." *Ibid.*, p. 92.

We have briefly reviewed the most important historical views respecting the Word of God, and the question remains which one of these deserves preference. There is but one who can give us a satisfactory answer, and that is God Himself. We shall have to place ourselves at His feet also in this respect instead of depending on our own ingenuity, and this means that we shall have to turn to the Bible for the authoritative word. This is what modern liberal theology failed to do, since it placed human reason above the Bible. It accuses those, who turn to the Bible for an answer, of reasoning in a circle. But the question may well be raised, whether this bogie of the 'circle' should deter us from seeking the answer in the Bible. Edwards says in work on *The Philosophy of Religion*, where he feels that he cannot give a *normative* definition of religion without reasoning in a circle: "It may well be doubted whether in our actual reasoning we ever

quite avoid the 'circle,' except when our reasoning is purely formal, sterile, and pedantic." P. 137. Girardeau meets a similar objection in connection with his discussion of the doctrine of inspiration, when he says: "Suppose we should use the argument: God declares that He is true; therefore God is true. Here God's truth would be proved by His truth. Would that be a vicious reasoning in a circle? The atheist might say, You assume that there is a God of truth. So we do, and so do all sensible men." *Discussions of Theological Questions*, p. 297. Jesus did not recognize the force of that objection, John 8:13, 14, and it has often been met apologetically.

It is quite evident that the Bible does not always use the term "Word of God" in the same sense. Sometimes it is used to denote the word of God's power, the word by which He created the universe and by which He upholds all things, Ps. 33:6; Heb. 1:3; 11:2. It is frequently employed to designate the divine communications to the prophets and to other organs of revelation, Gen. 15:1; Ex. 30:1. It was one of the characteristics of the true prophets among Israel, that the word of Jehovah was communicated to them. Hence the prophetic formula, "The word of the Lord came unto me," and others of the same import. Such direct communications of God to the prophets are also recognized by Barth and Brunner as part of the original revelation, and therefore as part of the Word of God in the primary sense of the word. But the term 'word of God' is not only applied to these direct divine communications to the prophets, but also to the resultant messages of the prophets to the people, the messages contained in the Bible, which constitute the sum-total of all that we know about them. And these, according to the same scholars, are not themselves a part of the Word of God, of the revelation, but merely constitute a part of the witness to the revelation, or a token of it, since the revelation itself never assumes an objective form, but is always simply God speaking. Yet the Bible designates them as the Word of God. Again, the term 'word of God' is repeatedly used to denote a divine commandment, Num. 20:24, which in many cases is simply equivalent to the law, Deut. 5:5; Ps. 105:8; 119:11, 17, 89, 105. Furthermore, it may refer to a word of promise, Ps. 1 19:25, 41, 81. Such commandments and promises, as coming directly from God to individuals or to the nation of Israel, according to Barth and Brunner, belong to the revelation, and as such are a part of the original revelation, but as recorded in the Bible can only be regarded as a part of the witness to the revelation.

However, the term 'Word of God' is also used in a far higher sense in the Bible. It is applied to the Second Person of the Trinity in the Prologue of John. It is expressive of the idea that the Second Person is as closely related to God as a word is to the speaker, and also sustains a similar relation to Him. He is the eternal principle of all revelation in God and can therefore also be said to represent God as the Revealer. At the same time He is also the revelation of God in the most exalted sense of the word. He is the Revealer and the revelation of God first of all in the work of creation, the true light, "which lighteth every man coming into the world," though the world did not know Him. He continues to be the Revealer and the great central revelation in the work of redemption, coming to His own already during the Old Testament period in theophanies and in the word of prophecy, and at last appearing as the Logos *ensarkikos*, the Word

become flesh. He is the highest revelation of God, and the center from which all other revelations radiate.

In view of the great revelatory significance of Jesus Christ, it is no wonder that a great deal of modern theology has represented Him as *the* revelation of God, and that Barth is doing the same thing today. It cannot be said, however, that modern liberal theology does justice to Him as the Logos, since it denies His eternal pre-existence, refuses to honor Him as very God, and simply regards Him as the most perfect product of the historical process of evolution. Theirs is, to use Sanday's term, only "a reduced Christianity." Barth goes to another extreme. He not only repudiates the "historical Jesus" of modern liberal theology and the idea that Jesus is to be regarded as the product of history, but also denies that *the* revelation of God is to be found in the appearance of Jesus in history as such. According to him, *the* revelation is found only in the super-historical in the life of Jesus, as this is recognized by faith. Brunner expresses this thought briefly in these words: "Thus the historical appearance of the human personality of Jesus is not, as such, revelation; it is the revelation only in so far as in this historical, human personality the eternal Son of God is recognized. The *incognito* of the historical appearance can be pierced only by the eye of faith." *The Theology of Crisis*, p. 35. This representation really destroys the connection between history and revelation, and makes the historical reality of the revelation in Christ, depend on its recognition as such. It really reduces the revelation in Christ to certain flashes which come to man in faith. This whole representation, which limits the revelation to those who recognize it as such, can hardly be said to do justice to the statement of Scripture, that the Word, the revelation, *dwelt* among men, and scarcely comports with the Scriptural idea that the appearance of Christ heightened the responsibility of those who persisted in unbelief, Matt. 11:20-24; John 15:22, 24. While emphasizing a very important truth, namely, that God is not recognized as He should be unto salvation, without the special operation of the Holy Spirit, Barth does not seem to do justice to the fact of human responsibility. There are, of course, many problems connected with this subject, which we cannot even begin to discuss in this paper, and therefore we hasten on to the concluding question.

Does Scripture justify our speaking of the Bible as the Word of God? It may be said at once that the term 'Word of God' is not used in Scripture as a designation of the Bible as a whole. And it could not be, since the Bible as a whole was not yet in existence at that time. It might have been used in the New Testament to denote the Old Testament in its written form, since this did exist as such, cf. John 15:25; I Cor. 15:54. But it is not even used in that limited sense. However, the mere fact that this term is not so employed in Scripture does not necessarily mean that the Bible does not warrant such use. The Church of Jesus Christ certainly never showed any hesitancy on that point.

Some Scriptural data deserve notice here. The Old Testament writings, as inspired of God, are called *ta hiera grammata*, the holy writings, II Tim. 3:15; and a part of that sacred written legacy is called "the prophetic word," II Pet. 1:19, since the *writers* spoke from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit. Some quotations from the Old Testament are introduced in the New with the words, "It is written in the law," and these words have the

exact force of, "It is written in your authentic Scriptures," John 10:34; 15:25; Romans 3:19; I Cor. 14:21. In other cases the simple formula, "It is written" is used, and this was equivalent to, "God says," Matt. 4:4,7,10; 26:24; Mark 11:17; 24:46. The terms *hegraphe* and *hai graphai* were designations of the written word, and the formula, "The Scripture saith," is used synonymously with "God says," Rom. 9:17; Gal. 2:8. In view of the fact that the Old Testament in its written form was thus represented as the Word of God in the New Testament, it need cause no surprise that the New Testament revelation, when it assumed a written form, should also be so represented, and that the term "Word of God" at once became a designation for the Bible as a whole. Peter explicitly places the Epistles of Paul on a level with the Old Testament writings, II Pet. 3:16. The Biblical authors therefore do not hesitate to consider the written Word as the revelation of God, and this finds its explanation in the fact that they were deeply conscious of the fact that the books of the Bible were written under divine inspiration, and are therefore absolutely reliable. By supernatural inspiration the Bible became the Word of God for all coming generations. In it God continually speaks to all the generations of men, and the Holy Spirit makes this continuous speaking effective where and when He pleases.

Barth objects that, by regarding the written word as the revelation, this revelation is separated from God as the speaker, and acquires an objective and static form. But it is hard to see why God cannot express Himself in the written word as well as in the spoken word, and why He should not continue to be the responsible author of the one as well as of the other. The real objection of Barth seems to be that, if the Word of God is objectified in that way, it becomes a historical datum and thus destroys the discontinuity between God and man. Man can say, I have God's revelation, and then make this, and in it God, an object of study, while God is never object but always subject. Now it is true, as Dr. Kuyper has said long ago, that man cannot place himself above God and elicit knowledge from Him as he does from other objects of study. He can acquire the necessary knowledge only from God's revelation. And when he studies this revelation, he does not place himself above God, but he lets God speak to him, and seeks to think the thoughts of God after Him. And, surely, for the knowledge of God and of His will it is better to depend on the written Word of God than on flashes of revelation, now and then, here and there. Barth himself attaches far more importance to the Bible than his principles would seem to warrant. It does not greatly surprise us to find Pauck coming to the conclusion that "The Bible is his final authority after all." *Karl Barth*, p. 169.

Mindful of the perennial value of the Bible as the inspired Word of God, we close with the words of the poet:

**The starry firmament on high,  
And all the glories of the sky,  
Yet shine not to thy praise, O  
Lord,  
So brightly as thy written word.**

**Almighty Lord, the sun shall  
fail,  
The moon forget her nightly  
tale,  
And deepest silence hush on  
high,  
The radiant chorus of the sky;**

**But, fixed for everlasting years,  
Unmoved amid the wreck of  
spheres,  
Thy word shall shine in  
cloudless day,  
When heaven and earth have  
passed away.**

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

### **Subscribe to RPM**

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).