

Lectures on the Holy Scriptures

(Prepared for the Pastors of the S.A. District of the L.C.A., Tatachilla Youth Camp, November 2-4th, 1982)

The decision to lecture on the Holy Scriptures as the In-service training portion of our meeting together at this place was not a personal decision. It was rather the result of a readiness to fall in with what the committee responsible for the programme thought was a necessary and a desirable subject to be taken up at some depth. The LCA as a whole has probably spent more time on the consideration, study, and discussion of matters relating to the Scriptures than on any other single matter in its short history. It may be that it is time well spent. Concentration on any aspect of the faith tends to affect the whole of it somewhere along the line. The relations between the Bible and Christology are specially close, as we all know, but no less so those between the Bible and the Spirit. In fact, the doctrine of Sacred Scripture is part of the doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit – that is its proper home in dogmatics. However, it is not only in a general way that concentration on this teaching is of value, even though one feels at times that the emphasis on this has been excessive, attention to it at this time is necessary also because of the debate that has arisen among us in recent years, for which some of you, I am sure, believe that I am chiefly responsible. But my Valparaiso lectures have been more the occasion for it than the cause, releasing already existing tensions beneath the surface rather than creating them. The present lectures will not only be more comprehensive than the lectures referred to but they will probably be something like my swansong on this particular matter. I should like to be convinced at the end that they have not only been an expression of my most mature thinking on the subject but that they have also been of real help to our church.

The first lecture is entitled –

SCRIPTURE AND THE WORD OF GOD

It is good to begin with the biblical position concerning the Word of God. In the OT, the Word is the central means of the revelation of Jehovah. It corresponds to his personal character and the fellowship with himself which he himself wills. In his Word Jehovah opens up his inner being as far as it is related to man (Ex. 34:6,7). He reveals himself in that he makes known his will, his thoughts, feelings, goals. Word of God are first of all the words of Decalogue and the related series of divine commands in the Pentateuch. So also the speaking of God through the mouth of the prophets is Word of God, marked out as such deliberately by introductory or concluding formulae. Also the descriptions of certain visions and speeches of the prophets are Word of God, for they present, underscore, drive home, unfold the meaning and content of the direct divine word. So all the testimonies of the OT prophets are regarded as Word of God, also the accounts concerning personal experiences in as far as they are taken over and determined by God, Hosea 1:11; Joel 1:1; Micah 1:1; Jer. 1:1 (LXX). Since the Word of God aims at a fellowship of existence within the frame of the covenant, it calls for proclamation, particularly the prophetic word. With the fixing of the prophetic word in writing, there came the reading of that word in public services of the synagogue.

The New Testament speaks of Word of God in the Old [Testament] in the following relations: the word of creation (2 Pet. 3; Heb. 1:3; 11:3; 1 Tim. 4:5); the commandment of love (Rom. 13:9); the law given through angels (Heb. 2:2); God's will as compared with human traditions (Mark 7:13); the word spoken to Israel (Psalms 95 cf Heb. 4:2); the word of promise (Rom. 9:6; 9:1; 1 Cor. 15:54); the word of Scripture (Rom. 10:8).

Word of God (Logos theou, logos kyriou) or simply Word (logos), meaning the same thing, is frequently found in the Acts and Luke for the preaching of Jesus and that of the apostles. So Word of God designates the apostolic message, carried out by the command of God and therefore to be looked on as his Word. It is the message revealed by God himself in the saving action of Jesus Christ, the living Word that is spoken, proclaimed, that sounds forth. It is heard, received, praised. Where this happens, the Word grows and spreads – or it is rejected in unbelief. The Word of God is the message of Jesus that calls for decision. The letters of the NT show the same situation. 1 Thess. 2:13 'And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you believers.' The apostle's writings are put on the same level as his spoken words as word of God: 'So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were

taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter' (2 Thess. 2:15); with which we should take the later words in chapter 3: 'If anyone refuses to obey what we say in this letter, note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed' (3:14).

The content of the Word of God can be described in the letters in various ways: 'the word of the cross', 'the word of reconciliation', 'the word of truth'. Word of God is the truth concerning man, concerning his ruin and salvation, a truth manifested in proclamation and hearing. – The word is the means of the regeneration God effects. The message itself, creating reception or rejection, decides concerning life and death (2 Cor. 2:14-17). It is 'word of life', it is 'implanted word' (logos emphytos), a living entity that is grasped by man in his entirety, not merely intellectually. – The Word of God is the apostolic message in the totality of its doctrinal content, but it is also the confession of it. The word is kept fast, one suffers for it, does not allow it be blasphemed. With pistos logos certain central sentences of apostolic teaching are described; to this certain word one must hold who wants to be leader in the church (Titus 1:9). So Word of God is the substance of the tradition (of apostolic teaching). Word of God can also be words directly revealed by God announcing the end of all things (Rev. 19:9; 17:7).

The big thing in John, of course, is the use of logos for God's revealer, Jesus, John 1:14; 1 John 1. Here the logos is a person of flesh and blood, and in his person, in deed and word, the revealer of the mind of God, the bringer of grace and truth, as Moses was the giver of the Law (1:18), the teller of heavenly things because he has descended from heaven as the Son of man (3:13). By the way, it is not only in John that we have the identification of the Word of God with the Son of God, Jesus Christ. There is at least the beginnings of that sort of identification in the Acts, in that highly confused sentence of 10:36-38, where we have ton logon, to genomenon rema, and lesoun ton apo Nazareth, all in apposition. The importance of this use of Word of God is to indicate most clearly what is the heart and centre of the Word of God of which the Bible speaks, - this among other important facts as well.

The brief review of the Biblical ways of speaking about the Word of God I have just gone through with its unity in spite of variety (Hebrew 1:1,2) helps us to state systematically what the word of God is, and where this Word is to be found in our day. Some repetition of material is almost inevitable, but I shall endeavour to keep repetition to a minimum. The easiest way to get at the view to be developed here is to begin with a common false way of speaking about the relation between the Bible and the Word of God.

That the Bible is the Word of God must be held without falling into the mistake of making Bible and Word of God identical, as if the two expressions were completely conterminous, Bible conveying the same connotation as Word of God, and Word of God the same connotation precisely as Bible. As a matter of fact, Word of God is a far wider term than Bible. Bible is part of the Word of God.

Word of God is applied repeatedly to the oral statements of men of God, of the many prophets in the Old Testament, of the apostles and others in the New [Testament]. All the words of the prophets were, first of all, oral proclamations, and these oral proclamations were truly Word of God. Only a portion of the oral proclamations finally found its way on to paper in written form, and some of the prophets did not commit any of their spoken words to paper. The same is the situation in the New Testament. St. Paul praises the Thessalonians in the following terms: "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13). What was true of St. Paul was true of the other apostles of Jesus Christ. Paul's letters can represent only a very small proportion of all that he spoke here, there, and everywhere when preaching, teaching, admonishing, advising. Most of the words that he spoke as Word of God are not recoverable. And this is even more the case with the other apostles, of whose words we have next to nothing.

Word of God must also be used to describe the oral words of Jesus Christ himself, just as he is the personal Word. Some of his words have been transmitted in the gospels, - maybe, all the important ones. But the non-recorded words in the very nature of the case must exceed these by far. The writer of John 21:25 points to this fact in his highly exaggerated statement: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; where every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Word of God, again, that is not part of the Bible!

All proclamation of the Gospel – and this is for us now the important thing – down the years by successors of the apostles and their successors down to our age is properly designated Word of God. This statement embraces every form in which this proclamation takes place: speaking, singing in pictures, in sculpture, in the

symbolic carvings on cathedrals, churches, and other ecclesiastical buildings. The minister should have the conviction every time he preaches that he has proclaimed the Word of God. The spoken word is or can be as much the Word of God as the written word.

YOU HAVE THE WORD OF GOD ...

There is a unity about all these forms of the Word of God. I should like to let the late Dr. Hermann Sasse, a great scholar in many field of theologies and a personal friend for many years, speak on this point.

“The Word of the Lord will stand for ever.” It belongs to the nature of God’s Word in contrast to human words that it cannot perish. The Word of God in creation, each of these words, is living and powerful even today. The word spoken by God before there was a human ear to hear is identical with the word later recorded in writing. The word that came to a prophet in a definite hour of history remains and is identical with the word written in Scripture, as it is identical with the word read from Scripture and proclaimed in the sermon according to Luther’s rule: “Verbum Dei praedicatum est Verbum Dei” (“The Word of God preached is the Word of God”). One must always keep in mind that the Word – or a particular word – exists in various forms: in the heart of God, going out of his mouth, coming to the prophet, heard by him, proclaimed by him, written in Scripture, read, learned, remembered, translated, accompanying the dying soul – always the same powerful and living Word.”

Granted the unity of the word of Scripture with all the other forms the Word of God, the Scripture is Word of God in a special way which makes it characteristically different from the other forms. It is permanent, approachable, readily available, and as the permanent form of the word of the prophets, Jesus Christ, and the apostles, source and authoritative norm of all preaching and teaching in the church of God.

The heart of the Biblical revelation is the history of great acts of God for the salvation of men. And the Bible is the permanent record of the speaking of God to these great acts of his. The Word spoken in revelation of the hand and act of God in the historical events of the past, that Word is kept, preserved as the same Word by the Scriptures, the written Word of God. All the spoken words of the prophets as they spoke forth the Word of God are no longer available for us. The same is the case with the spoken words of the apostles and of Jesus himself. Even the personal Word, Jesus Christ as the person through whom God has spoken to men in a final, definitive way, is not directly approachable by us. No one hears from him the Word of God any longer; no one has, since the time of the apostles. The Word of the Scripture, in short, is the permanent abstract of the Word of God spoken in their day by the men of God of the Old and New Testament, Moses, prophets, psalmists, apostles and evangelists, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

As such it is the original Word of God. No one can penetrate behind it to something still more original, still more basic and fundamental, still closer to its source [source], God himself. Neither liturgy nor tradition, can take the place of the Scripture as original Word of God. Accordingly, although to identify Bible and Word of God, as though these two entities were conterminous, is to fail to do justice to the many forms of the Word of God, the Bible effectually turns out to be the Word of God in a very special sense. It is therefore also source [source] and norm of all teaching and preaching.

The last of the Lutheran confessional writings, the Formula of Concord, in its shorter statement of doctrine called the Epitome, has stated the position of the scripture as Word of God in the following terms:

We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged ...Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles were preserved in post-apostolic times.

[some words missing here] that the Bible is authoritative Word of God. It is source and norm. Sermons, exhortations, essays, hymns, poems, and whatever else of verbal character that has been produced by men and women of the church, are Word of God only in so far as they are in keeping with the teaching of the Bible. For authority, true authority, we have to go beyond them to the Scriptures. All teachers and teachings in the church can be criticized and set right, as the Bible cannot be. It is possible that some great teacher can present a biblical truth more sharply and more incisively than the Bible does – for instance, Luther’s view of man in his

sin is probably more profoundly expressed than the Bible expresses it – but it does not for that reason displace the biblical statements, but it is rather to be assessed as Word of God by the biblical norm.

A final feature of the Scripture and of all forms of the Word of God needs to be mentioned, and this thought may bring this lecture to a close.

There is an ambiguity about all forms of the Word of God. I am up to a point using the word ‘ambiguity’ in a special way. Usually, ‘ambiguity’ (together with its adjective ‘ambiguous’) has reference to doubt or uncertainty of expression. Sentences which can be understood in two or more ways are ambiguous. Sometimes this ambiguity is intentional, as in many of the recorded oracles of the Pythia in Delphi and in double entendres. My present use of the words is to convey the thought that the Word of God that comes is never obviously Word of God, and that is true of all the forms of that Word. This state of affairs is not only an obvious fact, it is also in a way a necessary state of affairs. If God has chosen to reveal himself to mankind through speaking – *revelatio Dei est locutio Dei* – and if he has chosen to do so in human words, then ambiguity is unavoidable, an inbuilt part of the whole scheme of revelation. If the divine words come in the garb of human words, then the possibility always exists that they are seen and taken to be human words, and no more. A number of examples will make the whole idea clearer still.

A particularly striking example of this ambiguity we have in the confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah. We are told that, according to the Word of the Lord which came to him, Jeremiah was to make for himself thongs and yoke-bars and put them on his neck. In explanation of the action, not only Zedekiah but also the envoys from Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon were informed that they should submit to Nebuchadnezzar. Failure to do so would inevitably lead to enslavement but submission would guarantee continued national existence (Jer. 27). Jeremiah’s prophecy was disputed by Hananiah, who made a directly opposite assertion:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord’s house...I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah...and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon’. (Jer. 28:2-4)

And suiting the action the word, he took the yoke-bars from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet, and broke them, and said in the presence of all the people: ‘Thus says the Lord: “Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar from the neck of all nations within two years”’ (Jer. 28:10,11). So we have prophet against prophet, one man claiming to speak forth the Word of the Lord faced by another claiming the same, and the two of them declaring contradictory things. Two months later, Hananiah died as Jeremiah prophesied he would, and of course some years later the destruction of Jerusalem took place as foretold by Jeremiah. Subsequently events proved Jeremiah to have been right, but not necessarily that he spoke in the name of the Lord; but at the time of confrontation only what we should describe as Spirit-induced faith could have decided between the claims of the two prophets.

Other examples may be presented more briefly, for time presses, but they are just as important, or even more important than, the one treated at length.

The same ambiguity attaches to our Lord himself, to his words and to his person. If there were something about Jesus which was obviously divine, then the question he put to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi would have been quite pointless: ‘But who do you say that I am?’ and the subsequent statement even more so: ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven’ (Matt. 16:15-17).

Earlier I referred to the unique character of the Christian faith as being God’s speaking in relation to special acts of his for man’s salvation. There is nothing about the acts in themselves which are in any way different from other acts in history. There is nothing particularly ‘divine’ about the growth of Israel to be the nation it became after its deliverance from Egypt. History can point to parallel happenings and to situations even more remarkable. I doubt whether Israel could really be compared with the remarkable flowering of the human spirit in ancient Athens, in the hundred years or more between the Persian wars and the death of Aristotle, or in medieval Florence. Nothing on the face of things could be possibly seen as pointing to particular divine activity in the one case as compared with others. There is nothing obviously divine about the death of Jesus. Hundreds of criminals were crucified; innocent men, too, have been put to death often enough in human

history. Socrates, according to the pictures in Plato, met his end with a fortitude and nobility of spirit falling only a little, if at all, short of the death of Jesus. The resurrection remains, of course, an historical event in a class by itself, but it is not really historically approachable.

It is hard to see God speaking in the sermons we hear, no matter how good some may be. (Of course, we have ambiguity of a different kind and of a kind to be condemned when pastors preach without the conviction that they are proclaiming - Word of God.)

And so also, the Scripture is Word of God ambiguously. Nothing in any way is to be found there which obviously and without any gainsaying marks it as divine. Many writings of human authors are, in my judgement - on a far higher plane of human achievement. Only faith which the Spirit inspires can say of the Scriptures that they are God's Word. Purely objective, human reason cannot possibly make that judgement. It doesn't even know what divine really is, except that by definition it must be something afar in advance of and beyond the very highest achievements of man's mind, as far beyond it as the Creator is from the creature he has made.

Discussion questions have been omitted