



The 19th Annual Word & World Lecture

For the Nations, through the Nathans: When Word Speaks to World

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“**Y**ou are the man,” said Nathan to David. It’s the word of the Lord, and it stops David cold. But just how was Nathan’s accusation the word of God? Scripture actually never says that it was. Nathan comes to the king with his story about a poor man who had but “one little ewe lamb,” which was like a daughter to him. But that beloved lamb was shamelessly stolen by a rich man. David, enraged, condemns the rich man—and thus, of course, himself—which Nathan confirms by pointing his “you are the man” finger. Only after all this does the prophet say, “Thus says the Lord...” (2 Sam 12:7), not referring back to what has been previously said but opening a new extended diatribe against the king.

So, what makes Nathan’s first accusation the word of God? It is clearly not the words themselves. Let’s say Nathan had walked into the palace and said to the first person he met, perhaps the janitor, “You are the man.” The words would have been the same—indeed, the words of the Bible itself—but the announcement would have been nonsense. Or, again, let’s say the prophet had said to David, first thing, without his famous parable, “You are the man.” David, never lacking in ego, might well have heard, “You are the *man!*” and offered Nathan a high five.

So, the word of God is apparently not just a matter of getting the words right, not even the words of the Bible; it’s a matter of address, of context, of tone, of

Both word and world belong to God, yet God graciously leaves it to humans to bring word and world together. The interpretation of the world through the word is the risky and creative task of the preacher/prophet, who is called to be faithful to God’s word in Scripture and in Jesus Christ, while given remarkable freedom to speak a new word for a new time.

creative engagement. All of that is what finally pins David to the wall in the way that Saul's spear had failed to do (1 Sam 18:11). How does this work, and what has it to do with word and world?

IT'S ALL GOD'S

Let's start then from the beginning. Both word and world belong to God. I suppose that is self-evident to a group of pastors and students of theology, but it's certainly not a foregone conclusion in our culture, nor would there be common agreement even among believers about how to understand it. I recall a conversation at a World Council of Churches consultation on healing, some years ago in Germany, that was bogged down in controversy, so I tried to propose a starting point on which we might all agree: God is God, and we are not. But some present would not agree even to that, which seemed to make further conversation relatively pointless. So what do I mean, or what do I think the Bible says about both word and world belonging to God? Isn't that quite straightforward?

My Father's world?

The Bible is clear, is it not, and the hymn gets it right, doesn't it: "This is my Father's world"—but we probably can't get away with saying it that way any longer! My *Father's* world? How about, my *Mother's*? The Bible proclaims that Woman Wisdom was there in the beginning, after all—the all-but-eternal partner of the divine word of Gen 1 and the incarnate word of John 1—the creative and creating feminine, before all other works of creation (Prov 8:22–31). Proverbs tells us that God delights in her, and she delights in us (8:30–31)—so why not my Mother's world? More is at stake in that discussion than semantics and grammar. As I wrote in an editorial years ago: once we let "those people" in—even if, "those people," guys, are our wives and daughters—"we are not us anymore."¹ And it only gets more complicated. Now, Christians with whom we share the theological conversation include Africans and others in the third world—a good thing, we "liberals" would say—yet, some of those newcomers to our table think it may not have been a good idea at all to let women into the church's ministry, much less gays and others. God's world is complex, and discerning its order will never be a once and for all proposition—certainly not for biblical theology, despite the occasional attempts by various confessional or ideological perspectives to do just that. And if our attempts to order human society fail, let's not even talk about the natural world. Why, for example, does God waste so much rain where no people live (Job 38:25–27) while withholding it from those in need? Or why, just this past summer (2012), did God dump so much water on folks who live next door to the largest freshwater lake in the world while withholding it from the purple mountains going up in smoke, losing all their once-touted majesty, and from the amber waves of dust, not grain?

¹Frederick J. Gaiser, "We Are Not Us Anymore," *Word & World* 15/3 (1995) 247–250.

So, God's world, yes; but we still have a lot to learn about how it works. With a Lutheran understanding of vocation, this means we must be ready to learn *from* the world (God's world, after all), not just be eager to speak *to* it. Such a stance will help us develop an appropriate humility, admitting our inability ever to understand the world completely or to manage it successfully. All of which makes me reaffirm, especially as a onetime student of the sciences, that science is not and never

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has been the enemy of faith—true science, that is, not the ideological science of the new atheists who want to use data to disprove God, or its mirror image, creationism, that wants to use a different set of data to do the opposite. Trouble is, the biblical God tends to eschew proof, in either direction. Unlike the rationalist Fundamentalists and the new crop of rationalist atheists—remarkably strange bedfellows in their common wooden reading of the Bible—truly scientific observers of God's world, from Ecclesiastes to the present, recognize that careful and humble investigation brings greater awe and wonder, not certainty, fear, or unbelief. Biblical theology will call into question the overconfident believer, certain of his or her perception of divine order; the overconfident manipulator, certain of his or her ability to use the creation without consequence; and the overconfident skeptic, certain that all mystery is superstition and all religion simply another form of magic. Things are more wonderful than all that. God is God, and we are not. The world remains God's, not ours.

The word of God

And so does the word. That might be even harder for us to accept. An author whose work regularly both moves and haunts me, Alberto Manguel, has observed, "Outside theology and fantastic literature, few can doubt that the main features of our universe are its dearth of meaning and lack of discernible purpose."² Dearth of meaning, lack of purpose—enough to give us pause! Yet, theology and fantasy do take a stab at making meaning, and, interestingly, both do so the same way God does: through words. A daunting and dangerous task—precisely because so much of both fantasy and theology creates meaning that is dangerously warped and hazardous to the health of both human beings and the rest of the planet. But not all meaning is warped. Words kill, we say—and we see that almost daily in the suicides of bullied teens or the riots over religious speech—but words also make alive. We

²Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2006) 3.

learned that from God and from the Bible. We witness it too in human experience. Words say not only, “I want,” but also “I will” and “I do.”

The journal is *Word & World*. Most every year we have a dedicated Bible issue, but is that Bible issue more “word” than other issues? I would say no. Bible and word (even word of God) are not equivalent terms—at least not for those who regard God’s word as a living reality rather than something once delivered that is now safely gathered and limited within the covers of a book, even a book called holy. Lots of people in the Bible said, “Thus says the Lord.” Sometimes it was true. Even more say it now, and now—like then—sometimes it is true. So, how do we know?

What makes words that are clearly and always the words of fallible human beings—and they all are, even the ones in the Bible—the “word of the Lord”?

What makes words that are clearly and always the words of fallible human beings—and they all are, even the ones in the Bible—the “word of the Lord”?³ Just because I stand up and say, “Thus says the Lord,” does not make my sermon the word of God any more than this was true for the biblical prophets—and even less does it provide divine warrant for my every social or political pronouncement. There were false prophets, and there are false teachers. Then or now, when they are charlatans—preachers out for profit or power or praise—the determination is rather easy (even though the success of such preachers seems to be an indicator of at least original gullibility if not original sin). Still, as far as I can tell, there is no indication in the Bible that Hananiah, for example, did not think he was a true prophet of God, even when he was saying, “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer 6:14). Jeremiah steadfastly disagreed, but how was the hearer to discern the truth? The claim of the prophets was to have stood in the “real presence” of God, that is, in the divine council (23:18), but Jeremiah at least was willing to let that claim be tested. He was not just making this up, he argued. It was not dreams or visions (23:16, 28); this was no encoded or secret revelation, but simple fidelity to God’s plain and direct word (23:22, 28). Jeremiah appealed to the example of earlier prophets (26:12–19); he appealed to his own call and his willingness to bear the yoke that came with it (23:21–22; 27:2); he argued that the prophet’s lifestyle should match this holy calling (23:9–14); he insisted that true preaching led only to Yahweh and not to other deities, real or invented (23:13, 27); like the other great biblical prophets, he brilliantly worked from and with the older traditions of Israel’s faith. He even admitted he might be wrong; in fact, he hoped he was (28:6)! Finally, yet tantalizingly, Jeremiah argued that the proof of the pudding was in the eating: “When the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the

³Some of the material in this and the following paragraph derives from my lecture “By What Authority? The Word Proclaimed,” Study Conference 2012, Lutheran Seminary Saskatoon, May 2, 2012.

LORD has truly sent the prophet” (28:9). This seems to offer little help in the moment, though it does explain why we now have a book of Jeremiah in the Bible and not a book of Hananiah. People *did* come to understand that Jeremiah spoke truth, they did continue over the generations to hear God’s word in the words of Jeremiah, and they eventually did canonize those words and make them Bible. This did not happen with Hananiah, no matter how popular his message had been at the time. Hananiah got crowds (Jer 28:11); Jeremiah got death threats (Jer 26:11). So, how does one judge in the moment, on the spot, when decision is demanded, and the issue might well be life and death? Then, as always, people heard the word of God only in faith, not in certainty.

Commenting on disagreements regarding the role of the church in the Leipzig Peaceful Revolution of 1989 that led to the collapse of the East German regime, Old Testament scholar Rüdiger Lux describes the dilemma that plagued both Jeremiah’s day and his own:

They stood over against one another, prophet against prophet. And both never tired of appealing to the Scripture, to the word of God. But the Scriptures contain many words. And which prophetic word should apply in which historical situation cannot in any way be determined from the Scriptures alone. Rather, the prophets of Israel were given the task of accepting their own responsibility for the claim that the word they proclaimed was the word of God, along with the accompanying risk to their credulity, their security, and even their lives.... No one could take this decision from them.... The prophets had no little man in their ear to dictate what they should or should not do. They had the *Scripture* and the *tradition* in the form of the “prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times” (Jer 28:8). They had the *historical moment* into which they knew themselves to be called, and they had the *voice of their own conscience*, which compelled them to say the word that was needed.⁴

Teetering on the edge of this uncertain certainty, the prophet risks speaking in the name of God. The hearers risk believing, and in that, they, too, might risk their lives. What will it mean for today’s preachers to stand with the biblical prophets in the council of the Lord? As I know from my own experience and from my conversations with seminary students over several decades, most preachers and Christian leaders do have their own call stories, often not unlike those of the prophets. Still, how do we know even our own story to be true? How do we know we are not simply suffering, as Scrooge feared when he met Marley’s ghost, from an upset stomach, “an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato”?⁵ It is a question every preacher must ask herself. And it means, finally, that our own call stories won’t do. There needs to be an external measure.

⁴Rüdiger Lux, “Der dunkle Vorhang der Geschichte: Vom Sinn und Unsinn prophetischer Geschichtsdeutung in der Bibel und heute,” in Evangelische-Lutherischer Kirchenbezirk Leipzig, *Erinnern–Danken–Fragen: 20 Jahre Friedliche Revolution und die Kirche in Sachsen*, ed. Martin Henker and Frank Schmidt (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009) 70–71 (my translation).

⁵Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, in *The Works of Charles Dickens*, vol. 4 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1926) 16.

Happily, God has graciously provided that for us in God's own history of the divine word. We have two things (two very big things) that the prophets did not, namely, the word of God incarnate and the word of God in Holy Scripture. Those become our "council of the Lord." Have we stood in the council of the Lord? Well, are our sermons consonant with everything we know about God through the revelation of God's incarnate word and God's written word? Is our teaching? That will be our measure and our test, rigorous enough to protect our people, but open enough to surprise them.

That test is both rigorous and open. There is a large body of Holy Scripture with which to work—actual stuff, real words, hands-on material—and we need to take it seriously. There was a real hands-on human being who was the Word of God incarnate. This changes everything, especially what we think of God. We need to take that seriously. But neither thing will remove the necessity of interpretation and discernment. Neither will remove the terrible risk of proclaiming *this* word in this particular moment, whereas other equally valid words of Holy Scripture might yield a different counsel.

Virtually all church constitutions name the Bible as the source and norm of all teaching, but as Willi Marxsen noted already in my student days, this "bare statement leaves too much unsaid. In what way is an authoritative word derived from these writings?"⁶ That is, how does *this* church, how do *we*, interpret the biblical texts? "Different methods of interpretation yield widely disparate results," wrote Marxsen, so "as long as the method of interpretation is not specified, an appeal to the Old or New Testaments is meaningless, since I can prove from the Bible whatever I want if I am allowed to choose how I am going to interpret it."⁷ Lutheran confessional theologian Friedrich Mildenerberger concurs, though for him the decisive question is not so much the interpretive method as the interpretive center—the "Sache" of the Bible, its "thing," what the Bible is about. Without attention to that, says Mildenerberger, we don't actually have the Bible as word of God at all but only words to be applied "capriciously," in which "the words of the Bible are used according to one's own convenience, which then loses all respect for the word of God."⁸

What does this mean?

To enter dangerous waters, what does this mean if we apply it to the question of gay ordination and gay marriage? Some say these are church-dividing issues because biblical authority is at stake. It is not. Biblical *interpretation* is at stake, but those faithful Christians and biblical scholars who come down on the so-called "liberal" side of these matters take the Bible as seriously as do the traditionalists.

⁶Willi Marxsen, *The New Testament as the Church's Book*, trans. James E. Mignard (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 9.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Friedrich Mildenerberger, *Die halbe Wahrheit oder die ganze Schrift: Zum Streit zwischen Bibelglauben und historischer Kritik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1967) 44 (my translation). See Mildenerberger's broader argument on the necessity of interpreting the Bible in accord with its proper "Sache" on pp. 34–44.

They just interpret it differently—perhaps with a different hermeneutical center, perhaps with a different understanding of what some have called the “orders of creation” or “natural law,” perhaps with a different reasoned and prayerful interpretation of the few particular passages usually brought to play, or perhaps with the authoritative proclamation of other words—other biblical words—that seem to require a different response than those few texts that show up in all the arguments. But make no mistake, both sides are exercising the art of biblical interpretation. Neither has direct access to what the biblical authors (or the Holy Spirit) *really* meant.

Make no mistake, both sides are exercising the art of biblical interpretation. Neither has direct access to what the biblical authors (or the Holy Spirit) really meant. The Bible is inspired, we claim, but biblical interpretation is not.

The Bible is inspired, we claim, but biblical interpretation is not—or have I made that distinction too neat? That form of biblical interpretation we call preaching is, we claim, the word of God, even though we know it is composed by our own fallible fingers on the keyboard. And biblical exegesis, done in faith, in community, and in prayer for guidance of the Spirit, is more than just somebody’s throwaway opinion. Still, our interpretation is always an exercise of theological confession and practical reason. It is, we trust, biblically and critically informed and prayerfully considered—but nevertheless (on both sides) a human art, historically and culturally conditioned and always fallible. Those who disagree about the place of gays in the church—at least those who do so responsibly—cannot claim the Bible on their side as opposed to the others. The Bible says nothing about who should be ordained in the ELCA or how to vote on issues related to gay marriage in state elections. For some, what we think about those things comes from how we understand the Holy Scriptures and the Christian faith, but such thought—for people on both sides—is a matter of interpretation. It’s messy, and those who disagree as Christians will understand that they disagree as brothers and sisters in the faith, as communicants gathered around a common table. If they do not, they should—for the sake of their souls—leave the table at once, go to confession, and seek reconciliation with their brothers and sisters.

Actually, it gets even more dangerous than the question of the interpretation of the Bible or of the simplistic WWJD question. Some will go a step further, saying, yes, it’s true the Bible says x, but now, in faith, in confession, and in prayer for the Spirit, it is a time to say y. Lest we immediately dismiss or excommunicate such people, we must recognize that the Bible does this often. The prophet of Isa 56 overturns the mandates of Torah in welcoming eunuchs and foreigners;⁹ Jesus

⁹See Frederick J. Gaiser, “A New Word on Homosexuality? Isaiah 56:1–8 as Case Study,” *Word & World* 14/3 (1994) 280–293.

famously announces, “It has been said..., but I say....” Can we do that? We do, of course. Despite the rest of the Bible’s interesting diversity about the nature of marriage—you will search in vain, for example, for the supposed biblical definition of marriage as between one man and one woman—despite this, Jesus, at least, was pretty clear about divorce. We think and act differently. Why? Is it mere cultural indulgence, or have different definitions of marriage and divorce required a different response?

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Some new moves by the church seem not to be merely a matter of wishy-washy adaptation to culture (even if sometimes they are that), but an example of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of biblical texts—the history of their ongoing effect—assuming with Isa 55:10 that God’s word, like the rain, continues to do its work day after day. That, too, we would say, is the work of the Spirit. Consider, for example, the well-known Gal 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This text is appealed to now in support of women’s ordination and other roles of women in the church, even though Paul and the Pauline tradition were still writing elsewhere about women keeping silent in church (1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:12). How can this be? It appears that the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text has been at work. Paul’s gospel (that we are all one in Christ Jesus) has been busy subverting the traditional Haustafel ordinances of Paul’s own understanding—those texts about maintaining “domestic order”—so subsequent followers see things in an altogether different way, not because they have ignored biblical authority, but because biblical authority has been working in a different way. Interestingly, while the Spirit is having his way after the fact with Paul’s verse in Galatians, the Spirit is aided by words of authority working from the other direction, from the past: the claim already by Isaiah that all would be priests—not just the designated hierarchy (Isa 61:6); that all would exercise the Davidic covenant—not just a given line of rulers (Isa 55:3); and the promise of Joel that all the sons *and all the daughters* of Israel would be given the spirit of prophecy (Joel 2:28)—not just those with books named after them. That new age foreseen by Isaiah and Joel was breaking in in Jesus Christ, but it took awhile for the New Testament believers to figure out all the implications—and, of course, we still are not of one mind about all that.

Another example with this text from Galatians: an ugly story from my internship (we were in the early 1960s then, and the fights were about race and civil rights). In a Bible study on this text at a pastors’ conference, the leader advanced

the text to say, “in Christ, neither black nor white.” An elderly pastor rose, literally shaking with apoplectic anger, to shout, “That text doesn’t say a darn thing about blacks”—except he used a different “d” word than “darn” and the “n” word for blacks. Not a happy day for the church. Yet, that racist pastor was literally correct: the text says nothing about blacks. But for the leader, by then—and I would presume for almost all of us, by now—that text has worked its way into our hearts and souls so that we do not bat an eye when it is applied to race. That, too, is biblical authority at work, and it is anything but static. Today, some would add “neither gay nor straight”; is that apostasy or the voice of the Spirit at work? We are still working that out.

Friedrich Mildenerger describes this dynamic understanding of authority in this way. According to the Lutheran Confessions, he argues:

The place in which the Scripture is understood is the living fellowship of the church, formed and shaped through God, the Holy Spirit. This is the living context in which understanding occurs and in which the results are commonly accepted, because they have demonstrated themselves to be true in the experience of this fellowship.¹⁰

Mildenerger admits this is rather slippery. It lacks the certainties of both Fundamentalism and historical-critical exegesis, he argues, for “the Fundamentalist begins with the assumption that the entire Scripture is Word of God even before trying to comprehend or accept something in it, whereas the critical exegete first works to comprehend and accept something in Scripture and then declares that particular thing to be God’s Word.”¹¹ For Mildenerger, agreement regarding the meaning of Scripture is not a human achievement but the gift of the Spirit working through the community of the church. I would agree, while insisting that we do not merely sit quietly and wait for such agreement to happen. We read, study, pray, preach, worship, debate, discuss, and write journal articles, and we have faith that, through that process, the Spirit will do its work.

The word enters history

However slippery this seems, we need again to affirm that the word—like the world—remains God’s. Who decided that words have power—enough so that they establish meaning and create relationships, but also divide and destroy? God, it seems. In the beginning, God spoke. Word creation is not unique to the Old Testament. A form of it shows up in both the Enuma Elish and in ancient Egyptian cosmology,¹² and Talking God is a major figure in the Navajo pantheon. Here again,

¹⁰Friedrich Mildenerger, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Erwin L Lueker, ed. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 220–221.

¹¹Friedrich Mildenerger, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1983) 185–186 (my translation). My translation differs from that in Mildenerger, *Theology*, 220; it provides, in my opinion, a clearer sense of the German in the broader context of Mildenerger’s paragraph, even though I add words to the original in order to make this clear.

¹²See, for example, Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 111.

discernment will be necessary. Do all of these texts and myths say the same thing? We will have to see where they take us. A creative word might be a form of magic (“Abracadabra”), but the account in Gen 1 differs in that it sets in motion not only the earth and the cosmos but also human history, including the history of a particular people. Claus Westermann notes, “Magical activity is of its nature not historical activity. God’s creative action through the word in Gen 1:3 is a prelude to and directed toward [God’s] action in history.”¹³ We continue to live in that history, so we claim; and, more important, into that history the Word became flesh. That understanding of God—of a very particular God—changes everything. Mythology dissolves when we put our fingers in Jesus’ side. Still, the fact that God shows up in history simply reaffirms that our certainties of faith are relational rather than propositional. The God of the Bible and of biblical faith is not an idea to be applied as needed but one who comes in person, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love—more, who comes *as* person, in Bethlehem’s manger and Calvary’s cross. Relating to such a God is personal rather than propositional, a matter of the spirit rather than of the letter. Nineteenth-century Scottish preacher George MacDonald put it this way—quite sharply, but appropriately so—when he was talking about the misuse of the written word for what he called “word-worship, false logic, and corruption of the truth”: “Seeing it could not give life, the letter should not be throned with the power to kill; it should be but the handmaid to open the door of the truth to the mind that was *of* the truth.”¹⁴

Westermann’s observation that God’s creating word is a prelude to history rather than an act of a-historical magic has been amplified more recently by Bruce Marshall, extending the narrative beyond the Bible itself and arguing that the one God of Scripture becomes “identified as Trinity through the unfolding of a complex narrative which links Israel, Jesus, and the church; this narrative identification of the triune God organizes a comprehensive view of all things, and especially of human nature, history, and destiny.”¹⁵ But does that not go too far, especially for an Old Testament teacher like myself? “Trinity” is, of course, not a biblical concept per se, yet Marshall argues that its definition properly continues the narrative that the Bible begins, so, in that sense, for him it *is* what the Bible is about, its interpretive center. One could speak similarly of confessional readings of the Bible that posit their own focus, their own insistence of what the Bible is about (as Mildenerger does). We do that because we must; we do it in order to preach, not just to observe or teach. Still, if we are not to allow confessional and ecclesiastical tradition to force a return to the dogmatic control over the Bible that my teachers in Heidelberg sought so valiantly to overcome, we will need some caveats. One comes, for example, from Christopher Seitz, who reminds us that a

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴George MacDonald, “The Knowing of the Son,” in *Unspoken Sermons, Series III* (1889), now in *Unspoken Sermons, Series I, II, III in One Volume* (Whitehorn, CA: Johannesen, 1997) 435.

¹⁵Bruce D. Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 3.

trinitarian hermeneutic—even of the Old Testament—does not imply some kind of “single-meaning exegesis.” “The dynamic character of scripture in its two-testament form does not allow for propositional or technical flattening, given that this witness is received in faith, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, disciplined by prayer, Eucharistic fellowship, and the teaching of the church in its baptismal interrogatories and creedal affirmations.”¹⁶ And, I would add, all dogmatic formulations are inherently neater and more systematic than Scripture itself, so all must be subject to the “yes, but” of other biblical texts. This is why, for example, Lutheran systematic theologian Helmut Thielicke, though clearly favoring the Lutheran understanding of the relation between law and gospel to that of John Calvin, nevertheless recognizes that their significant theological differences are “no reason for schism,” since both Calvin and Luther work from Scripture and, as Thielicke notes, every precise theological principle they formulate “is continually shattered by the fulness of holy scripture.”¹⁷ Thielicke is consequent, therefore, in maintaining a certain modesty about all doctrinal formulations.

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And we must be modest as well, since finally the word on which we stake our lives remains God’s—not even the church’s. Still, God is generous and risk-taking with the divine word. God gives it to us from outside ourselves, creating life and all that is, but God also gives it to us to use within and among ourselves through the gift of articulate speech, which, according to Genesis, is closely associated with what it means to be in the image of God. We are listeners, speakers, hearers, talkers, and this makes us human and gives us amazing power—which is why our mothers were correct when they told us to mind what we say and to keep a civil tongue in our heads.

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

What will this mean regarding the intersection between word and world as we see that take place in the Bible? What will it look like when word speaks to world? As we consider this, we inevitably run across the phrase “speaking truth to power,” a notion that reflects a significant courageous prophetic heritage, especially in light of our observance of the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King

¹⁶Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 8–9. The quotations from both Seitz and Marshall (note 15, above) are cited also in Craig G. Bartholomew, “Listening for God’s Address: A Mere Trinitarian Hermeneutic for the Old Testament,” in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God’s Address*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and David J. H. Beldman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 3–19.

¹⁷Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of God and of Christ*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 203.

Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Biblically, of course, this will take us back to where we started, with Nathan announcing to David, "You are the man!" (2 Sam 12:7). But we will in no way diminish the power of Nathan's bold and courageous voice of challenge by reminding ourselves of his even more famous announcement to David, speaking for God, "Are you the one to build me a house to live in?" (2 Sam 7:5). Rather, says Nathan, "The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house" (2 Sam 7:11)—the promise that sets in motion the messianic trajectory

But God and the Bible are about promise, first and foremost. And that is sometimes as hard for the powerful to hear and accept as the challenges of God's law, since the promise that God works through weakness and for the sake of the oppressed will always undermine human notions of power.

that moves through David and the entire Old Testament to Jesus of Nazareth and the salvation of the world. In the Bible, speaking truth to power was, first, speaking promise. It necessarily became judgment only when power became arrogant and threatened to usurp for private gain the promises God meant for all people. But God and the Bible are about promise, first and foremost. And that is sometimes as hard for the powerful to hear and accept as the challenges of God's law, since the promise that God works through weakness and for the sake of the oppressed will always undermine human notions of power and our readings of what constitutes blessing or success. That promise belongs to God, that the future belongs to God, inevitably diminishes the ideological claims of any political system, capitalistic or communistic, democratic or republican, libertarian or communitarian. The cautionary note of Proverbs applies to all of them: "The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established" (Prov 19:21). The Bible understands that caveat positively. It is not that God puts no stock in human efforts; rather, God has better things in store for us than any human system can devise or control. "I am about to do a new thing," comes pretty close to a self-definition of God in Second Isaiah (Isa 43:19). That, too, was speaking truth to power to those who wanted, above all, either to retain or to return to the old ways.

Consider Amos. He and the other eighth-century prophets were not anarchists, throwing a monkey wrench in the gears of the political machine just to watch it sputter out. Fact is, they weren't even what we would call liberals—shepherds (like Amos) rarely are. The view of these prophets, as Terry Fretheim has reminded us, was rather conservative, calling Israel back to God's concern for social justice that was "richly embedded in the traditions they inherited."¹⁸ Sometimes, to be sure, the prophets just became weird, acting like what we today would call per-

¹⁸Terence E. Fretheim, "What Biblical Scholars Wish Pastors Would Start or Stop Doing about Ethical Issues in the Old Testament," *Word & World* 31/3 (2011) 304.

formance artists, and they were regarded in their day to be just as strange as we regard their counterparts today. Sometimes, apparently, God does send folks just to shake things up, to get our attention: prophets in punk, perhaps.

It is true that Amos strongly condemned the leaders who “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth” (Amos 2:7), but that was because such oppression stood in the way of where God and the book of Amos finally want to take God’s people, to a time “when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13). God is not opposed to abundance, as sometimes seemingly implied by plain-is-better Puritans, wealth-is-bad liberals, or austerity-now Tea-Partiers. God gives the grain and the wine for us to enjoy, as Luther noted in his explanation of the Lord’s Prayer in the *Large Catechism*: “When you say and ask for ‘daily bread,’ you ask for everything that is necessary in order to have and *enjoy* daily bread and, on the contrary, against everything that interferes with *enjoying* it.”¹⁹

Still, as the prophets and Jesus make clear, that enjoyment is meant for all God’s children. God makes the seeds sprout for the sake of all, not just for the few—while at the same time warning of the dangers to the soul of accumulating wealth (certainly, my soul included). Does this tell us for whom to vote on Election Day? Not directly, I think, any more than Leviticus or Romans tells us how to vote on contemporary gay issues. Considerable discernment will be necessary, especially for those of us with interest-bearing retirement accounts and interest-due mortgages, both of which would have been as incomprehensible to the prophets as contemporary understandings of human gender and sexuality.

The Bible is not silent on issues of caring for the poor and maintaining sexual morality—far from it—but whose side is it on? Things get slippery here. Social conservatives quote the Bible often, but traditional limited-government conservative D. G. Hart warns his like-minded friends to be wary of the so-called evangelical right, since their concern is ideological, to which “conservatism is inherently opposed.”²⁰ Reading the Bible and loving Jesus can just as easily lead to Jim Wallis, Randall Balmer, or Tony Campolo as to Sarah Palin or James Dobson.²¹ Hart is right to remind us that Christians should distrust all political ideologies this side of the Garden of Eden,²² but does this mean finally that our faith has nothing whatsoever to do with our voting habits? What are we to do?

I can imagine a Christian arguing that the best way to care for the most peo-

¹⁹Martin Luther, Explanation to the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, in *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* [hereafter *BC*], ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 449 (emphasis added). I am grateful to my colleague Gary Simpson for reminding me of Luther’s explanation here and its relevance to my current topic.

²⁰D. G. Hart, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 207.

²¹See *ibid.*, 161.

²²*Ibid.*, 196–197.

ple is through a program of austerity and job creation (so long as that program has a broader concern than merely keeping the world safe for the rich), just as I can imagine another arguing, with Amos, that the unequal distribution of wealth is such an incendiary problem and so distasteful to God that something has to happen now. For Amos, that one is an issue that requires him to become a smoke alarm with its piercing announcement that “The house is on fire!” This was perhaps a significant role of prophets like Amos—not so much to advocate a particular social or political program as to ask about the smoke rising from the basement or, to use another metaphor, to point out that the peculiar shape looming on the horizon is going to sink our ship—to jump up and down and scream, in fact, if no one seems to be taking notice.

What is about to make our boat sink? Lack of concern for the poor or too much debt? It may well be that our house is on fire—and I think the prophets might agree—but Amos probably does not immediately know whether this particular fire requires a Class A, B, or C extinguisher. That becomes a matter of human reason. Fact is, as conservative business leader Stephen Young has written recently, there is nothing in the US Constitution that supports either what he calls the “nanny state” of the new left or the survival-of-the-fittest capitalism of the new right.²³ The Bible, of course, knows nothing of either, much less the rampant individualism of that extreme form of libertarianism that is willing to embrace selfishness as virtue.²⁴ Nevertheless, blind ideological insistence on one or the other of these seems now to paralyze our republic. To overcome our divisions, we will have to talk. A Christian role in present public life will be to support and encourage real conversation (not mantras), perhaps even providing forums for it, and to encourage as well that form of “love thy neighbor” known as compromise—as much as those ten letters have become a four-letter word for so many in today’s political environment. Luther’s admonition to “speak well of” the neighbor “and interpret everything they do in the best possible light”²⁵ applies even in the world of politics. I will not convince today’s campaign managers of that, and certainly not the Super PAC polluters of the airwaves, since the Supreme Court has assured us that their nefarious work is guaranteed by the Freedom of Speech Amendment to the Constitution—something that I treasure as well, especially having lived where there is no such thing. Still, Luther got it right, and Christians must understand that lying about and defaming the neighbor is sin, that it stands under the judgment of God, even in the realm of politics; and every once in a while we should probably mention that.

²³Stephen R. Young, “Nanny State’: The Origin, Evolution of the ‘New Left,’” *StarTribune*, July 29, 2012, OP1 and OP4. Stephen R. Young is described by the newspaper as the “global executive director of the Caux Round Table, an international network of business leaders working to promote a moral capitalism.” Young continues his reasoned argument for a rejection of the extremes that poison the American political-economic debate in his “A Meeting of the Minds,” *StarTribune*, September 30, 2012, OP1 and OP4.

²⁴Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet, 1964).

²⁵Martin Luther, Explanation of the Eighth Commandment, in *The Small Catechism*, in BC, 353.

SOMETHING TO SAY NOW

You may begin to think that my academic nuancing of the issues will make me shy away from actually insisting upon anything. I admit the danger. I do, though, want to insist upon a couple of things. First and foremost, the prophets spoke truth to power because they anticipated a future in which God wanted all of us to be able to share in the baskets full of bread left over from the divine banquet, and no one or no cause should be permitted to stand in the way of that, even this side of the eschaton. The poor cannot be left to starve while waiting for either the politicians or God to get things in order. The best way to avoid that consequence might be debatable. For Christians, the goal itself is not. More, the biblical tradition knows that God's banquet was broken open to all when God's son Jesus became the welcoming host. Open the doors, no holds barred, y'all come. I will gladly share that prophetic announcement. Jesus is the open door to God, and our job is to make that known and get out of the way.²⁶ Christ is our hope, our healer, our salvation. That is clear. More, in Christ, we are free to debate, as brothers and sisters, secular and even sacred issues—like matters of human sexuality and economic responsibility.

The biblical tradition knows that God's banquet was broken open to all when God's son Jesus became the welcoming host. Open the doors, no holds barred, y'all come.

However, I also know that things do stand in the way of equal participation in God's banquet. And I have to speak of that as well. Some years ago, when I went to teach once again in Zimbabwe after things had already turned bad and the country was being destroyed from within for the sake of political expediency and personal gain, I began to wonder whether I should be there at all, since there was so little food, and I was one more mouth to feed. When I talked about this with a cab driver, he said, "Oh no, it is important that you are here. You must go home to tell the story." So, I have both a Jesus story to tell and a Zimbabwe story to tell. These came together in an email I sent to family and friends during that visit. My message was sent on the First Sunday in Advent when I had gone to the local shopping center for coffee. I wrote:

There are some things too terrible to look at and too terrible not to look at. This morning behind Avondale Shopping Centre I saw groups of people scouring through the piles and cans of garbage, immediately eating what they found. You can't look without weeping; you can't look without dying inside; you can't look without feeling invasive, but you must look because you must bear witness to the terrible poverty, the willful destruction of the

²⁶Ernst Käsemann draws the radical conclusions of this open invitation for our understanding of who is welcome at the Lord's Table in his essay "Guests of the Crucified," *Word & World* 33/1 (2013) 62–73.

economy that has brought people to this state. All of them in dark clothing, encrusted with dirt, hunched over the garbage, they looked like so many crows picking at a carcass. But, of course, they are not crows, they are human beings. So maybe it is fitting that I see this on the First Sunday in Advent, since the incarnation of Jesus is precisely for this. To see this is to have a whole new sense of what it means that Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Phil 2:7). He came to be with these people, more, to be one of them, for God, too, cannot look at such a thing without tears. But Jesus also came, he said, “to bring good news to the poor...to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). So, we pray for the overturning of the orders of oppression, wherever they are, that produce human crows. “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” ⊕

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