



# Speaker, Word, Breath: A Scriptural View of Christian Formation

LAURA J. THELANDER

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

—Book of Common Prayer<sup>1</sup>

In his treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, Martin Luther identified the word of God as the primary mark of the church. It is “the principal item, and the holiest of holy possessions.” Wherever this word is “preached, believed, professed, and lived,” Luther wrote, we should not doubt that the true church is there.<sup>2</sup> If there were only one sign by which the church is to be recognized, the word of God would be it. From liturgy to theology, from prayer to constitutional documents, the central and authoritative role of scripture in both informing and norming the prac-

<sup>1</sup>*The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979) 236.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 149, 150.

*Scriptural imagination is not a skill set we can possess. Rather, the scriptural shape of our life entails being in the world in a way that evidences a lifelong process of transformation by the power of Holy Scripture. This way of envisioning the world shapes our discernment of how we are to engage and be in the world.*

tices and beliefs of Christians and Christian communities is unquestioned. The Bible is the norm of Christian faith and life.

In spite of this widely accepted claim of scripture's centrality, when it comes to actual practice, church leaders and congregations alike face the ever-present temptation of co-opting scripture for our own purposes. We try to make scripture serve us rather than our being responsive to and shaped by God's word. Preachers and teachers move quickly to arrive at the preached or exegeted word before first pondering the word addressed to us. Congregational members and leaders alike may seek out that "perfect" scripture verse to provide the stewardship theme for the year or to kick off a congregational meeting. We know that we should incorporate scripture into our congregational life as well as the life of discipleship, but once we have made a perfunctory nod toward scripture, we may assume that we have done our Christian duty. Rarer is it that we allow God's word to take a central and authoritative position in our lives as Christians, summoning us to listen, ponder, and respond accordingly. In short, scripture is often employed as a tool at our disposal, a word that is placed under our control, rather than experienced as a primary instrument of the Spirit working on us and in us.

When it comes to Christian spirituality, that is, the experience of abundant life in the crucified and risen Christ, scripture itself illustrates how it functions as both source and norm of such a life. As the early followers of Jesus reflected upon their experience of the Spirit of the Risen Christ calling them into a life of mission as his disciples, they drew upon the stories and images of Hebrew Scriptures. Out of these early reflections emerged the gospel narratives and epistles that constitute the New Testament. As Sandra Schneiders has pointed out, "Scripture not only funded the original expression of Christian spirituality but that spirituality led to the production of a new body of Scripture which, in combination with the Hebrew Scriptures, forms the Christian canon."<sup>3</sup> As this inspired collection of revelation, the Bible both records and communicates the abundant life found in Christ, and thus is integral to Christian spirituality.

#### TRINITARIAN PATTERN OF THE SCRIPTURAL WITNESS AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Christian spirituality has to do with the formation of the self by the Spirit of God into the likeness of Jesus Christ, who in his own person is the true and real human being. It is God's Spirit encountering and transforming our sinful selves into the selves we were meant to be *Coram Deo*, before God.

—Christopher Hall<sup>4</sup>

The Christian life is shaped foremost by a relationship with the Triune God

<sup>3</sup>Sandra M. Schneiders, "Spirituality and Scripture," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville: Westminster John Knox) 62.

<sup>4</sup>Christopher A. Hall, "Reading Christ into the Heart," in *Life in the Spirit*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010) 146.

and informed by the story of scripture in which God is the principal actor and subject. Scripture thus serves as the Triune God's primary means of communication in mediating an ever-deepening communion with us. Beginning with the story of God's creative activity and continuing with the revelation of God's essence of love in Jesus the Christ and the ongoing activity of the Spirit in conforming us to Christ, scripture conveys the Triune God's continual, gracious activity in our lives. Throughout the narrative arc of scripture, we perceive the deeply Trinitarian nature of God's very being: "the Eternal Word, sent by the Father, has become incarnate in Jesus Christ and continues to speak to us through the Holy Spirit."<sup>5</sup> As such, we may consider the Triune God as Speaker, Word, and Breath.

---

*Throughout the narrative arc of scripture, we perceive the deeply Trinitarian nature of God's very being. As such, we may consider the Triune God as Speaker, Word, and Breath.*

---

In the scriptural witness, we encounter God first as Speaker. In Genesis we hear that, through the word, God creates life by calling into existence all that is. The repetition of "God said...and there was" throughout the first chapter of Genesis underscores that through this speaking God, all of life is created.

God also speaks salvation into existence by the word. In the Gospels, God's very Word, Jesus, speaks salvation into existence, communicating forgiveness, blessing, healing, mission, and love to all whom he encountered. In proclaiming the coming Reign of God, Jesus embodies this message. The Word made flesh becomes the Word spoken and enacted in this world. As Eugene Peterson observes, "The *word* is as foundational in the work of salvation as it is in the work of creation."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the word of God continues to do its work in our lives by the Spirit, the breath of God. The Spirit "breathes into" the reading and hearing of scripture the "living reality of the Speaker."<sup>7</sup> Through the inspiration of the Spirit, the breathed-in power of God, the living word of the living God continues to speak to us, breathing life into us, and thereby transforming us and re-creating us into the image of Christ. We may even say that this creative and saving word now gives birth to Christ in us (Gal 4:19). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, like many before him, spoke of receiving the word of scripture and pondering it in our hearts as Mary did so that Christ may be formed in us.<sup>8</sup> This transformative work of God's word dwelling in our lives, penetrating our hearts and minds, is not self-generated activity aimed

---

<sup>5</sup>John D. Godsey, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Christian Spirituality," in *Reflections on Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (Chicago: Covenant, 1999) 79.

<sup>6</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 48. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup>Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1988) 36.

<sup>8</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, ed. and trans. David McL. Gracie (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986) 33.

toward developing our full potential as human beings; rather it is revelatory of the ongoing work of Holy Spirit in our lives, the “real teacher of the Scriptures.”<sup>9</sup> As the Spirit guides and teaches us through scripture, opening the heart and mind to receiving God’s word, we experience the deep, internal, and transformational work of the Spirit forming us into the image of Christ.

The following three sections explore in turn the practice of spiritual listening to God the speaker, participating with the word in prayer and praise, and experiencing the animating power of God’s breath. Collectively these three dimensions provide a framework for describing the formative power of scripture in the lives of disciples and Christian communities.

### A WAY OF LISTENING

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

—John 1:1

“The heart of God opens itself to us in God’s Word,” wrote Bonhoeffer. It is precisely in our human hearts where the word should find its home and dwell in us.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, if scripture’s fundamental purpose is to communicate God’s word to us and sustain and deepen our relationship with God, our posture with respect to scripture will first and foremost be as a listener rather than as a proclaimer or teacher. In assuming the posture of a listener, we signal an openness and receptivity to a living encounter with God, an expectation that in reading and listening to scripture, God is addressing us.

Bonhoeffer’s guidance with respect to personal meditation on scripture was that we are to read it as “God’s Word for me personally.” He warned against asking what a particular passage might have to say to others or pondering how one might preach or teach on a text. He was adamant that personal meditation on scripture is not a time for exegesis or preparation for a sermon or Bible study. It is only this: “waiting for God’s Word to us.”<sup>11</sup>

Scripture, God’s living address to us, communicates God’s gracious will for us. In that sense, scripture can even be said to bear God’s sacramental presence for it is where God has promised to meet us. As a means of grace, scripture, like the sacrament of baptism, bears daily gifts to us through the Spirit who works by water and the word (Eph 5:25–26). As the sacrament of baptism points to a daily drowning to sin and a rising to new life in Christ, so too does scripture call forth a life that is daily immersed in the word. Through reading and hearing daily God’s speech addressed to us, we are plunged into the words of scripture that form us according

<sup>9</sup>Martin Luther, *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings* (1539), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 34, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960) 286.

<sup>10</sup>David McL. Gracie, introduction to Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 9.

<sup>11</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 5, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 87.

to God's Spirit: "the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is...drowned and die[s] through daily contrition and repentance," while a new person "come[s] forth and rise[s] up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."<sup>12</sup>

---

*"Before the heart unlocks itself for the world, God wants to open it for himself; before the ear takes in the countless voices of the day, it should hear in the early hours the voice of the Creator and Redeemer. God prepared the stillness of the first morning for himself. It should remain his."*

---

Daily immersion into the life of Christ through the word means that we begin a new life with God each day, renewed every morning in God's promises. For that reason it follows that God would have the first word of the day. Referencing Isa 50:4, in which we read that "morning by morning [God] wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught," Bonhoeffer writes, "Before the heart unlocks itself for the world, God wants to open it for himself; before the ear takes in the countless voices of the day, it should hear in the early hours the voice of the Creator and Redeemer. God prepared the stillness of the first morning for himself. It should remain his."<sup>13</sup>

In describing his own practice of daily meditation as well as that of the seminarians at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer spoke of the importance of the daily reception of and meditation upon God's word. What Bonhoeffer practiced and taught his students was merely a continuation of the ancient Christian tradition of sacred reading, *lectio divina*. This practice of sacred reading, sustained by monastic communities over the centuries, has seen both increased awareness and practice across a broad spectrum of Protestants as well as among Catholic laity.<sup>14</sup> This form of prayer is "one concrete means of opening ourselves to the action of grace and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."<sup>15</sup>

In his *Rule* guiding monastic life, the sixth-century abbot St. Benedict called for several hours to be set aside each day in which monks would read and listen to scripture. He advocated a slow, sustained reading of a single book from scripture, reading from beginning to end. Patient and persistent reading and listening to scripture was the marker of daily meditation among the monastics as they followed in the path of those called "happy," whose "delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night" (Ps 1:1–2).

<sup>12</sup>Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (1529), in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 360.

<sup>13</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 38–39.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room, 2000), and Hall, *Too Deep for Words*. The art of sacred reading, developed in the Western monastic tradition, has been preserved in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, a guide for monastic life ever since the sixth century.

<sup>15</sup>Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading* (Liguori, MI: Liguori/Triumph, 1996) 6.

Writers and teachers of spiritual reading frequently appropriate the metaphor of eating when attempting to capture the essence of meditation. In the opening pages of *Eat This Book*, Eugene Peterson describes for readers the evident joy and delight of his dog leisurely gnawing on a prized bone. In Peterson's words, he was witnessing "my dog meditating his bone."<sup>16</sup> This is the picture of meditation: "a slow, paced, leisurely gnawing on the Scripture, a reading that breaks through the bone and sucks out the marrow, Christ himself."<sup>17</sup> In meditating on scripture, listening to God's address to us in the word, we find ourselves called to slow down and enjoy a leisurely meal, and not eat on the run. This slow, prayerful reading of scripture nourishes us with God's word and God's life with staying power to sustain us throughout the day as we continue "chewing over" and "ruminating" the word of God throughout the day. In that way, *lectio divina* both encourages and funds a life of praying without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17).

As we assume the posture of listener, we find ourselves immersed in the word that not only comforts us with God's presence but also confronts us "with the truth of our own existence."<sup>18</sup> "A fundamental movement of the spiritual life is from self-deception to self-awareness, an awareness of the truth about the human condition and the state of our relationship with God."<sup>19</sup> The regular, disciplined practice of *lectio divina* creates an opening precisely for God's truth to break through. We read to be transformed by God's Spirit into the image of Christ. But such formation is a long, slow process. An image that captures this slow, formative process is of water slowly working away at stone. Only after much time is it noticeable that the water is indeed wearing away the stone. "Water can wear away rock, but it needs time as its ally. God's word will certainly refashion our lives, but not overnight."<sup>20</sup>

#### A WAY OF SPEAKING

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.  
—Psalm 51:15

I rise before dawn and cry for help; I put my hope in your words.  
—Psalm 119:147

In assuming the posture of listener, we have come to know more deeply that God has the first and final word, the work of creation and salvation. In this time of attentive listening and humble stillness before God's word, we have also been learning how to speak ourselves. Immersed in the language of scripture, we are given words with which to respond to God. Bonhoeffer provides this description: "Grounded in the Scripture, we learn to speak to God in the language which God

<sup>16</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 2.

<sup>17</sup>Hall, "Reading Christ into the Heart," 151–152.

<sup>18</sup>Casey, *Sacred Reading*, 9.

<sup>19</sup>Hall, "Reading Christ into the Heart," 148.

<sup>20</sup>Casey, *Sacred Reading*, 10. Here Casey is drawing on a saying of Abba Poemen, one of the desert fathers.

has spoken to us. We learn to speak to God as the child speaks to its mother.”<sup>21</sup> Like Mary, after pondering the word in her heart, we no longer remain silent. Now this word is given voice in song and prayer. Our response to God’s word takes shape in worship, in a life of praise and prayer.

In scripture we are bestowed gifts of language and images that shape our life of worship and prayer. Scripture not only assumes its central place in the liturgy of the Word, but it also provides a source of language and images, giving life to the entire liturgy, including the hymns and songs of worship as well as our prayers. A nineteenth-century hymn captures this integral relationship between scripture and our response to God: “Lord, speak to us, that we may speak in living echoes of your tone.”<sup>22</sup> Through immersion in scripture, we learn the language of worship and prayer.

---

*prayer then is no human monologue to which God tunes in; rather, prayer is best understood as a rhythm of responsiveness to God’s creative and redemptive activity narrated by scripture*

---

Prayer is a primary way in which we speak to God. Eugene Peterson describes prayer as “answering speech” in response to God’s “addressing speech.”<sup>23</sup> We can respond to God in prayer only because we have first been spoken to. Prayer then is no human monologue to which God tunes in; rather, prayer is best understood as a rhythm of responsiveness to God’s creative and redemptive activity narrated by scripture. For Peterson, the language for our speaking to God in prayer is grown and nourished in the soil of the psalms. Through praying the psalms, we acquire language for answering God; they are the “great and sprawling university” where we attend “to learn to answer God, to learn to pray.”<sup>24</sup> As we are schooled in the psalms, we practice and learn the language of prayer. Deborah Hunsinger describes praying with scripture as “the daily exercise that enables God to tutor us in prayer.”<sup>25</sup> In so doing we are shaped by a language that is capacious and malleable enough, and, above all, faithful enough to express a range of experiences and emotions before God. In the psalms, Peterson writes, “Everything that a person can possibly feel, experience, and say is brought into expression before God.”<sup>26</sup>

For Bonhoeffer too, the psalms hold a unique and invaluable place in scripture. They are “the great school of prayer” in which we learn what prayer means, namely, “praying on the basis of the Word of God, on the basis of promises. Chris-

<sup>21</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 40.

<sup>22</sup>Frances R. Havergal, “Lord, Speak to Us, That We May Speak,” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) #676.

<sup>23</sup>Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 45, 51.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>25</sup>Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 30.

<sup>26</sup>Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 57.

tian prayer takes its stand on the solid ground of the revealed Word.”<sup>27</sup> What is more, through praying the psalms, we are actually joining in the prayer of Jesus. Bonhoeffer writes, “The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ. . . . He prayed the Psalter, and now it has become his prayer for all time.”<sup>28</sup> On this christological basis, the psalms are acknowledged as both God’s word and at the same time our prayer offered to God. As we pray the psalms, we pray not only in the name of Jesus Christ but also in his very words.

#### A WAY OF DISCERNING

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

—Romans 12:2

As we receive the breath of God through listening to scripture and by participating in speaking God’s Word, we become fully alive. By the breath of God, all of our senses become fully animated and alert, and we sense the world in light of God’s presence and activity. In God’s light we see light (Ps 36:9). In the *Institutes*, John Calvin offers an analogy likening scripture to spectacles. Left to our own devices, we cannot clearly know or see God for our vision is weak and blurry. However, with the aid of spectacles (that is, scripture) we can see more clearly the one true God.<sup>29</sup> This metaphor suggests that by looking through the lens of scripture—by learning the stories of God’s creative and redemptive activity among the people of Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth—we are not only able to know the God to whom scripture witnesses, but our vision is also enabled to perceive God’s ongoing presence and activity in the world. What we are speaking of is the fostering of a scriptural imagination that helps us navigate the intersection of God’s word and our lives as we discern our way of being God’s people in the world.

Scriptural imagination, however, is not a skill set we can possess. Rather “the scriptural shape of a whole life” entails “a way of being in the world that evidences a lifelong process of transformation by the power of holy Scripture.”<sup>30</sup> This way of envisioning the world shapes our discernment of how we are to engage and be in the world. But, of course, the words of scripture alone cannot do this. There remains an utter dependency upon the Spirit and the Spirit’s work of illumination to bring clarity to our vision. We may meditate upon scripture unceasingly and still find ourselves with blurred vision. In praying for divine illumination to guide and teach us, we are asking for the indwelling gift of the Spirit that Jesus promised to his followers, the Spirit who will lead us in truth. It is this presence of word *and*

<sup>27</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 55.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 54–55.

<sup>29</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960) 1.6.1.

<sup>30</sup>C. Kavin Rowe, “The Formation of Scriptural Imagination,” *Faith & Leadership*, at <http://www.faithandleadership.com/features/articles/c-kavin-rowe-the-formation-scriptural-imagination> (accessed April 30, 2014).

Spirit that enables us to practice an attentive and responsive obedience to what God is speaking to us and doing among us. In this way the Spirit vivifies scripture, making it a living word from God that speaks into our present lives.

---

*we are speaking of fostering scriptural imagination that helps us navigate the intersection of God's word and our lives as we discern our way of being God's people in the world*

---

Such acknowledged dependency upon the Holy Spirit's work as teacher and guide is essential, especially when considering that scriptural interpretation allows for multiple meanings to "arise in the interaction of the reader with the text."<sup>31</sup> In order to hear and respond to the living voice of God and make connections between the original, historical context and its present significance, a scripturally shaped imagination requires the guidance of the Holy Spirit to be at work in the intersections between the text and the world of the reader. In the light of God's "ongoing work in the world" through the Holy Spirit, we are called to "ongoing discernment" to pay attention and tune in to what God is doing in the world.<sup>32</sup> Under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, as we read and listen to scripture both in community and in individual prayer, we undergo the critical process of discernment so that our lives may be ordered in accordance with God's desire for us: namely, to love God and love and serve the neighbor.

Of course, this way of living with a scripturally shaped imagination is not without struggle or suffering. We recall Luther's dictum that three things make a theologian: *oratio* (prayer for insight and humility), *meditatio* (careful study and reflection on scripture), and *tentatio* (trial and struggle).<sup>33</sup> A life that is conformed to Christ is a life lived under the cross. We will not come away from our encounter with God's word unscathed. Yet it is precisely in this encounter that we meet the Word who promises life in abundance (John 10:10). ⊕

LAURA J. THELANDER is Seminary Pastor at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She previously served at Princeton Theological Seminary and congregations in Minnesota and New Jersey.

<sup>31</sup>Schneiders, "Spirituality and Scripture," 66.

<sup>32</sup>Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds. *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 5.

<sup>33</sup>Luther, *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition*, 285–287.