



Word and World

FREDERICK J. GAISER

WORD AND WORLD: A BIBLICAL THEME

“**S**ticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” Hah! Fact is that names, taunts, bullying can hurt much more than sticks and stones. They don’t break the bones, they break the soul, and the familiar children’s rhyme is an attempt to ward off this terrible truth.

Words have power, both to harm and to help. And if human words have power, so do God’s—even more so. When God’s word enters God’s world, that word can kill or make alive. The word kills:

Your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command, and stood and filled all things with death. (Wis 18:15–16)

But God’s word also—and no doubt preferably—gives life, as Simon Peter confesses:

“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)

So word and world: Good news or bad? Life or death? Or maybe both? Word and world are often juxtaposed in the Bible, but sometimes, it seems, in contradictory ways. Always the word is powerful, accomplishing God’s purpose:

With the practiced eye of someone who has wrestled with the theme of Word and World for many years as editor of this journal (1987–2016), Fred Gaiser reflects on the ways in which these two poles have defined and shaped theological reflection over the thirty-five-year history of our journal, and how these twin foci are still vitally important for the Christian community.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10)

But what is that purpose? True, in the beginning God spoke the world into being:

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (Gen 1:3)

Yet God can also speak the world into extinction:

The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the LORD has spoken this word. (Isa 24:3)

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Just as word and world are inseparably linked in biblical thought, we hope the same thing is true of our journal as well—in this case not to harm but to help. Of course, in *Word & World*, though we certainly want to present God’s word to the world, we actually speak of our words *about* God’s word—human words. How long will they endure—certainly not forever, as Isaiah promises for the word of God (Isa 40:8)? Not long ago, I read somewhere that if you want something you write to be read in a hundred years (hardly forever!), you have to put it in print. No doubt true. I have no way to read the floppy discs on which much of my early stuff was written on my old Apple IIe, and what happens to all of my stuff “safely” stored in “the cloud,” when the cloud is struck by lightning or a blast of radiation (perish the thought)?

Alas, not even words in print will be around forever. (Remember the fate of the famous Royal Library of Alexandria?) That humbles those of us who write and edit. What about the words in *Word & World*? A rough calculation indicates that in the years of our existence we have published some 6,500,000 words. (And the editors at least have read them all, usually more than once!) We hope they have explicated the word of God. Still, these are not themselves the word of God, so they too will be part of the “heaven and earth” that will eventually “pass away” (Matt 24:35).

Or will they? A few years ago, preparing for retirement, I was forced to go through all the papers in my office—letters, lecture notes, sermons, *Word & World* files, and others—collected over forty years of teaching, but now destined for the recycling bin. It was disheartening work. One day, when she was helping, I lamented to my wife, “I’m throwing away a lifetime of work here.” She corrected me: “Your work,” she said, “is not here on paper; it is in the minds and work of those you have taught all these years.” Thank you, Barbara! Hopefully, we can say something similar about *Word & World*. The paper will inevitably be cast into the pro-

verbal fire, but the journal, too, is not only words on paper. The words “live” on our website and in library collections to be sure, but more importantly in the thought and discussion these words have produced. We are grateful to have been part of that process. As then editor Arland Hultgren put it in an early issue of *Word & World* with the title “What Words Will Do,” we might “carry on a discussion concerning what words will do when they are well chosen and put to use in proclamation, teaching, pastoral care, conversation, and public witness.”¹ That remains our goal.

WORD & WORLD: THE JOURNAL²

Word & World was born on January 1, 1981, with its first issue on the theme of “Evangelism.” The journal turned thirty-five on January 1, 2016, with an issue on “Masculinity.” Those two themes mark something of the scope of the journal’s interests: Evangelism as an essential activity of the church (“*Word*”) and masculinity as a relatively recent social concern (“*World*”). In between have been issues on almost every book of the Bible, pastoral matters such as “The Funeral” and “Prayer,” and ethical concerns, such as “The Land” and “Water.” For the editor, working through the articles for each issue has been something of a continuing education course in that particular area. Our hope is that the same is true for our readers. Thus, we remain a thematic journal with largely solicited articles.

Early decisions

Obviously, there had to be planning prior to the publication of that first issue, on evangelism. Interest in putting out a journal arose within what was then the “joint faculties” of Luther-Northwestern Seminaries (now Luther Seminary). In its proposal to the full faculties, the Church Relations Committee said that “the journal should present itself to the reader in a quiet, dignified, and confident manner.” Further,

the journal must represent the very highest quality of biblical interpretation, historical research, and theological reflection but that these scholarly materials must be delivered in such a way that they will be of interest and use not only to those in teaching responsibilities but also to pastors seeking help in the practice of ministry.³

This description could have been written by today’s Editorial Board with virtually no changes (though I’m not sure that all of our articles have been “quiet,” nor should they have been). It might be said that the journal has moved more closely to the focus on parish ministry, but certainly the goal of publishing articles of the “highest quality” of theological work remains.

¹Arland Hultgren, “What Words Will Do,” *Word & World* 6/3 (1986) 247.

²Significant parts of the remainder of this article were originally published in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 43/1 (2016), at <http://www.currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/issue/view/2/showToc>. The material used here is printed with the kind permission of CTM.

³A copy of this proposal is available in the *Word & World* files.

In January 1979, the joint faculties, meeting and acting together, elected a faculty board to begin its work.

What's in a name?

A matter of central importance was the selection of a name for the journal. The board considered this for some six months before narrowing down the list of suggestions to four finalists: *Simul*, *Martyria*, *Accent*, and *Word and World*.⁴ Deciding on *Word and World* (the “and” was later changed to an ampersand) was, in my opinion, crucial. While *Simul* and *Martyria* are rich theological terms, even in 1980 they would not have been immediately understood by many—especially, the “nonspecialist” readers the journal was meant to reach—and now most would look at them like, in Luther’s famous words, “cows at a new gate.”⁵ Those terms would not have worked, nor would have “Accent,” simply because there is nothing there to point potential readers to the mission and purpose of the journal.

The first editor, James Burtness (now deceased), discusses the significance of the name in his first editorial,⁶ and I have subsequently written on our website:

At *Word & World* we take our conjunctions and prepositions seriously. We are Word and World: Things flow both ways across an “and.” Word is in conversation with world. We seek to inform and to be informed. We speak and we listen. We welcome the open connection because we believe both word and world belong to God. We are Theology for Christian Ministry: There is direction in a “for.” Theology is for the work of God in the world; it is for the ministry of the church; it is for the gospel. We recognize that if theology is for ministry, neither theology nor ministry will remain unchanged. Such change we do not fear for it is the change that comes with life and growth.⁷

Relation to Luther Seminary

The original plan was to give the journal independent legal status, and all the paperwork had been established to make that happen. But then the board reconsidered. As Sponheim pointed out in his letter:

I believe the essential point is that independent legal incorporation might mean that the journal would tend to drift away from the seminary or be perceived to do so. There is strong conviction that the journal belongs with the seminaries and that independent legal incorporation, while it may have some advantages, seems to compromise that connection with the seminaries.

Again, this was a crucial decision. *Word & World*'s integral relation with the seminary has been beneficial to both. The journal has a firm base, a “home,” and a

⁴Information about this early work and the suggested names was shared with the faculty in a March 12, 1980, letter from the first chair of the Editorial Board, Paul Sponheim. The letter is in the *Word & World* files.

⁵Luther used this German proverb more than once, the best known place being in “On Translating: An Open Letter,” in *LW* 35:188, where Luther is speaking about how his Catholic opponents gaze in bewilderment at his insertion of “sola” into his translation of Rom 3:28.

⁶James Burtness, “The Word for the World,” *Word & World* 1/1 (1981), 3–6; reprinted in this issue.

⁷On the *Word & World* website, at <http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/about.aspx?m=4024>.

purpose not unlike the seminary itself, as the subtitle suggests: “Theology for Christian Ministry.” That push, theology for ministry, has helped shaped the mission and direction of not only the journal but also that of the seminary’s curriculum. Theology is not merely an academic enterprise—though it must be rigorously academic—it is engaged for the sake of ministry; nor is the seminary’s work merely “practical.” Ministry without a strong theological base quickly becomes shallow and amorphous.

A journal of the entire faculty

All of the original documents and decisions presuppose that *Word & World* is a journal of the seminary faculty, not controlled by the administration or a tool for the development office; the board is elected by the faculty, and the board, in turn, elects the editorial staff. Without this proper “separation of powers,” the journal could not have received the recognition that it presently enjoys. I have sometimes compared the work of the journal to that of a tenured faculty member, though that analogy is not perfect. While fully committed to the mission and work of the school—like a tenured faculty member—the faculty board has full control over the content and themes of the issues without fear that someone is looking over their shoulder. This relationship has generally been respected by all parties and has frequently worked to their benefit. Only once has a member of the administration (in this case a development officer) objected in advance to an issue because it might prove too controversial (the issue was on “Sexual Identity”); and on one occasion, when a donor wrote to the president complaining that a particular author was an out-and-out heretic (which, in our judgment, he was not), the president was able to explain that the journal was not a “house organ” and that its individual authors spoke not for the seminary nor, for that matter, for the faculty or the journal.

An important element in the journal’s thriving within the seminary and without has been an insistence and practice of representing the whole faculty, neither one faction of the whole nor one department or division. Attention has been paid to this in election of the board and selection of staff. Burtness, a systematic theologian, served as editor for only the first three issues before departing for sabbatical leave. He was followed by Arland Hultgren, a professor of New Testament. Hultgren served until 1988, when I, an Old Testament professor, was elected editor. As planned, I have now been succeeded by Mark Granquist, a professor of church history.⁸

How “Lutheran” are we?

The initial proposal cited earlier insisted that “the journal should represent the evangelical strength of the Lutheran tradition without being parochial.” Thus, a happy fringe benefit of not adopting the name “Simul” was the avoidance of the

⁸I would be remiss were I not to mention the important work over the years of our Editorial Fellows, Luther Seminary graduate students, and above all the essential contribution of our Production Editor Sylvia Ruud, who has been with the journal almost since Day 1.

immediate Lutheran connections with that term.⁹ *Word & World* does not at all shy away from its Lutheran heritage, and it is happily ensconced in a Lutheran institution. But the journal has always sought to represent and reach a broader community. Its authors have never been exclusively Lutheran, and its readership is increasingly ecumenical. And, of course, the seminary itself is a different place than it was in 1980, when all of the board members were Lutheran, as was almost the entire faculty. No longer the case, the board and staff now include also Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, a monastic of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and one person self-defined as “nondenominational,” while the faculty itself is an even more ecumenical group.

What do these changes imply? Will denominations survive in anything like their present forms? Will Lutheranism continue to splinter or find its way back together? What will be the impact of global Christianity? We have considered such matters in several issues, particularly in two: “Whither Lutheranism?” (11/3) and “Whither Denominations?” (25/1). Not surprisingly, both times people have jokingly suggested that we should have dropped the first “h” in “Whither”! Now, coming in 2017 will be an issue on “Life without God,” considering among other things the growing percentage of “nones” in American life and beyond.

Obviously, the “world” has changed dramatically in the past decades and so have our understandings of the divine “word”—at least some of them. Things change, and they must.

Our mission

Surprisingly—or perhaps not—the description of the mission of the journal found in the earliest documents and editorials has changed little. Obviously, the “world” has changed dramatically in the past decades and so have our understandings of the divine “word”—at least some of them. Things change, and they must. Our first board chair, Professor Sponheim, along with his colleague Terry Fretheim, might argue for changes in God as well. Both have written about this in the pages of *Word & World*.¹⁰ Yes, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8), but that verse refers to the gospel, God’s total and reliable commitment to the divine promises. This remains unchanged, despite the fact that Jesus himself “grew and became strong” (Luke 2:40), just as our understandings of God and Christ must grow. Things change, even Jesus.

So, as our understandings grow, so must our theology and our notions of ministry. Word and world continue to define our identity, and theology for Chris-

⁹Many years ago, students, noting that the seminary stood at the corner of Como Avenue and Eustis Street, made and sold T-shirts that played off the Lutheran formula *simul justus et peccator*. The shirts bore the legend “Como, Eustis, et Peccator.”

¹⁰See, for example, their articles in *Word & World* 19/4 (1999), both entitled, “To Say Something—About God, Evil, and Suffering.”

tian ministry our purpose, but the sense of every term in those descriptions necessarily changes with time. Otherwise, why plan ahead for new issues? Why not rerun the old ones, many of which remain surprisingly useful and relevant? *Word & World* seeks to look back at the best of our traditions (historical theology), to look carefully at the sources that ground us (biblical theology), to look and think carefully about God and faith (systematic theology), to look around at our present world (ethics, environment, social concerns), and to look forward to what is coming and what will be needed for pastoral ministry (once practical theology, then pastoral theology, and now “leadership”—everything changes!).

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Quoting Burtness again in his first editorial:

There will be those who think we are too theological, who will not see the importance of investigation unless it is immediately usable. And there will be those who think that we are too tied to ministry, too superficial. There will be those who think we are too tied to the Word, and those who think we are too immersed in the world.

After thirty-five years, I hope any such skeptical voices—at least those who have continued to read the journal—have become convinced of the validity of our goal: joining theology and ministry as we believe they must be and as our subtitle announces: “Theology for Christian Ministry.”

Explicating this, the first announcement of the journal, along with a bid for subscribers, stated:

[The journal] affirms that theology is a necessary function of the entire church, that theology which does not drive toward ministry is no longer Christian theology, and that ministry which neglects theology will soon lose its identity as Christian ministry.

Our audience

Who are our readers? Who comprises our audience? What is the nature of our articles? There, too, things have changed. Early on, a reader would have found many uses of the rhetorical “we,” mostly descriptive sentences, and a much more “objective” tone. If an author used “I,” that almost guaranteed that the article would be consigned to the “Perspectives” section. That section still exists and still is used for pieces of clearly personal opinion or personal observation. But the person of the author has become increasingly visible in all our articles as the years go on—all in all, a good thing in my opinion, but even in our Face to Face feature,

which is by definition a matter of different opinions or perspectives, we want something more than blogs. We want thought-out opinion, developed opinion, opinion well argued, and not all authors or potential authors understand that. Have they been ruined by reading too many blogs and by their own blogging?

Nevertheless, though we want the journal to show up in libraries and classrooms, even more we would like to find it on pastors' desks. My present "instructions to authors" states:

Prior to all technical considerations, authors should commit themselves to write for the journal's primary audience—parish pastors who are interested in the best fruits of study and reflection as these are addressed to them in their work. Articles should be written with creativity and imagination in a style that is fully accessible to a careful but nonspecialist reader in the practice of ministry.

Or, following this paragraph, in another place:

To be sure, the journal is intended for scholars and students as well, and we seek to publish articles of substance that will honor our place in the academic community. We do this, however, with the goal of relating theology to ministry in the contemporary world.

I have sometimes stated that my "ideal" article would be one fully accessible to the nonspecialist reader who is interested in theological matters, but one that a scholar in the field, had she or he not read it, might feel they had missed something. Obviously, articles rightly fall at different places on this continuum, but that general description remains our goal.

Our future

I dearly hope this is not another place where we can or should omit the first "h" from "whither," though, as we all know, the future of print journals is troubled. But print must not be lost, or it may be that all is lost:

A physical book, which liberates from pop-up ads and the temptation to click into oblivion when the prose gets dull, represents everything an identity requires. . . . It offers immersion into inner experience, engagement in impassioned discussion, humility within a larger community, and the affirmation of an ineluctable quest to experience the consciousness of fellow humans. In this way, books can save us.¹¹

It may be that's too grand a notion to apply to journals like ours, but even for us print offers something that digital expression cannot. There's something about a physical page that makes the material more real, more lasting, more "there."

Or maybe that opinion is just as outdated as I am. So, while for now *Word & World* has a stable core of faithful readers, we know we must think of ways to be more digitally present to this brave new world without, I hope, giving up on print.

¹¹James McWilliams, "Saving the Self in the Age of the Selfie," *The American Scholar*, Spring 2016, 35.

We have begun a process to think about such matters. How do we have more direct contact with our readers? How do we allow responsible feedback? How might we work more directly in tandem with other Luther Seminary online enterprises such as Working Preacher and Enter the Bible? We are pretty much the same people, so working together ought not be difficult, but we have not yet done it adequately. Beyond the Luther Seminary sites, how do we develop a more lively presence on Facebook or even Twitter (though, in my personal opinion, while Twitter works for some things, trying to address significant matters in 140-character “tweets” more often truncates or even prevents reflective thought rather than stimulating it)? Facebook—or perhaps a feedback section on our own website—could help us continue the “word and world” conversation outside the journal itself.

So, while maintaining its original intent and identity, *Word & World* has come a long way in thirty-five years. But we are not finished. As Robert Frost has written, “[We] have promises to keep / And miles to go before [we] sleep.”¹² ⊕

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¹²Robert Frost, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” available often on websites, including, for example, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171621>.