

SCRIPTURE AS WORD OF GOD:
EVANGELICAL ASSUMPTION OR EVANGELICAL
QUESTION?

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Within historical and modern evangelical orthodox Christian contexts it is all but assumed that when reference is made to "the Word of God" it is Holy Scripture that is intended; and that in spite of evangelical Christocentricity and the fact of "the Word made flesh." Modern evangelicalism, across the traditions, has consistently maintained the propriety of the claim that Holy Scripture *is* the written or, more recently, "inscripturated" Word of God, whatever else may rightly and more directly be identified as the Word of God. Indeed, much of evangelical theological identity, and its Christocentricity, is grounded in the confessional linkage whereby Scripture *is* the written Word of God.

Yet this contention cannot be regarded as confined only to modern evangelicalism. Historians of Christian theology have repeatedly pointed out, often with scorn, that this textual identification or connection of Word or revelation of God with Holy Scripture is the almost universal position of the church fathers and pre-Christian Judaism.¹ Historically, post-Nicene, medieval (East and West), Reformation, and post-Reformation Catholic and Protestant Christianity has held the same position—despite historical, ecclesiological, conceptual, and methodological shifts and developments. In fact, the often predominant position of church fathers and doctors, and on occasion the Reformers, was not simply that Scripture is or can be rightly identified as the written Word of God but that this very process meant essentially divine dictation of the books of Scripture. While such an extreme "docetic" view has been disavowed almost unanimously in modern evangelicalism, the central contention about the revelatory character of Scripture has

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¹Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Hayser and Row, 1960) chaps. 2, 3; Bruce Shelley, *By What Authority?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture," in *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). This is a position acknowledged by Pinnock but skirted by Bloesch and Fackre.

continued to be basic. But it is this very point of identification that has in recent years been carefully and subtly denied by theologians who claim the label "evangelical."

In order to bring preliminary clarity to the claims, issues, questions, and criticisms, as well as constructive reformulation, several points regarding evangelical assessment of Scripture and contemporary developments ought to be made. By thus identifying Scripture as the written Word of God, the claim is then that God has revealed himself historically in acts, centrally and supremely in Jesus Christ. It also means that God has revealed himself personally to persons to redeem them; that God has revealed himself "contentfully," i.e., that God's self-disclosure is not fully given in a bare Act of power (e.g., Exodus) nor in dramatic, but conceptually empty, "will-o'-the-wisp" personal encounters, but "content-fully" in ways effectually expressible *in* and *as* human language, even *written* language. The theological result is not merely a Scripture that points to the Word of God (Christ), like John the Baptist in the Grünewald altarpiece,² nor a Scripture that "becomes" the Word and which the Word of God breaks through in order to meet us as "I to Thou,"³ nor a Scripture that "brings" or "conveys" the Word of God to us; nor even a Scripture "in which" the Word of God can be found somewhere. Instead, the evangelical position on revelation is an understanding of Holy Scripture as the in-scripturated Word of God, whatever may be its other Spirit-effected roles in relation to the redemptive self-disclosure of God (cf. below). However we reckon Scripture's unitary connectedness to, in, and under Christ *the* Word, by the Spirit, the historic evangelical position emphasizes the reality of the participation of Scripture within the economy of God's gracious, condescending self-giving, to be known objectively and redemptively as he is in himself in the world. The point is that at some level Scripture-as-Scripture *is* (ontologically) Word of God. The evangelical position, like the historical position of the church, is not fearful of or repulsed by the participation of the divine in the human, the material, even in the linguistic (at the level of the text).

But within evangelicalism there is a subtle and nuanced move away from this identification of Word of God and Holy Scripture at any level, except perhaps in a formal "adoptionist" or "Arian" sense. Whether correct or incorrect, these recent attempts to cut the divine Word of God free from the written text of Scripture are conceptually and methodologically reflective of the re-entrenchment of dualistic thinking which, in theology, inevitably bifurcates the unity of God's

²This was a favorite illustration of Barth's for the role of Scripture in relation to Christ. The picture has John pointing to the crucified Christ, thus bearing "witness to him." A copy of the Grünewald altarpiece hung just above Barth's desk at his home in Basel.

³Such "personalistic" emphasis, via the influence of Jewish existentialist Martin Buber, has played a prominent role in concepts of divine revelation in this century, especially, e.g., in the thought of Emil Brunner, John Baille, and to a lesser extent in Barth and Thomas Torrance.

redemptive-kingdom purposes by cutting off the objective knowledge of God in the world. It is the purpose here to present, analyze, and critique three recent evangelical discussions of Holy Scripture in relation to revelation/Word of God, and to present a Christocentric revelational model wherein participative place is found for written human language *in* and *as* Word of God.

I. THREE RECENT FORMULATIONS OF THE SCRIPTURE-WORD OF GOD RELATIONSHIP

A. Donald Bloesch

Donald Bloesch has long been an insightful, intelligent, and effective evangelical theological light in the midst of mainline Protestant theology. A combination of theological acumen and humble, faithful, Reformed piety is found throughout his works.⁴ In recent years Bloesch has embarked on an extensive theological project entitled *Christian Foundations*, already well-known and much used in evangelical seminaries and colleges. In the second volume, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation*, Bloesch endeavors to walk the *via media* between what he sees as the theological pitfalls of (inerrantist) fundamentalism and liberalism on the question of Holy Scripture. This dialectical structuring of what he perceives to be extreme against extreme is found on nearly every page of the work.

But the concern here is the relation of Scripture to Word of God, and thus biblical authority in a primary sense. Again, one cannot really trace out Bloesch's position without seeing those dialectical relations within which he sets his view. Yet even here the point is not immediately clear. In addition to following James Barr's critique of a largely straw man "fundamentalism," and so lumping, e.g., Carl Henry, Millard Erickson, and J. I. Packer together as advocates of a "rationalistic neo-fundamentalism,"⁵ he also chides neo-orthodoxy and liberalism, claiming for his own position the high ground of the title "evangelical." How then is this reflected in his assessment of the character and authority of Scripture?

Against what he esteems to be the "frozen truth" of orthodoxy and its "docetic" view of Scripture, Bloesch sees the need to recover the "paradoxical unity of Word and Spirit" and a highly dynamic conception of the self-disclosure of God in Christ. To this end, he says, we must distinguish between the "transcendent content" of divine revelation and its historical form (Jesus) and any sense of Scripture as "written Word of God," i.e., as witness to the truth revealed in Christ, and as the "living Word" which it "becomes"

⁴E.g., *The Struggle of Prayer, Wellsprings of Renewal, The Crisis of Piety*, and others, along with works directly related to "doctrinal" theology.

⁵Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 65-7, 94-101.

when it actually communicates the truth and power of Christ to us by the Spirit.⁶ Indeed, these could be useful points of distinction in seeking to understand God's self-disclosure. But what Bloesch intends in terms of Scripture's relation to "Word of God" is largely fashioned in the dialogical relation he maintains throughout with the "dialectical theology movement," or "neo-orthodoxy," and with Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in particular. In terms of criticism, the following statement is both telling and ironic:

Neo-orthodoxy . . . while calling for a recovery of biblical authority, was unable to hold together the divine and the human sides of Scripture. It can be faulted for fostering a Nestorian approach to the Bible in which the divine word and human word are only loosely associated and never function in indissoluble unity.⁷

Elsewhere Bloesch says that:

For Barth the Bible *is* the Word of God because . . . [the] work of God is done *through* this text. . . . Every word or proposition in the Bible when taken in and of itself and when divorced from God's truth is open to error. At the same time, when united to the divine Word [i.e., Christ], the living, transcendent center of the Bible, it is then a *bearer* of the transcendent . . . the potential of being a vehicle of divine grace.⁸

It is here, says Bloesch, that neo-orthodoxy advanced beyond "fundamentalism," i.e., by its "sharp distinction between Scripture as a historical and literary document and divine revelation."⁹

Bloesch, following Barth especially, understands God's revelation to be objective truth and event, focused primarily on God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. But it refers also to the dynamic and effectual meaning and significance of Christ.¹⁰ Does this latter element refer to Scripture via the process of "inspiration"? No. Bloesch all but passes by classic passages such as 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21, etc., while defining "inspiration" dynamically after Barth's own pattern, which emphasizes primarily the ever presentness of inspiration by the enactment of the Spirit. To this are joined other elements reflecting both his concern for existential encounter with God's transcendent Word and his antipathy to any "static" identification between the transcendent Word/Truth of God and the historical, cultural, human witness to that Word, i.e., Holy Scripture.¹¹

⁶Ibid., 24-5.

⁷Ibid., 33.

⁸Ibid., 101-2.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 49ff.

¹¹Ibid., 117f., 126f.

Yet Bloesch does not take a straightforward "Barthian" position. Contra Barth's clear distinction between Scripture text and Word of God, Bloesch's position is more nuanced. Thus he says,

The *content* of the Bible is indeed God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, but this content comes to us in the form of a historical witness to this event or constellation of events. To know this content we need to get beyond "the right human thoughts about God [i.e., Scripture]" to "the right divine thoughts about men" [i.e., "Word," quote from Barth]. . . . [The Scriptures] now function as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit . . . [by whom we become] contemporaneous with the moment of revelation . . . through the word that we hear. The Bible is not in and of itself the revelation of God but the divinely appointed means and channel of this revelation.¹²

Since, for Bloesch, the "Word of God transcends the human witness," the "human word," it is not surprising that he must caricature what has been understood as the "evangelical" or "historical orthodox" position, claiming that its representatives identify the scriptural writings as the "stenographic notes of God's audible voice."¹³ This is why he anachronistically claims that the "magisterial Reformers (especially Calvin)," the Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, etc., also held to his own neo-Barthian emphasis on the "qualitative transcendence of divine truth over the earthen vessels."¹⁴ To defend his position that the Word of God "does not consist in revealed truths that are objectively 'there' in the Bible," he must simultaneously agree and disagree with Carl Henry, saying that:

God reveals himself not only in acts but also in words. But does God reveal words and statements, and, if so, are they identical with the biblical words? Is there not a qualitative distance between the speech of God and the writing of humans?¹⁵

But *why* must there be and *how* can there be this "qualitative distance" between God's Word and some transcendent "divine

¹²Ibid., 56-7. Herein Bloesch is much indebted to Soren Kierkegaard and his concept of "contemporaneousness" as developed to relate Christ the Word to later believers in *Philosophical Fragments*. It is in regard to this very concern that this writer recently discovered a pertinent point made by Millard Erickson about Bloesch's view of Scripture, one with which he is essentially in agreement. He says that "Bloesch chooses to identify with the "sacramental" approach [to understanding the nature of Scripture]. . . . this is not to say that the words of Scripture are directly revealed (as in the Scholastic approach) but that Scripture embodies the truth that God wants us to hear." "It is the Word of God in human clothing, the revelation of God transmitted through human concepts and imagery." Erickson adds that, "It appears that we have here a view of revelation and the Bible that is basically the orthodox view, but influenced by elements of Barth's view."

¹³Ibid., 58.

¹⁴Ibid., 60.

¹⁵Ibid., 67.

speech/words" (whatever that might be, as an abstraction) and human language *unless* there is an inherent limitation to the gracious condescension of God and his desire to make himself redemptively and objectively known as he is for us *in history*?

It must be acknowledged that the phrase "Word of God" is used with contextual variety in Scripture. Scripture is *not* "Word of God" in the same sense, or better, as I will argue, at the same "level" as Christ the Word, for he is by nature the eternal, self-disclosure of God (John 1). And yes, Scripture is the God-given witness to Christ (John 5:39). Scripture, by the process of *theopneustos*, in, of, from, and under Christ, is *derivatively* Word of God. But by God's grace, it *is* Word of God, a conclusion affirmed by scriptural usage of the concept "Word of God." It is here that Bloesch, like Barth and Brunner in various ways, falls into disjunctive or dichotomous (dualist) means of conceptualizing the Word of God out of a neo-Platonic fear that an affirmation of such a historical, linguistic Word of God would tarnish *the* Word of God. What then of the incarnation?¹⁶

This "transcendentalizing" tendency causes Bloesch (like Barth) to back away from such condescension and from all truly asymmetrical, interactive, unitary God-world-human (historical) redemptive relatedness. While chiding Barth for his revelational "Nestorianism," Bloesch is, from one perspective, almost as "Nestorian" as Barth at this point. But from another side, Bloesch, with his desire to lift up the divine authority of the, finally, human word of Scripture, is probably best characterized as "Arian" regarding the relation of Scripture to the Word of God.

B. Gabriel Fackre

For many years, Gabriel Fackre, too, has labored for what he has called a properly "evangelical" theology within the mainline streams of Reformed thought in the United Church of Christ, Andover-Newton Theological School (where he is Abbot Professor of Theology), and the Boston Consortium of theological schools. His writings have influenced recent thought on worship, evangelical ecumenism, and especially the contemporary effects of the Noachic covenant and narrative theology. The last two especially play crucial roles within the argument in his new work, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation*.

Much of Fackre's reformulation of the doctrine of revelation stands under the broad influence of Avery Dulles's *Models of Revelation*, especially Dulles's emphasis on the centrality of revelation. As Dulles puts it, "The great theological disputes turn out, upon reflection, to rest on different understandings of

¹⁶This is a concern and relation which Bloesch comes very close to acknowledging on pp.69-70.

revelation, often simply taken for granted."¹⁷ Also crucial for Fackre are Dulles's primary "models," "intellectual constructs that express major tendencies"—here, of course, with reference to revelation.

Fackre draws on Dulles's five phenomenological models of revelation and transposes them into his four "phases of revelation," which he sets in terms of his narrative approach and then exemplifies in terms of prominent twentieth-century Christian theological expressions of revelation. In terms of narrative, or the central "disclosive moments" within "the comprehensive story of reconciliation," Fackre's reconfiguration emphasizes first "preservation" or revelation vis-à-vis universal human experience; second, "action" or revelation in definitive acts of God, especially the election of Israel and then centrally the Incarnation; third, and quite significantly, "inspiration" or the "privileged" accounts and interpretations of the deeds of God in Scripture (a position Dulles terms "revelation as Doctrine"); and fourth, "illumination," or the light God sheds on all previous acts of divine disclosure. Within twentieth-century discussions of revelation, Fackre examines a series of "interlocutors" who typify these particular aspects of the "Grand Narrative" of revelation—especially Paul Tillich ("preservation"), Karl Barth ("incarnate action"), Carl Henry ("inspiration"), and Karl Rahner ("ecclesial illumination"). Fackre's evangelical concern is that these models be holistically and properly seen within the broad purposes of God's reconciling divine disclosure. But in the course of discussion it becomes clear also that Fackre is committed to essentially the Barthian-Christocentric position, not only as it *rightly* grounds all revelation in Jesus Christ, but also as it finally cuts off "inspired" Scripture from any direct participation *in* and *as* "Word of God" in the strict sense. The relation of the chapters on "incarnate action" and "inspiration" are then crucial in presenting Fackre's narrative case at this particular point of concern.

All this is not to say that Fackre denies cognitive revelation in order to reduce the heart of what may be called divine revelation to the content-less "encounter" of "dialectical presence" (e.g., so-called neo-orthodoxy). In criticizing Tillich's "ontological reason" and religious symbols as revelation, Fackre reveals this concern, saying that

While the symbols of myth and cult are said to give "knowledge" of ultimate reality, the word in that context means access to *mystery* of being itself. Their purpose is expressive and evocative, not cognitive in its usual meaning.¹⁸

And, in criticizing Barth's epistemology, Fackre somewhat obscurely points in this direction when he states that

¹⁷Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) xix.

¹⁸Gabriel Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 85.

The problems with Barth's epistemology arise when he departs from his own biblical standard for understanding the freedom of God for and among us. This might be described as the influence of an "actualism" with philosophical roots in existentialist philosophy. . . . The entrance of [divine sovereignty and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit] into the doctrine of revelation is related to Barth's determination to protect the decisiveness of the ["incarnate action"] chapter of the Story. Only here in Jesus Christ is God free *for* us. . . . [T]he actual address happens only when and where He wills it to be so. . . . [Thus] no assurance can be given that the media [e.g., Bible] are always and everywhere bearers of the knowledge of God.¹⁹

Yet here, too, as in the Tillich critique, the real nature of "knowledge of God" and "cognitive" revelation is not clear. Given what we will see of Fackre's concerns about "propositional" (content-ful) revelation, and so of any identification of Scripture with divine Word of God in more than an indirect sense, one is left with as much doubt about Fackre as Fackre had about Tillich.²⁰

While critical of Barth at points and bringing proper initial corrective to the particular form of Barth's Christocentric concept of revelation, Fackre often falls in step with that very same type of Christocentricity as the core of his own understanding of the "Grand Narrative." For Fackre, "All that is said in this [Fackre's] work on revelation is finally traceable to the Word that God spoke to us in the historical event of Jesus Christ."²¹ This means that Christ is rightly regarded as *the* defining action of God, God's ultimate deed and disclosure, and the "central chapter of the story" which then determines what we see in all other aspects of the story. But it also means that Jesus Christ is finally the one, true, and only Word of God. While emphasizing, much like the later Barth, the freedom of God in promising a trustworthy Presence in all of his reconciling work (and so the narrative), Fackre also insists that Christ is "the one Word" and Scripture, as "witness to that Word," stands at last outside of what can be truly regarded as divine disclosure or Word of God. So Fackre's own Christocentricity, no less than Barth's, reflects a fear that any historical claim to continuity (identity) with the revelatory divine Presence, other than the incarnate Word, imperils that centrality of Christ.²² Fackre expresses a significant point for his larger and narrower purposes when he asks,

¹⁹Ibid., 137f.

²⁰In relation to such emphases one ought to note what Fackre is affirming via Donald Baille (Fackre, *The Doctrine*, 31-2).

²¹Ibid., 147.

²²It is noteworthy that in reference to Scripture, Fackre acknowledges Barth's correctness in teaching a generation to be wary of theologies that "take deity capture in forms of human manufacture." The point is that, like Barth, Fackre understands God's sovereignty, and thus God's freedom, to mean that the one place that God has chosen to be revelatorily free for us and among us is in Jesus Christ. Thus it is to this one place that Scripture bears witness (Fackre, *The Doctrine*, 137f.).

In what authority do we say that Jesus Christ is the centre of the narrative of . . . revelation? In the thought of Karl Barth, and throughout this work, we have turned to the "Bible" definitively and the "Church" derivatively as witness to the Word come among us.²³

But why is this so? Why are Scripture and tradition, Bible and church, said to be "definitively" and "derivatively" related to the revelation and so to authority? Our concern again is Scripture, and Fackre's point is directed to inspiration of Scripture and to dialogue with the work of Carl Henry. Here Fackre clearly confirms his chastened Barthian understanding of Scripture and Word.

Fackre's concern with what he calls "the much-neglected theme of the inspiration of Scripture," occurs via analysis of Carl Henry's work, as he seeks to uncover why the Bible is an authoritative source of the narrative, "a phase of revelation."²⁴ Such references to "authority" and "revelation" would appear to mean *prima facie* that Scripture is itself revelation. Not so. Fackre emphasizes the crucial nature of the "inspiration" of the text of Scripture and formulates his view in dialogical contrast to historical evangelicalism's assertion of a divinely content-ful (i.e., propositional) text of Scripture as an aspect and product of revelation in and under Christ by the Spirit. Wanting to correct this in a "properly evangelical" way, Fackre analyzes Henry's position along lines that are useful and often insightful as well as formative for his own disjunctive, dualist understanding of Word-Scripture.

Carl Henry's role has been to call theologians back to "inspiration" and so to the importance of the text and the place of words in the inspiration of Scripture. The acts of God are vacuous without verbal interpretation. Fackre acknowledges that Henry's view of verbal inspiration arises from a legitimate concern for the place of propositions in the inspiration of Scripture. Put in narrative terms, Fackre asks whether biblical images and Scripture's "overarching story" correspond to actual human and divine states of affairs. And does Scripture make cognitive truth-claims along these lines? Henry insists that revelation cannot be reduced to the personal or social power of Encounter, metaphor, or community story. While Scripture, understood as a participative aspect of revelation, *does*

²³Ibid.

²⁴He responds to Carl Henry's contributions to the "narrative of revelation" in terms of the "inspiration" of the text of Scripture. Fackre says that "As all loyalties are rooted in a 'leap of faith,' so the doctrine of inspiration presupposes a primal decision: the Yes to the living Word by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. The believer brought to Jesus Christ by that Word spoken and received through the power of the Spirit is *led* into the Great Narrative found only in this Book. To be drawn to Christ is to be drawn into the Story, into its 'source' text. . . . The authenticity of the encounter with the Word, Jesus Christ, is inseparable, therefore, from the trustworthiness of Scripture." Such points reflect somewhat how Fackre juxtaposes Word Christ and Scripture text, but also leave a question as to how and why Carl Henry was used at all—except to broach the topic or category of "inspiration" (Fackre, *The Doctrine*, 162).

meet us personally and on the affective level, and *does* constitute the unique language world of the Christian community, yet "its meaning is not exhausted by its evocative and expressive power." Paraphrasing what he takes to be one of Henry's central contributions, in terms of the "symbolic truth" of language philosophy, Fackre says that

Biblical symbol . . . depicts Reality as well as drawing us into relationship with it. It discloses states of affairs, the way things are with both God and the world. However expressed . . . fundamental assertions about reality—propositions—are made that invite the response of Yes or No.²⁵

Well and good as far as it goes.

Yet it is at this very juncture, where actual content-ful disclosure draws nigh to Scripture text, that Fackre calls John Baillie and Karl Barth to his constructive aid lest any possible conceptual divine content be related too closely to a historical text. Using Baillie's parallel critique of Austin Farrer, he says

John Baillie is right in his concern that Farrer's images not be too simply juxtaposed to propositions for "images and propositional truths are inextricably intermingled." On the other hand, Karl Barth is right in contrasting the speaking of the Word in the person of Jesus Christ [i.e., incarnation] as "*Deus dixit*" with the "*Paulus dixit*" of the biblical words, thereby challenging theories of inspiration which identify one with the other.²⁶

But while influenced by Barth's dichotomy, Fackre finds legitimacy in Henry's defense of "propositional content," thus narrowing the chasm and allowing some connection between *Deus dixit* and *Paulus dixit*. Again, this means simply a chastened, and so "narrowed," Barthian disjunction between Word and text. While affirming a content-ful revelation, Fackre, then, like Bloesch, re-transcendentalizes such content, à la Barth and then eschatologizes it, à la Jürgen Moltmann.

The evangelical experience tempts closure of the distance between the Now and the Not Yet. . . . [Epistemologically it is] to overlook the mirror dimmed and the glass darkened. Scripture is held [by Carl Henry] to shine now with a light reserved only for a day yet to be. . . . The eschatological nature of verbal inspiration appears in Henry's construal of biblical propositions. . . . His understanding of

²⁵Ibid., 167-8. Fackre can speak of "propositional truths," e.g., God created the world, Israel is called into special covenant, God comes among us in Jesus Christ to reconcile the world. But he speaks of these as "truths of the symbol" and as "embedded in" each chapter of the Grand narrative. Thus, he significantly states as a definition of "proposition," "that which is expressed in a statement as *opposed* to the way it is expressed." Cf. Fackre's illuminating endnote 35 (pp. 176-7) to which one could wish that Fackre paid more careful attention.

²⁶Ibid., 168.

[the propositions] as sentences . . . affiliates the human words themselves with the clarity of Light reserved alone for the End.²⁷

Thus, applying eschatologically, revelatorily, and so epistemologically Luther's *simul justus et peccator* to Scripture and to Henry-type evangelical views of Scripture, Fackre emphasizes the problem of too closely tying Word of God to Scripture and failing to honor the temporal distinction between eschatologically ultimate revelation and the penultimate media, Scripture. Any collapse of eschatological truth into the verbal, or the incarnate Word (the Centre) into the historical, epistemic text, is said to miss Barth's point in the *Barmen Confession*: the "one Word of God" is not replicated by, but "attested by," Holy Scripture.²⁸

But, again, the problem is that Fackre's dualist or disjunctive thinking leads him to conclude that only clear differentiations will suffice to set forth properly the "Centre" of the "Grand Narrative" of revelation, Jesus Christ, *the* Word of God. But this is not a necessary or even a useful principle—certainly not with regard to the Scripture-Word of God relationship. A statement Fackre makes near the end of his discussion of "Scripture: Inspiration" is revealing: "Inspiration, while *part* of the revelation story, is neither the whole nor the heart of it, and must find its *derivative* place under the Word enfleshed and its *relative* place before the Word *eschatological*."²⁹ That is correct. Properly understood, this is a position with which Carl Henry would agree. But the nature of "inspiration" (the force of which Fackre seeks to blunt) of the historical text of Scripture is not intended to displace the centrality of Jesus Christ, the ontological Word made flesh, in the whole of God's redemptive self-disclosure. Scripture is the inspired *witness* to Christ; it is such by the Spirit under Christ the Word. But this subordinate servant's role is clear in Scripture itself and is affirmed historically by the church. Scripture is, to use Fackre's own term, "derivative" Word of God, unitarily (and economically) grounded in Christ the Word. Borrowing from Einstein's portrayals of reality (*mutatis mutandis*), Christ the higher "level" of divine disclosure is the interactively related basis of the lower, historical, written "level," of revelation, by the Spirit of God. This is a position taken in Scripture when Scripture itself is referred to.

Therefore Fackre affirms Scripture as a "part" of revelation, as the "in-Spirited" media *integral* to "the Tale" by which Christ and (non-textual and, apparently non-historical) content related to Christ (whatever that might be) come to us. He reflects a desire to affirm an authoritative Scripture text that can in some sense be called "divine" as well as human, a result of the action of the Spirit. Yet it is a text which cannot be directly continuous, even at a lower level, to Christ

²⁷*Ibid.*, 170.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 172.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 175.

the Word of God. His affirmation that God speaks "words," but words that are necessarily non-linguistic and non-historical, reflects again the effects of platonic perspectives. As with Bloesch, using the early Christological positions analogously, we find an "Arian" position on Scripture, a position resulting, like Arius's own, from an inherent dualism.

C. CLARK PINNOCK

For some years, Clark Pinnock has been professor of theology at McMaster Divinity School and continues to be engaged in issues of concern to evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike. Scripture and biblical authority are among the issues with which he is often identified. His thinking in *Biblical Revelation* (1971) developed eventually to his notable work *The Scripture Principle* (1984), with which we will now interact.

While this is the oldest of the three works examined here, it is in many respects the best. Pinnock grapples with issues in ways which others, perhaps concerned that they might not be understood, would avoid. The problem of course is that his book reflects his thinking over fifteen years ago; and surely his views on a number of these issues have changed. But a clear statement of his current understanding of the nature of Scripture would be difficult to obtain from his recent more polemical writings.

Pinnock means by "*The Scripture Principle*" first, that there is a place where the Word of God is accessible in human form. The creaturely text of Scripture is God's written Word and the place where he reveals his mind, where God has communicated authoritatively on subjects which call for submission. Thus Scripture is an informative Word of God to the church, given as divinely authoritative and in contentful language.³⁰ Second, Pinnock speaks in defense of scriptural authority and trustworthiness in the face of the contemporary crisis regarding "the Scripture Principle." Third, he wants "classical Christians," who maintain scriptural authority, to "move ahead" in their understanding against the current crisis, at the heart of which is the "liberal denial" of the ancient, ecumenical, classical conviction that Scripture is the written, authoritative Word of God. This crisis has arisen from the cultural shift to secular and rationalist modernity, and hence to an antipathy to any book speaking of God and humanity in pre-modern categories and to an orthodoxy which rigidly locks God in a book.³¹

Like Bloesch and Fackre, Pinnock rightly emphasizes the *Christocentric* pattern and *soteric* purpose of all self-disclosure of God. Yet, contra Barth, and more clearly than Bloesch or Fackre, Pinnock is adamant that the biblical presentation of "revelation" is "not a

³⁰Clark H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) 62, cf. p. xiii.

³¹*Ibid.*, vii, xiii, xiv.

single activity or a simple entity but that the 'pattern of revelation' within which Scripture fits is a complex web and set of actions designed to complementarily disclose the divine message of salvation" ("many and various ways God spoke"). Revelation is multifaceted and "bipolar" in structure, both objective and subjective, content revealed, received, and confirmed.³² But "Jesus Christ is and must be the centerpiece of the Christian revelation, because in him God entered the parameters of a human life . . . the revelation of God without peer. Of all the forms of revelation, this is the best."³³ Thus Scripture exists to bear witness of him (John 5:39). The Christ principle of incarnation is at the core of all consideration of the richly variegated pattern of divine revelation.

In this way, Pinnock corrects not only Barth but most theological streams since Schleiermacher by stressing the "content," the "objective truths of revelation"—it is no mere existential address or content-less encounter. In this he advances beyond the similar correctives of modern views as found in Bloesch and Fackre, and stands against these tendencies which refuse to affirm

a message full of content and truth given in intelligible speech and language—as if there were some kind of opposition between personal revelation and verbal communication. The New Testament knows no such dichotomy; it stems from modern philosophical objections to cognitive revelation and an objective knowledge of God.³⁴

This is right to the point. Pinnock's analysis and criticism of the modern shift from objective, contentful revelation is exacting and correct. Whether in the context of Israel's covenantal anticipation or the new covenant fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, revelation according to Scripture itself is content-ful, intelligible, and speaks to persons on subjects they are able to understand.³⁵

³²Ibid., 4, 5, 8.

³³Ibid., 10.

³⁴Ibid., 14.

³⁵Ibid. Note that Pinnock's early, excellent corrective factors lead to the dualist disjunctive tendency to negate content-ful revelation. At this point he contends that, "One could explain the dramatic shift away from content by listing a series of factors that incline modern minds to resistance: the theistic model presupposed by taking the Bible as written revelation, the miracles accompanying the story of divine redemption, Kant's dogma that one can have no knowledge of the transcendent such as the Bible claims, to deny numerous objections to one or another of the biblical concepts, the belief in the fallibility of the Bible as propounded by liberal criticism, and the imperialism of any claim that makes Jesus the only reason for the rejection of content in revelation: a lot of moderns are not willing to have dictated to them how they must think and how they must act. The idea that human beings must approach God on his terms, implied by the second commandment, not in ways they themselves define, is simply unacceptable to the autonomous people of today. We face such a resistance to what the Bible teaches today that the battle necessarily takes place around the issue of revelation and inspiration." Then, getting even more to the core of the problem and its implications, he says, "By shifting away from the objective content of revelation liberal theology has given the church a migraine headache. The truth foundations of

Does this affirmation truly give place to the text of Scripture in Pinnock's "pattern of revelation" in such a way that at some level Scripture *is* ontologically Word of God? It appears so. Two points seem constructively significant here, particularly in contrast to Fackre. First, in a note, Pinnock points out that Klaas Runia has rightly criticized and corrected Barth's exclusion of the scriptural text from the revelation it attests.³⁶ Second, he clearly distinguishes "revelation" from the church tradition that it engenders.³⁷ While occasionally referring to Scripture as a "medium" or "vehicle" of revelation, Pinnock's early argumentation almost always relates "Scripture" and "Word of God/revelation" in a way fully in keeping with the historical position of the church, i.e., "Scripture is the written Word of God" or "written revelation of God." Referring to the typical OT portrayals, Pinnock points out that

In the prophets . . . people who see themselves, in the tradition of Moses, able to mediate God's Word to the people . . . [they] spoke out boldly the words he gave them. They were servants to whom the Lord had revealed his secrets (Amos 3:7). They believed that God had put his words in their mouths. . . . They spoke the very word of God to Israel.³⁸

Pinnock finds the NT to be no different, especially as it both endorses and quotes from the OT "as the Word of God,"³⁹ and then claims for itself the same status.⁴⁰ While he periodically expresses an occasionalistic view of Scripture as Word of God, i.e., that part of Scripture might have been Word but is no longer Word of God for us (probably referring to applicability),⁴¹ he does not press this idea. Essentially his position early in *The Scripture Principle* is that Scripture objectively presents us, informationally or content-fully, with the "plans and purposes of God." While pointing out that Scripture is unsystematic and fragmentary, Pinnock seems clear that its testimony suggests that it was God's will that "written revelation in the form of Scripture" should come forth out of the tradition of Israel and church to "preserve the substance of the faith for posterity." At this point, then, Pinnock affirms that "Holy Scripture

the gospel are swept away and the validity of the gospel cast in doubt. We face a dilemma not unlike the one Luther faced: is the gospel and salvation based upon the Word and work of God, or is it founded upon human wisdom and achievement? Is Christian theology a clear rendition of the Word of God given in the Scriptures, or is it the highest and best human option? Emphasizing the objective side of revelation and the authority of the Bible has nothing to do with bibliolatry or rationalism. It has to do with keeping the church securely founded upon the apostolic scriptural witness, which is essential to its life and work" (Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle*, 24, 27).

³⁶Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 230 n. 34.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 15.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 32.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 44-54. Cf. esp. pp. 43, 46, 54.

⁴¹E.g., *ibid.*, 41.

is the inspired Word of God," a divine gift as "classical Christians" have always believed.⁴²

But the idea of Scripture as "medium," "vehicle," or "conveyor" of the revelation of God (revelation then being different, other, or beyond the text, having only formal and functional connection to the text), occasionally present early on, becomes increasingly dominant and finally determinant. This point is sometimes made, initially, in the "practical" sense whereby knowledge of the Scripture text as such apart from faith is not knowledge of the Word of God, since it lacks "the eyes of faith"—seemingly reflecting a sense most would agree with.⁴³ But the intent of the argument is more transitional to a "sacramental" role for Scripture akin to Fackre's. All agree that Scripture presents its truths in human language, and most hold some form of accommodation. But does the humanity of the text require disjunction from the self-disclosure of God in terms of any and all identity? Or can such human language be both witness and conveyer, a direct product of revelation, inscripturated Word of God by the Spirit? By using a number of metaphors, the most noteworthy being John Calvin's picture of "eyeglasses" and a "freight train," Pinnock builds his point that as the glasses help one to see reality "out there" and as the train carries freight that is not itself the train, Scripture, too, is the divinely given medium through which the transcendent Word of God comes from beyond.

Yet here it must be noted that for Pinnock, in contrast to Bloesch and Fackre, the interactive relation and inseparability of Word-text remain very strong. This seems to result from the conceptual implications of his acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the Incarnation analogy for our understanding of Scripture.

Christian theology . . . [presupposing God] is not beyond its epistemic rights in claiming that God has reliably revealed himself and his will in a set of creaturely modalities. . . . So long as the God of the gospel is believed in, the Bible itself is no conundrum. It can be God's infallible Word in exactly the way that it claims to be his Word and the product of God's revelational activity. If Jesus Christ

⁴²Ibid., 54. Note also pp. 55-7, 62. On p. 62, Pinnock explains what a (not "the") Scripture principle means. "It means that there is a locus of the Word of God in a humanly accessible form available to us. It means that the Bible is regarded as a creaturely text that is at the same time God's own written Word, and that we can consult his Word, which reveals his mind, and seek to know his will in it. It means that God has communicated authoritatively to us on those subjects about which Scripture teaches, whether doctrinal, ethical, or scriptural, and that we believers willingly subject ourselves to this rule of faith. More than merely human tradition and merely existential address, the Bible is the informative Word of God to the church. The text is not reduced to an expression of human experience and tradition as in liberalism, but is a contentful language deposit that addresses, as it decides, with the authority of God."

⁴³Ibid., 56.

was raised from the dead . . . then the process of revelation and its products that center upon Christ are vindicated along with him.⁴⁴

Yet despite such apparent affirmation, Pinnock's final disjunction of Scripture text and Word becomes quite plain. Affirming again that God ultimately gave Scripture to be that "literary vehicle of his Word," he further concludes that "Barth was right to speak about a distance between the Word of God and the text of the Bible." While the written medium is very limited, these restrictions are overcome by the divine message given through it.⁴⁵ Pinnock, then, takes a relatively strong view of the inspiration of Holy Scripture, affirming the dynamic work of the Spirit, who interfaces with culture-bound and limited human beings. So he considers it a divine product, a divine and human writing, and as such a functional "Word of God," almost the *sine qua non* of our "hearing of the Word of God" that is conveyed through the text for us to hear and heed. In this way, Pinnock recognizes the divine nature of the text of Scripture, but a text brought into existence to mediate the transcendent Word of God in Christ. Thus Scripture is, for Pinnock, not really so much a product of revelation as it is a product for revelation. It is the "switch track" by which the transcendent Word can be mediated redemptively into the space-time domain of human life. This disjunctive, "sacramental" conception of the relation of Scripture text to Word of God, reflected less adequately in Bloesch and Fackre, is similar to the view of Barth and also to Tillich's use of revelatory symbols. And the need for such sharp differentiation arises again out of the dualist impulse and thus from the unwillingness to conceive of unitary, interactive "levels"—in this case "levels" of the one Word of God, whether ontological or derivative. There is no need to divide Scripture from the Word of God by reducing the former to a "functional" Word, contrary to scriptural usage. Rather, true scriptural differentiation within relational singularity allows one to reflect all aspects of the Word of God in their proper relations to one another within the unitary whole and under Christ.

My concern in the analyses of Bloesch, Fackre, and Pinnock has not been to ascertain any movement into heterodoxy. All three seem to stand within the broad parameters of orthodoxy, and, when "push

⁴⁴Ibid., 95. Note also pp. 96-7ff. Here Pinnock further negates earlier statements affirming that Scripture is Word of God, the outcome reflecting something of an "adoptionism" in some contexts and "Arianism" in other contexts with regard to the status of Scripture and its relation to the Word of God.

⁴⁵Ibid., 100-1, where Pinnock approves of Hans Küng's understanding of Scripture, i.e., that "Through all human fragility and the whole historical relativity and rotation of the biblical authors, who are often able to speak only stammeringly and with inadequate conceptual means, it happens that God's call as it finally sounded out in Jesus is truthfully heard, believed and realized." It is also here that Pinnock begins to voice his quarrel with Calvinist orthodoxy and what he sees to be the problematic effects of its deterministic views on the modern formulations of biblical inerrancy, etc. Cf. pp. 188, 191.

comes to shove," Pinnock especially stands very close to the historical orthodox position. But my concerns are, first, the entrance and disjunctive effects of ontological and epistemological dualism into the doctrine of revelation, which may, if pressed consistently, lead to adoptionism or to an Arian Christology; and, second, the resulting dichotomous severing of the historical text of Scripture from revelation-as-such, *Word of God*, thus reducing any relation to the merely functional.

II. REFORMULATION AND REAFFIRMATION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE AS WORD OF GOD

A. *Written Language—Word of God?* J. I. Packer

Is a severance of Scripture from the Word of God (in terms of actual ontological and historical participation and economic/"leveled" identity) a needed corrective to the historical position of the church? In other words, reckoning the presuppositions involved, ought we finally to recognize the ideal-historical differences inherent in the issue and so forgo any linkage/continuity that might somehow jeopardize that transcendentalized, ideal Word? Must the Kantian noumenal-phenomenal split and the consequent positivistic skepticism about any real referentiality of human language be taken to heart and accepted by contemporary Christian orthodoxy? Or should such (neo-) platonic, dualistic incursions be resisted and the reaffirmation of the revelatory nature of the divine-human text of Scripture, as derivative Word of God (by the Holy Spirit), be given and restated? It is this second option which the argument here will now briefly pursue.

Can *human* linguistic forms, human language, and specifically written human language ever be legitimately reckoned as *Word of God*, indeed, God's own verbal expression? Can God give objective, content-ful, as well as personal, disclosure of himself and his purposes in space-time? Historically, the answer has been "yes." The writers of Scripture themselves believed that Yahweh, the covenant God, the God self-revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, is the speaking God who declares himself and his ways to his prophets, who thus makes himself known personally and informationally to his people. OT prophets, Jesus, and the apostles were of one mind on this, regardless of contemporary views about such communicability within the God-world-human relation. Phrases such as "Thus says Yahweh" and "God/Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets"⁴⁶ permeate both Testaments and are clearly to be taken as in some sense literally true. If Jesus is recognized as God incarnate, then his

⁴⁶E.g., Acts 28:25; Heb 1:1, 3, 7; etc.

speaking, teaching, and witness to the Father, as the Father's own Word, further confirms God's content-ful use of human language (any disjunctive difference between spoken disclosure and written communication is evasive, obscurantist non-sense). The early church reaffirmed this categorically in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, echoing the scriptural language, "The Holy Spirit . . . who spoke through the prophets."

J. I. Packer finds that the modern theological aberration that rejects the possibility of God declaring himself to humanity objectively, content-fully (informative, factual), and in human linguistic forms, has multiple roots, two of which are especially pertinent to the formulations of Bloesch, Fackre, and, to a lesser extent, Pinnock. First, pervasively skeptical Western culture has accepted the unproven assumption that all language is inadequate as a means of personal communication. If such inadequacy occurs at the common human level, the problem is surely much greater at the divine-human level.⁴⁷ Second, modern doubt regarding the possibility of content-ful divine communication has been influenced by so-called "Eastern" religious notions, as well as parallel emphases in resurgent neo-platonism, both of which stress the ineffability and inexpressibility of the remote or undifferentiated "divine."⁴⁸ Third, and more directly applicable, Packer rightly points out the prominent contemporary doubt that human language can communicate transcendent realities at all.⁴⁹ Semantics and linguistic analysis, long under the dualistic sway of defunct logical positivism, have arbitrarily concluded that language cannot connote, denote, inform, or point legitimately beyond the world of the senses. Finally, skepticism about the possibility of God's expressing himself in human linguistic forms arises from the modern widespread unwillingness of theologians to allow that in Scripture, God is actually informing human beings about himself.⁵⁰ Whatever may be acknowledged about Scripture somehow "mediating" contact with God/the divine (why Scripture?), even so, many are yet more certain that Holy Scripture is not God's Word in any way resembling Augustine's "what thy Scripture says, thou dost say." As alluded to previously, Immanuel Kant's rather deistic epistemological dualism led him to deny both the need and the very possibility of verbal revelation from God. Theological liberalism, from Schleiermacher and Ritschl to the present, has remained faithful to Kant, despite variations in emphasis. Yet it has been the breakaway movement of "dialectical theology" (or "neo-orthodoxy") which has been so directly influential on contemporary evangelical thought at this point, and it too has maintained Kant's noumenal-phenomenal split

⁴⁷James I. Packer, "The Adequacy of Human Language," in *Inerrancy* (ed. Norman L. Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 202.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 205-6.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 203-4.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 204-5.

and the consequent rejection of Scripture as Word of God (except in an occasionalist and functional way).

Within contemporary evangelical discussion on the nature of Scripture, Bloesch, Fackre, and Pinnock embrace the third form of skepticism, the inability of language adequately to refer to the "transcendent." More explicit is a Kantian dualism, which, when combined with Buberian "personalism," ends in "transcendentalizing" and de-historicizing both God and his Word, while declaring that very Word to be personal rather than propositional. Kant's deistic agnosticism left God both remote and unintelligible, and then Barth, even the mature Barth, concluded, as Frame, rightly points out, that

God's transcendence [so understood] implies that he *cannot* be clearly revealed to men, clearly represented by human words and concepts. . . . [But] Scripture never deduces from God's transcendence the inadequacy and fallibility (let alone the impossibility) of all verbal revelation. Quite the contrary. . . . Verbal revelation is to be obeyed without question *because* of the divine transcendence.⁵¹

Barthian unwillingness to allow for any real, "substantial" continuity, connection, identity, or ontological participation of the content-ful (propositional) scriptural wording as being properly within the larger category "Word of God" arises directly from Kantian, dualistic, transcendentalist thinking, as is evident especially in Bloesch and Fackre. There is no need first to extol Scripture's mediated glory and then to conclude that Scripture is finally the word of man rather than the Word of God, except in some sacramental sense. Such simultaneous bibliological Arianism-Adoptionism is only necessitated by these dualist presuppositions.

This is not to say that Bloesch's, Fackre's, and Pinnock's concerns with the real identity of Scripture and Word of God are insubstantial, in light of issues arising from elements of the text relating to human culture—perspectives and elements bound to a particular history and place. Nor are the linguistic-analytical questions empty, as they give critical attention to the very human semantic forms of discourse such as analogy, parable, model, etc. Rather, the point is that such concerns are answered in the God-world-human interactive relatedness, established in creation, sustained in providence, and completed redemptively in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, the Word made flesh in the power of the Holy Spirit. Calvin is right in emphasizing that God's gracious condescension, the "humility" of God whereby he lovingly identifies with that which is beneath him,

⁵¹John Frame, "God and Biblical Language," from *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. J. W. Montgomery, quoted in *Inerrancy*, 215. Note the good critique of the separation of personal from propositional in twentieth century theology (e.g., E. Brunner), in Paul Helm's *Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982) 26-7.

means, in terms of revelation, inspiration, and Scripture, that God was willing to become "undignified" for human redemption.⁵²

*B. Affirming Scripture as Word of God:
Paul Helm*

British philosopher Paul Helm thoroughly discusses the question of the relation of Scripture and Word of God in his work *Divine Revelation*. Crucial to his argument is commitment to a classical Christian affirmation: special revelation (or simply "revelation" in the strict sense) is a cognitive concept in that it has to do with *knowledge*, an actual or possible mode of knowledge of that which cannot otherwise be known.⁵³ Thus, in keeping with our emphases above, Helm too acknowledges the need for content, indeed information ("propositional" revelation), in contrast to notions of "personal encounter" or bare "act," etc.⁵⁴ Thus he says that

It is curious . . . that while the idea that the Bible is God's special propositional revelation has been charged with replacing God himself by propositions about God, examination of . . . periods when such a view was dominant suggests the exact reverse. . . . [There] is no antithesis between believing a proposition and believing a person if the proposition is understood as the assertion of a person. . . . So the claim that the idea of propositional special revelation is essentially impersonal appears to rest on a misunderstanding.⁵⁵

The modern theological claim that there is an antithesis between "propositions" (content-ful, meaningful statements) and persons is surely false, given that propositions are the utterance of some person. To deny this to God, in the God-world-human relation, reflects an arbitrary assumption of both metaphysical and epistemological dualism.

Helm's primary dialogue partner is Karl Barth, and then those variously influenced by Barth's primary reasons for denying that Scripture can be the Word of God. Barth's understanding of revelation (God-in-Christ as independent of the knower) is both ontologically objective and epistemologically subjective with respect to revelation (human knowledge of God). What are the results? Put briefly, Barth contends that God is sovereignly free in his revelation. Revelation cannot be "static." Yet the very notion of covenant and covenant faithfulness shows that God is willing to limit himself. Second, and consequently, Barth says that any revelation of the sovereignly free God must be a personal *act* or *event*. But given the

⁵²Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.8.1; also Calvin's comments on 1 John 3:12 in his commentary.

⁵³Helm, *Divine Revelation*, 32ff.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, chap. 2.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 26-7.

biblical pattern, special revelation cannot be bare act or event of God, but acts or events of God *and interpretation*. Third, modernity as a whole and "Barthian" formulations of revelation in particular have been hesitant to allow for divine self-disclosure as truly historical, a datum of history. In terms of Word and Scripture, Barth points out that Scripture is a "worldly (historical) document" and so this rules out *a priori* any possibility of the Bible being itself and as such God's Word. Yet, says Helm, Barth's act/event formulation of revelation, as related to (yet different from) Scripture as "witness" to revelation, means that the "words" of the text are altered in the moment they became Word for an individual. In fact, most texts of Scripture are not plausible as candidates for such an occasionalism of the Word. Also, Barth's emphasis on scriptural witness *becoming* Word of God "for me" leads to the "private language" problem and essential incommunicability.⁵⁶ But of special importance is Helm's analysis of the influential Barthian contention that Holy Scripture is only the "witness" to the Word of God, an analysis which, in effect, turns the Barthian contention on its head. If, as Barth presents the matter, the relation between Scripture and God's Word is a non-contingent one

then it must be one of *meaning*; there must be a connection of meaning between the two. And if there is a connection of meaning between the two then God's Word must be propositional, since the Bible is propositional and there is a logical relationship between the two. But if God's Word, special revelation, is propositional, then for Barth this must mean that it is "static" and manipulatable. Once again, the relationship between the Bible and the Word of God, in the Barthian scheme of things, is seen to be wholly problematic.⁵⁷

While Helm's subsequent argument about how one ought and ought not to present a positive case for the text of Holy Scripture as Word of God as special revelation is useful, his role here has been primarily in terms of response to dualistic, transcendentalist presuppositions that have been basic to modern denials of Holy Scripture as Word of God. But before leaving this issue, the case here can be further developed by means of a very recent work aimed at these concerns for historical revelation.

C. Affirming "Divine Discourse" in History:
Nicholas Wolterstorff

In his recent Wilde Lectures at Oxford University, subsequently published as *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*, Nicholas Wolterstorff has sought to examine the "strange but riveting" declaration introduced to humanity by Judaism that "God speaks to us on our way, and that our calling as

⁵⁶Ibid., 40-4.

⁵⁷Ibid., 46.

human beings is to listen to that speech from beyond and hear."⁵⁸ The notion of God speaking—if true, both an unsettling and a consoling assertion—has faced much modern hostility. But it is this hostility which Wolterstorff addresses as “ill-advised” and “self-defeating.”

But what does Wolterstorff mean by God’s “discourse” or speaking? Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Bultmann, Tillich, and, more recently, David Tracy and Gordon Kaufman have referred to “God’s speaking.” But for these authors, the intention is at best metaphorical, symbolic, non-informative. Barth and Brunner have discussed “God’s speaking” at great length, but for these and like-minded theologians, God’s discourse or disclosure is act or encounter without revelatory, interpretive, historical content. While variously influenced by these modern trends, yet consciously endeavoring to stand within Christian orthodoxy, Bloesch, Fackre, and Pinnock are very serious about “God’s speaking.” They do not want God’s self-revelation reduced to merely wordless “events” or I-Thou “encounters.” Yet these, too, finally balk at the radical historicity required by any possibility of ontological connection or identity between Scripture and Word of God. What of Wolterstorff? Does an underlying dualistic scheme force him to transcendentalize divine speaking to the transhistorical, beyond anything auditory or written? Or does he attempt to correct such modern tendencies?

While Wolterstorff does not affirm the complete truthfulness of Scripture, and while he is concerned primarily with divine discourse/speaking rather than with divine revelation, a fine distinction for which he labors effectively, the question of divine speaking as revelatory, as Word of God, is very significant to him. Moving illustratively from the words of the child, “*Tolle lege, tolle lege,*” which Augustine took to be God speaking to him, he purposes to counteract modern philosophico-theologico-epistemological unwillingness to allow for historical, informative divine speaking, while strongly affirming, somehow real divine revelation. The outcome of his multi-leveled analysis of language theory is that God need not remain incommunicative beyond bare act or meeting (“manifestational revelation”) but that God can and has made historical “assertions,” “propositions” (“non-manifestational revelation”) and that this speaking can and has resulted “*in a text which, when properly interpreted, transmits knowledge from God to us.*”⁵⁹

As a consciously philosophical work dealing with theological questions, *Divine Discourse* develops its critical and constructive argument without much direct reference to Scripture. But when Wolterstorff does refer to Scripture, he emphasizes that the near-consensus opinion among modern (post-Kantian) theologians (e.g.,

⁵⁸Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) ix.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 27-8.

Barth, John Baillie, Bultmann, et al.), that revelation can only be non-linguistic act, stands in strong conflict to the text of Scripture itself. Therein God is engaged in speaking or in propositional revelation (e.g., in the Exodus).⁶⁰

But for our purposes, it is most useful to note Wolterstorff's responses to Barth and John Baillie as influential representatives of thinking hesitant to identify the text of Scripture with Word of God. After effectively analyzing Barth's emphatic Christocentric understanding of "the Word of God," Jesus Christ as the *one* speech-act of God (John 1), Wolterstorff capably points out that for all of his emphasis on the Word of God, Barth largely avoids discussion of God "speaking." The point is clear that apart from God's revelation in the event of Jesus Christ there is no Word of God, no human speaking that is truly a speaking in God's name. All acts of "witnessing" to God's one speech-act, though under the guidance of the Spirit, remain necessarily and only human speech. But Wolterstorff comments,

What God does in addition [to the incarnation] is *bring it about* that what God said in Jesus Christ is both presented to us and, by some of us, acknowledged. But that "bringing about" is something different from speaking. Barth's thought is that the very being who is the content of Scripture and proclamation, Jesus Christ, the Word, the speech of God, so acts on us that we acknowledge that content. True enough. But is that action more *speaking*?⁶¹

While Barth (like Bloesch and Fackre) comes very close to acknowledging this, in the final analysis he consistently avoids such a conclusion. Why?

Wolterstorff answers by rightly noting, first, such differentiation of Scripture from Word of God, God speaking, is now often regarded as the only way of honoring the results of biblical criticism while affirming Scriptural authority, the medium God uses *through* which to "speak" to us. This same concern is reflected in each of our three evangelical writers discussed above. Second, like Paul Helm, Wolterstorff reiterates Barth's fear that assertion of God's authoring Scripture in any direct sense compromises God's freedom. Responding at two levels, he points out that if such authoring and commissioning of human authors of a text is limiting then perhaps we ought to take seriously the possibility that God is willing to limit his freedom in this way. But beyond Helm, Wolterstorff finds that Barth may be working with an alien concept of "freedom." He finds it hard to see how God's decision to appropriate human speech compromises his freedom in any way. "Probably Barth never even

⁶⁰Ibid., 30. Wolterstorff's responses to both Karl Barth and John Baillie are quite illuminating in clarifying his intentions and points. Cf. pp. 298-9 on John Baillie's representative views.

⁶¹Ibid., 70, 73.

considered the appropriation model as a way of thinking of God as author."⁶²

While necessarily moving past Wolterstorff's insightful, careful argumentation, we must briefly present the bottom line of Wolterstorff's own constructive emphases on divine speaking as it relates to our question of Scripture and Word of God. He asks why, if Scripture were a mere medium of "revelation" in the modern sense (event, encounter), one would continually return to Scripture's text? Mere mediation is used but once. When its work is done, one moves on. Wolterstorff's answer arises from his understanding of the relation of Scripture as human discourse to divine discourse and how Scripture can be both simultaneously. Herein he works with four assumptions about the text. First, the books of Scripture did not come into being by God directly producing inscriptions on parchments but by human beings doing so. Second, those human beings were themselves performing acts of discourse; they were not just writing words down. Third, God's discourse is a function not just of those human acts of inscription but "of those human acts of discourse generated by those human acts of inscription." One must know more than just the original text as such, but "what was being said with those texts" by whatever human beings authorized them as *their own* discourse.⁶³ Finally, in the fact that one person's discourse can count as another person's discourse, Wolterstorff finds a model for the text of Scripture. By "deputation" (e.g., the prophets) and by "appropriation" as "supplemented" by inspiration, Christian Scripture as a whole and its various books are to be understood as God's discourse as well as human discourse.⁶⁴ While new questions potentially arise from this model, it does lead Wolterstorff to highlight authorial intention in hermeneutics in establishing the meaning of God's discourse.

III. RE-STATEMENT: WORD OF GOD AND SCRIPTURE

Our claim is that Karl Barth's understanding of the Word of God and the nature of Holy Scripture, as variously influential on our three evangelical theologians, is both right and wrong—at different levels. Barth's Christocentricity, his point that *the Word of God* as such and ultimately is Jesus Christ, is correct. John 1 and Hebrews 1, with other related texts of Scripture make clear enough that the *logos* who is God and who became flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, *is* the self-disclosure of God in an eternally unique, absolute, and preeminent way. He is *the ontological Word of God*. But does this fact negate any legitimacy in conceiving Scripture too as Word of God? Certainly not. Barth is again biblical in calling Scripture the primary "witness to the Word/Christ," for Jesus says the same in John 5:39. But, again,

⁶²Ibid., 74.

⁶³Ibid., 186.

⁶⁴Ibid.

does this distinction of Christ the Word from Scripture's testimony necessarily alleviate its continuity and nuanced identity with the Word as Word of God? No. Indeed, the Holy Spirit, too, bears witness to Christ. How then might these interrelated elements be conceptually brought together or modeled in a way that is in keeping with Scripture's own testimony to itself? Given that Jesus Christ, incarnate, eternal Word of God, is said to be the utterly unique, supreme, objective self-giving of God to be known; that the scriptural data also speak of their own proper status as revelation or Word of God; that Scripture is distinguished from Christ as "witness" to Christ; and, finally, that God's revelation is one because God is one, then we must avoid a flat, blank, undifferentiated identity between Jesus Christ and Scripture as being Word of God in the same sense. We must also avoid dualistic, disjunctive thinking that finally separates Christ the Word and inscripturated Word, as though the latter were actually word of man and at best only functionally Word of God. The need is for unitary, interactive thinking, as reflected in twentieth century physics, which can think after the identity-in-difference inherent in our question.

For example, in *Physics and Reality*, Einstein accounts for different "levels" or "strata" of knowledge in a scientific system arising from natural cognition of ordinary experience. Scientific theory must be brought to "logical" unity, and finally to a strict "higher level" of logical unity, as each level of knowledge is related to and grounded in the "higher" level. In this way, thinking penetrates more and more toward the interior connections of reality. Each level is "open up" to the next higher level and "disclosive" down. No level below has its whole truth in itself, but is true as it is interactively related to and "open up" to the greater refinement at the next higher level. All is grounded finally beyond the contingent in that sufficient reason for the lower contingent order of rationality and intelligibility.⁶⁵

This model has been effectively related to the Nicene *homoousion*, reflecting unitary, interactive relatedness, identity-in-difference. And so too is such a stratified model reflective of the incarnate Word-inscripturated Word relationship. At the "lower level," historical Scripture is the written, preserved record of revelation, the "derivative" Word of God, by means of inspiration. As such, it stands in, under, of, and from Jesus Christ. Its truth is not simply *in itself* but, as "open up" unitarily in and under Christ by the Spirit, its truth is ultimately grounded in Christ the ontological Word, i.e., in the Logos, and so finally in the perichoretic relations of the triune Godhead. Then also the inscripturated Word is "disclosive down" and within the present historical space-time situation of humanity.

⁶⁵See the discussion in three works by Thomas Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1980) e.g., p. 12; *Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1980) 11, 105; and *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

To lose this aspect or "pole" of the unitary Word of God is to disengage God's truth from history, to "transcendentalize" the Word. Content-ful (propositional) revelation is negated. This is the inevitable outcome of such disjunctive, dualistic, separationist thinking. As Ray Anderson has said,

What is at stake in giving up that which a concept of propositional revelation seeks to preserve is the pole of transcendence which we have said lies in history and thus can serve to inform the act of faith "in the Spirit" of its transcendent grounds in the person of Christ . . . if the cognitive link with the content of God's transcendence as historical act is broken, the act of faith must supply its own content to the divine Word.⁶⁶

It is this very historical, content-ful revelation, as grounded by the Spirit in Christ, which is apparently cut away by those forms of theological thinking analyzed earlier.

Significantly, something akin to this very "stratification" of the written Word of God in, under, and from Christ is reflected in John Calvin's understanding of the Word of God. Historically, according to Calvin, the written Word of God stands "over" the church, i.e., it is, in Einsteinian terms, "disclosive down" as the derivative/inspired Word of God to be heard and known here and now.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God: A Christological Critique* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 213.

⁶⁷See this writer's article, "John Calvin's Christological Assertion of Word Authority in the Context of Sixteenth Century Ecclesiological Polemics," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 45/4 (1992). Again note Packer's critique, noted previously in n. 49.