

# About “The Word of God”

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I’ve been mired in boxes of books, tools, supplies, and household paraphernalia as we seek a more manageable shape of life. The thrift stores have welcomed us with open arms. But now it’s time to return to more public matters, even as our country grieves once again at the senseless carnage that has engulfed the citizens of El Paso, Dayton, and many other places in our country. Out of an ongoing effort to struggle with the religious roots of our inability to walk the path of reconciliation, I share this reflection. It’s a theological rumination, but I invite everyone to reflect with me from their own angle of vision.

Many Christians claim that the Bible is “the Word of God.” It is not. As attested to by John’s Gospel, Jesus Christ is the Word of God (John 1: 1-5, 14). The main problem with saying that the Bible is “the Word of God” is that we are soon led to a literalism that gives every word, sentence, and passage equal value. This leads to a legalism and fundamentalism that casts aside the spirited relationships of love, mutual persuasion, humility, and service characteristic of Jesus’s message and ministry. In the church battles over human sexuality the words of the Bible become legal clubs for attacks on others and defenses of our positions. Every time we make statements in worship, writing, or speech, that assume the Bible is the Word of God, we further encase ourselves in this literalistic legalism and fundamentalism.

The concept of “the Word of God” is firmly embedded in churches shaped by the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The more Protestants rejected the Papacy and the Roman Church as the proper interpreter of divine truth, the more they appealed to Scripture. The more they appealed to “scripture alone,” the more they fed the literalism we suffer today. Yet Jean Calvin, at the fountainhead of the major strand of the Reformation informing American Protestantism, held firmly to the position that it is Jesus Christ who is “the Word of God” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*,

Book 1, Ch. 13, section 6). As Methodists and other Christians appeal to the Bible in their struggle over the proper forms of human sexuality and activity, reclaiming this simple truth becomes crucial.

What then, does it mean, that Jesus Christ, not the Bible, is “the Word of God”? First, it is important to remember that the Bible itself is a collection of books written between about the tenth century before Jesus to around seventy years after his death. Other writings, such as the *Didache* and *Shepherd of Hermas* contended for canonical status well into the third century AD, when the basic collection of canonical writings took shape. Even today, Catholics and Protestants are divided over which books constitute “the Bible.” These books themselves do not claim to be “the Word of God,” since they all were written before even the basic shape of the Bible was established by the churches formed by these scriptures.

The concept of “the Word of God” does, however, shape the Scriptures. God creates by a “Word” in Genesis 1. The prophets frequently speak of hearing and proclaiming “the Word of YHWH (“the Lord”) as they receive their calling and prophecies. It is in the Johannine writings that this creative and prophetic Word is seen to become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The “Word of God” is the dynamic life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ. It is this reality, known through the Holy Spirit informing the church, that God’s “Word” is present.

What we have in the Biblical writings, from a Christian perspective, is a series of documents in which people give witness to the work of God in their history. The Scriptures lay out the faith and history of the people among whom Jesus lived, ministered, taught, died and was known in resurrection by his followers. They speak out of deep inspiration and ecstatic experience, but their words only point to the mystery of God’s work that Christians see in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ. They are not the work and word of God themselves.

Christian preachers and witnesses hope that their words will open up this saving work of God to others, but neither their words nor those of the Scriptures are “the Word of God” themselves. The reading of Scripture can

draw us into a greater experience and understanding of this incarnate Word, but Scripture itself is not this Word. Moreover, the capacity of these words to draw us into God's revelation depends on the Holy Spirit that continually seeks to guide the church assembly in its work of discernment. Reading the words does not automatically open us up to "the Word" that is Christ. That is the work of the Spirit guiding the community of listeners.

In moving from the view that the Bible is the "Word of God" to one that holds that Christ is the "Word of God," we move to opening ourselves up to this deeply personal, mysterious, and self-transcending reality of a life, a living presence, that is transforming us toward the love, goodness, and beauty of the Creator of All. It is in the Spirit of this reconciling work that we are to approach the vexing ethical and spiritual challenges of our world.