

# **VERDICT**

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Essays 15 and 16

1984

## **The Gospel and the Spirit of Biblicism- Part 1**

**Essay 15, pages 1- 13**

Robert D. Brinsmead

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# VERDICT

*Verdict is committed to “Nothing But the Gospel, and the Gospel Plus Nothing.” It affirms that this gospel, according to the faithful testimony of Holy Scripture, concerns the objective, historical, finished and unrepeatable act of God on behalf of the human race in the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Verdict believes that the gospel is the joyful proclamation that all who believe in Christ’s life, death and resurrection on their behalf are forgiven, accepted of God and may have the assurance of eternal life. It also believes that all who belong to Christ will exhibit the spirit of Christ and live for God’s glory and the well-being of humanity.*

*Verdict is opposed to every religious accretion which corrupts the gospel. This includes sectarianism, which insists that salvation is found in believing the gospel plus something else; subjectivism, which confounds the gospel with religious experience; sentimentalism, which substitutes pious feelings about the Jesus of popular imagination for faith in the New Testament Christ; mysticism, which looks for the knowledge of God in private illumination; techniqueism, which advocates that salvation is attained through the application of religious formulas or disciplines; and nationalism, which identifies the cause of Christ with political or cultural self-interests.*

*Verdict’s commitment to “Nothing But the Gospel, and the Gospel Plus Nothing” is not a Christian reductionism which accepts less than the whole counsel of God. Rather, it is recognition that the gospel of Christ is God’s final word, beyond which there is no more profound knowledge or experience of God. This is not to imply that Verdict is unconcerned with the great range of issues which impinge on human existence, but it is to affirm the desire that the gospel determine and structure our view of everything else.*

*Essay 15, 1984*

## Introduction

Our recent remarks on “A Freedom from Biblicism” must have struck a sensitive nerve. 1 Such swift and fiery responses! But we are not repentant for saying that the Bible may either find people mad or make them mad. Like Jeremiah, we have decided to add more words.

The blame, however, for so much Christian stupidity, arrogance, persecution and bigotry does not rest on the Book. Yet it is generally exhibited in the name of allegiance to the Book— just as Judaism opposed Jesus and Paul because of a certain commitment to the Law or Old Testament Scripture. The fundamental issue then and now is the true purpose and the proper use of Scripture. Whoever addresses this issue risks being labeled an enemy of Holy Scripture, especially by the pious. We have obviously decided to take that risk, and we confess that we have enjoyed this pursuit. We hope we can mediate something of this joy and liberty in the gospel to others.

## Is *Sola Scriptura* a Heresy?

As the formal principle of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura* became a great Protestant slogan. “The Bible and the Bible only, — cried Chesterton, “is the religion of Protestants.” What Protestant sect, no matter how divergent, has not proudly congratulated itself for being “the people of the Book”?

As this century has progressed, the sciences of biblical criticism 2 have released a flood of new information about biblical literature, and especially insight on how the text and canon of Holy Scripture came into existence. Fearing skepticism or any revision of its time-honored *sola Scriptura* stance, the evangelical wing of the Christian movement has recently responded with massive literature on the inspiration, inerrancy, infallibility and authority of Scripture. Its litany of praise for the Bible apparently knows no bounds.

We want to suggest, however, that even a slogan like *sola Scriptura* may be given such a slant as to embody a great heresy. It has often been said by wise observers of history that heresy is truth carried to an extreme. To illustrate what we mean we shall raise some questions which challenge the spirit of biblical absolutism.

1. Why is the Bible almost silent about the Bible? If we follow the written record, Jesus and the apostles apparently said embarrassingly little to extol the wonders and virtues of the Bible. In his last discourse, on the eve of his departure, why did not Jesus comfort his disciples by telling them that the written text of Holy Scripture would take his place and reveal to them everything they needed to know?

2. Why did Jesus write nothing (except on sand) and not even instruct his eyewitnesses to record their witness in writing? Few biblical scholars today really believe that the beloved disciple actually wrote the Gospel of John. A careful reading of the book makes no such claim but instead suggests that the authors (i.e., “we”) were the community who accepted the testimony of the beloved disciple (e.g., “he who saw testimony,” etc.) (John 19:35; 21:24). The New Testament apparently gives us no written testimony by first-hand witnesses.

3. If the possession of information including mundane details was so crucial, why do we have four Gospels rather than one? For nearly two thousand years the church has tried to harmonize the four accounts but has been forced to acknowledge the task as impossible. Of course there are insurmountable discrepancies in the four Gospels! Anyone who says they do not exist might as well join the Flat Earth Society.

4. If God in his wisdom saw that we needed an in-errant Bible, why did he not

provide us with an inerrant method for interpreting it?

5. If the all-sufficiency of Scripture means that nothing else is needed to bring a person to the truth, why is it the norm for people to become Christians by hearing a living witness? After all, the New Testament record is clear that the spoken Word is the vehicle and the ear is the receptacle for the Spirit (Acts 10:44; Rom. 10:5-17; Gal. 3:1-5). Scripture alone did not enlighten the Ethiopian with the gospel, nor is Scripture alone sufficient to make a person a particular sectarian. People do not become dispensationalists, Adventists, Calvinists or Lutherans just by reading the Bible. Usually they do not even become Christians just by reading the Bible.

6. The Christian church came into existence and communities of Christians flourished throughout the Roman Empire before there was a Christian Scripture and certainly for generations before there was a New Testament canon. The Christian Scripture therefore did not give birth to the church, but rather the church gave birth to Christian Scripture.

7. The faith of the great heroes of the Bible was not biblical faith. Abraham's faith preceded the formation of Old Testament Scripture. The faith of the primitive Christians, which mightily spread throughout the world, was not faith in Christian Scripture either.

8. Belief in the all-sufficiency of the Bible has often supported the notion that the Bible is a complete blueprint for everything a person needs to believe and do. Not only is the Bible supposed to answer every kind of theological question, but it is supposed to be a "how to" book on all aspects of human behavior— how to organize a church, how to run an evangelistic mission, how to manage rebellious teenagers, how to turn defeat into success, or how to secure guidance in business and pleasure. The teacher or leader who can answer almost every conceivable theological and moral question from the Bible is greatly admired. The fact that we Christians have often been mistaken on many important scientific, social and moral issues does not deter us from behaving as though we had God's inside information on every difficult issue. But the Bible frequently has no clear word from the Lord on many difficult social and moral questions. The silences of the Bible and the silences of Jesus on many theological questions should suggest that we ought to be dogmatic on very few things. It would do most of us good to say "We don't know" and "We were wrong" much more frequently. There is no virtue in being like the old Scottish divine who prayed as he studied the Bible, "Lord, please don't let me come to wrong conclusions, for you know I never change my mind."

9. In view of the fact that devotion to *sola Scriptura* led Pharisaic Judaism to oppose Jesus and the gospel, how can such devotion be the hallmark of faithfulness to the

gospel today?

Is *sola Scriptura* a heresy then? Not necessarily, but quite possibly!

## The Word of God in the Old Testament

### The Spoken Word

Throughout the Old Testament “the Word” or “the Word of God” primarily pertains to what is spoken and heard. It seldom refers to what is written and read. As a general rule in the Old Testament, while the Law may be read, the Word is heard.

God is the living, personal One who loves his people. Because he loves them, he wills to commune and fellowship with them. His Word, “the Word of God,” is God’s mode of communication. It is always personal address.

We need to guard against the idea that God’s Word contains mere information, ideas or propositions. God’s very heart and Spirit are in his Word, and when he speaks to Israel, he always gives himself. This is why his Word demands far more than mere assent to divinely revealed information. The Word demands from Israel the personal response of trust and loyalty.

Because the Word of God is living, personal address, it was communicated to Israel through the mouth of a living person—the prophet (“God spoke...to our fathers by the prophets”— Heb. 1:1). When the prophet was endued with God’s Spirit, he spoke. Just as words are formed by breath, so the prophet’s words were formed by God’s breath (Spirit). (“Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God”— 2 Pet. 1:21.) God’s Word conveyed presence, Spirit, life, power. The prophets were not philosophers uttering timeless theological or ethical insights divorced from concrete historical situations. But in the midst of real events in history, the prophets were vehicles of God’s personal address.

Thus, the Word was living and full of breath. It was spoken and heard. For this reason it has been said that the religion of Israel was a religion of the ear, not of the eye, of sound rather than sight. This tended to remove Israel’s temptation to make visible icons.

### The Written Word

From the beginning of its history Israel made written records of the living Word that was spoken to them. That which Moses wrote, or what the members of the community

wrote down on his behalf, came to he called the Torah (Law). But Torah was broader than Moses. It included what the later prophets said (Isa. 1:10; 8:16, 20; 30:9, 51:4, 7; Jer. 6:19; 26:4ff). Torah could mean the entire Old Testament Scripture (see John 10:34). For this reason the terms *Torah* and *Scripture* could be used interchangeably.

It used to be generally thought that the entire Mosaic Torah dropped directly from heaven. Today, through the science of biblical criticism, we know better— at least we ought to know better. (We need not fear the new information so widely available. It can only urge us toward a better appreciation of the nature of the Word.)

Today no responsible scholar would disagree with Albright, who recognized that the Torah had its basis and beginning in Moses. Yet it is just as clear that Moses did not write the so-called books of Moses in their present form. Much of the material was gathered, edited or reedited long after the time of Moses. In his book, *Jesus and the Law in Synoptic Tradition*, 3 Robert Banks shows that in the history of Israel preceding Ezra, the Torah was not the static, inflexible, timeless document that it later came to be. Rather, it was growing, expanding and flexible. The covenantal community often revised, reinterpreted and even altered specific statutes in the light of new and changing situations in which God repeatedly spoke through the prophets. The process of continually reinterpreting and revising the Torah reflected an ever-growing awareness of God's will. As Banks says:

**With the passing of time, this historical revelation [to Moses] was interpreted afresh in the light of new circumstances, added to in the light of new situations, and summarized in a more comprehensive norm of behavior...**

**[Sometimes] older traditions were handled with quite extensive freedom. 4**

**There are also clear examples of new instructions being added which have no discernible basis in any previous legal statutes [e. g., cf. Exod. 20:24; Deut. 12:1] 5**

**Every generation was summoned anew to listen to them [Yahweh's demands] and to interpret and apply them for itself. [Torah]...then, is flexible in application. 6**

**[There was] freedom to re-interpret and alter the Law as new situations arose. 7**

At the risk of the distortion which attends reductionism, let us attempt to summarize how the Torah was revised, reinterpreted, expanded and adapted to new situations. This development grew out of the intriguing tension between priest and prophet.

The priest was the custodian of the written Torah. He was dedicated to preserve the sacred tradition and to insure that the rituals and stipulations of the Torah were faithfully fulfilled.

As new situations arose, God would again speak through the prophet (living Torah).

But to the priest it generally seemed that what the prophet said conflicted with the written Torah. In his allegiance to the Torah the priest would make war on the prophet and would generally arouse both king and community to resist this enemy of the religious *status quo*. The prophet was resented as a disturbing influence, for he would declare that Israel was not really obeying God's Torah at all. Often Israel did not realize that the prophet bore the Word of God until after he had been removed as an enemy of the Torah. When they realized that what he said in the new situation was the Word of God, the community through its priestly editors would revise and expand the written tradition.

Thus, Old Testament history shows that the written Torah or Old Testament Scripture may be called the Word of God only in a secondary, relational or derivative sense. This helps us appreciate why the Old Testament rarely calls the written tradition the Word of God. Strictly speaking, the Word of God is alive and full of Spirit. It is spoken and heard. What was written was a record of how the Word was spoken and heard in Israel. It is therefore a *witness* to the living Word, but the living Word itself could never be reduced to mere finite textuality.

We may use the following illustration to make the vital distinction between living Word and written witness: Suppose we saw a living lion in its awesome setting in Africa. We might take a picture of the beast. We might even shoot it and have a taxidermist mount it in our home. But neither the photograph nor the mounted carcass would be the real lion. If there were no breath in it, it would not be a lion but only a representation, witness or image of the reality.

The prophet Amos clearly shows that there is a difference between Word of God and written Scripture.

**'Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord  
God,  
"when I will send a famine on the land;  
not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,  
but of hearing the words of the Lord.  
They shall wander from sea to sea,  
and from north to east;  
they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of  
the Lord,  
but they shall not find it. – Amos 8:11, 12.**

This prophecy does not mean that Israel would lose all their copies of Holy Scripture. Amos is referring to the living Word— i.e., "hearing the words of the Lord." Amos is predicting the silencing of the Word of God through the voice of the living prophet.

The process of recording the Torah, of expanding, reinterpreting and editing it,

ended with the work of Ezra. With Ezra the flexible and expanding written tradition gave way to the rigid and static written tradition. One of the great Old Testament scholars of our time describes this transition:

During the exile, though we cannot say precisely how or where, the records and traditions of the past were jealously preserved. In these, which both awakened recollection of Yahweh's past deeds toward his people and held an earnest of hope for the future, the community *lived*. The Deuteronomic historical corpus (Joshua to II Kings), probably composed shortly before the fall of the state, was reedited, added to (cf. II Kings 25:27-30), and adapted to the situation of the exiles. The sayings of the prophets, now vindicated by events, were likewise preserved, orally and in writing, and in many cases, "footnoted" down to date, as it were, by additions and expansions. Though the details are quite unknown, the process of collection which ultimately produced the prophetic books as we know them was carried forward. The cultic laws which comprise the bulk of the so-called Priestly Code, and which reflect the practice of the Jerusalem Temple, were likewise collected and codified in definitive form at about this time— a necessary step now that the cult, its practice controlled by custom and precedent, had left off. The Priestly narrative of the Pentateuch (P) was also composed, probably during the sixth century, and probably in the exile. Here we have a theological history of the world, beginning at Creation and culminating in the ordinances given at Sinai, which are presented as an eternally valid model not only for the past but for all time to come. As the community thus clung to its past it prepared itself for the future. 8

If Moses was Israel's founder, it was Ezra who reconstituted Israel and gave her faith a form in which it could survive through the centuries. 9

The distinguishing mark of a Jew would not be political nationality, nor primarily ethnic background, nor even regular participation in the Temple cult (impossible for Jews of the Diaspora), but adherence to the Law of Moses. The great watershed of Israel's history had been crossed, and her future secured for all time to come. 10

The new Israel wanted desperately something to draw it together and give it distinctive identity; and this was supplied by Ezra through the law book that he brought from Babylon and, with authority from the Persian court, imposed on the community in solemn covenant. That marked a great turning point. A new and well-defined community took shape composed of those committed to the law as promulgated by Ezra. This meant, in turn, a fundamental redefinition of the term "Israel." Israel would no longer be a national entity, nor one coterminous with the descendants of the Israelite tribes or the inhabitants of the old national territory, nor even a community of those who in some way acknowledged Yahweh as God and offered him worship. From now on, Israel would be viewed (as in the theology of the Chronicler) as that remnant of Judah which had rallied around the law. He would be a member of Israel (i.e., a Jew) who assumed the burden of that law.

But this redefinition of Israel meant inevitably the emergence of a religion in which law was central. This betokened, let it be repeated, no break with Israel's ancient faith, all the major features of which continued in force, but a radical regrouping of that faith about the law. The law no longer merely regulated the affairs of an already constituted community; it had created the community! As the community's organizing principle and line of demarcation, law assumed ever greater importance. Originally the definition of action on the basis of covenant, it became itself the basis of action, virtually a synonym for covenant and the sum and substance of religion. The cult was regulated and supported by the law; to be moral and pious was to keep the law; the grounds of future hope lay in obedience to the law. It was this consistent stress on the law which imparted to Judaism its distinctive character. 11

Of the greatest importance is the fact that the Jewish community was constituted on the basis of a written law. 12

The canonizing of the law gave to Judaism a norm far more absolute and tangible than anything old Israel had known. Since God's commandments were stated in the law once and for all, with eternal validity, his will for every situation was to be determined from it; other means to that end were overlaid or suppressed. This doubtless explains why prophecy gradually ceased, for the law had, in fact, usurped its function and rendered it superfluous. Though prophets of old were revered, and their words accorded authority, the law actually left no place for a free, prophetic statement of the divine will. 13

The law did not, as once was the case, describe existing practice; it prescribed practice. 14

In the apostolic writings which preceded the New Testament era, the written Law (which in the broad sense embraced the Old Testament) was elevated to a higher and higher status. In the Book of Jubilees, for example, the written Torah appears as eternal, absolute in authority and written on heavenly tablets even before Creation. The voice of the living Word through living prophets had long ceased, but the further they were removed from that era, the more Judaism extolled the virtue of the written Torah. In the sayings of the rabbis the Torah was the Word, wisdom, light, life, bread, unchanging, the way, the truth, the life— indeed all those titles of honor which the Gospel of John deliberately takes from the Torah and ascribes to Jesus Christ.

Judaism was the classical example of a religion based on a book. The world has never seen greater exponents of *sola Scriptura*. Judaism claimed that the written text contained all that could be known of the will of God. They thought that their entire responsibility was to exegete and implement the text. God's Word was dehistoricized and depersonalized.

The stage was set for the final confrontation between this religion of the book and the Word incarnate in Jesus Christ. Just as Israel repeatedly made war on the prophets, so they made war on the Living Word— and in principle for the same reason. In the name of written Scripture and from a sense of zealous allegiance to it, they arrayed themselves against the Word made flesh. They barricaded themselves behind the letter of Holy Scripture and closed their ears against the living, eternal Word of God.

We need to exercise more sympathy for the dilemma of the Pharisees. On a great number of points the letter of Scripture seemed to demand that the Nazarene teacher should be destroyed. Humanly speaking, it is not a question of asking. "How could the Pharisees be so blind?" but, "How could we have failed to join them if we also stood on *sola Scriptura*?"

The tragedy was that Pharisaic Judaism, in its exalted view of the written Torah, was partly right. Even the Psalms seem to extol the Torah or Law as the Word, light, life, light, wisdom and truth (Ps. 119). But the written Torah or Scripture was only those things in a secondary, derivative or relational sense. As John declares in his Gospel,

Jesus Christ rather than the written Law and Scripture is, all these things. That which was written is only a witness to the Living Word and may be called the Word only in that relational sense. In its own right (or in the absolute sense) it never was and never will be the Word of God.

Pharisaism's mistake was to take the Word of God in a relative sense and make it the word of God in the absolute sense. For example, the living Word is eternal and inerrant, but Pharisaism claimed that their written Torah was eternal and inerrant. No wonder they thought Jesus blasphemous when he exalted his authority above Moses, the Sabbath and whatever else was in the Law! Even many Jewish Christians could not abandon this Judaistic notion that the written Law was eternal and inerrant. They therefore bitterly opposed Paul's gospel, which announced the end of the Law's binding claims.

Granting absolute status to the written witness was then and now a system of religious absolutism or religious fascism. It was then and now idolatry in its most insidious form because it makes a visible icon out of the witness to the Word of God. Taking that which belongs to the living Word (the eternal and inerrant attributes of God) and bestowing it on written Scripture compromises the uniqueness of the incarnation. As there is only one incarnation, so there is only one union of perfect divinity and perfect humanity. The one ideal, sinless humanity is the Word made flesh in Jesus' humanity.

## **The Word of God in the New Testament**

The living Word spoken by Old Testament prophets was finally disclosed in the person of Jesus. He was the living, eternal, inerrant Word, and the words which he spoke were Spirit and life (John 6:63). In him and him alone the eternal, inerrant Word took human form and was given human expression. To suggest that there could be any other perfect human expression of God is to deny the absolute uniqueness of the incarnation.

It is significant that Jesus made no attempt to convey his message in writing. The only written record he left was what he wrote in sand—and that was soon swept away. If we think that the Word of God is essentially information, propositions or ideas, then we will also think that it can be adequately expressed in writing. But once we begin to see that God's Word is the presence of infinite life and Spirit, we begin to appreciate why none of Christ's eyewitnesses thought they could contain the Word in writing. The community of the beloved disciple passed on his testimony that "the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" if the living Word had to be reduced to writing (John 21:25).

The priestly guardians of the written word tried to silence the living Word. But the death of Jesus did not silence the living Word. Like the alabaster box which, when broken, filled the house with perfume. Christ's broken body resulted in the Spirit of Christ flowing out over all, the world. The resurrection means that the living Word has not left; he has merely changed the mode of his being present. He is no longer present clothed in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth: but his Spirit is alive in those who believe in him, and his personal presence makes the proclamation of his gospel the Word of God.

Throughout the New Testament "the Word" or "the Word of God" refers to the orally transmitted gospel (e.g., Acts 4:29; 6:4; 10:44; 13:5, 44, 48; 18:11; Rom.10:5-17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:1; 1 Pet. 1:23). Especially in Paul the orally proclaimed gospel is a synonym for the Word or Word of God. Werner H. Kelber summarizes the New Testament data as follows:

The master metaphor of the apostle's entire program is *gospel*. He employs the term approximately fifty times, more than any other author in the New Testament, and places it into predominantly auditory contexts. The gospel is commonly linked with verbs or nouns denoting the act of speaking. It is preached, spoken, announced, proclaimed (*euaggelizesthai, lalein, kataggelein, keryssein*), and a matter of confirmation, confession, defense, and participation (*bebaisosis, homologia, apologia, koinōnia*). In Paul's view, the gospel was promised in advance by the prophets in Scripture (Rom. 1:1-2) but was not in itself a scriptural authority. It is constitutionally and operationally defined in oral terms, not by association with writing and reading. Although Paul does, of course, commit the gospel, or reflections upon it, to letters, his written exposition leaves no doubt that the gospel, when it came alive, was spoken aloud and, if it is to bring life again, must be sounded afresh. Clearly, the writing of a gospel after the manner of Mark is foreign to Paul. The gospel he writes about bears the indelible imprint, or more accurately, echoes the voiceprints of an oral authority.

The oral quality of gospel is corroborated by the fact that *logos* or *logos tou theou* can serve as synonyms for gospel in Pauline language. The Thessalonians have received "the Word" (1 Thess. 1:6), the Corinthians heard the unadulterated "Word of God" (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; 1 Cor. 14:36), the Galatians were taught "the Word" (Gal. 6:6), and the Philippians spoke "the Word of God" (Phil. 1:14). Gerhard Kittel has stressed the activist character of *logos* with a seriousness rarely encountered in Pauline scholarship: "In all this the *logos* is always genuine *legein*, or spoken word in all concreteness. One of the most serious errors of which one could be guilty would be to make this *logos tou theou* a concept or abstraction." As a rule, the Pauline reference to *logos* or *logos tou theou* is to the living, preached word of the gospel. 15

Just as the Word of God was once spoken by prophets upon whom the Spirit of God rested, so now it is spoken by Christian "prophets" who have the "gift of prophecy" (1Cor. 14:1: cf. esp. 1Cor. 14:24, 25 with Heb. 4:12, 13).

The bearers of Christ's gospel are not just bearers of mere information and theological ideas. They are bearers of the Spirit — the life, power and presence of Jesus, the living Word. The gospel in the mouth of the living Christian "prophet" is the vehicle to convey the Spirit — the life, power and presence of Jesus — to those who hear (Acts 10:44; Rom. 10:17: 1 Cor. 2:4: Gal. 3:2; 1 Pet. 1:12).

Those who receive this living Word receive not just information but the living Christ, “who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). They believe in their hearts that Christ is raised from the dead (Rom. 10:9). Their deep conviction and firm assurance (1Thess. 1:5) of the resurrection does not rest on the apostolic testimony alone. No amount of historical evidences of the resurrection can place the issue beyond all doubt. But in the gospel the resurrected One is present to manifest himself in a way which confirms the apostolic testimony (John 14:18, 21; 16:16; Rom. 8:16). The hearer of the gospel is like the men of Samaria who said to the woman at the well, “It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

## **The New Testament Scripture**

As time passed, it was inevitable and necessary that the Christian community make some written record of how the Word (Christ) appeared and how the Word (gospel) was proclaimed. Although inevitable and necessary this exposed the community to the same dangers which attended the giving of the written Torah in the time of Ezra.

It is clear that the New Testament authors did not customarily refer to their written record as the Word of God. That subsequent Christian tradition tends to do this while the writers themselves hesitate to do it should tell us something. Evidently they distinguished the difference between the living, infinite Word and the written record more clearly than we do. If the written record is ever called the Word, it is the Word only in a secondary, derivative or relational sense. It is not the Word in the absolute sense. Strictly speaking, the Scripture is the witness to the Word of God, and like a good witness, it does not speak of itself but points away from itself (cf. John 5:39),

Church history has amply demonstrated that we have not generally made the same distinction. The written record became absolutized. The prophetic spirit was quenched. The Christian Scripture became a rigid Christian Torah, a rule book for everything Christians must believe and teach. The gospel became a new law. Faith was confounded with orthodoxy, which was really theological legalism. The church ceased to be a charismatic community and became an institution. Instead of the Spirit there were rules. Instead of the priesthood of all believers there was wretched clericalism. Instead of the Spirit and presence of the living Christ there was religious canned goods. Instead of the living gospel there was dead ideology. Instead of freedom there was bondage. Yet, like the Pharisees, we have desperately tried to substitute an incredible devotion to the letter of Holy Scripture for the prophetic spirit. Instead of having the certainty which the Spirit inspires, we have looked for certainty in endless apologetics and theories of textual inerrancy.

## Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, scriptural quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

1. See "A Freedom from Biblicism," *The Christian Verdict*, Essay 14 (1984): 9-14.
2. The word *criticism* has a neutral scientific meaning and does not mean a negative stance toward the Bible.
3. See Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
8. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), P. 350.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 391.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 392.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 433.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 435.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 437.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 438.
15. Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 144.

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1984

## **The Gospel and the Spirit of Biblicism- Part 2**

**Essay 16, pages 14- 29**

Robert D. Brinsmead

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*Verdict is committed to “Nothing But the Gospel, and the Gospel Plus Nothing.” It affirms that this gospel, according to the faithful testimony of Holy Scripture, concerns the objective, historical, finished and unrepeatable act of God on behalf of the human race in the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Verdict believes that the gospel is the joyful proclamation that all who believe in Christ’s life, death and resurrection on their behalf are forgiven, accepted of God and may have the assurance of eternal life. It also believes that all who belong to Christ will exhibit the spirit of Christ and live for God’s glory and the well-being of humanity.*

*Verdict is opposed to every religious accretion which corrupts the gospel. This includes sectarianism, which insists that salvation is found in believing the gospel plus something else; subjectivism, which confounds the gospel with religious experience; sentimentalism, which substitutes pious feelings about the Jesus of popular imagination for faith in the New Testament Christ; mysticism, which looks for the knowledge of God in private illumination; techniqueism, which advocates that salvation is attained through the application of religious formulas or disciplines; and nationalism, which identifies the cause of Christ with political or cultural self-interests.*

*Verdict’s commitment to “Nothing But the Gospel, and the Gospel Plus Nothing” is not a Christian reductionism which accepts less than the whole counsel of God. Rather, it is recognition that the gospel of Christ is God’s final word, beyond which there is no more profound knowledge or experience of God. This is not to imply that Verdict is unconcerned with the great range of issues which impinge on human existence, but it is to affirm the desire that the gospel determine and structure our view of everything else.*

*Essay 16, 1984*

## Letter and Spirit

**Editorial Note:** This issue of *Verdict* continues and completes our discussion on “The Gospel and the Spirit of Biblicism.”

The clash between Judaism with its written Torah and Jesus with his living Word is maintained in the clash between Jewish Christians and the apostle Paul. To understand this conflict we need to appreciate the meaning of Paul’s letter/Spirit antithesis (Rom. 2:29; 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:3-6).

In Paul “letter” and “Spirit” represent the dispensations of the Law and the Spirit. Letter is from the Greek word *gramma*, which is closely related to *graphie* [writing] and *cheirographon* [handwriting]. Letter (*gramma*) refers to the Mosaic Torah in its written form. In Romans 7:6 the New International Version translates *gramma* “written code,” though it prefers “letter” in 2 Corinthians 3. It is clear that *gramma* has an obvious

connection with writing.

Spirit (*pneuma*) is not that which is written, at least not in the ordinary sense. Paul connects Spirit with the gospel which he has orally communicated.

## Some Contrasting Observations about Writing and Speaking

In order to appreciate the rationale behind Paul's letter/Spirit antithesis, we will digress to make some observations about writing and speaking.

**Writing:** Writing is a much better medium than speaking for conveying exact information. Writing is the vehicle of precision and definition. Writing lends itself to analyzing a matter with objective detachment. "Spoken words personify; written words objectify." There is no such thing as a face-to-face encounter with a text. The written text tends to be far more depersonalized than oral communication.

For these reasons textuality is a poor medium for conveying Spirit. In the New Testament the Spirit is always represented as being imparted through the spoken Word. If there are instances where people become Christians by reading alone, they are the exception rather than the rule (Rom. 10:8-17). Walter J. Ong draws attention to another deficiency in writing: "Writing and print effect closure. The written word means constriction." 1 In an essay on "Orality and Literacy" John F. Becker discusses some consequences of the Gutenberg printing revolution:

**But not only were the disciplines conceived of as closed and self-sufficient systems, books themselves contributed to the ideal of closure. The fact that they locked thought into space induced a sense of finality. Protestantism erected the Book into the ultimate divine authority. The idea of doing the definitive book, getting a total world vision into a book, has obsessed writers right up to our own time.**

**We are lucky that this sense of closure, which has affected all thinking from literary theory to theology and physics, is dissipating under the force of new awareness created by the power of electronic communication.** 2

Writing is impersonal and invites objective detachment rather than personal involvement. It lacks breath and spirit and effects closure and constriction. Thus, writing is related to death. As Herbert N. Schneidau says, "interpretation, and alienation, are bound up with writing itself: both imply an absence at the core, not communion with a presence." 3 Again Ong states, "The association of writing with death is not total, but it is manifold and inescapable." 4 And Werner H. Kelber declares, "An oral language deconstructed by textuality undergoes a kind of death." 5

**Speaking:** Orality is at a disadvantage where the essence of communication is the transmission of exact information. Where there is oral communication, there is a

tendency toward reductionism. Mundane detail may be simplified and subordinated to the need to convey the desired impression. Rather than relying on abstract propositions, oral cultures tell stories to convey essential insights.

In quoting Finnegan, Kelber states, “Literalness, ‘which has almost become a fetish with literary scholars,’ is foreign to oral transmission.” 6 In a stimulating article on the relationship between stories and the Bible, Frances M. Young says:

**Stories may be a better medium than philosophy, creed or dogma for all talk about God and his relationship with the world. ...**

**When we tell a story we inevitably pass on an edited version of the event concentrating on only the essential features. We highlight important points and ignore side issues. The better the story-teller, the more this is so; a good story-teller abstracts and to some extent distorts in order to bring out the sequence of actions or the development of character. ...**

**Stories belong particularly to religion. If you draw up a philosophy or a system of doctrine you have to avoid contradiction and be coherent, but when you are talking about the meaning of life or about God, the subject is too big to pin down. There are all sorts of apparently contradictory and paradoxical things you may want to say. The old arguments about freewill and predestination, about whether we are saved by faith or works, or whether Jesus reconciled an angry God to man or hostile men to God — all these are doctrinal problems to which neither side of the argument has the whole answer; both have part of the truth and are incapable of embracing the whole paradox. The argument merely highlights the fact that in the end we are attempting to speak of matters which are beyond human comprehension and too full of depths, questions and doubts, faith, hope and mystery. However, if we tell stories we may strike at deeper chords of meaning even while admitting that we cannot tell the whole story or in any sense give through stories an accurate picture of the greater reality we are trying to express. 7**

Oral communication is a superior vehicle for conveying spirit. This is also true with respect to the Holy Spirit.

**Spoken words breathe life, drawing their strength from sound. They carry a sense of presence. 8**

**Living words . . . are the carriers of power and being. 9**

**Voice is alive, and spoken words are consubstantial with life. 10**

The spoken Word of the gospel invites participation rather than detached deliberation. It fosters community as speaker and hearers are bound together. Faith is a kind of infection that flows from heart to heart. “The spoken gospel can thus function as carrier of life and give birth to life.” 11

## **Paul’s Critique of the Law — The Background of 2 Corinthians 3**

Paul’s opponents in Corinth were Jewish Christians whom he derisively calls “super-apostles.” They claimed that written credentials (which Paul did not have) were the marks of a true apostle. Apparently they also linked these letters of commendation with

the Decalogue (the heart of the Mosaic Torah), which they probably likened to a letter from heaven. According to Paul's Jewish opponents an authentic apostle would carry both the heavenly letter and the earthly letters as written credentials. Obviously Paul had no use for either of these written credentials.

Paul stands in the true prophetic tradition in his understanding that the living Word is spoken and heard. The Word of God, proclaimed in the gospel, contains the presence, power and Spirit of the resurrected Christ. This ministry of the Spirit is life which gives birth to life wherever it is spoken and heard. Ministers of this new covenant are not mere wind-bags of information on theological questions, but they are living transmitters for the Spirit of the resurrected One. 12

This stance of the apostle helps explain Paul's critique of the Law. In many of those passages where he speaks of the inadequacy of the Law, Paul draws attention to its written or chirographic nature. As Kelber emphasizes:

**Paul's concern ... is the grammatological nature of the Law. The principal antithesis is not between Spirit versus works, but between Spirit versus the Written. Paul's objection is not to the *nomos* as a legal authority, but rather to the objectification of the Law as *gramma*. ...**

**The written medium, the one quality of the Law that is a principal key to Paul's antinomianism, has not been taken with full seriousness, either theologically or hermeneutically. 13**

## **The New Testament in the Perspective of Letter and Spirit**

This preference for the oral communication of the living Word over a religion of a book is reflected everywhere in the New Testament:

1. Jesus wrote nothing. Moreover, Jesus did not teach like the scribes, who spent their time prescribing and proscribing on the basis of written texts. Nor was he like theologians who define theological concepts in abstract propositions. He did not come to impart mere information but to impart life and Spirit. He knew that the kingdom of heaven was beyond mere definition. "Unto what shall I liken the kingdom?" he frequently asked. Since mere propositions could not adequately portray it, he told stories which contained a variety of living images of the kingdom. Story is often the best medium to convey spirit. For example, the best way to convey the spirit of America is to tell the stories of its founding. Its spirit cannot be conveyed by mere definition. If the primary purpose of the Word were to convey precise information as in a scientific formula, then writing would have been its ideal medium. But since the Word is life and Spirit, it infinitely transcends mere print.

2. There is no evidence that Jesus ever instructed the eyewitnesses to record his life, death and resurrection in writing. The written accounts are generally from secondhand and thirdhand witnesses. Did the eyewitnesses have such a deep sense

of the mystery of the living Word in human flesh that writing it down would seem to tarnish and belittle it?

3. Even when secondhand and thirdhand witnesses undertook to record the Christ event, they produced four Gospels. For two thousand years Christians have tried to harmonize these Gospel accounts, but no one has yet been able to surmount the divergencies and mundane discrepancies that exist in the four Gospels. This ought to tell us something.

In the words of Robert Morgan:

**The variety of witnesses (which include the other New Testament writers) to the one Lord is one way of ensuring that this Lord transcends not only these witnesses but also all subsequent Christian theological and ethical positions and decisions. 14**

Everything indicates that the Christ tradition must have flourished in an oral culture where there was often little concern about transferring exact information. The writers are not always careful to quote the Old Testament exactly. Matthew's chronology, for example, does not fully harmonize with the Old Testament, and his threefold set of fourteen generations is not mathematically exact. It is more like what G. R. Driver calls "round figures" 15 or what J. H. Ropes terms "Jewish sacred arithmetic." 16 If the apostles were building a theological space shuttle requiring exact transmission of scientific data, they would not have been so "careless" regarding such details. The fact that we attempt to explain these embarrassing discrepancies shows that we do not appreciate what the writers wanted to convey. That they embarrass or offend us also shows we are not on their gospel wavelength. In the final analysis the Word or gospel is not something which is subject to mere definition. It is Spirit and not letter.

When will that branch of the church which so proudly labels itself "evangelical" recognize that authority and certainty are not found in the transmission of inerrant information which reduces the gospel to an ideology or to a scientific formula? True Christian certainty is a Spirit-induced certainty. The resurrected One is present in the message of his resurrection and seals to the heart the truth of the apostolic testimony. Therefore the attempt to derive a sense of certainty in the possession of an inerrant Scripture is misguided. Might this not indicate a loss of the prophetic (gospel) Spirit?

Does not this absolutizing of the Scripture link us with the Pharisees, who imputed to Scripture what belongs alone to him who is the Living Word? If the incarnation is indeed unique and unrepeatable, then there is but one perfect union of the divine and human. Scripture cannot be another expression of inerrant humanity.

If we move in the direction of biblical absolutism ("the religion of the Book"), how can we escape turning the New Testament into a Christian Torah and the gospel into a new law? Once we do that, religious fascism with all its sectarian ugliness cannot be

far away. Far better a mistaken Christian (a heretic) who has somehow caught the Spirit of Christ than an orthodox Protestant who thinks that the Spirit is mediated to him through the letter of correct theology.

## **The Necessity and Limits of Holy Scripture**

### **Its Necessity**

It was necessary that the ongoing Christian movement have a written record of how the Word appeared in human flesh and of how he was first proclaimed in the gospel. The believing community must be sure that the Spirit who leads them is the Spirit of Jesus. We cannot divorce this Spirit from the historical Jesus without falling prey to another spirit, another Jesus or another gospel.

The letter of Holy Scripture is like having a photograph of a person whom we wish to meet at the airport. The image in our hands is not the living person and cannot adequately portray his living reality. But it enables us to recognize the right person when we see him and prevents us from mistaking him for another person. So Scripture may help us recognize the Spirit of Jesus and keep us from embracing another spirit.

As there is only one Jesus, so there is only one gospel. The primitive community stood nearest to the beginnings of the gospel proclamation. Their written witness to that gospel is an irreplaceable landmark. Later gospel witnesses may in some respects see implications of the gospel more clearly than did the first witnesses. But later witnesses can never replace the first witnesses, because all subsequent testimony must be measured and tested by the primitive testimony.

### **Its Limitations**

The letter of Holy Scripture can never adequately or exhaustively contain the Spirit who is the presence of the resurrected One. Surely the incarnation ought to teach us that God cannot be textually defined. Neither can the reality of the gospel be expressed by mere definition. Of course the gospel has rational content, but it is much more than information. The gospel includes a living Witness and a living Presence. What is conveyed is not the mere words of man but the presence of the Son of God, who gives life to the dead. The gospel conveys not just definitions and theological information but Spirit and life which give birth to life.

When the living Word is not distinguished from its written witness, the great mistake of post-Ezra Judaism is repeated. What should have remained flexible under the guidance of the prophetic spirit Judaism made inflexible and thereby quenched the prophetic spirit. What was relative was made absolute. A rigid spirit of biblical

absolutism is a kind of religious fascism, and it makes no difference whether it is manifested by devout Jews, Iranian Moslems or orthodox Christians. It is the same rigid, arrogant, oppressive, sectarian spirit.

The Spirit who is present in the gospel brings a freedom to reinterpret the letter of Scripture to meet new situations which are sure to come with changing historical circumstances. Because the New Testament was written in the context of a certain culture, it expresses its witness in thought forms which reflect that culture. We are not bound to wash one another's feet or to greet fellow believers with a holy kiss just because the New Testament explicitly commands it. The so-called "New Testament pattern" should not be made into a straitjacket for church order for all time to come. The New Testament should not be made into a rigid Christian Torah to replace the Jewish Torah.

The prophetic Spirit of the gospel may even lead us to go beyond the letter of Holy Scripture in the interest of giving a better expression of the gospel. Christians need to beware of barricading themselves behind proof-texts in opposition to the gospel and leading of the Spirit. For example, despite much churchly resistance the Spirit led Christians to go beyond the letter of the New Testament in the matter of opposing the institution of slavery. Might not the same Spirit lead believers to go further than the New Testament community in the matter of granting equality to women?

While we stand on that one gospel which has been passed on to us through the apostolic witness, we may be led by the same gospel to see some of its implications more clearly than did the first witnesses. Yet the church has often settled down like a priestly guardian of the *status quo*.

The variety of ways in which the New Testament bears witness to the gospel should cause us to guard against the tendency to systematize and reduce the gospel to a closed system of theology. This turns the gospel into a new law and enslaves believers to a kind of theological legalism. Keeping the faith becomes being careful to preserve and even fight for religious canned goods. The faithful are indoctrinated to express their faith according to the letter of the creeds and confessions of the theological system. They may think that the meaning of the death of Christ must be explained only in terms of the substitutionary atonement theory. Or they may think that a certain view of justification by faith is the only way to explain how to get right with God.

The New Testament witness, however, cannot be squeezed into one tidy theological mold. Luke, who wrote more of the New Testament than any other person, does not appear to connect the forgiveness of sins with the death of Christ, much less present a theory of atonement. If Luke/Acts can bear witness to the gospel without the slightest suggestion that Christ paid the penalty for our sins on the cross, why insist that the

gospel today must be clothed in that kind of terminology? That other New Testament authors may suggest a substitutionary view of Christ's death is beside the point. The same may be said about justification by faith, election or baptism.

The Spirit brings freedom from the oppression of theological legalism. We may express meaning in the death of Christ by drawing images and illustrations from contemporary culture, just as Anselm drew his substitutionary theory of atonement from existing institutions of Roman law and medieval feudalism. The problem arises when we absolutize these images and illustrations as if they were exact expressions of the divine realities. Even the images of the New Testament, whether they are drawn from Old Testament history or contemporary culture, are parables or illustrations of divine realities rather than exact descriptions of them.

Where human wretchedness is manifested in preoccupation with guilt, there the gospel needs to be proclaimed as atonement for sin. And if the hearers live in a thought-world which relates everything to law and punishment, why not express the efficacy of Christ's death in terms of punishment and payment for sin? Where there is alienation, there the gospel needs to be expressed in terms of reconciliation. Where there is an all-pervasive mood of meaninglessness, there may the gospel be, given as the word of hope. In every case the gospel does not affect salvation by conveying exact theological information but by conveying the presence of the resurrected One. This is the Spirit who alone brings life, not always because of our theological talk, but often in spite of it.

## Appendix

***Editorial Note:*** For much of our material on writing and speaking we are indebted to Werner H. Kelber's book, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). The main strands of Kelber's thinking from which we drew the contrasts about writing and speaking are reproduced in this appendix.

Spoken words breathe life, drawing their strength from sound. They carry a sense of presence, intensity, and instantaneousness. ...

Moreover, sounded words emanate from one person and resonate in another, moving along the flow and ebb of human life. They address hearers directly and engage them personally in a manner unattainable by the written medium. One can well imagine Jesus' words interacting with people and their lives, and enacting presence amidst hearers.

As is well known by most ancient cultures, living words, especially those uttered by charismatic speakers, are the carriers of power and being. ... When sounded words

are thus known to be effective in the act of speaking, it takes but one small step to regard them “as being of the same order of reality as the matters and events to which they refer.” In addition, oral language is always personalized. Speaker and hearers together create situations wherein words come into being. Spoken words, therefore, can produce the actuality of what they refer to in the midst of people. Language and being, speaker, message, and words are joined together into a kind of unity. This powerful and binding quality of oral speech we shall henceforth refer to as *oral synthesis*. It is not a universal rule governing orality, but it is more nearly true of spoken words than of written ones. 17 ...

Literalness, “which has almost become a fetish with literary scholars,” is foreign to oral transmission.<sup>18</sup>...

This ardent desire [of Paul] to convey the word in person, or through personal representatives, may indicate that the letters do not “bear the apostolic power to the same degree as Paul’s personal presence.” As harbinger of oral words and personal presence, the travelogue may even be taken to suggest “that Paul wrote reluctantly,” perhaps regarding the oral word more fully effective than letters. 19...

The master metaphor of the apostle’s entire program is *gospel*. He employs the term approximately fifty times, more than any other author in the New Testament, and places it into predominantly auditory contexts. The gospel is commonly linked with verbs or nouns denoting the act of speaking. It is preached, spoken, announced, proclaimed (*euaggelizesthai, lalein, kataggelein, keryssein*), and a matter of confirmation, confession, defense, and participation (*bebaiosis, homologia, apologia, koinonia*). In Paul’s view, the gospel was promised in advance by the prophets in Scripture (Rom. 1:1-2) but was not in itself a scriptural authority. It is constitutionally and operationally defined in oral terms, not by association with writing and reading. Although Paul does, of course, commit the gospel, or reflections upon it, to letters, his written exposition leaves no doubt that the gospel, when it came alive, was spoken aloud and, if it is to bring life again, must be sounded afresh. Clearly, the writing of a gospel after the manner of Mark is foreign to Paul. The gospel he writes about bears the indelible imprint, or more accurately, echoes the voiceprints of an oral authority.

The oral quality of gospel is corroborated by the fact that *logos* or *logos tou theou* can serve as synonyms for gospel in Pauline language. The Thessalonians have received “the Word” (1 Thess.1:6), the Corinthians heard the unadulterated “Word of God” (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; 1 Cor. 14:36), the Galatians were taught “the Word” (Gal. 6:6), and the Philippians spoke “the Word of God” (Phil. 1:14). Gerhard Kittel has stressed the activist character of *logos* with a seriousness rarely encountered in Pauline scholarship: “In all this the *logos* is always genuine *legein*, or spoken word in all concreteness. One of the most serious errors of which one could be guilty would be to

make this *logos tou theou* a concept or abstraction.” As a rule, the Pauline reference to *logos* or *logos tou theou* is to the living, preached word of the gospel. ...

The gospel is “the power of God” (Rom. 1:16: *dynarnis gar ton theon estin*; cf. 1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Cor. 2:4-5; 2 Cor. 6:7). The copula *einai* in Rom. 1:16 (1 Cor. 1:18) serves to connect the subject gospel (or *logos*) with the predicate power, expressing a logical relation and indeed an identity between the two entities. The gospel is inseparable from power. Its “efficacy is supremely concrete,” and to dismiss it as magic or obsolete speculation is to turn a deaf ear on one of the most elementary aspects of Paul’s perception of language. Julius Schniewind, in an excellent study on Pauline hermeneutics, noted some seventy years ago that the modern reader tends to associate *logos* and *euaggelion* with doctrine and specific content, whereas Paul’s interest does not primarily focus on these aspects. So impressed was Schniewind by the evidence pointing to the efficaciousness of the Pauline *logos* and *euaggelion* that he regarded this aspect as the most important result of his investigation. Paul links the word primarily not with content, but with the effect it has on hearers. Frequently a genitive attached to *logos* is best defined as a genitive *efficaciae*, which may or may not encompass the force of an objective genitive. The “word of life,” for example, received by the Philippians (Phil. 2:16: *logon zoes epechontes*) is less a message about life than the power of life transmitted by the word, and “the word of reconciliation” entrusted to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 5:19: *ton logon tēs katallages*) involves not merely the enunciation of a specific message, but the reconciliation effected by its proclamation. By endowing gospel with power, the apostle has assigned it the very quality which is consistent with its oral operation. “Paul connects the word as power with oral word because the real nature of words, their power, is disclosed when they are spoken, pronounced.” Spoken words exist only in active production, at the moment of speaking. Being fully caught up in the utterance, they surrender their very being into the act of verbalization. As speech, the gospel actualizes the reality of what is being spoken. On this view, the concept of the gospel as the power of God states nothing less than a fundamental creed of the apostle’s oral hermeneutics. ...

Operated by the breath of air and endowed with spirituality quality, speech is fluid, hence living, and not subject to the written regimentation of textualization. Moreover, spoken words are invisible and in this regard of the order of God and the Spirit. Energized by spiritual force, the spoken gospel can thus function as carrier of life and give birth to life. ...

Spoken words are experienced personally and more directly than written words. Sound has a pervasive quality; it permeates one’s whole physical existence. ...

While there is no such thing as a face-to-face encounter with a text, the mouth-to-heart engagement in oral communication fosters personal and intimate relations. The

spoken word, emanating from interiority and entering another interiority, creates a deep-set bonding of speaker with auditor. “Sound unites groups of living beings as nothing else does.”...

Wherever the word is, there must also be *koinonia* (Gal. 6:6; Phil. 1:5). 20. ...

The one feature Paul emphasizes in describing the human condition under the Law is the written nature of the Law. The Law is called “the Scripture” (Gal. 3:8: *he graphe*) or “the book” (3:10: *en to biblio*). It exists in written form (3:10: *tots gegrammenois*), and the obedience it claims is to its written totality (3:10: *pasin tois gegrammenois en to biblio tou nomou tou poiesai auta*). Implied in this language is not aversion to the legalistic character of the Law, nor skepticism about self-righteous use of it, but a sense of its written totality and complexity. From the standpoint of *akoe pisteos*, the technology of writing facilitates an unparalleled expansion of mental storage possibilities, effecting a vast augmentation of the Word of God. Insofar as it is recorded by the written medium, the Law renders the obligation to live up to “all that is written down in the book” ever more difficult. This written complexification of the Word appears to be contrary to the personalized communication fostered by the oral gospel and faith that comes from hearing. There is, therefore, a linguistic dimension to the Pauline polemic against the Law, which connects the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13: *tes kataras tou nomou*), its tragic inability to give life (3:21), with its objectification into a written record. ...

The peculiarly negative assessment of the mediation of the Law reflects the hermeneutical conviction of one dedicated to the unmediated, direct, hence oral delivery of the Word of God. In Gal. 3:19-20 the two mediating agents of angels and Moses produce a double distancing effect. The voice of God, when communicated by mediation, no longer speaks directly. In its mediated form, it operates as a fractured, secondary version. Whereas the promises were spoken to Abraham (3:16: *to de Abraam errethesan hit epaggeliai*) and renewed in the gospel of Christ, the Law (which came between Abraham and Christ) was equivalent to the interrupted voice of God. The ideal of oneness, invoked by Paul in antithesis to mediatorship, signifies the unmediated, total presence attainable through the personalizing powers of the gospel of Christ. This is how the status of the Law, the written Word of God, must appear to one who is committed to the oral gospel and its participatory effects.

Apart from creating complexification and distancing, the Law is beset with yet another problem: it produces alienation. The statement that “the Scripture has locked up (*synekleisen*) everything under sin” (Gal. 3:22; au. trans.) conjures up the imagery of the Law as a prison house. The term *sygkleio* connotes “to lock up,” “to shut up,” with little hope of freedom or escape. The precise logical connection between sin and Law is left unspecified, but nothing in the immediate context suggests boastful,

righteous use of the Law. The following line depicts the Law as a force constraining people within its narrowly contained space, holding all in the clutch of sin: “But before the coming of faith we were kept in custody of the Law, locked up until faith was later to be revealed” (Gal. 3:23; au. trans.). *Phroureisthai*, to be held in custody, is reinforced here by the formerly used *sygkleisthai*, to be locked up, and together the two verbs project the Law as an inescapably closed system. Now the imagery of prison, confining space, controlling and alienating people, leaps to the eye.

Circumcision constitutes the works of the Law that submit people to the yoke of slavery. But the concrete issue of circumcision leads Paul to deeper reflection on the nature of the Law and its role in history. There is something about the Law itself and its ordained role in history that tends to enslave people in a closed system, prohibiting entrance into the perfection of Abraham’s seed. Language that records the curious metaphor of the Law as closure and prison invites exploration into the linguistic, sensory base of Pauline thought. The antithesis of the Law as *graphe* versus the *epaggelia tes pisteos* (3:22) indicates affiliations with underlying linguistic realities. The Law that commits man to bondage is the Law in its inscribed existence, *he graphe*, whereas it is in the form of a spoken message, *he epaggelia* that the Word is delivered into the hearts of believers. In depth, the prison house of the Law is constructed in chirographic form. In the words of Ong: “Writing and print effect closure. The written word means constriction.” The Law as written Law circumscribes a medium world that is tighter and more sealed off from life than spoken words whose acoustic field is both fluid and open. For Paul the Law as written authority locks Abraham’s heirs behind its verbal walls and, instead of opening up to God, alienates and creates a sphere of sin. 21...

Hermeneutically,...[the] inclination [of the Corinthian “super-apostles”] to attribute commanding authority to both personal and heavenly letters rested on the conviction that the written word served as carrier of the Spirit. Paul, on his part, operated in the fashion of an *oral traditionalist*, disconnecting the *pneuma* from *gramma* and reconnecting the “Spirit of the living God” with word in its internal, personalizing efficaciousness (3:2-3). ...

The Pauline response is thus not designed to address the work-character of the Law. It is hardly accidental that in all of 2 Corinthians 3 the term *nomos* is absent. Paul’s concern, we observed, is the grammatological nature of the Law. The principal antithesis is not between Spirit versus works, but between Spirit versus the Written. Paul’s objection is not to the *nomos* as a legal authority, but rather to the objectification of the Law as *gramma*. ...

The written medium, the one quality of the Law that is a principal key to Paul’s antinomianism, has not been taken with full seriousness, either theologically or

hermeneutically. 22. ...

It is under the grammatological authority of the Law that one suffers the fall, experiencing a heightened sense of the self in conjunction with profound alienation, and even death. ...

The psycholinguistic realities entailed in the process of pinning down living words on paper are profoundly intricate, but they are conveniently summed up in the fashionable aphorism: spoken words personify, written words objectify. In the performance of the oral gospel the power of words is actualized, and speaker and hearer tend to converge in the message. Spoken words encourage participation *in* the message, not reflection *on* it. The written word of the Law, on the other hand, has become unhinged from the oral, participatory lifeworld. It has assumed an existence as verbal artifact, an object apart from speaker and audience. It is in this posture of detachment that the Law benefits the quality of perception. Laid out before one's eyes, the Law as *gramma* invites scrutiny and fosters critical mental activity. Deliveration of its meaning has replaced participation in its message. The individual self, standing apart from the *gramma*, reflects upon it and comes to awareness of its own inner selfhood. The distance guaranteed by the written Law heightens a sense of self-surveillance and self-criticism. This is the hermeneutical truth behind Paul's statement that I would not have known myself, were it not for the old status of the written Law. 23. ...

Not even Sanders has succeeded in rigorously rethinking the roots of Pauline antinomianism. ...

Understandably, the novel technological management of the written medium resulted in the attribution of unprecedented authority to the written Word of the Bible, which in turn launched a challenge to the traditional authority. To be sure, the Reformers, above all the early Luther, retained and in part rediscovered the *viva vox* of the gospel. And yet, the shift in traditional medium priorities inevitably made its impact on Christian theology that both in its Catholic and Protestant affirmation had to come to grips with the rising new consciousness. The written word, magnified, and monumentalized by the printing technique, entered Christian consciousness in a manner unmatched in previous theological history. Slowly, but surely, this elevation of the newly managed medium, led interpreters away, from awareness of Paul's linguistic frame of reference. As typographical medium consciousness gained the ascendancy, finding its theological formulation in the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, the apostle's full disposition to language was increasingly subject to misapprehension. The temptation was irresistible to link the Law with legal authority rather than with the increasingly cherished written medium. 24 ...

"The association of writing with death is not total, but it is manifold and inescapable"

(Walter J. Ong)...

“Interpretation, and alienation, are bound up with writing itself: both imply an absence at the core, not communion with a presence” [Herbert N. Schneidau]....

An oral language deconstructed by textuality undergoes a kind of death. 25

Voice is alive, and spoken words are consubstantial with life. Synoptic orality is drawn to Jesus’ words and deeds, to his activity and exercise of power. Oral speech provides the matrix in which the living Christ flourishes and a sense of God’s presence grows. 26

## Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, scriptural quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

1. Walter J. Ong, quoted in Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 155.
2. John E. Becker, “Orality and Literacy: Justice and Economy of the Mind.” *Worldview*, 26, no. 11 (Nov. 1983): 10-11,
3. Herbert N. Schneidau, quoted in Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel*. p.184.
4. Walter J. Ong, quoted in Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel*, p.184,
5. Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel*, p. 185.
6. Ibid., p. 27.
7. Frances M. Young, “Redemption —The Starting-point of Christian Theology — II,” *The Expository Times* 89 (Oct. 1977): 9-10.
8. Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel*. p.18.
9. Ibid., p. 19.
10. Ibid., p. 194.
11. Ibid., p. 146
12. Paul did not regard his letters as something which could take the place of the oral communication of the gospel. He ardently desired to convey the Word in person or through representatives. Yet his letters did assume the posture of personal address as much as possible.
13. Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel*. pp. 158-59.
14. Robert Morgan, “The Hermeneutical Significance of Four Gospels,” in James Luther Mays, ed., *Interpreting the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 53.
15. G. R. Driver, “Sacred Numbers and Round Figures,” in F. F. Bruce, ed., *Promise and Fulfillment* (Edinburgh: T. & T, Clark. 1963).
16. J. H. Ropes, quoted in R. V. C. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and*

*Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), p. 3].

17. Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospel*, pp. 18-19.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-47

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-55.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 157-59.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 165-66.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-85.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 194,

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