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WORD of **GOD** and **TRUTH**

THE ARTICULATION OF Christian belief and witness, from New Testament times onward, has involved assertions of many different sorts. They range from straightforward historical claims, such as "Paul wrote this," to anthropological generalizations ("All have sinned" [Rom 2:23]), metaphysical and cosmological statements, and many others. Included is a variety of complex theological utterances which have at least the form of assertions, such as "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19), and "One who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). These diverse sorts of statements would not all seem to be of the same degree of importance or centrality to Christian witness; they manifest different kinds and levels of reflectivity, and they respond to differing needs.

The common persistence of this evident diversity throughout the Christian tradition means that there can be no *general* characterization and vindication (or demolition) of the cognitive claims involved in Christian discourse as such. The meaning and truth of any of these assertions can

only be assessed in the light of the criteria relevant to its particular use. The historical claim that Paul wrote Galatians, or that Jesus was crucified, for example, is subject to the same sort of critical testing to which any other assertion of historical fact must be open. It cannot be held exempt from such examination simply because it occurs within a theological or religious context, without forfeiting its identity as a historical assertion. Of course, a theologian or a believer might want to say something which sounds like a historical assertion without meaning it as one, much as a storyteller might, but that is another matter. If an utterance is meant as a historical claim, its very meaningfulness, no less than its truth-value, depends upon its being subject in principle to the normal canons of historical inquiry. The same sort of point may be made concerning assertions of other types occurring within a theological context: each is subject to examination according to the criteria governing assertions of its type.

The difficulty of "placing" some of the assertions encountered in Christian discourse so as to determine the relevant criteria of interpretation—and indeed, the difficulty of determining whether a particular utterance actually functions as an assertion at all—is notorious. Among the most resistant to analysis in this regard are some of the complex sorts of theological utterance of which two examples were cited above: utterances which relate God in particular ways to particular events and persons. Many statements concerning the atoning work of Christ fall into this category. "In Christ God was reconciling . . ." (2 Cor 5:19), "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3), and "God has brought you to life with Christ, having forgiven us all our sins" (Col 2:13) combine references to real persons and historical occasions with claims concerning

God's action or disposition. Not long ago, a recognition of the centrality of such statements to the traditional Christian witness of faith provoked considerable attention to the problematic character of claims about "acts of God": What is meant or implied by the assertion that God has acted or is present in a particular event? How is such an assertion warranted? How may one presume to claim (even if that claim takes the form of "confession") that a given historical occurrence has a particular significance in the divine economy?

The aim of this essay is to suggest a way in which the meaning and truth-value of some such utterances might be clarified by taking as an interpretative clue one of the oldest and most common ways in which Christians have characterized the language of scripture and proclamation, namely, as "Word of God." While the notion of "acts of God" directs our attention to the events purportedly described and interpreted by the language, the term "Word of God" functions to remind us of the character of the language itself. This assumes, of course, that to say, "this is the Word of God," in a theological (or liturgical) context may be to say something more than "this is true" or "this is very important." Undeniably the statement, "this is the Word of God," is often made to advance precisely those claims, that is, to lend credibility or force to what is being said or read. And certainly either or both of those claims may be implied on a particular occasion by the statement. But these familiar associations should not be allowed to obscure the possibility that the prior function of that characterization is to say something about the *sort* of utterance we have before us; that is, that whatever else might rightly be said about the nature or provenance of the statement, it is to be regarded as a word from God. That affirmation has some

interesting and perhaps important features, even apart from the presumption that whatever God says is bound to be both true and important.

What sort of difference might it make to our understanding of an utterance to identify God as its speaker or author? In some cases, it might make little or no difference. There are statements whose meaning is relatively or even wholly independent of the identity of those who utter them. An assertion such as "Abraham Lincoln was born in Massachusetts" is of this sort. There are other assertions whose meaning is governed in part by the identity of the speaker: "I was born in Massachusetts," or "My brother is the President," for example. The truth-value of a statement of this second sort may not be determined until its meaning is more clearly specified, i.e., by establishing the identity of the speaker to whatever extent is necessary to make a judgment possible. (It should be clear, incidentally, that not all "self-involving" assertions require this sort of specification of authorship before their truth-value can be determined. "My sister is the President" is false if it can be proven that "the President" does not refer to anyone's sister.)

Now, surely, even if God were to make an empirical assertion of either of these sorts, that assertion would be subject to the same standards of meaning and truth which apply to anyone else's similar utterance. If God were to claim that Paul died in Rome, the claim would be true as a historical assertion only if Paul did in fact die in Rome. God's claiming it would not make it true if Paul actually died elsewhere; nor would God's claim be meaningful as a historical assertion if the fact that Paul died elsewhere were not allowed to count against the claim that he died in Rome. (Faced with the divine claim

under those circumstances, we would probably be inclined to probe its meaning further, on the assumption that we have not yet understood what is really being said.) Similarly, "I led Israel out of Egypt" would be a meaningful assertion only if "Israel's leaving Egypt" were a conceivable event and if some sense might be given to the notion of the speaker's "leading" someone. (Here, the question as to how the concept, "act of God," is to be understood is pertinent.) The fact that this assertion has the first-person form of God's own claim, rather than the form of someone's claim about God, does not substantially alter the criteria by which its meaningfulness, meaning, and truth-value must be determined. It should be clear that the issue here is not God's veracity, but how our language may be understood. And the point is that to call assertions of these kinds the "Word of God" may not shed much light upon their intelligibility, or shift the ground of interpretation radically.

But there are other cases in which that designation may prove to be more interesting and more pertinent to our understanding of what is said. Consider such statements as "I love you," "I forgive you," "I consider the matter closed," and "I hope to return." None of these statements may be taken simply as a report upon an observable state of affairs; each involves some element of self-disclosure or self-commitment. Some statements of this general sort might be classified as "performative utterances," following J. L. Austin: statements which are most usefully regarded as acts rather than as assertions, and in judging which a person looks to the conditions which would make them effectual ("felicitous") rather than to the evidence which would make them true.[1] "I find you guilty,"

1. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

"I promise to attend," and "Strike two!" have this performative character. "I forgive" may, in some contexts, function as a performative, indeed, even with a legally binding force, as when one forgives a debt or an obligation.

But there are also contexts in which "I forgive you" (or, perhaps more clearly, "I have forgiven you") is not so much an act as a disclosure. It may, like a performative utterance, change the situation and put things on a different footing, but it does so by telling the hearer how things stand. In this, it is closer to "I love you" than to "I commend you," and closer to "I intend to come" than to "I promise to come." It is the self-disclosive element in these utterances involving the concepts of forgiving, loving, intending, hoping, considering, identifying and so on, which needs further elucidation in connection with our inquiry.

Take the statement, "I wish it hadn't happened." It seems fair to regard this as an informative, rather than performative, utterance. Whatever its causes or effects might be, it appears to be an assertion. Its claim may be true or false. Further, it appears to be a factual assertion, one whose truth or falsity is contingent upon circumstances which could be otherwise; and a hearer may conceive of evidence which would tend to support or disconfirm the claim—e.g., the speaker's apparent mood, how the speaker proceeds to deal with the situation, or whether the speaker had tried to prevent the thing from happening. Yet, the statement is not properly viewed as a *report*, either as to outward circumstances or to the occurrence within the speaker of a phenomenon called "wishing." ("I was there when it happened" might serve as a report of the first kind; "I was frightened when it happened," of the second.) If I truthfully say "I wish it hadn't happened," I am not issuing

a report, but instead I am telling my hearer something about myself. It is an informative claim about myself: stating it does not make it true, and my hearer may quite properly expect my behavior to bear out the claim in appropriate ways, or at least not to conflict with it.[2] In a similar way, "I consider you my friend" does not refer to some antecedent event or situation (that is, it is not a report on the observable facts of our relationship, nor on the inner dynamics of "considering"), nor is it best viewed as a performative statement (that is, although the utterance may surely have some effect, it does not "make" you my friend). Rather, it is a self-disclosive assertion: I am revealing, or at least claiming to reveal, something of myself to you. The revelation may lead you to rethink some incidents in our relationship up to this point, as well as perhaps to modify your attitudes toward me and your expectations of me from now on.

It is in connection with assertions of this general character that the designation of a body of discourse as "Word of God" may become most significant. To construe an utterance not only as God's word but also as God's self-disclosure is to make an important interpretative decision; it is to place the assertions contained in that discourse in such a way as to open up a certain range of criteria of interpretation and appraisal, and to render certain other criteria less pertinent.

Needless to say, that may take a bit of construing. A great amount of the material Christians characterize as "Word of God" is, prima facie, someone else's words, not only in that these texts have human authors but also in that they are often *about* God: God is spoken of in the third person, frequently

2. For an illuminating discussion of "telling," see Hunter, *Essays after Wittgenstein*, 91–114.

in statements having the form of empirical assertions. To take these texts as, nevertheless, God's own self-disclosive utterance, is to make what may appear to be an eccentric judgment in the face of some obvious and perhaps more immediately compelling alternatives. But there is a logic to such construal.

As a first step toward the clarification of that logic, a simple case may be useful. Suppose I say, "Ann intends to finish the job." I may have formed a hypothesis concerning Ann's intentions, which I am thus expressing; or, I may be telling you what Ann has told me. A statement as to another's intentions, attitudes, or inclinations may be a judgment based on one's knowledge of the person (or of "human nature" under the circumstances, or of whatever other data one considers relevant to such a judgment). I may be "reading" Ann's intentions from her behavior, or making an inference from past experience. But such a statement may also be simply the reiteration of what the person in question has told the speaker. I may be sharing with you what Ann said to me as to her own intentions. If so, since my statement takes the direct form it does ("Ann intends . . ."), I am probably fairly confident that her declaration to me is reliable; otherwise, I might say instead, "Ann said she intended . . . ," thus putting the burden on her. But as it stands, my statement might rightly be construed as my transmittal of Ann's own self-disclosing statement.

Now, to take "God loves you" as a word from God means to take it not as someone's hypothesis concerning God's disposition, but as a reliable transmittal or reiteration of God's own self-declaration on the matter. That is a fairly straightforward instance, parallel to "Ann intends . . ." Consider what happens when we apply this same sort of construal to other,

more complex assertions, for instance, regarding the identity and work of Christ. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself," heard as a self-disclosive word of God, becomes revelatory of the significance *to God* of a particular historical event. It declares God's self-identification with what went on in that event: God interprets the event to us as God's own action, the fulfillment of God's own intention. The statement is no longer heard simply as someone's hypothesis about the significance of Christ, still less as a metaphysical claim about the nature (or natures) of Christ. "Christ died for our sins" becomes, not someone's inference concerning the meaning of Christ's death, but God's own disclosure of God's judgment regarding its significance—God's judgment being, in this instance, the judgment that counts. "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:19), taken as God's word, discloses God's self-actuation in and solidarity with this human life: Jesus is the one with whose life God is fully identified. To hear the claim that we have died with Christ as God's word is to hear God's declaration that our death is somehow included in his. In each of these cases, our attention is directed not to some unusual feature of an event, some quality inherent in the event itself that we might, in principle, find out for ourselves if we studied the event long enough or with the right equipment, but instead to what God alone can tell us about its significance. God alone can tell us this, not because God is in a better position to view the event and all its effects, but because God has freely created its significance, in the unity of God's action and self-disclosive word.

These construals are, obviously, rough and tentative and partial, and are not meant to stake out substantive Christological positions. They are intended only to suggest a direction

in interpretation. Examples from areas other than Christology might serve as well. In fact, a large proportion of the typical assertions concerning "God's action in history" might be usefully approached in this way. To identify a particular event, e.g., the Exodus, as an act of God, would then not be a way of drawing attention to unusual, perhaps supernatural or miraculous features of the event, on the basis of which one might infer that God was at work in it. Instead, it would be to say that God has identified this event as an enactment of the divine intention. It is God's word that discloses the significance of the event by claiming it in a particular way. Once that identification is made—and perhaps only then—the event itself becomes disclosive of the character or purposes of God. In addition to its own value simply as the event it is, it takes on the character of a gesture or sign, because God has given it this meaning.

It is in some such ways as these, then, that the reminder that a given utterance is to be taken as "Word of God" may open some lines of interpretation. But how does that reminder bear upon the further question as to the truth of these assertions? To identify a given assertion as a self-disclosing utterance does not rob it of truth-value. It does not cease to be an assertion on that account. But a different range of truth-criteria comes into play than would be the case if we were to take the assertion as, say, an empirical hypothesis.

If my statement as to Ann's intention to "finish the job" were in fact a judgment I had formed on the basis of observing her work, it would be pertinent to the assessment of my claim to ask me to cite the evidence I considered relevant: what data do I read as reliable indicators of her intention? But, if my statement is simply a restatement of Ann's own dec-

laration, a different set of considerations becomes involved: Is her statement of intention trustworthy (or was it a joke, a lie, a rash promise)? Can we believe her? It may also be important to know whether she is capable of fulfilling her intention, but at this point it is the intention, not its performance, which is at issue. And while we might appeal to various sorts of evidence to justify our confidence or lack of confidence in the truthfulness of her declaration, the evidence may never be wholly unambiguous. (Not even Ann's completion of her job would necessarily eliminate the possibility of doubt as to her present intention.) We may decide to believe her, or to doubt her, or to reserve judgment; what we may not do is gain some immediate access to her intention, apart from her own disclosure of it.

To take the utterances of Christian scripture or proclamation as the word of God involves a similar shift in truth-criteria. When we take a statement such as "God was in Christ" as an assertion of Paul or of another human being—certainly a reasonable thing to do—it is reasonable to expect the one making the assertion to be able to provide some evidence to support the claim: how did the writer arrive at that judgment? And certainly, that particular claim has been elucidated and defended in a great variety of ways in every period of Christian history, by thinkers who acknowledged the validity of that expectation. Even Paul would not spurn such a request—though the inquirer is likely to find that Paul chiefly advances and defends his claims concerning Christ, not on the basis of empirical evidence, nor through metaphysical argument, but on the basis of what he has heard God say through the prophets and through the church's tradition ("from the Lord"). But to take the claim as the word of God

introduces a new element: in addition to (or perhaps despite) whatever the relevant evidence may indicate, we have God's word for it; or at least, that is what the designation, "Word of God," asserts. We face the claim directly, not as a hypothesis put forward by a third party, but as a putative self-revelatory assertion.

In such a case, it is to the consequences of the claim, rather than to its antecedent grounds, that we must look for confirmation of its truthfulness, and sometimes for a clearer indication of its meaning as well. The truth of the statements "I love you" or "I have forgiven you" will be borne out, or not, by the course of the relationship between speaker and hearer from that point on. The claim generates a certain range of expectations. If the expectations, by and large, seem to be fulfilled by the later course of developments, the hearer is generally satisfied (and properly justified) to take this as confirmation of the claim. If certain expectations, especially the more crucial ones in the hearer's judgment, are unfulfilled or thwarted, the hearer may conclude either that the claim was untrue, or that its meaning was misunderstood. Either conclusion may lead to some sort of confrontation in which the situation is clarified. ("How can you say you love me, when . . . ?" "Is this what you call 'forgiving someone'?!") It is not at all uncommon for our expectations in connection with such claims to be modified considerably over the course of a relationship—some receding, others assuming new importance, fresh ones appearing. One major reason for this is that it is in such relationships that we learn, and continue to learn, the meaning of concepts like "love" and "forgiveness." The process of understanding and the process of confirmation are inseparable.

This is clearly the case with the assertions we have been considering as divine self-disclosure. Their meaning and truth may only be assessed through a continual process of discovering and testing their implications. This involves, in part, becoming educated in the meaning of, e.g., divine love or forgiveness, or divine judgment or presence, so as to learn what sorts of expectations are justified and what sorts are inappropriate in this context. What does it mean, for example, to have God present? Can the divine presence be sensed? How does it differ from divine absence? When is it useful to speak of God's presence? Of course, one can hardly learn the right use of such a term apart from the matrix of discourse in which it is imbedded: a working knowledge of the notion of God's presence involves a familiarity with certain features of Christian affirmation regarding creation, providence, the human condition, and so on. Furthermore, a person does not gain mastery of any of these concepts one at a time, moving on, say, from divine grace to divine judgment and then to divine righteousness. Rather, one gradually learns a whole way of thinking, speaking, and existing, in which these terms and concepts figure significantly, interpreting one another and together giving a certain sense to life.

This leads to another feature of this process of discovery and examination: Besides requiring an immersion in a whole field of discourse, rather than the dissection of isolated concepts, it also involves a willingness to have one's expectations in connection with divine love or presence or judgment put to the test by directing one's life accordingly. This is because it is in the course of that sort of living interaction that we may come to learn (to put it very simply) what *God* means by "love" and "forgiveness" and "faithfulness." If the assertions in

question are to be taken as divine self-disclosure, rather than only as human opinions about God, it would seem that the most obvious context in which to pursue the question of their meaning and validity would be the ongoing divine-human relationship itself. It is as that relationship is lived out that we gain and refine our understanding of God's own word. Again, the procedure through which we come to understand the meaning of that word and the procedure of confirmation may fairly be said to coincide. We cannot judge the truth of a self-revelatory claim until we know its meaning, and we cannot learn its meaning until we are engaged in the same living practice of conceptual discovery and formation which also leads to judgments of confirmation or disconfirmation.

To hear an utterance as the word of God is, at least in the sorts of cases considered here, to hear it as an "address," in which God becomes present to the hearer and offers thereby the possibility of new understanding and appropriate response. It conveys a claim to truth; that is an inescapable feature of its meaning. But it does not simply seek to inform; it also invites the hearer into a relationship which, among other things, is to be the context for a continuing exploration of the meaning and truth of that divine self-disclosure. Such is the invitation which calls the Christian community into being. Christian theology is one aspect of that community's ongoing response.